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MANACLED DESIRES: WILLIAM BLAKE'S STRUGGLE FOR SEXUAL
AUTONOMY

by

Cheryl Adams Rychkov

A Thesis Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts in English

Longwood University

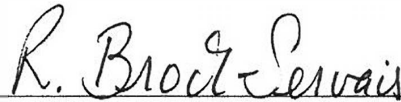
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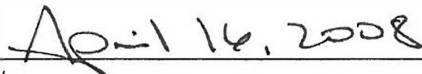
Esther L. Godfrey, Ph.D.
Thesis Director



E. Derek Taylor, Ph.D.
First Reader



Rhonda Brock-Servais, Ph.D.
Second Reader



Date

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AUTONOMY

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Cheryl Adams Rychkov

A Thesis Submitted in
Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

In English Literature

at

Longwood University

April 2008

GRIFT, COMPTON
FARMVILLE VA 22408
1000 N. Main Street
Farmville, VA 22408

For my mother and guardian angel,

Katie Goin Adams.

Who has loved and believed unceasingly

And

Without whom this thesis would remain unwritten

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In the hours and days following my thesis defense I began to mentally compile a list of individuals I wished to thank. The list grew quickly and was imbued with fond memories of those who assisted me in myriad ways. First and foremost, I must thank my thesis director, Dr. Esther Godfrey, for her patience and her perception of knowing precisely when to push and cajole, or when to encourage and comfort. I am also forever grateful for her continuous reminder that I need no one's approval or permission to make my own argument.

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FIGURES CITED

- Fig. 1 Blake, William. *For the Sexes: The Gates of Paradise*. Pl. 9. c. 1793.
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INTRODUCTION

In 1791, a reliable witness observed William Blake and his wife, Katherine, sitting naked in their London garden. When the witness, who was also Blake's patron, Thomas Butts, hesitated, Blake casually called out, "Come in! It is only Adam and Eve, you know!" The couple had been reciting lines from *Paradise Lost* in their grape arbor (Ackroyd 154). Though this incident may at first seem like more than an interesting anecdote, it in fact clarifies Blake's philosophy about sexuality and the rights of women. Moreover it illuminates the connection Blake made between the Edenic Fall and what he believed to be a malignant disconnect between male and female.

Eighteenth-century London was a place known for licentious behavior, but casual, urban nudity, even in a private garden, did not fit with contemporary social mores. Blake's willingness and apparent pleasure in appearing nude in the company of his nude wife connotes a social and sexual leveling, and a mutual innocence. For Blake, the male and female are equally sexual when naked, and equally vulnerable. That he was comfortable with the idea of possibly being seen in such a state suggests that Blake considered open sexuality to be the natural human state, or, as his work often indicates, the state the creator intended for both sexes before the Fall. Suggestions, rather than bold statements regarding free love and female autonomy, are what a scholar must work with, for Blake – aside from several anecdotal stories told of him by others – embeds his philosophy within his work and then cloaks it in a cryptic mythology, wherein he only further confuses those who would understand him. Blake the poet, the visionary, the liberator, the madman, is slippery indeed. His interest in sexual freedom over all else,

however, runs like a scarlet thread throughout his pastel palette and his pantheon of twisting, contrary deities.

Many critics of Blake acknowledge his interest in matters of sex; however, they fall into splintered groups within two distinct camps. The first camp espouses the idea that Blake was a misogynist out to destroy what he calls the “female will,” and the female spirit as well. Within this first group can be found scholarship that proclaims Blake as a frustrated, female-controlled man, as a traditionalist in full support of patriarchy, or as a closeted homosexual who also happens to hate women. David Sutherland believes Blake’s work suggests that women seek to entrap men, and out of jealousy, keep them from fulfilling their sexual desires (425), while Margaret Storch plainly states that Blake expresses a “deep animosity” towards women (McQuail 125). Some critics, including Susan Fox, view Blake as condescending, rather than compassionate towards women, by portraying the women in his work as weak and unable to articulate their sexuality (513).

Critics supporting these readings of Blake point to the rape and rejection of Oothoon in *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* and to the subsuming of the female into the male deity at the conclusion of *Jersusalem*. This thesis will closely examine these and other aspects of Blake’s work, then compare and contrast the texts with what can be known of Blake’s life and world. The latter step is crucial in order to go beyond what most critics have discovered, since a more comprehensive understanding of Blake’s work emerges only by probing beneath the surface of the texts.

The second group insists that Blake is a child of the Enlightenment and should be classified as a sort of proto-feminist. This reading of Blake maintains that he possesses only the loftiest ideals, that he wants women to be treated as the equals of men because it

is the right thing to do, and that he upholds the Enlightenment ideal of egalitarianism. Critics from this school of thought hold forth biographical evidence from Blake's life, claim he surely must have been friends with Mary Wollstonecraft, and point to events of the times in which Blake lived, particularly those which include the ideals of the French and American Revolutions. The French Revolution in particular advanced the cause of women's rights, specifically supporting female equality in the earliest declarations against the *ancien regime* (Abney 48). Nancy Moore Goslee proclaims Blake a selfless poet who would emancipate the entire world (101), including women, while Robert Essick argues that Blake splits women into groups of good (passive, subservient), and bad (active, self-autonomous) (615). Selflessness and a concern for humanity as a whole are qualities attributed to Blake by this group, with no commentary regarding the possibility that there were personal motives at work.

The viewpoints of both groups offer clues to understanding Blake. Critics who read Blake as misogynist help to clarify Blake's interest in his selfish sexual pursuit. However, they paint Blake with a brush that is too broad and ultimately unfair. A strong interest in sexual freedom does not equal a hatred of women, nor does it necessarily demonstrate that Blake wants to control women. Abundant evidence to the contrary is, unfortunately, entirely ignored by critics reading Blake as a misogynist. Those favoring the feminist reading make the important point that Blake has sympathy for the plight of women, but once again, such critics take their argument to an extreme, choosing to portray Blake as a do-gooder on behalf of women and oversimplifying his position. He clearly has sympathy for women and all people whom he considered to be in some form of bondage, but his work repeatedly betrays a selfish, rather than a *selfless* intent. Neither

group of critics directly addresses the possibility that Blake is keenly interested in sex and sexual freedom for women because it would benefit him *personally*. I do not argue that Blake is a sex-obsessed “dirty old man,” but that he is a highly sexed individual who was raised by indulgent parents. As a young adult and as a married man, he became disenchanted with the moral strictures of his Christian upbringing. He determined that religious and social mores were responsible for massive misunderstandings between the sexes, which rendered sexual freedom impossible for either male or female. Blake’s frustration found at least partial release in his work, where he argued for the abolishment of said mores fiercely and repeatedly. His sympathy for the plight of women *and* men is of a tender, but most urgent nature. His images of both Adam and Eve frequently portray the prototypical couple bound in the coils of snakes. Who else but a hedonist (however frustrated) would write,

