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Rending the "Soft Plains" of America: Rape and Liberation in the Poetry of William Blake

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ABSTRACT

William Blake is often popularly recalled as a proponent of "free love" who equated unrestrained desire with the push for universal liberty, yet much of the sex that appears in his work is non-consensual and violent, the product of a masculine urge for sexual self-actualization. This apparent contradiction has confounded critics for decades, particularly since feminist theory transformed the discourse on rape in the mid-twentieth century. As this article will argue, however, the representations of sexual assault in Blake's work are neither an endorsement nor an evasion of the gendered dynamics of forced sex, but are instead evidence of his efforts to work through his own uncertainty regarding what limits, if any, the drive for personal liberty should observe. In his interrogation of this question, Blake takes an approach that is analogous to the methodology of hermeneutics, repeatedly revisiting instances in his mythopoeia in which liberty and sexual assault collide in order to confront the contradictions inherent in his conception of emancipation. Working through these versions, Blake uncovers the imperialist, colonialist logic that underpins any quest for individual liberation that refuses to acknowledge its victims.

In the popular imagination, William Blake is often recalled as an eccentric believer in "free love" who was centuries ahead of his time,[1] yet his representation of sexuality, especially issues surrounding consent, at times seems to reflect the entrenched biases of his day. In the revolutionary years of the early 1790s when he produced his most overtly political works, Blake typically conflated sexual, political, and spiritual liberation, and equated all forms of constraint on personal freedom with the "mind-forg'd manacles" (27) of repression, exclaiming "Exuberance is Beauty[!]" (38). In particular, he denounced the moralistic indoctrination of the young, blaming societal fears regarding the disruptive effects of erotic pleasure for creating a world in which young women were incapable of openly and honestly expressing their desires and young men were, as a result, denied the possibility of sexual gratification. Although Blake consistently condemns this unhealthy dynamic between the sexes in the strongest terms, the heterosexual, penetrative sex that appears in his mythopoeic works is overwhelmingly violent and

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non-consensual rather than pleasurable, the product of a frustrated masculine craving for sexual self-actualization. Rape, a recurring motif, would thus appear to occupy an ambivalent position in his doctrine of personal liberation.

Over the course of his career, however, Blake's representation of sexual violence would evolve as he began to confront the troubling implications of associating liberty with the exercise of sexual power freed from all restriction and regardless of the consequences. Though this involved revisiting earlier representations of sexual assault in his work, it was not a simple matter of overwriting what came before. For Blake the truth was always complex and multifaceted, the product of a visionary encounter with the infinite possibility of what he called "Eternity." By exploring variations of the same act from a number of different perspectives he was able to reach a fuller understanding of that eternal truth, in an approach that is analogous to the hermeneutic method. Traditionally, hermeneutics has been criticized for its practice of building interpretation upon interpretation, producing what would appear to be a closed loop with no reference to objective reality. In place of the image of the circle, however, the hermeneuticist Paul Ricoeur imagined the process as "an endless spiral that would carry the meditation past the same point a number of times, but at different altitudes" revealing more of the truth with each revolution (72). Moving in this hermeneutic spiral pattern, Blake gradually unfolds the larger significance of sexual assault within his mythopoeia as he strives to apprehend the interplay between absolute freedom and moral debasement in the act of violently subjugating the other. As these versions accrue, Blake uncovers the corrosive, imperialist logic that underpins any conception of individual liberation, even that of his own younger self, which refuses to acknowledge its victims.

Blake's representation of rape shows particular interest in the psychological experience of the victim, yet he also appears at times to endorse the notion that rape is the "natural" result of male passions run wild in response to knowing female provocation. These seemingly conflicting impulses reflect the crosscurrents in depictions of rape in the culture of the era. In late-eighteenth-century Britain, establishing the crime of rape was extremely challenging and placed a considerable moral burden on the victim to prove herself worthy of consideration as such through her behavior before, during, and after the event. Under the law, rape was defined as forced penetration and ejaculation (exceedingly difficult to prove),[2] and in practice the woman was expected to resist her attacker with all her might and bear the marks on her body as evidence to prove her innocence (Clark 28). As Mary R. Block comments, "The guidelines [legal experts] devised to establish proof of rape reflected a cultural distrust of women and their claims of non-consensual sex" (26). In fact, there was some dispute as to whether rape was possible at all under the mistaken assumption that a truly unwilling woman could prevent unwanted penetration.[3] Pregnancy was commonly taken as absolute proof of consensual sex since conception was thought to be literally inconceivable in cases of rape.

In the broader public sphere, social attitudes were similarly loaded against the accuser with judgements of rape often reliant on suppositions regarding the perceived value of the victim within the patriarchal economy as, for example, a virginal daughter or chaste wife. In the mid-eighteenth century the success of Samuel Richardson's novels *Pamela* (1740) and *Clarissa* (1748) set off a craze for representations of rape in which the act is figured as an unspeakable violation that is, nonetheless, teased for the prurient entertainment of readers. In the pages of popular novels, insidiously attractive villains

menaced victims for whom a tragic death was the only way to reclaim their reputation in the wake of their assault, given the mores of the era. This speaks to the very real double-bind faced by women who tried to prosecute their attackers; even if they succeeded in their case by speaking publicly about sex they were devalued in the eyes of society as impure (Clark 2). In general, consent was assumed unless proven otherwise and, for many, a woman with a less than perfect reputation simply could not be raped, since her sexual experience meant she was already, in a sense, considered communal property.

Towards the close of the century political and international conflicts complicated these existing cultural patterns further, with the French revolutionaries characterized in the British press by a frenzied violence that was charged with dangerous sexual overtones, their uncontrollable physicality making them the natural enemies of British rectitude (Philp 59). One of the most influential examples of the genre can be found in Edmund Burke's account in *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790) of the march on Versailles of October 1789 in which he describes how a band of "ruffians" infiltrated the French queen's bedchambers "and pierced with an hundred strokes of bayonets and poniards the bed, from whence this persecuted woman had but just time to fly almost naked" (105–06). Radicals like Mary Wollstonecraft objected to Burke's "exaggerated" (53–54), emotive descriptions of the incident, yet the imputation that the revolutionaries' attacks on traditional values rejected basic norms of sexual decency remained at the forefront of anti-Jacobin propaganda (Binhammer). This stigma extended to British supporters of the revolution, as in James Gillray's engraving of well-known radicals readying George III for execution: as Charles James Fox raises the axe, John Horne

Figure 1. Gillray, James. *The Hopes of the Party, Prior to July 14th*. London, 1789. Library of Congress.