Abstinence sows sand all over
 The ruddy limbs and flaming hair
 But Desire Gratified
 Plants fruits of life and beauty there
 In a wife I would desire
 What in whores is always found –
 The lineaments of Gratified desire.
 (Blake’s Notebook)

Despite the fantastical, mythological nature of Blake’s images and poetry, eighteenth-century London and its attendant sexual codes inform his work. Blake was

born in London in 1757 to Protestant Dissenter parents. His childhood was a mixture of Biblical adages, pious behavior, and the sexually licentious activity commonly observed on the same streets he often strolled during his childhood. From this mixture, he received conflicting messages concerning sexuality. From home there came a strange dichotomy: on one hand Blake was taught the stern Protestant belief that sexual indulgence was bad, except within the confines of marriage, and even then not to be talked about and not something women should enjoy. On the other hand, Blake was a spoiled child, endlessly indulged by doting parents who, despite their Dissenter beliefs and limited means, permitted their son numerous freedoms and luxuries. Among the personal freedoms allowed him, young Blake was kept out of school and allowed to spend his days daydreaming, sketching, and wandering the city streets.

The streets of London offered young Blake the message that sex is a tool of power, used by and against women for purposes other than fulfillment of mutual desire. Contemporary reports, which will be explored more fully in chapter one, suggest that chastity was a rare commodity in eighteenth-century London, and that poverty-stricken women and even very young girls thought nothing of lifting their skirts and engaging in sexual acts for food or money in the very streets Blake wandered as a young boy. When he returned home to the Dissenter community, he was confronted with young women who, according to David Punter, were raised with the notion that all sex amounted to rape, instilling a fear of men in many young girls and women (479).

Both these wretched images and pious mindsets angered Blake very deeply, and he spent much of the rest of his life producing work that critiqued how society and religion had destroyed the original, Edenic state of sex. Blake argues that both male and

female should express their sexuality freely and often -- a position that resolves the problem for him intellectually and benefits him personally.

Critics such as David Punter discuss some of the complex social reasons as to how and why, by the late eighteenth century, many men and women regarded females as simultaneously frigid, wanton, and manipulative (478). One of the more significant eighteenth-century explanations has a history going back more than two thousand years in Western thought. Simply put, society literally regarded women as inferior *males*. According to Thomas Laqueur, the Ancient Greeks considered women to possess not the uniquely female sexual organs of vagina and ovaries, but an inverted penis and testicles (27). This idea of females as defective males allowed for the *treatment* and rights of women to be diminished. Furthermore, the “fact” that her “inverted” organs possessed qualities of the male as well as female suggested a sexual potential that was threatening. With the sexually powerful ambiguity of such organs inhabiting the form desired most by *males*, the female came to be seen not only as a powerful sexual force, but as a force that must be controlled, if necessary, by fear and by force.

According to Blake, a major component of the sexual power struggle between men and women consists of what he terms the “Female Will.” Critics have, unfortunately, trampled over Blake’s own definition of this term, choosing to assume that Blake wishes for men either to ignore or take control of female desires. Some go so far as to suggest Blake seeks to have women enslaved. Others, such as John Sutherland, claim that it is the Female Will that controls the male, preventing men from achieving sexual freedom (429), and that Blake sought to do away with Female Will because it had become too powerful. What these and other critics have not examined carefully is

Blake's insistence that Female Will came as a result of the patriarchy that developed after the Fall. While critics are correct in arguing that the qualities present in what Blake terms "Female Will" are not helpful in relationships between the sexes, Blake does *not* blame women for the development of Female Will. Blake insists, directly and via symbol and metaphor, that the qualities inherent in the Female Will – those of manipulation, jealousy, withholding, and others – came about *only* because these methods were necessary for females to survive under an unequal patriarchal system. According to Blake, prior to the Biblical Fall male and female were equally empowered, including sexually. Indeed, he believed that male and female were literally *one being*, possessing both masculine and feminine attributes. When he refers to the breaking or destruction of the Female Will, he is speaking of a return to female – and male – sexual freedom.

Blake desires this not only out of compassion for humankind, but so that his own life – and his own wife – will be sexually liberated. In a world without jealousy, he believes he can pursue other women and still have peace at home. Without manipulation, his wife and other women will not use their sexuality as a means to get men to do their bidding, nor will they withhold sex as a means of punishing men. Finally, Blake believes that if an enlightened society finally recognizes female autonomy, thereby freeing women from the religious and social constraints that prevent them from experiencing their sexuality, then he and other men will have both more sex with their wives, and more access to other women.

To reach such conclusions, it is necessary to confront and decipher the mercurial aspects of Blake's images and poetry. I believe this can best be done by understanding the world that Blake inhabited as an impressionable young man. In his work he explored

and experimented with ways to resolve his own inner conflict and, as he believed, the sexual conflict affecting all of humanity. To understand Blake, and his work, one must understand first what in his background created his mindset of sexual freedom. This contextual background illuminates the texts. The path to such understanding must include a careful consideration of Blake's background and personality, followed by a close reading of the works in which he most clearly articulates his call for sexual freedom and equality.

Chapter one explores Blake's life and world, from his years as an indulged child of Dissenter parents to the ever-present backdrop of a lascivious and brutal London society. I pay particular attention to the impact these two aspects of his life may have had on the development of his sexual philosophy. The socio-political dramas of the eighteenth century, including the Industrial, American, and French Revolutions are also discussed and shown to have influenced Blake's thinking. Evidence concerning the role of gender, the upbringing of male and female children, and the subsequent social expectations placed upon women and their relationships with men underscores my argument that much of Blake's philosophy and work is an expression of his frustration with conventional heterosexual relationships.

Chapter two offers a textual and visual examination of Blake's interest in sexual freedom. A discussion of the dichotomy of female sexual interest versus sexual reticence in *The Book of Thel* is provided. A close reading of *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* follows, with particular attention paid to Blake's ideas of sexual empowerment and entrapment. Portions of *Jerusalem* and *Songs of Experience* pertinent to my argument are also explored. I demonstrate how those works provide evidence of Blake's rebellion

against traditional roles and expectations, and of his interest in sexual freedom of expression for both men and women. I consider evidence of Blake's views that organized religion and established gender roles have warped human understanding of themselves as sexual creatures.

The conclusion affirms the evidence for the argument that William Blake neither hates women nor regards them as men's equals, and that he seeks equal rights for women *and* men in order to encourage sexual freedom for both. His motivation is grounded in selfish desire, while at the same time he embraces the idea that sexual freedom for all would return the sexes to a state of Edenic oneness.