Tooke hoists up the king's legs at an angle and position that suggests sodomy will be added to the helpless monarch's final indignities (Figure 1). At the same time, the debate around the abolition of the slave trade, which caught fire in Britain just as France exploded into revolution, threatened to undermine this convenient redefinition of rape as a sign of an inherently un-British libidinal profligacy, with many British colonists and plantation owners revealed to be complicit in the systematic sexual abuse of slaves.[4]

Subverting the prevailing nationalist narrative in *The Visions of the Daughters of Albion* (1793), Blake portrays rape as symbolic of (an implicitly British) colonial and imperial aggression. The reaction of Oothoon, the heroine and representative of the "soft soul" of America in the poem, also confounds contemporary clichés in that she is a victim who survives her violation, though not unscathed, and refuses to be silenced. In *America: A Prophecy* (1793), however, when Blake grapples with the righteousness of using violence to oppose the forces of oppression, his conflation of liberty with a lack of sexual inhibition opens the door to an exploration of the male perpetrator of sexual violence and seems to reinforce the popular British association between revolutionary agitation and sexual aggression. In Orc, the central figure of *America*, Blake embodies the spirit of revolution in the form of a hyper-masculine youth, hairy, muscular, and virile, whose nature is to defy all limits and trample all boundaries in his path. Once enslaved himself, he achieves his freedom by sexually assaulting a female figure whose characterization as an apparently willing victim seems to muddy her status. After feminist theory transformed academic discourse on rape in the mid-twentieth century, the episode became a subject of controversy for critics and has remained so ever since. For some it can be explained away as a "supposed rape" (Vine 42) or, even more problematically, a "consensual rape-embrace" (Hobson 103), forgivable because it is politically "necessary" (Behrendt 41), while for others it is plainly an act of predatory misogyny that is endorsed by Blake's narrator and therefore, presumably, by the author himself (Bruder 124–25). Perhaps, however, the equivocal nature of the incident is meaningful rather than evasive, itself a manifestation of Blake's growing disquiet regarding what boundaries, if any, the push for universal liberation should observe. As this article will demonstrate, in *America* and in later poems that return to this pivotal incident in Orc's story, Blake engages in a series of hermeneutic revisions of the moment in which liberation and forced sex collide in his mythopoeia, repeatedly confronting the contradictions at the heart of his representation of emancipation. Rape would thus become a way for Blake to think through a growing suspicion that beneath the hunger for a sudden, violent enactment of universal liberty lay a craving within the self to universalize its own desires even if this means the obliteration of the subjecthood of the other.

"On his stormy bed / Lay the faint maid"

The most discussed representation of rape in Blake's mythopoeia is undoubtedly that of Oothoon in *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*. Oothoon, who celebrates "Love! Love! Love! happy happy Love! free as the mountain wind!" (50), is often taken to embody a rare instance in late-eighteenth-century literature of the positive representation of a desiring female self. Yet, however close Oothoon may be to achieving positive sexual apotheosis at the outset of the narrative, her first sexual experience brings this process

to a traumatic end. As she flies to meet her lover, Theotormon, she is attacked by the jealous Bromion, who "[rends] her with his thunders. on his stormy bed / Lay the faint maid, and soon her woes appalld his thunders hoarse" (46).[5] Unlike the majority of contemporary authors, Blake does not shy away from the brutal violence of the act of rape. Indeed, throughout his oeuvre Blake uses the verb "to rend," connoting a vicious and destructive tearing apart, to refer to sexual assault. Nor does he ignore the all too common response to rape victims in his society, though *Visions* is set on a mythic plane far from the realities of life. With its long speeches reading as if they were conflicting witness statements, Misty Kreuger reads *Visions* as "an appropriation of eighteenth-century rhetoric on rape" (149) as seen in legal trials in the period. Blake also evokes the many accounts of the vicious treatment of women on slave plantations common in abolitionist writing when Bromion, in the wake of the rape, claims Oothoon's "soft American plains" as his own as well as the "swarthy children of the sun" that inhabit them (46). Yet, as Bethan Stevens notes, Blake departs from the conventions of abolitionist poetry, much of it produced by women, who, because of their "need to avoid being seen as perverse spectators," were inclined to write "veiled representations of rape" (246). This often led, consciously or unconsciously, to the sentimentalizing and covert eroticization of the slave's suffering, impulses Blake actively resists.

Like Clarissa, Oothoon suffers an interruption of consciousness during the attack, a state which absolved her fictional counterpart of moral complicity in the eyes of Richardson's readers, but within the world of Blake's text this distinction matters little—like an American slave her consent is irrelevant to those for whom her body is a commodity. After the attack Bromion casually dismisses Oothoon, calling her "Bromions harlot" (46) when he tries to hand her off to Theotormon. Wounded and angry, Oothoon's former lover then rejects her as an adulteress even though she was incapable of giving her consent when Bromion attacked her. Theotormon behaves as if her loss of his love and respect justifies the total revocation of her liberty, chaining Oothoon to her rapist, in an act that prompts David Erdman to remark that "love and slavery" are the "two poles of the poem's axis" (*Prophet* 228). *Visions* therefore does not only explore how Oothoon is wronged in the moment, but also how the response of others compounds that initial trauma in the aftermath of the violation. As becomes apparent only later in the text, the actions of both Bromion and Theotormon ultimately endanger Oothoon's most precious attribute: the revolutionary imagination that had once symbolized the liberatory potential of America itself.

With its portrayal of Oothoon's suffering *Visions* explores the psychological effects of her subjection and invokes the reality of widespread sexual exploitation within the colonial system through her role as the representative of the nascent American nation.[6] Oothoon's response in the aftermath of the assault reveals that in her traumatized condition she has internalized the repressive ideology that would attach the largest portion of the moral stigma associated with sexual violation to the victim. In a speech on plate 2 she explicitly accepts the blame for her own assault and deliriously welcomes her penance by calling on Theotormon's eagles to "Rend away this defiled bosom" (46) in a disconcertingly sexualized image that allusively reenacts her rape with the use of the key term "rend." Her embrace of the word "defil'd" to describe her own body is also significant since it directly contradicts the rejection of sexual shame, "the soul of sweet delight can never be defil'd" (54), that appears first in Blake's *The Marriage of Heaven and*

Hell and is repeated in *America* by Orc, the voice of revolution. In the opening lines of *Visions* a "Golden nymph" echoes this phrase when exhorting Oothoon to pluck one of her flowers (symbolizing the loss of virginity), but with the substitution of "Can never pass away" for "can never be defil'd" (46), prefiguring Oothoon's defilement but also her survival. Oothoon, who embodies the "soft American plains" (46), could no more escape her defilement than America could deny the historical fact of its colonial origins or its slave-based economy.

Though Oothoon lives on she is tormented by the loss of the happy state of innocence in which she felt no shame at her desire. Her altered attitude towards sexuality is evident in her longing to be cleansed of her (purported) sin and to become "pure" once more, a term she uses no fewer than six times in her speech that makes up the remainder of the work. More ominously, she displays a total disregard for the sexual autonomy of others when she fantasizes that she will ensnare other girls in "silken nets and traps of adamant" (50) for Theotormon's sexual enjoyment since she is no longer able to pleasure him herself. It is just about plausible to construe Oothoon's speech up to this point, as Harold Bloom does, as a subversive argument in favor of "free love" (900) in which sexual fulfilment is available to all in any combination. Yet even if Oothoon's "nets and traps" are silky soft, their significance should not be minimized. Whatever their material, for Blake, such implements were a byword for oppression and exploitation in his writing. This moment is therefore, as Helen Bruder has asserted, one of many instances of Oothoon's "discursive self-betrayal" (79) in the text. Indeed, earlier on in *Visions* Oothoon herself railed against the "nets & gins & traps" of the parson who captures others and drowns them in "cold floods of abstraction" (49). In *Visions*, rape is thus shown to be a tool and symbol of oppression that does not dispose of its victims in a tidy, narratively satisfying manner but scars them in ways that have far-reaching consequences both for the victim and for those around her.