CHAPTER I

Beneath the mysticism and mythology, and beyond the prophecy and poverty that were hallmarks of his life, William Blake was a man with a long history of demanding – and getting – what he wanted. Born in 1757, into a century of massive and revolutionary social change, the one thing Blake desired most was what society forbade him: sexual freedom for himself, and by extension, society as a whole. He expresses in his poetry and images, repeatedly and often vociferously, the frustrations of unfulfilled sexual desires. Blake's *Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (ca. 1790), considered by many to be his most significant work, is his manifesto against restraint and expresses a firm conviction that humans can only find happiness by giving in to desires. Plate 7 of *The Marriage* heaps scorn upon those who would suppress desire and guarantees enlightenment to those who indulge: "The road of excess leads to the palace of wisdom / Prudence is a rich ugly old maid courted by Incapacity / He who desires but acts not, breeds pestilence" (*The Marriage* 8-10). It is clear that the desires Blake refers to throughout *The Marriage* are of a sexual nature. "Old maid" suggests sexual potential that has been wasted and "Incapacity" translates to "impotence." Thus, Blake juxtaposes the sexually charged words of "desire," "courted," and "breeds" with their opposites.

Sexual desire and difficulty concerning relations between male and female are the overriding themes of much of Blake's work, prompting John Sutherland to posit that the "extent of Blake's preoccupation with sexual love may need critical attention," and that Blake expressed a lifelong preoccupation "with the relationships between the sexes" (424). Clearly, Blake presents himself as a man not only with a strong interest in sex, but

also with a strong interest in realizing his sexual desires. However, descriptions of sexual *fulfillment* do not appear in his poetry or images. Instead, Blake's work is populated with characters and situations involving a longing for sex, or suffering from not having it, usually due to some sort of social constraint. In his *Notebook* and in his later works, he makes frequent, derisive comments against the gender expectations of his age. *The Marriage* is written early enough in his career to serve as a foundational document of his later philosophy favoring the active over the passive and is rife with hints of unfulfilled desires. *The Marriage* is a personal plea from a man who is accustomed to having his way but is denied his will with regard to sexual matters. He then spends the rest of his life complaining about it in word and image. Such is the swift and bitter current that runs through Blake's otherwise ethereal landscape.

Before he was bitter, he was indulged -- first as a child, by his parents and others -- then, as an adult and to a lesser degree, by his wife (Bentley 22-26). Use of the word "indulged" suggests a rather harsh criticism, but Blake himself uses it, along with the adjective "lenient" to describe the treatment he received from his parents (3). Such terms also read strange when associated with the behavior of Protestant Dissenters, among whom James and Catherine Blake counted themselves members (Ackroyd 20-21). Dissenters encouraged a staunch work ethic, sacrifice, and piety -- a stark contrast to lenient indulgences (20). What some of Blake's biographers, in particular G.E. Bentley, have observed is that the very faith of the Dissenters themselves encourages leniency (9-11). By dissenting -- or disagreeing with and removing themselves from the Church of England, Blake's parents and other dissenters were rebelling against the Establishment and *indulging* their individual ideas of faith. Blake was born into a family of leniency

and tolerance. He grew up in an atmosphere of rebellion – within his Dissenter home, and during a period of social and political revolution. He later articulates his own rebellion against established religion and its requisite suppression of desires in “The Garden of Love,” from *Songs of Experience*: “The gates of this Chapel were shut / And ‘Thou shalt not’ writ over the door...” (5-6), “And Priest in black gowns were walking their rounds / And binding with briars my joys and desires” (11-12). Bentley refers to this passage as “cynical” (11). If so, they are the words of a cynic who seeks to rebel against the tenets of organized Christian society. This passage also expresses a tinge of bitterness and resentment. Blake’s use of the words “shut” and “binding” are words of restriction, “briars” suggest that pain is the result of suppressed desires, and the spectre of “Priest in black gowns” “walking their rounds” creates an uncomfortable feeling of being constantly watched and perhaps caught in the act of fulfilling forbidden desires. A number of poems from *Songs of Experience* express Blake’s rebellion against social dogma that prohibited sexual freedom.

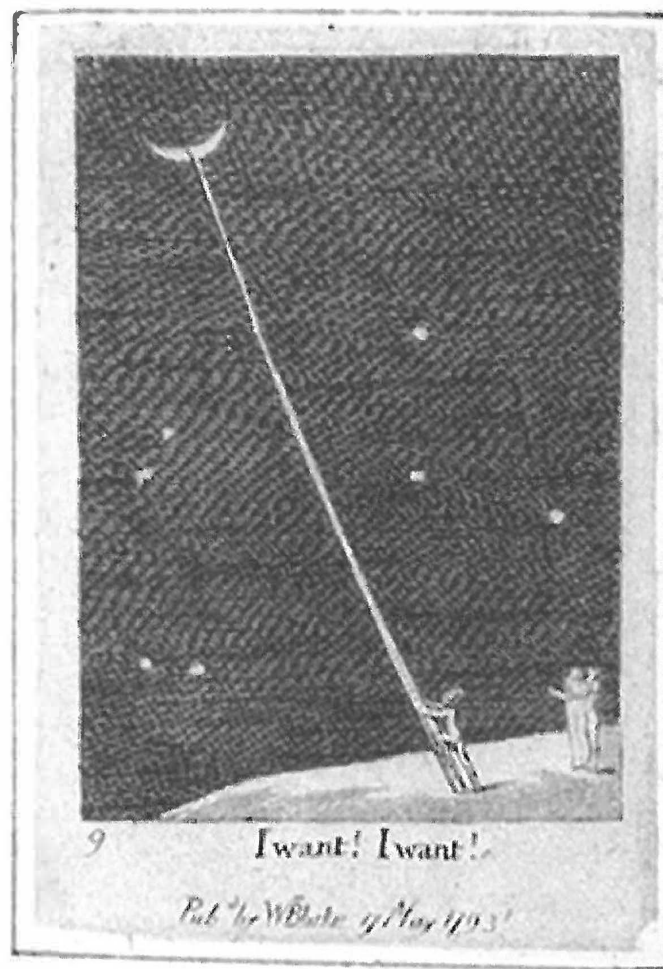
Blake’s rebellious nature revealed itself during his childhood, and each time his parents offered their full support (Bentley 20-26). Typical of the middling merchant class, James Blake began training William (along with his brothers) to enter the family trade of haberdashery. William was not interested and spent his hours in the shop creating sketches on the backs of bills, receipts, and even the store counters. When assigned errands and chores, his attempts were half-hearted at best (21). He so mightily resented the mundane tasks of his father’s business that his parents gave up on making him a shopkeeper. They had recognized since his early childhood that William was possessed of a creative, even fantastical spirit (22). Unsurprisingly, expression of their

own liberal values encouraged their son in his interpretation of dissent. Still, the case of the young William Blake is unusual. A strong work ethic typically held sway in Dissenter homes but did not include sketching and daydreaming, two activities favored by Blake and tolerated – even encouraged – by his parents (21).