"He siez'd the panting struggling womb"

In the same year that Blake completed *Visions*, he produced another work that explores the power dynamics of sexual assault but in a very different way: *America: A Prophecy*. *America* is a mythic retelling of the events of the American War of Independence, incorporating real figures (such as General Washington and George III) but focused on Blake's invented personification of the revolutionary spirit, Orc. In the body of the poem, Orc appears as a "Wonder o'er the Atlantic" (53) whose fires fuel the revolutionaries' fight for liberty. Yet, in a development that sits uncomfortably alongside his role as liberator, the two-page introductory "Preludium" section tells the seemingly unrelated story of Orc's own release from imprisonment, which he accomplishes through a coercive sexual encounter with a nebulous female figure, the "Shadowy Female." It is notable that the Preludium appears to have been a late addition to the text. Blake added the Preludium subtitle on a separate piece of copper plating only after the plate had been finished (Dörrbecker 74). This suggests that as the work moved towards completion Blake was engaged in something of a reassessment of his vision of Orcian revolutionary change.[7] By bringing to the surface the contradictions inherent in the representation of Orc-led universal liberation as the product of violent, masculine self-assertion, however,

this late-stage alteration threatens the poem's internal cohesion. Blake, nevertheless, preserved these tensions around Orc's actions in the finished narrative.

With the insertion of the Preludium Blake introduced a disconcerting thematic conflict into the text of *America*, which is most apparent in the discrepancy between Orc's behavior in the new opening section and his vehement celebration of the free, autonomous expression of sexual desire when he rallies the revolutionaries in the body of the work. In this speech, which appears on plate 8, Orc equates the founding of the new revolutionary order with a world in which

> … pale religious letchery, seeking Virginity,
> May find it in a harlot, and in coarse-clad honesty
> The undefil'd tho' ravish'd in her cradle night and morn:
> For everything that lives is holy, life delights in life;
> Because the soul of sweet delight can never be defil'd. (54)

Sexual and political freedom are thus envisioned as one and the same, while the forbidding doctrines of religious moralism are swept aside by a burst of erotic joy summed up by his reiteration of Oothoon's euphoric exclamation that "everything that lives is holy!" from *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*. With his echoing of a victim of sexual assault and his defiant assertion that even the "ravish'd" female body remains nonetheless "undefil'd," Orc champions those whose exploitation was treated as a matter of course in Blake's society. Indeed, Orc emphatically rejects traditional models of morality that blamed the victims of sexual predation for their own suffering while excusing the perpetrators' actions as the natural state of things. By linking the abuse of vulnerable female bodies to the cause of American independence, Orc further demonstrates that his aim is not simply to challenge oppression within the political sphere. His intention is to indict the entire system that would use shame as a means to cow the people into a state of abject submission. For Blake this rigidly moralistic worldview would come to be embodied in his mythology by Urizen, the demigod of hypocritical rationalism. In *America*, it is Orc who stamps Urizen's "stony law" of "ten commands" into dust, decrying it as a perversion of "fiery joy" (54).[8] Orc, the sexually liberated youth opposed to all checks on libidinous, disruptive energy, thus offers himself as the foremost adversary of the repressive, totalizing system that seeks to colonize every aspect of life, which Saree Makdisi has dubbed the "Universal Empire" (157). Orc's rousing defense of sexual freedom cannot, however, banish the shadow cast by the events of the Preludium, which hint that his equation of liberty with carnal gratification masks a deep seam of entitlement that has its origins in the narcissistic pleasures of violent aggression.

Blake used the subtitle, Preludium, a portentous sounding Latin word meaning simply "prelude" or "introduction," only in *America* (1793), *Europe: A Prophecy* (1794), and *The Book of Urizen* (1794), suggesting that *America* increasingly anticipated those gloomier works of 1794 as it reached its final form. Why he felt the need to add this material is not immediately apparent, however, since the episode bears only a vague relation to the body of the work and the events described in it are not referenced again until the Preludium of *Europe*. Given the lack of an obvious connection to the narrative proper, John Beer posits that the Preludium is intended to represent a possible point of intersection between Blake's eternal mythology and the "historical" events to follow (103). However, while the reader is given only a hazy sense of how precisely it relates to the

rest of the narrative, the "pre" of Preludium does indeed indicate, if nothing else, that it occurs sequentially "before" the poem proper. The prefatory relationship it implies does not apply to the "Argument" subtitle Blake had favored up to this point for the introductory sections of *All Religions Are One* (1788), *There Is No Natural Religion* (1788), *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1790), and *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*. The syntactic relationship of the Preludium to the body of the poem is suggested most strikingly in the color copies (such as copy M from 1793: see Figure 2). At the bottom of plate 4 at the end of the Preludium there is an image of Orc emerging from the earth with what can be identified in the colored images as the first rays of the sun haloed behind him. If, as seems likely, this is indeed the breaking of the new dawn Orc's appearance presages in the body of the poem, then the implication is that the disturbing episode depicted on these plates occurs immediately before the events of the rest of the poem. Susan Matthews comments circumspectly with reference to both Oothoon's rape and the assault of the Shadowy Female that "[sex is] the event which precipitates or allows the possibility of change" (*Blake* 150). The events of the Preludium, specifically Orc's encounter with the Shadowy Female, make his later actions possible: imprisoned, he cannot lead the revolutionaries to victory. If the Preludium is causally linked to the narrative in the body of the poem then the moral significance of Orc's attack on the Shadowy Female, and the question of whether or not it should be considered rape, cannot be separated from the meaning of the larger work.

Though both Oothoon and the Shadowy Female suffer an assault, the very different framing of their experiences reflects the complicated contemporary response to the victims of sexual violence. Indeed, it would appear that with the Preludium of *America* Blake was very deliberately rewriting the episode in *Visions* in much murkier terms.[9] Perhaps most significantly, while in *Visions* the "faint" Oothoon is confirmed to the reader as being incapable of giving her consent, in *America* the Shadowy Female's victimhood is less clearly delineated. Orc's erotic partner, variously called the "nameless female," the "shadowy daughter of Urthona," and the "Dark virgin," is assigned a series of contingent identities that define her largely through her association with males. She is only real enough to be a reflection of masculine desire, simultaneously flimsy and fleshly, and so cannot access the interiority that had become a crucial component of the drama around consent in the literature of the era. Indeed, for Matthews, although the assumption that the scene is a rape is "virtually universal" (*Blake* 149) among critics, the fact that "we can have no access to the Shadowy Female's consciousness" makes it impossible to determine definitively, given the cultural construction of rape in the period (151). Relentlessly objectified from the start, all of the Shadowy Female's body is exposed to Orc's gaze save for her veiled face, which evokes dehumanizing orientalist fantasies, and her genitals, ominously described as "awful folds" (51), are concealed in sublime secrecy. The Shadowy Female's coy semi-nakedness associates her with stereotypes of the manipulative seductress, her cynical performance of feminine "modesty" designed to madden men with desire while refusing to fulfil it.[10]

Although almost all of the Shadowy Female's body is available to Orc's view, he claims that his "red eyes" seek only to "behold [her] face" (51), sounding very much like the too-ardent lover of romance. Upon winning his freedom, however, it is not the Shadowy Female's face he reaches for:

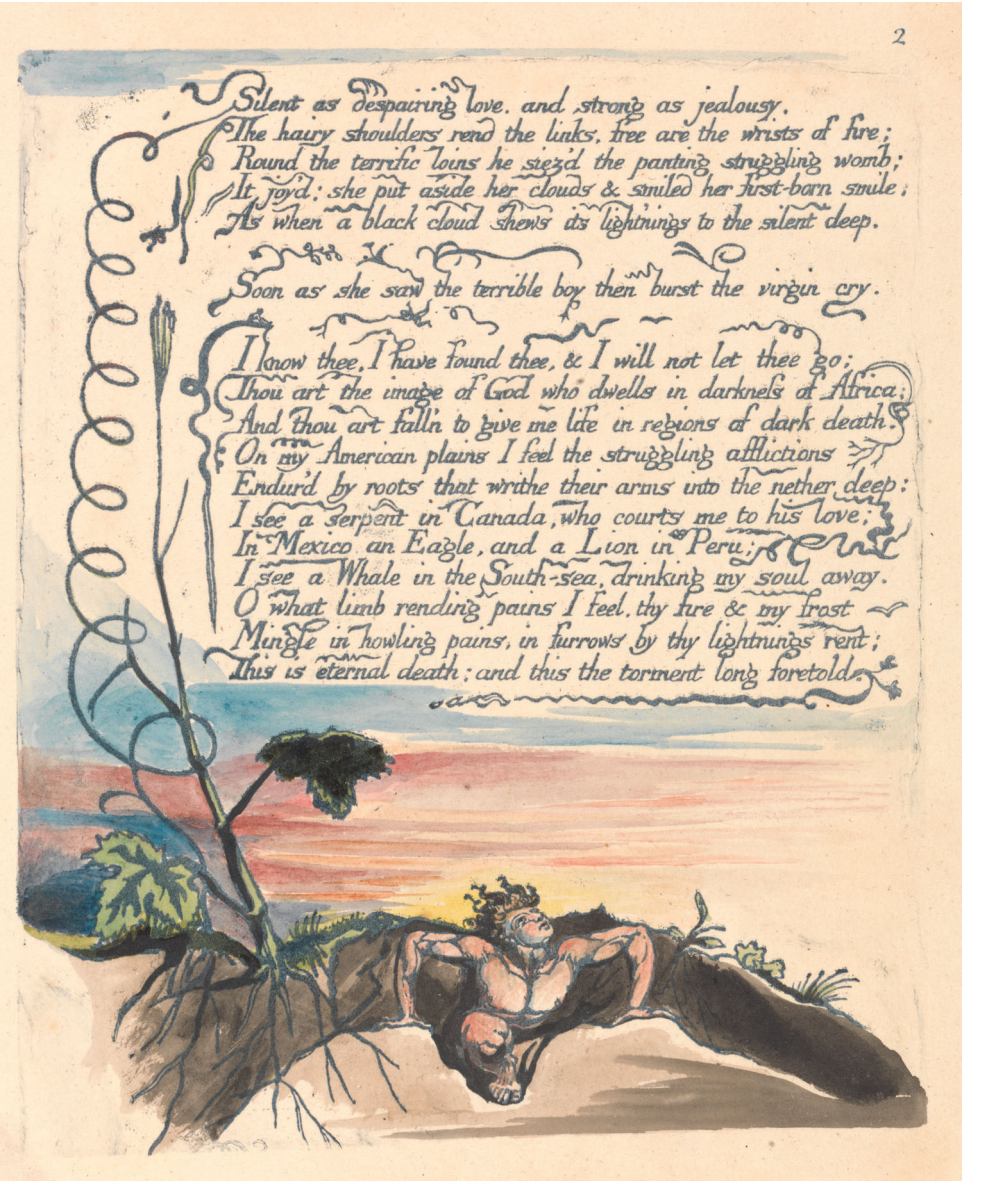

Figure 2. William Blake, Plate 4, Copy M, America: A Prophecy. 1793. Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection.

> Round the terrific loins he siez'd the panting struggling womb;
> It joy'd: she put aside her clouds & smiled her first-born smile
> As when a black cloud shews its light'nings to the silent deep. (52)

In place of the horror of the assault in *Visions* the encounter between the Shadowy Female and Orc plays out like a disturbing parody of a romance narrative with the Shadowy Female at first resisting Orc's advances but soon uncovering her face for him and welcoming him with her "first-born smile." The Shadowy Female's reaction in the moment

appears to transform what began as an act of forced sex into a matter of delayed synchronization of desire reminiscent of moments of dubious consent in works of early-eighteenth-century amatory fiction. Such a response would certainly have rendered any accusation of rape worthless in both the legal and the public realms of the period. Nevertheless, language such as "siez'd" and "struggling" conveys the violence of Orc's actions and demonstrates plainly that her reciprocation of his desire was as irrelevant to him as Oothoon's was to Bromion. Furthermore, the Shadowy Female does not simply lack the subjectivity necessary to register her consent, as Matthews astutely points out; in the moment of the assault he actively denies it to her. The Shadowy Female is degraded in the most explicit terms possible when in the course of the attack she is stripped of any subjective dimension and reclassified as a set of semi-sentient sex organs. Transformed into an objectified womb, she is denoted by the pronoun "it" in "It joy'd," while her subjective response, "she smiles," is shunted to the following line. Matthews observes that before 1800 Blake did not distinguish reliably between these concepts, a conflation that was typical of the period ("Sex" 317–18). However, in this passage he does make it clear that the equation of the female self with her sexed body robs her of any possibility of subjecthood. The Shadowy Female's reproductive capability has become the only index of her identity. It is difficult, if not impossible to reconcile this debasement of the sexualized female form with Orc's revolutionary speech, which characterized women's freely expressed sexuality as the "soul of sweet delight" that could "never be defil'd." Orc may, by her retroactive consent, be said to evade the charge of rape at least on the cultural terms of Blake's era, yet by using the Shadowy Female in this way he has surely violated her by the standards of his own doctrine of erotic liberation.

Paradoxically, Orc's degrading attack triggers the Shadowy Female's ability to assert herself as a desiring subject, a development which invites uncomfortable interpretations as it suggests that forced sex can be a legitimate part of the process of liberation. Critics have long struggled to explicate this problematic implication. Morton Paley interprets the episode as a rape but argues that in its presentation its significance is largely symbolic. In this reading "Nature" in the form of the Shadowy Female is the "vacuum" animated by Orc's "energy" (125–26). Bloom eschews symbolic exegesis, suggesting instead that the assault should be considered an act of charity because it gives "the previously silent woman a voice" (902). Jon Mee echoes this reading, describing the Shadowy Female as "voiceless till liberated by Orc," but reads this as a statement of Orc's "unsatisfactory" complicity in patriarchal power (*Dangerous Enthusiasm* 104). The line which informs these varying interpretations describes the Shadowy Female as "dumb till that dread day when Orc assay'd his fierce embrace" (51). The meaning is ambiguous but it does seem to credit Orc with bestowing some form of self-determination upon her through the sex act. Could this be Blake's representation of the reality emerging in revolutionary France in which those who would not consent to be liberated, such as the counter-revolutionaries of the fertile Vendée region, had freedom forced upon them? Perhaps the significance of Orc's actions can best be judged on the basis of what the Shadowy Female chooses to do with her newfound liberty.