Further evidence of an indulged childhood appears with regard to Blake's schooling. While Dissenters tended to prefer educating their children at home (16), away from the world of "the Beast and the Whore" (11), the child balked and demanded his own created curriculum of sketching and wandering the streets and fields in and around London (16-20). As usual, his parents acquiesced and then lent their full support to their son's creative potential by enrolling him in art school (22). Even for the lenient Blake family, such expenditure was a luxury and a displayed vivid lack of adherence to the Dissenter condemnation of images (25). There was more to come. The boy soon returned home with complaints that he must have models at home to work from, books to enhance his studies, and prints of the masters to copy (24). Young Blake soon became a regular visitor to London print shops and even to great auction houses such as Christie's. Twelve years old, with fiery hair standing on end and eyes described as "otherworldly" (24), the boy cut a striking figure amongst the staid and pretentious dealers and auctioneers (25). His enthusiasm and bargaining over cheap prints endeared him to one and all, enabling him once again to get what he wanted (25). Thus, the family of nine with limited means agreed to purchase the expensive and utterly impractical materials. This action stands as further testament to James and Catherine's dedication to leniency.

Blake later tellingly created an image portraying a child reaching for the moon, exclaiming, "I want! I want!" Two figures that could represent doting parents stand off

to the side, lovingly gazing upon the boy whose confidence and determination drive his attempt to climb a ladder to the moon. The presence of possible parental figures who may well have provided the ladder on which to climb is highly evocative of Blake's own childhood experiences. The image is part of a series of plates entitled *For the Sexes: The Gates of Paradise*. The images detail a chronological progression of human life and experience, from infancy to "Death's Door."



(Fig. 1)

Blake's parents, with their large family and limited income, somehow managed to provide young William with a similarly improbable "ladder," one made of art lessons, models, prints, books, and other luxuries.

If the elder Blakes indulged any of their other children to such excess, no known record exists confirming it (Bentley 6). William Blake was more than indulged; he was favored over the other children and denied nothing, thus instilling in him a lifelong sense of entitlement and encouraging his belief that fulfillment should necessarily follow desire. And the desires of even a precocious child are different from those of a youth. One of Blake's earliest known poems, entitled *Song*, was written before he was fourteen, and indicates he was already well aware of issues concerning adult relationships and sexual desire:

How sweet I roam'd from field to field,
And tasted all the summer's pride,
Till I the prince of love beheld,
Who in the sunny beams did glide!

He shew'd me lilies for my hair,
And blushing roses for my brow;
He led me through his gardens fair,
Where all his golden pleasures grow.
With Sweet May dew's my wings were wet,
And Phoebus fir'd my vocal rage;
He caught me in his silken net,
And shut me in his golden cage.

He loves to sit and hear me sing,
 Then, laughing, sports and plays with me;
 Then stretches out my golden wing,
 And mocks my loss of liberty.

(1-16)

Bentley suggests that this early effort represents Blake's attempt at mimicking Elizabethan love poetry and remarks that "Marriage as a cage and love as a tempter and betrayer are sophisticated concepts for a boy of twelve or thirteen" (27). All of this is true, but Blake is also hinting at deeper concerns. The poem is more about the tragic state of misunderstanding between male and female than shallow notions of romance and subsequent romantic entrapment. The first stanza introduces a female speaker who describes a happy life of sexual freedom. She roams "from field to field" indulging in a variety of sensual ("tasted") experiences until she encounters what she believes to be true love. The second and third stanzas are rich with sexual imagery and the fulfillment of the speaker's desires. Use of the word "blushing," followed by the highly sexually evocative phrases of "his golden pleasures grow," "my wings were wet," and the hot, lustful cries suggested by "And Phoebus fir'd my vocal rage" raise the poem's sexual tension to a feverish pitch. Surely this, the speaker suggests, is true love. At that very moment, in mid-stanza and, for the speaker, mid-bliss, Blake throws the "mind-forg'd manacles" ("London" 8) onto both the speaker and her lover. While it is the speaker who is caught "in his silken net" and shut "in his golden cage," both suffer. According to Blake's philosophy, it is sexual equality that allows for sexual freedom. The contrast between the lush world of indulgence portrayed in the first half of the poem and the stark, mocking,

and enslaved conclusion demonstrates that Blake's philosophy concerning desire came to him early in life.

As he grew to young adulthood, Blake began to observe the *suppression* of human desire within the polite Dissenter society of his upbringing (Bentley 44). The raucous, sexually free streets of London served as a confusing backdrop to that of suppression. Blake's artistic eye, poetic mind, and indulged nature struggled to reconcile what he perceived as the creator's intent for human relationships, and the chaotic, unequal relationships wrought by society. Through his literary and artistic pen, he attempted to exorcise the social evils that he believed kept men and women sexually chained. In Plate 16 of *The Marriage*, Blake suggests that even Divine sensuality now exists in chains:

The Giants who formed this world into its
sensual existence and now seem to live in it
in chains, are in truth, the causes of its life
and the sources of all activity; but the chains
are, the cunning of weak and tame minds, which
have power to resist energy... (1-6)

"Energy" and "activity" are two of Blake's code words for desires fulfilled (Crehan 138-140). The chains that restrain both the creators of the world and its inhabitants are symbols for organized religion and social constraints. Blake's use of "cunning," "weak," and "tame" suggests contempt for social and religious expectations.

The Marriage declares Blake's intent for humanity in general and was written, tellingly enough, in 1789 – a time of political, industrial, and social revolution, from which Blake took much inspiration (Bentley 134-35). His interest in sexual freedom, however, goes beyond a general concern for society as a whole. Imagery and fervent expression favoring and even demanding sexual freedom are such frequently occurring motifs that his interest can be nothing less than personal. Blake's parentally instilled indulgent nature adds strength to the argument that his quest for sexual freedom and equality is rooted in his desire to secure this freedom for himself, first and foremost. It is necessary, therefore, to follow the indulged little boy and frustrated youth into the social dichotomy that influenced the development of the adult Blake's "contraries." The street life of eighteenth-century London and the respectable, polite, and pious community of London Dissenters stand as two opposing, yet sometimes overlapping, sexual constructs. Despite the common knowledge of street criminals in town and the presence of highwaymen in the country, James and Catherine Blake typically honored their son's wishes to stroll and hike alone, even before the boy was ten years old (17-18). Perhaps his reports of seeing a tree full of angels, along with visions of and conversations with Biblical figures (Ackroyd 34-35) convinced them that strangers would be dissuaded from interacting with the strange, mystical child. Whatever his parents' reasoning, Blake was free to roam at will, his young mind soaking up the sights and sounds of the lively city (29-33).