If Orc does, indeed, grant the Shadowy Female a kind of freedom by forcing sex upon her, what then does that freedom enable her to do? With her first words she announces to Orc: "I know thee, I have found thee, & I will not let thee go" (52). While he has asserted his total control over her body, she declares her ownership of all that he is. The Shadowy

Female's response to Orc's transgression thus corrupts their bond further, turning Orc's assault into a kind of shared defilement, as violation provokes further violation. If we are to judge the success of her "liberation" by its effects, it would seem that Orc, the spirit of revolution, has been transformed into both a conqueror and a slave. The impression that theirs is a union defined by reciprocal subjection is strengthened by the Shadowy Female's speech, which rounds off the Preludium by invoking the specter of slavery to characterize their dynamic. Claiming that she feels "the struggling afflictions" on her "American plains," an allusion both to her own pain and to the suffering of the slave populations, she casts Orc as the deity of those enslaved, describing him as "the image of God who dwells in darkness of Africa" (52). The Shadowy Female's final pronouncement is a statement of how much his revolutionary power has been compromised by his encounter with her, as she declares that his fall has conferred his creative energy upon her, giving her "life in regions of dark death" (52). In her celebration of their mutual enslavement, the Shadowy Female reveals that although she is now capable of giving voice to her desires, her imagination is still in fetters, trapping her in a state of living death that is anathema to liberty.

If the source of Orc's rebellious power, his libidinous energy, is tainted by the ugly manner in which he secures his liberty in the Preludium, then all his words and actions from that point onwards, including those that inspire the American revolutionaries, must also be considered tainted. That the late insertion of the Preludium introduces such inconsistencies into Blake's representation of Orc may be an indication that the episode was the product of an abrupt mid-composition shift in his attitude towards Orc when the process of creating *America* was already far advanced.[11] This supposition is supported by an illustration that appears on one of the plates Blake chose not to include in the final work. On cancelled plate c an image in the bottom left-hand corner shows a naked male figure who appears to be sexually assaulting a female figure with her arms thrust above her head in a posture that suggests surrender or distress (Figure 3). The text that accompanies the image refers to attacks carried out by the forces of "Albion's Angel" (the embodiment of British colonial power) against the American rebels. Erdman connects the image to the rapine of America's "soft plains" in the attacks on the Shadowy Female in the Preludium and Oothoon in *Visions* (*Illuminated Blake* 394), which would also have the effect of linking Orc to the cruel slaver Bromion. The implications of this chain of associations for the interpretation of Orc's shifting valence in Blake's oeuvre makes it important to determine, as far as is possible, at what stage Blake created and discarded the plate. The style in which Blake executed the design is consistent with that of the finished plates of *America*. It is therefore probable that plate c was produced at or around the same time as the text we are now familiar with was completed (Dörrbecker 72), but before those containing the Preludium. As such, the image is an unequivocal statement that at a point when Blake was deep into the composition of *America* he was still using rape to symbolize the brutal actions of British colonialism. By representing Orc despoiling the "soft plains" of America Blake therefore chose to align him with the repressive and exploitative logic of empire. From this perspective, what Orc does to the Shadowy Female in the Preludium amounts to a devastating and darkly ironic self-indictment for the savior of American liberty.

Immediately after the poisonous speech given by the Shadowy Female in the Preludium, Blake included four lines that retrospectively recast the entire episode as a

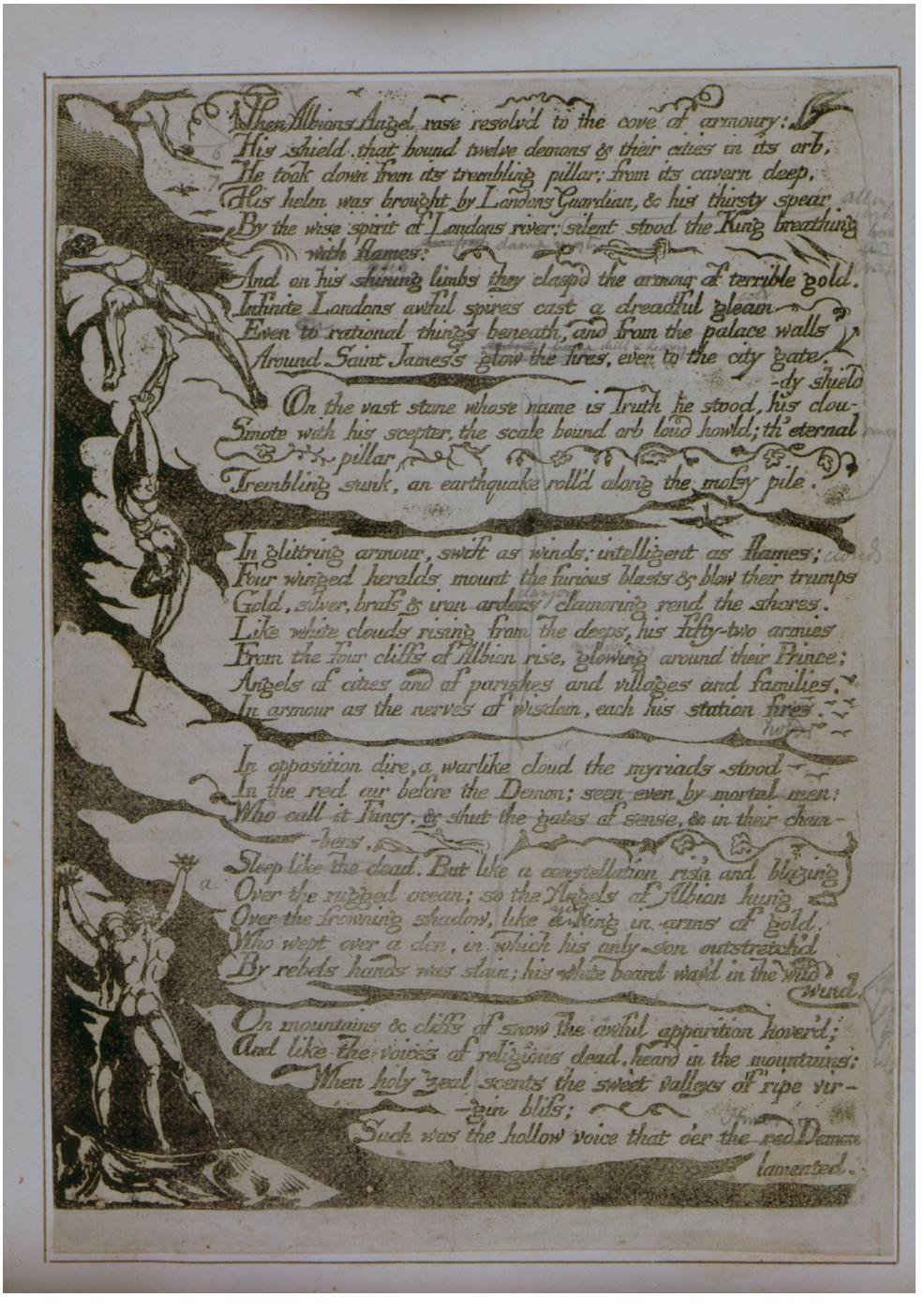

Figure 3. William Blake, cancelled plate c from *America: A Prophecy*. London, 1793. Library of Congress, Rare Book and Special Collections Division.