And lively it was. The purpose of this thesis, however, is to determine what in Blake's experience of the city affected his views on sexual freedom and relations between the sexes generally. Most historians agree with Roy Porter's assessment that the

eighteenth century was a “high point in sexual liberation” (Harvey 899), largely due to the social and political changes evolving from ideas of the Enlightenment and the changing roles of family and gender resulting from the Industrial Revolution (899-900). The American and French Revolutions also impacted and inspired English outlooks and behaviors (Bentley 43). Much of these changes in attitude were visible to the average Londoner in the form of prostitutes. According to Elizabeth Delinger, “eighteenth-century Londoners perceived prostitutes to be ubiquitous” (361). Indeed, Blake’s friend John Stedman recorded in his diary in 1795 the following casual remark: “Met three hundred whores in the Strand” (361). In 1758, one year after Blake’s birth, “a conservative estimate [found] over three thousand women working full time as prostitutes” (362). This number is significant in light of the fact that the population of London at the time was only 675,000 (361). All sorts of women and girls were on offer, and competition was so fierce that prostitutes seldom worked within a brothel. Rather, they wandered the streets, shops, and taverns with other Londoners, often loudly proclaiming – and exposing – their charms and abilities to all (362). By 1790, their riotous shouts and behavior had become such a “common complaint” that the *Times* published an open letter to the London Police. It lamented that, “the streets should be every night infested by a number of impudent though unfortunate women, who not only assail the ears of the passengers with the most blasphemous and obscene language, but even go to the length of assaulting their persons” (390). As an adult, Blake recorded his own thoughts on the matter in the poem “London”:

But most, through midnight streets I hear

How the youthful harlot’s curse

Blasts the new-born infant's tear,
 And blights with plagues the marriage-hearse. (13-16)

Critics usually interpret this stanza as an example of Blake's criticism of social ills, particularly venereal disease. There is a larger message at work here, however. Blake is questioning the status quo of sexual behavior within *marriage*. He suggests that if both male and female possess sexual freedom, there would be more and better marital, pre-marital, and extra-marital sex, thereby reducing the desire to seek sexual fulfillment outside the marriage bed. Blake suggests these variations of marital sex as reasonable options, since a sexually free people may select potentially safer and *known* partners within their own social group. I maintain that Blake desires that scenario for himself particularly, and that the imagery of "Plagues upon the marriage hearse" (16) is an expression of how he is both drawn to and afraid of seeking sexual fulfillment with prostitutes. If sexual freedom existed among married people in polite society, the numbers of prostitutes and threat of disease might be greatly reduced. Not only does Blake fill his work with words and images connoting sexual freedom, but he also harangues about it, and insists upon it, even suggesting that infanticide is preferable to the suppression of desires: "Sooner murder an infant in its cradle than nurse unacted desires" (*The Marriage* 12-13). The prostitutes of London must surely have made an impression on a man driven to write such words.

Certainly he could not avoid encountering prostitutes as he strolled the city streets. According to Delinger, "Londoners walking or riding through the city would have experienced their audible and visible presence" (359). Prostitutes handed out "business cards" during intermissions at Covent Garden theaters (384). During the 1770s

a London woman named “Mrs. Roach” regularly “show[ed] pornographic prints to young people entering her shop” (373). Blake turned thirteen in 1770 and was apprenticed in a neighborhood bordering Covent Garden (Bentley 32). Guides to local prostitutes and other publications featuring ads for sexual services were readily available for sale to anyone of any age on the streets and in the shops (Delinger 380). The writers of the guidebooks provided descriptions of a given prostitute’s physical attributes and sexual skills, which, while generally cloaked in metaphors involving a lush and beautiful landscape, were also quite graphic. As Delinger points out, by couching “dirt” amongst a “picturesque landscape,” such descriptions “simultaneously elevate and degrade their [female] objects” (381). Critics often suggest that Blake describes women in the same ways in his own work (Fox 512-13). If so, he took a part of his inspiration from the London sex trade.

Blake was not the only creative mind to take note of London’s raucous sexual climate. Poet John Gay offered a stanza of caution to those who would wander London streets in “Trivia” (1716), a poem paying homage to the varied and colorful aspects of life in the city:

O! may thy Virtue guard thee through the Roads
 Of Drury’s mazy Courts, and dark Abodes,
 The Harlots’ guileful Paths, who nightly stand,
 Where Katherine-street descends into the Strand.
 Say, vagrant Muse, their Wiles and subtil Arts,
 To lure the Stranger’s unsuspecting Hearts;

So shall our Youth on healthful Sinews tread,

And City Cheeks grow warm with rural Red. (260-268)

Gay's "harlots" were not only out and about in the evening, but also practiced their trade in broad daylight, if artist and engraver William Hogarth is to be believed. Even a cursory glance at the first two plates of his *The Four Times of the Day* points significantly to the sex trade being conducted during daylight hours. In Plate I two men openly kiss and fondle women, while an older whore bearing the facial marks of syphilis strolls pensively through the square.



(Fig. 2)



(Fig. 3)

Plate II shows more of the same taking place at noon, even as worshippers are leaving out the church door.

Hogarth was well known for his didactic approach, but in the case of *The Four Times of Day*, Hogarth offers an important and telling glimpse into the day-to-day world of London, or for the purposes of this thesis, the world in which William Blake grew up. “Noon” is set in Covent Garden, the neighborhood where Blake lived and worked as an apprentice for seven years (Bentley 33).

I do not argue that Blake’s exposure to prostitutes corrupted his mind to sexual “deviancy,” or made him any less a poet or socially-aware citizen, but, rather, that his early and regular exposure to lewd language and behavior, and his intelligent, creative mind led him to the conclusion that while many men in London were interested in sexual freedom, and many women were openly willing to accommodate them (for a price), the city was swimming in sexual activity but devoid of sexual intimacy and *freedom*. And such states of confusion and denial mattered a great deal to a man who so clearly desired to attain his own sexual freedom. Frustrated, he poured his confusion into poems such as “To the Accuser Who is the God of This World”:

Truly My Satan thou art but a Dunce

And dost not know the Garment from the Man

Every Harlot was a Virgin once

Nor canst thou ever change Kate into Nan. (3-6)

These are words rich with innuendo and not a small amount of bitterness. I argue that the “Accuser Who is God” Blake addresses is not God, but Satan, since Christian doctrine states that after the Fall Satan became master of the earth. Blake mocks Satan for his

inability to distinguish the true sexual nature of male and female and condemns him as a “Dunce” for destroying the sexual freedom experienced in the paradise of Eden.

If the illicit streets of London both confused and informed the young Blake, he found no comfort on the respectable side of the social coin. As a member of the middling merchant class, additionally imbued with the piety – however liberal – of the Dissenter community, Blake was aware of the expectation that he would be a willing player in a prim sort of sexual game (Punter 479). If indeed his literary railing against social norms and the suppression of desires came from personal experience, the socially mandated sexual game must have only increased Blake’s frustration since he clearly placed the “proper” method of securing a mate in the same moral category as street prostitution.

The same sexual fears Blake expressed concerning the prostitutes in his poem, “London,” have a contrary and equal fear with regard to the young women of his social set. The women in question were “nice girls,” who, according to David Punter, were brought up to fear men – even those of a kindly nature – as monsters that would ruin their lives if the women allowed any physical liberties to be taken (480-86). Even in marriage, sex was something to be endured, not enjoyed. Punter writes, “if it is part of female education to fear sexuality, then the dominant ideology renders it impossible to attach meaning to respect for the continual expression of that fear: all sexual experience becomes rape of one degree or another” (479). Viewed in the context of the times there were actually valid, if misguided, cultural reasons for females to be raised with such a mindset.

Robert Shoemaker argues that as the eighteenth century progressed, “respectable women were increasingly seen as too pure and delicate to think about sex, let alone talk

about it in public” (115). In fact, it became socially unacceptable for a woman to defend her honor in court. For example, should a woman be publicly insulted as a “whore,” or any other term suggesting loose morals, she had to remain silent if she wanted to attempt a restoration of her respectability (114). Women of all classes in eighteenth-century London faced such a potential threat to their respectability. Even a whiff of ill repute could break up a carefully planned marriage match, cause a woman to lose her children, or doom a female servant to unemployment (110). Randolph Trumbach argues that since women could not be both respectable and sexual at the same time, they “were often punished for taking sexual initiative...” and that the only “...women who could express sexual passion” were “prostitutes, seduced servants, remarrying widows, and adulterous wives” (Harvey 903). Thus, a young woman’s reticence, fear, and use of trickery both to tempt and reject men were understandable. Blake was sharp enough, even as a very young man, to realize the punishing situation in which society had placed would-be respectable women, and men as well (Punter 485-86). Indeed, his early poem “Song” pleads the case of a warm, sexual being held prisoner by social constraints.

English society, and Western civilization generally, had a long tradition of sexual oppression of women. Men, too, were victims, since they had little chance of a healthy sexual or emotional relationship with members of a group who deemed them “monsters” (Punter 476). The roots of the male and female sexual disconnect can be found not, as Blake supposed, at the time of the Edenic Fall, but in the foundational scientific literature of Western civilization itself (Laqueur 25). Blake’s vision of human existence prior to the Fall is far more complex than the Genesis version of human creation. He was well acquainted with early Western literature and anatomical texts. That exposure may have

helped to form his belief that prior to the Fall, humans possessed physical and emotional attributes of male *and* female (Hayes 160-61). To Blake's way of thinking, it is only in the pre-Edenic, sexually unified state, that humans are free, sexually and otherwise. Many of Blake's images include androgynous figures, perhaps most famously the image of Albion in *Glad Day*.



(Fig. 4)

Some critics consider *Glad Day* or *Albion Rose* to possess homoerotic qualities (Elfenbein 117). Considering the larger context of Blake's philosophy regarding the

unification of the sexes and of sexual freedom, a more precise reading of the image might note that Albion's combination of feminine facial features above a soft, rosy figure, overlaid with male genitalia and musculature, suggests the reunification of the sexes has taken place. Certainly Albion's relaxed posture and freed limbs indicate a status of physical and mental freedom.

Blake's later works, including *Jerusalem* and *The Four Zoas* groan with the human striving towards unification of the sexes (Essick 616-17). Male and female are at last reunited at the conclusion of *Jerusalem* (617). Feminist critics complain that Blake portrays the unification as a subsuming of the female into the male and cite this as evidence of Blake's misogyny (Hayes 141). While there exists evidence that Blake supported patriarchy in certain ways, the subsuming of the female into the male is Blake's way of keeping with Biblical tradition and his own philosophy of sexual equality. Eve, the first female, was created from a part that came from the first male, Adam. Therefore, the prototypical human possessed the qualities of both male and female. The female qualities were removed from man to create woman. By returning the female "part" to its originating source, the human assumes original form.

According to Blake, it is only in this state that humans can be free to fulfill their desires. Additional evidence of Blake's ideas of male and female unity is found in the pages of his *Notebook*, and in *The Four Zoas*, where language suggesting sexual unity exists alongside hermaphroditic images (Wilkie xii-xiii). Furthermore, Blake's notion of one or dual sexed humans is not considered far-fetched in the Western tradition.

Thomas Laqueur explains that Western societies since the time of the ancient Greeks shared a common concept of the physical, sexual body (25). According to the

“one-sex” theory, male and female possess the same sexual organs, with similar functionality and sexual desire (47-48). However, according to this perspective, women are not men’s equals, since their sexual organs are inverted. Thus, females are defective, inferior males (26). For fifteen hundred years, according to Laqueur, belief in this theory had created two sexual mindsets in Western civilization. First, if women are defective and inferior, they cannot possess the physical or mental abilities of a “complete” male, and are therefore undeserving of the rights of a man (197). More significant, sexually speaking, was the male fear and resentment inspired by the one sex theory. Most males desire the female form, but within that form are the organs – however inferior, and sexual power of the male. According to this theory, female sexuality is powerful, even insatiable, and over the centuries men encouraged cultural, legal, and political means to control it (194-196).

Laqueur believes that by Blake’s time the one sex theory was beginning to decline (112). Karen Harvey agrees that perceptions of human sexuality were changing by the middle of the eighteenth century, but she also stresses that the decline began earlier than Laqueur believes. She argues that historians of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries claim that important scientific changes in the understanding of gender and bodies began more than a century before Blake’s birth (904). However, she points out, the masses did not generally have access to the vivid one-sex images and descriptions in medical books and treatises. Harvey suggests that “pornography, cheap medical treatises and court depositions” (913) were common sources of sexual information for most people in the sixteenth through the eighteenth century. “Different types of evidence,” she says, “yield different kinds of understandings of bodies” (913). In this instance, Blake once again

reveals his contrary nature. As a member of the masses, he was exposed to popular and folk cultural knowledge and beliefs; as a student of art learning to copy from prints and books, he very likely had access to books dealing with anatomy and other medical matters. Acquisition of the knowledge of the one sex theory may have served as inspiration for Blake's philosophy pertaining to the reunification of the sexes, in what he predicted would be a return to an Edenic existence for humanity. Possession of that same knowledge also would have served as an idea in opposition to the two-sex theory evident in popular culture, a dichotomy Blake the contrarian would have eagerly embraced.

Harvey's argument that popular culture influenced social perceptions of relations between the sexes gains strength in light of the great social and political upheavals of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Laqueur agrees with her that the social and gender adjustments brought on by the Industrial Revolution put an end to the one-sex theory, (Laqueur 194-96) though the two critics diverge in precisely why.