"song" of the Bard, a being who represents the time-bound aspect of prophecy in his writing. Yet if this is the case the Bard's response hints at deep unease with the events of the introductory section:

> *The stern Bard ceas'd, asham'd of his own song; enrag'd he swung*
> *His harp aloft sounding, then dash'd its shining frame against*
> *A ruin'd pillar in glittring fragments; silent he turn'd away,*
> *And wander'd down the vales of Kent in sick & drear lamentings.* (52; Erdman's italics)

In his editorial notes on the passage, Erdman speculates that because they first appear in copy A printed in 1795, Blake did not add these "'harp-shattering' lines" until then making them the expression of a later, momentary "despair in the Prophecy" (802). This would explain why some copies include them while others do not. It would also have the effect of pushing the timeline for Blake's re-evaluation of the potential for Orcian revolution forward from 1793 to 1795. Blake's despondency would presumably by then be justified, for Erdman, since the "Gagging Acts" had since been passed and true revolutionary change appeared a much more distant prospect. There is, however, evidence that the lines were present from the beginning and Blake merely covered them with a piece of paper in the earlier print runs (Bentley 87).[12] As Blake's representative in his poetry, the Bard has the authority to judge Orc's actions, and the image is a bleak one of a creator sickened by his creation. Blake's hesitation as to whether to include these lines may therefore lie in the fact that they remove any remaining doubt surrounding the meaning of Orc's actions in the Preludium. Perhaps Blake, in 1793, was not yet prepared to take that step.

The issue of whether or not Orc's assault on the Shadowy Female in the Preludium qualifies as rape in the strictest sense of the term has occupied quite a bit of critical attention. Yet, by focusing on whether or not Orc can be absolved of this transgression, narrowly defined, the larger significance of the episode can retreat from view. To exonerate Orc still leaves unresolved the problem of how his involvement in a relationship dynamic that the Shadowy Female refers to as "eternal death" (52) can be compatible with Orc's own equation of sexual autonomy with imaginative liberation. In *Europe*, dated 1794, Blake would pursue what Orc's inability to extricate himself from his tie to the Shadowy Female would mean for his potential as the avatar of revolutionary change. In the Preludium to *Europe* the narrative picks up in the immediate aftermath of the sex between the Shadowy Female and Orc which produces self-consuming offspring that are "Devouring & devoured" (61). According to contemporary legal and medical theory, the Shadowy Female's pregnancy would be taken as definitive proof that the sex between them was not rape.[13] Yet the symbolic significance of their monstrous reproduction for the cause of liberty is inescapable. The children born of the spirit of revolution are self-destructive slaves branded at birth "with a signet" (61). Blake thus hints that beneath the hope that America's newly free society represented for radicals lurks the continuing reality of the slave economy. With regard to these misbegotten children, the Shadowy Female crows that she has redirected the energy of Orc's rebellious fires to "bring forth howling terrors, all devouring fiery kings" (61). From the wellspring of revolution a new generation of power-hungry petty tyrants flows just as the French Revolution in time produced its own would-be kings and emperors. If Orc feels horror or outrage or, indeed, anything at all in response to this debasement of his great purpose

we get no sense of it. He is completely mute throughout *Europe* betraying nothing of his inner life and showing no concern for the repression of others within the system. Taking on the form of a serpent, he becomes the embodiment of ravening appetite incapable of either thought or speech. In fact, in *Europe* there is little beyond the name to link this mindless "horrent fiend" (66) to the awe-inspiring figure who so eloquently expressed his righteous fury in *America*.

"Orc rent her & his human form consumd in his own fires"

America presents Orc's attack on the Shadowy Female as a step that makes possible both his liberation and the uprising of the American Revolutionaries, but one that may also fatally compromise his ability to bring about universal liberty. After taking the relationship between Orc and the Shadowy Female to even darker depths in *Europe*, reflecting the bleak atmosphere of the mid-1790s, Blake would revisit the episode yet again in *Vala, or The Four Zoas* (1797).[14] With *The Four Zoas*, Blake attempted to produce a great epic that would bring together the various strands of his existing mythopoeic works as part of a larger narrative of spiritual and visionary redemption that takes place over nine long nights of the soul. However, the unfinished state of the manuscript, which he worked on for almost a decade, speaks to his difficulty in reconciling the competing narratives within this structure as his ideology continued to evolve. The text breaks down completely at Night VII, which exists in two entirely different forms critics refer to as Night VIIa and Night VIIb, a schism that Blake either could not or would not resolve. The iteration of the episode from the Preludium to *America* appears in Night VIIb and continues Blake's efforts of the mid-1790s to work through the full implications of the corruption of the energy principle as the historical moment of revolutionary possibility receded into the past. Importantly, the alterations Blake made to the version in *The Four Zoas* speak to a shift in perception that suggests he had moved beyond any ambivalence he might once have felt regarding the significance of the episode. Thus, while *The Four Zoas* closely replicates the narrative of Orc's attack on the Shadowy Female from *America*, the later version is both more incisive and less equivocal in its portrayal of the encounter.

In comparison to *America*, a more complex emotional dynamic emerges between Orc and the Shadowy Female (elsewhere identified in *The Four Zoas* as Vala[15]) in Night VIIb, which sees her develop into much more than a half-formed manifestation of his unbridled lust. From the start she acts on her own agenda, and the narrative is explicit that her conscious aim is to subsume Orc's insurgent energy and thereby enslave him. To this end, she deliberately disguises her intent with an excessive display of feminine victimhood, consisting of "sighs & howling & deep sobs that he might lose his rage / And with it lose himself in meekness" (363). Her performance is intended to neuter Orc's capacity for violent self-assertion by appealing to his sympathies, which both she and Orc perceive as an enfeebling feminization of masculine vigor. G. A. Rosso argues that this behavior "associates the Shadowy Female with the diversion of sexual energy into social mores and war, exposing her constitutive role in the formation and maintenance of Britain's imperial state" (ch. 2). It is by her influence that Orc will become not merely subject to the "Universal Empire" but its chief enforcer.

Unlike in *America*, however, Orc is awake to the Shadowy Female's manipulations from the outset, denouncing her deployment of the stereotypically feminine wiles of

"Pity & Meek affection" (363). He is even cognizant that it is "by these arts the Serpent form exuded from his limbs" (363) bringing about his degeneration. But despite his awareness he falls into the same old abusive pattern, using her machinations as a pretext for his subsequent assault of her. Although she may embody his fears of deceitful femininity, this time there is no sense from the text that this justifies the violence of his reaction. Insulted by her attempts to dictate his emotional response, his energy spills over into a misogynistic rage that in its extremity is the corollary to her feminine excesses: he attacks her out of jealousy "that she was Vala now become Urizens harlot / And the Harlot of Los & the deluded harlot of the Kings of Earth" (363). The line, "Silent as despairing love & strong as Jealousy" (363) from Night VIIb is quoted verbatim from the Preludium to *America* but in the earlier poem the cause of Orc's "Jealousy" was never clarified. In *The Four Zoas* Orc brands her Vala the harlot, his use of the epithet linking him, once again, to the brutal, colonialist figure of Bromion from *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*, who uses the same derogatory term to condemn Oothoon after he rapes her. All traces of the Orc who defended female sexuality and espoused a belief that it could "never be defil'd" have vanished. Uncoupled from the history of the Americans' bid for freedom, Orc's struggle to free himself is now wholly driven by a vindictive desire to assert his power by punishing faithless womanhood.