Laqueur suggests that men and women came to accept the two-sex theory based on new scientific knowledge acquired as a result of the Renaissance, the Industrial Revolution, and the resulting spread of information through print and rising literacy rates (11). Harvey and Michael McKeon argue that this is an oversimplification of what are actually deeper – and darker – issues. While Harvey agrees that Laqueur's rationale is valid, the underlying reasons for the change and the willingness of the scientific community to urge the change in sex theory came out of a need to preserve patriarchal power in light of the growing societal interest in egalitarianism (Harvey 907). The one sex theory dovetails nicely with ideas of sexual equality. The "woman question" had plagued the social and political patriarchy for centuries (907). By the time of the French

Revolution, the issue had turned into a movement for the *rights* of women (Abrey 43-44). And if medical science confirms that men and women are one sex, then all should possess the same human, legal, political, and sexual rights. If scientists then proclaim two sexes rather than one, and women are judged as the inferior sex, then patriarchy is preserved.

Social and gender changes resulting from the Industrial Revolution signaled another challenge to the patriarchal social order. Enclosure deprived rural women, and many men, from the traditional means of earning a living, and as McKeon points out, “work patterns for men and women outside the household diverged in a number of ways” (299). This situation caused women to be “thrown into competition with men” (300), confusing gender roles. Not surprisingly, the unemployment figures for these women remained high, and by the middle of the eighteenth century, early marriage and fertility rates were rising. McKeon argues, “there were obvious motives to marry younger as defense against the unemployment which was increasingly the lot of women” (299).

Women at the middle and higher end of the social scale often found themselves in equally difficult situations (299-300). With the rise in industry came an increase in the incomes of the middle and upper classes. To set themselves apart from the masses, men from these classes sought to validate their success by encouraging idleness in the women in their family. It became socially unacceptable for women possessing family and means to seek work that paid wages. As labor became cheaper to hire, these women even lost control of what was traditionally their domain, household duties (300). Across the classes, and with the support of the scientific community, females were rendered almost powerless.

During the years leading up to the last decade of the century, progressive women and men such as Blake became aware of revolutionary ideas from France, some of which supported the idea of rights for women (Bentley 109). While French women traditionally shared a lack of rights similar to that of English women (Abray 43), by the 1780s some French intellectuals began to publish and circulate pamphlets containing “specific proposals about education, economics, and legal and political rights” for women (44). Their argument was based upon the Enlightenment idea that men and women are naturally equal, and that sexual discrimination must therefore be unnatural (45). The contributions of a French nobleman, the Marquis de Condorcet, lent further legitimacy to the movement toward rights for women. He wrote and spoke publicly – and adamantly – that “domestic authority should be shared and all positions and professions opened to both sexes” (46). He also insisted that women of property should be allowed to vote and questioned, “Why should people prone to pregnancy and passing indispositions be barred from the exercise of rights no one would dream of denying those who have gout or catch cold easily?” (46).

In late 1789, women’s rights advocates began to take their grievances and proposals directly to the government, where, in 1791, Olympe de Gouges “announced the rights of women” (48) by stating

All women are born free and remain equal to men in
rights....The aim of all political associations is the
preservation of the natural and inalienable rights of women
and men....The nation is the union of women and
men....Law is the expression of general will: all female and

male citizens have the right to participate personally, or through their representatives, in its formation.

One year later, Mary Wollstonecraft sent an English volley of support to her French sisters in the form of *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*. At long last, the “woman question” had a political voice that demanded to be heard. While French feminists did not succeed in every area, significant gains included a sexually equal inheritance law, and changes in laws that concerned a woman’s rights with regard to her children and property. Divorce laws were changed to “treat both sexes equally” (58).

Back in England, Blake was paying close attention to social changes taking place abroad (Bentley 72). As he watched the promise of both the American and French revolution sink to the depths of slavery in the former, and terror in the latter, he began to encapsulate ideas from some of his earlier works and form his own call for both male and female sexual freedom. His efforts, which take the form of an image-drenched book titled *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*, point repeatedly to the sexual injustices he has observed, read about, and discussed with others, perhaps Wollstonecraft herself (Bentley 137). Blake’s pessimism in *Visions* that nothing less than the apocalyptic will effect the social change he deems necessary to bring equality between the sexes is palpable and touching. *Visions* is essential in understanding Blake’s views on sexual freedom and equality. It also serves as foreshadowing of the relentless and complex pursuit of and demand for sexual freedom so evident in his later work. It is within the text of *Visions* and its earlier companion piece, *The Book of Thel*

that he is fully willing and able to articulate his *own* vision of relations between the sexes and how the disconnect might be resolved.

CHAPTER II

William Blake's call for sexual freedom reached an eloquent apex in *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*. However, there is much in his earlier work that served as foundational material for the development of his theories concerning relations between man and woman. As discussed in Chapter I of this thesis, one of his earliest known literary efforts addressed a disconnect between the sexes. The final stanza of *Song* particularly demonstrates that from an early age Blake felt both a frustration and empathy towards the plight of women. I use the word "empathy" cautiously, for while Blake's work suggests he acknowledged that a certain level of patriarchal tyranny against women existed, he sought equality and sexual freedom for both sexes to serve his personal agenda. His empathy was genuine, but not of a fully altruistic nature. Blake's childhood of indulgence colored his adult expectations of how his life should be lived. Upon becoming a young man, he encountered and wrote about socially created "mind forg'd manacles" ("London" 8) and realized that women of his social circle would not entertain – let alone indulge – his interest in sexual freedom (Punter 480-82). As discussed in chapter one, women wanting to preserve their respectability dared not express their sexuality either prior to marriage, nor in an extra-marital affair (483). Despite poet Alexander Pope's remark that "Ev'ry woman is at heart a rake" (Spacks 27) and the great popularity of romantic novels during the period (31), society continued to dictate that respectable women must keep any sexual feelings and capacity for "rakishness" in check (27-29). As for their male partners' sexual freedom, most women acknowledged the sexual double standard maintained by males, but that acceptance did not necessarily

translate to approval. Respectable married men indulging their sexual appetites outside the marriage bed usually did so in secret, i.e., without true sexual *freedom*.

When Blake married Catherine Boucher in 1782 (Bentley 68), he had been writing about the poor state of relations between the sexes for more than a decade. Some Blake biographers suggest that Blake hoped his marriage to an uneducated and assumingly submissive woman would provide him with a partner who would be easily molded to suit his need for indulgence (64-65). This notion proved to be true in some respects. A number of their friends and acquaintances commented on how quickly and enthusiastically Catherine embraced Blake's philosophies on art and religion (65-67). Her willingness to go along with her husband's ethereal, impractical ideas and the resulting grinding poverty in which they lived does indeed demonstrate a profound devotion to her spouse. Like other eighteenth-century women, Catherine had no realistic alternative but to go along with her husband's wishes. However, it is worth noting that some of the couple's contemporaries often remarked on the couple's happiness, marveling at Catherine's tolerance of Blake's odd behavior and his difficulty in providing for the household (69-70). Clearly the Blake's happiness was due in large part to the acquiescence of Mrs. Blake to whatever Mr. Blake desired – except on possibly one account.