While the ambiguity around Orc's attack on the Shadowy Female in *America* has allowed some to dismiss or downplay its disturbing implications and thus shield Orc in his role as liberator from opprobrium, in *The Four Zoas* the connection between the act of rape and Orc's own degeneration is incontrovertible. Not only is he conscious in advance of the consequences of his attack, but the narrative also unsparingly describes how "Orc rent her & his human form consumd in his own fires" (365). The imagery is vividly metaphoric as Orc's raging lust is not merely presented as animalistic, but it also precipitates his transformation into the form of the monstrous phallic serpent. In contrast to the more equivocal presentation in *America*, the link between Orc's warlike nature and his capacity for sexual violence is also unmistakable as war, now detached from the liberatory aims of revolution, is implicated in the attack: "Loud sounds the war song round red Orc in his [*?triumphant*] fury / And round the nameless shadowy Female in her howling terror" (364). That Orc's martial campaign has little to do with true freedom is underscored when it is revealed that those who are bred to feed the war machine are "Kept ignorant of the use that they might spend the days of wisdom / In sorrowful drudgery to obtain a scanty pittance of bread / In ignorance to view a small portion & think that All" (364). The system Orc's war ushers in is an empire of exploitation and misery, its inhabitants conditioned to believe that this pitiful measure of freedom is "All" they can hope for. In a debased parody of the Atonement, which Blake elsewhere had called "murder" (614), shot through with bleak historical allusions to the internecine excesses of the French Revolution,[16] Orc is then crucified in his incarnation as "Luvah"[17] upon the "Tree of Mystery" by the very fighters whose violence he inspired: "They cast the lots into the helmet, / They vote the death of Luvah & they naild him to the tree" (364). With this hermeneutic revision of his earlier depictions of the "liberation" delivered by the energy principle Blake reveals this utterly corrupted version of Orc, who had once symbolized the possibility of real change, to be a prisoner of his own urges and incapable even of saving himself.

In his portrayal of the episode between Orc and the Shadowy Female/Vala in *The Four Zoas* Blake decisively detaches the issue of the morality of Orc's actions from questions surrounding her fulfilment of the role of victim. Indeed, although the text is clear in linking Orc's assault of her to his debasement, this does not mean that she becomes a more conventional or sympathetic victim. Rather, in *The Four Zoas*, Vala grows to become considerably more powerful and malevolent, glorying in her role as the fatal, delusive woman of man's most paranoid imaginings. The narrator places particular emphasis on the pleasure Vala experiences at the violence Orc has unleashed and her malicious delight in his total degradation: "She joyd in all the Conflict Gratified & drinking tears of woe / No more remaind of Orc but the serpent" (365). Wandering alone in the aftermath of the attack, Vala, weeping and yet luxuriating in the chaos she and Orc have instigated, encounters Tharmas, whose rage she encourages in order to fan the flames of war. Tharmas, in his anger, then accuses her of being ultimately responsible for the destruction that has ensued when he declares: "Vala thy Sins have lost us heaven & bliss / Thou art our Curse" (366). She is a new Eve, who feels only a pleasurable self-pity at the fallen world she has helped to bring into being and who goes on to found a corrupt, blood-thirsty religion centered on Luvah/Orc that is a parody of Christianity, celebrating death, war, and ritual sacrifice.

In *The Four Zoas* the encounter between Orc and Vala is presented as part of a larger exploration of the division of the sexes, which in the poem exemplifies the spiritual struggle between love and despair within the self. Orc and Vala are one of four major pairings in the work (the four "zoas" of the title and their female "emanations" or counterparts) who fall into conflict and are then each reunited in the denouement of Nights VIII–IX. Though the text was once named *Vala*,[18] suggesting she at some time played a central role in the narrative, the prolonged and elaborate resolution of Orc (as Luvah) and Vala's estrangement in Night IX is perhaps the least satisfying of the four. After being consumed by fire in their degenerate forms,[19] Luvah and Vala are reborn in an Edenic garden. Andrew Lincoln notes that the episode has the character of a "pastoral interlude" (207), yet Blake inverts the familiar gender dynamics of the pastoral in which the beautiful nymph resists the lusty shepherd's embrace. When Vala searches the garden for Luvah it is he who shyly avoids her presence and floats "invisible" over her head "in bright clouds" (395). He speaks to her as a disembodied voice and even when she asks, "Why shouldst thou hide thyself from Vala[?]" (398), he refuses to show himself. He appears to her only when she is dreaming, a dream vision within a dream:

> When in the pleasant gates of sleep I enterd
> I saw my Luvah like a spirit stand in the bright air
> My Luvah smild I kneeled down he laid his hand on my head
> And when he laid his hand upon me from the gates of sleep I came
> Into this bodily house. (397)

The reconciliation between Luvah and Vala is complicated by Luvah's ascension to become an incarnation of the "Divine Vision," the embodiment of Jesus's message that liberation comes through love for the other and the conscious casting off of selfish impulses that Blake calls "self-annihilation." Aside from the brief moment of blessing within her dream, in which Luvah appears before Vala as the resurrected Jesus did before Mary Magdalene, their relationship conspicuously lacks any physical dimension.

Indeed, Luvah avoids contact with her so assiduously that it implies that even in his exalted state she still represents the danger of sexual contamination to him.[20] For the other male/female pairings in *The Four Zoas* reconciliation between the sexes is figured as an "embrace" (which is loving and erotic if not explicitly sexual) in which the female is reabsorbed into the male, representing a return to wholeness. Luvah and Vala, however, remain separated from one another. As the incarnation of the Divine Vision, Luvah has become a passive, sexless figure for whom a woman's touch is anathema, while Vala, whose motives cannot be subordinated, whose sexed nature cannot be expunged, remains stubbornly unassimilable. Instead, their sojourn in the garden inaugurates a new status quo in which he confines her to her "bodily house" (both a real house he has built for her and a metaphor for her body), while he remains pure spirit. Having reached this point, sex between them can therefore reveal nothing more for Blake in his mythopoeia. In Milton (1807), the Orc/Vala episode recurs but while Orc once again responds to what he perceives as sexual provocation from Vala, this time when he "rends" her it is "limb from limb & joint from joint" (112) with no suggestion of a sexual dimension. In *Jerusalem* (1804–20) Luvah becomes her father rather than her lover.

Perhaps in an earlier version of the *Four Zoas* manuscript, which we might call *Vala*, Blake used the narrative schema he had created around the division and reunification of the sexes to redeem Vala and Luvah/Orc through sexual consummation. Luvah's name is an aural echo of his one-time narrative role and his birth, from the loins of Albion, signifies his inherently sexual nature. Such a resolution would have had the effect of restoring a higher purpose to the spirit of revolution in Luvah-as-Orc, healing the fissure between revelation and revolution, history and vision, which had bedeviled Blake's mythopoeia since *America*. Furthermore, if this reunification had taken the sexual form that is implied by Vala's references to "my Luvah" it would also have served to redeem heterosexual, generative sexuality from the destructive, mutually hostile dynamics that dominate relations between the sexes in Blake's writing in the latter half of the 1790s. If this was once his plan for the work, however, only traces remain of it. Blake either discarded or never attempted the dubious narrative arc that would have taken Orc from Vala's rapist to her loving sexual partner as Luvah. In later phases of the composition, the struggle for supremacy between male and female in *The Four Zoas* moved away from the genitally focused sexuality of Vala (womb) and Luvah (phallus) and became rooted in a battle of wills whose resolution is in the recognition that true victory lies in the achievement of universal pleasure. Thus Los, the zoa dubbed the "Eternal Prophet," who moved to the center of Blake's mythopoeia in the final decades of his life, must first set aside his "Domineering lust" (367) before he can embrace his emanation Enitharmon.

Over the course of his career, Blake's writing both reflects and reflects upon the paradoxical representation of rape in his society. The hermeneutic spiral of his inquiry reveals it to be an act that is at once the ultimate expression of individual freedom and a tyrannical betrayal of the larger goal of universal liberty. That he chose to use rape as the prism through which to explore the moral complexities of his feelings around the violence that had engulfed the revolutionary cause in the mid-1790s displays both his discomfort at these developments and his keen sense of the intersecting lines of power and subjugation in his society. The contested critical

reception of this episode even to this day indicates that the encounter remains disturbing, resisting moral simplification and drawing the reader into the complicated reality of colonial and patriarchal power structures, which enmesh victims and their abusers in webs of mutual debasement. Trapped in the sexed roles society has preordained for them, the Shadowy Female, as the deceitful temptress, and Orc, as her sexually unrestrained attacker, can never be reconciled since their relationship is a negative dialectic in which each corrupts the other. Thus, while Orc, with his libidinous excesses, was at one time synonymous, for Blake, with liberation, the Preludium of *America* signals the start of a shift that would reveal him to be an instrument of the very imperial system from which he presents himself as the only possible means of escape. Tracking these revisions, it would appear that with Blake's decision not to reconcile Orc and Vala in *The Four Zoas* he conceded that penetrative, heteronormative sex could not be the means of achieving universal liberation. Reconciliation, when it comes for the other zoas and their partners, is an empathetic as well as an erotic process, as mutuality becomes the mechanism by which they free one another. By repeatedly revisiting the clash between liberation and violent sexuality Blake had come to realize that liberty, like pleasure, cannot be forced upon the other and radical compassion is the only way out of the problem of pain and exploitation in the fallen world, whether it be on the plains of America or the streets of London.

Notes

1. Often cited in support of this view is the incident in which Thomas Butts, a friend of the Blakes, came upon Blake and his wife Catherine in their garden in Lambeth reading *Paradise Lost* naked as "Adam and Eve" (Gilchrist 115).
2. This definition was established in 1781 by *Mary Portas v. Samuel Hill*. Because Portas could not confirm that Hill had ejaculated the jury acquitted him. The precedent was then adopted for future rape trials (East 439–40).
3. In an influential late-eighteenth-century text on the law and medicine, Samuel Farr remarks that rape, meaning full penetration, would seem to be "impossible … for a woman always possesses sufficient power, by drawing back her limbs, and by the force of her hands to prevent the insertion of the penis into her body" (42).
4. Blake had become familiar with the horrors of slavery through his work on the illustrations for John Gabriel Stedman's *The Narrative of a Five Years Expedition against the Revolted Negroes of Surinam* (1796), which he worked on from 1792 to 1794.
5. The implication that Oothoon is either semiconscious or unconscious during her ordeal is strengthened by the echo of a line in "A Song of Liberty" in which colonial oppression causes "the American meadows" to "faint!" (44).
6. Erdman links this representation of Oothoon to the portrayal of Joanna, the "mulatto" woman Stedman had a relationship with and then abandoned in *Five Years Expedition* (*Prophet* 232–33).
7. 1793 was a tumultuous year for radicals in Britain, with prominent figures such as Thomas Hardy, John Horne Tooke, and John Thelwall tried for treason. Though they were acquitted, the trials had a chilling effect on radical discourse. For more on radicalism in the mid-1790s, see, Bugg; and Barrell.
8. For a discussion of Blake's antinomian influences, see Thompson; Mee, "Is there an Antinomian?"; and Rix.
9. For Erdman, the identification between the two characters is so obvious that he refers to the Shadowy Female as "Oothoon" in his analysis of the Preludium (*Prophet* 259).

10. For a full discussion of this archetype and its relation to the possible biographical roots of Blake's misogyny, see Essick, "William Blake's 'Female Will,'" and for an analysis of the symbolic implications of this gender bias, see Fox.
11. What might have prompted this change must be left to the realm of speculation. Certainly, the descent of revolutionary France into internecine violence was widely reported in the British press from the eruption of the brutal War of the Vendée in the spring of 1793 to the beginning of the Reign of Terror that autumn. Accounts of these events, which could be interpreted as an attempt to force "liberty" upon an unwilling people, would have made painful reading for even the most committed radical.
12. These lines are only visible in copies A (1795) and O (1821). However, their inclusion on the copper plate from 1793 is now widely accepted.
13. Echoing popular belief, Farr states, "without an excitation of lust, or the enjoyment of pleasure in the venereal act, no conception can probably take place. So that if an absolute rape were to be perpetrated, it is not likely [the woman] would become pregnant" (43).
14. While *Vala, or The Four Zoas* bears a date of 1797 on the unfinished manuscript, in reality Blake worked on the text from around 1796 to 1807. For brevity's sake I will use the short title, *The Four Zoas*.
15. Though in Night VIIb she is eventually identified as Vala, for the first fourteen lines of page 91, which contains much of the reiteration of the episode from the Preludium to *America*, the narrator uses titles such as "nameless shadowy Female" or "nameless shadowy Vortex," which recall her nebulous characterization in *America*. This may be an indication that Night VIIb was the earlier of the two Nights VII.
16. Many of those who had led the revolution at various points in its earlier phases, such as Georges Danton, Jacques Pierre Brissot, Jean-Paul Marat, and Maximilien Robespierre, had been executed by 1797, victims of the events they had set in motion.
17. Luvah is introduced in *The Four Zoas* as the higher incarnation of Orc. His name evokes romantic love and he is generally less warlike than in his Orcian persona. In *The Four Zoas*, he evolves into a Christ-like figure called the Divine Vision.
18. Essick has identified three broad phases of Blake's work on the text of *The Four Zoas*. First was an early phase intended for intaglio printing, which we may think of as *Vala* and to which he gives a tentative date of 1796–1800. This was followed by a second phase, producing a text which Blake intended to print in letterpress format using the leftover designs he had produced for an edition of Edward Young's *Night Thoughts*. This second phase roughly corresponds to *The Four Zoas*, which Essick dates c.1800–1804. Then, lastly, a third phase, which Essick identifies with the working manuscript we now know and suggests was "unrelated to any specific publication intentions," dated c.1804–1807 ("*Four Zoas*" 219).
19. Luvah in the form of Orc and Vala as Rahab, the embodiment of "Mystery."
20. Blake seems to have been thinking of *John* 20:17 when Jesus appears before Mary Magdalene after his resurrection and warns her: "Touch me not; for I am not yet ascended to my Father."

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