Though their source is apocryphal, some critics have suggested that fairly early in the marriage Blake recommended the addition of a concubine (Schuchard 5). Catherine's purported reaction is discussed later in this chapter, though it is interesting to note that much of Blake's work following the first years of his marriage contains a much harsher tone with regard to matters of love. The sweet longing of *Poetical Sketches* gives way to

the revolutionary tone of *The Marriage*, suggesting that Blake increasingly turned to his work as a means of expressing his sexual frustration. His early poetry demonstrates a disappointment in the state of relations between men and women. His empathy for the frustrations experienced by both sexes, too, is apparent, as well as an increasingly angry demand that both male and female be sexually free. Blake's struggle to continue his lifelong pattern of self-indulgence is revealed in this chapter through a close reading of several texts written fairly early in his career.

While some of Blake's earliest efforts, such as those found in *Poetical Sketches*, hint at the poet's growing interest in the pursuit of sexual freedom, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (c.1790) bursts forth from the page as a cynical, sexual manifesto. While the words are indeed Blake's and his desire for sexual freedom is his own, there are at least two powerful personalities that influenced the writing of *The Marriage*. The first, and most commonly alluded to by critics, is the Swedish philosopher Emmanuel Swedenborg. Blake was so impressed with Swedenborg's theories that he attended the 1789 foundational meeting of a church built upon Swedenborg's philosophy. According to G.E. Bentley, Blake was "profound[ly]" influenced by Swedenborg's teachings (127). One of the teachings encouraged the idea of polygamy (Schorer 157-58). An apocryphal story claims that Blake approached his wife with the idea of bringing a concubine into the marriage, and that she soundly rejected his suggestion (Schuchard 5-9). Similar stories, described by Mark Schorer as "semi-legends," include the suggestion that Blake may have wanted to develop a "community of wives" (159). While no proof exists that Blake ever considered such an arrangement, the repeated use of the sexual freedom motif in his work may serve as evidence that he did.

However “profound” an effect may have had on Blake, by 1790 the poet had changed his mind about matters Swedenborgian. Critics frequently point to the *Marriage* as Blake’s satirical tirade *against* the philosopher’s teachings (Crehan 136). According to Geoffrey Keynes, Swedenborg advocated passive acceptance of the social status quo (Crehan 137). “To him [Blake],” Keynes writes, “passive acceptance was evil, active opposition was good” (Crehan 138). Certainly Blake’s lively support of the Devil in *The Marriage* (highly reminiscent of Blake’s hero John Milton’s treatment of Satan in *Paradise Lost*) suggests that Keynes is correct. But the intensity with which Blake encourages and even demands “active opposition” in the *Marriage* suggests an agenda beyond taking to task the stodgy Swedenborg. That influence, according to Blake disciple Frederick Tatham, was artist and poet Henry Fuseli. Tatham wrote that, “Blake was more fond of Fuseli than any man on earth” (Bentley 105). Contemporary sources such as Tatham suggest the two artists valued one another’s opinions and enjoyed regular witty exchanges. Fuseli was a supporter of the idea of free love, who, unlike Blake, actually practiced what he preached (including an extramarital affair with Mary Wollstonecraft) (Todd 727). In light of Blake’s repeated call for sexual freedom in his work, Tatham’s words are particularly significant.

At some point in 1788, Blake came in possession of Fuseli’s translation of Swiss poet Johann Kasper Lavater’s *Aphorisms of Man* (Bentley 106-08). Satirical works had great appeal with the friends who enjoyed witty banter. Indeed, Fuseli’s translation instructed the reader to annotate freely either positive or negative reactions to the various pithy statements contained in the work (Bentley 107). Many of Blake’s annotations are strikingly similar to declarations he made in *The Marriage*. Phrases Blake added to the

text included, “Active Evil is better than Passive Good,” “all Act is Virtue. To hinder another is not act[;] it is the contrary...whatever is Negative is Vice,” and “hell is the being shut up in the possession of corporeal desires which shortly weary the man for all life is holy” (Bentley 108). These annotations suggest that Lavater and Fuseli were instrumental in the development of Blake’s ideas for *The Marriage*. In Plate 3 of *The Marriage*, Blake repeats and expands upon his annotation concerning contraries:

Without Contraries is no progression. Attraction and Repulsion, Reason and Energy, Love and Hate, are necessary to Human existence.

From these contraries spring what the religious call Good & Evil. Good is the passive that obeys Reason. Evil is the active springing from Energy.

(7-12)

Blake’s association of the word “obey” with “passive” suggests that his rebellious spirit balks against society’s definition of “good,” and favors instead the excitement of the “active springing” of “Evil.” In Plate 4 he continues to rail against religion and society by declaring (via “The Voice of the Devil”, or the energy represented by “Evil”), “That God will torment Man in Eternity for following his Energies” (10-11), followed shortly by the statement “Energy is Eternal Delight” (20). By insisting that religion and societal “Evils” are actually the good and natural way of mankind, Blake again makes the case for men and women to “follow” their “Energies.” I argue that by pairing the word “Energy” with “Eternal Delight,” Blake refers to the delights of sexual energy, and that religion and society, or “God,” will torture those who would wish to indulge in such energies by making the expression of such “delights” socially unacceptable and largely inaccessible. An explanation of that social mandate arrives in Plates 5 and 6 of *The Marriage*:

Those who restrain desire, do so because theirs
 is weak enough to be restrained; and the restrainer or
 reason usurps its place & governs the unwilling.
 And being restrain'd it by degrees becomes passive
 till it is only the shadow of desire (1-5).

Blake's choice of language has a strong sense of bitter physicality. "Restrain," "usurp," "govern," and "unwilling" are words associated with social systems, which clearly he is critiquing here, and they also demonstrate Blake's frustration at being held back from expressing his desires. His desires are smothered into "shadows" and the restraints of "reason" force him to suppress his true nature.

Blake does not choose to continue his manifesto in a state of depression. In Plate 7 he returns to boasting and sarcasm, claiming that "The road of excess leads to the palace of wisdom" (8) and stating that "Prudence is a rich ugly old maid courted by Incapacity" (9), before warning, "He who desires but acts not, breeds pestilence" (10). Again, the word associations of "Prudence" and "Incapacity," and of inactivity leading to "pestilence" demonstrate Blake's firm belief that the social and religious constraints of his day have destroyed normal relations between male and female.

Blake had discovered in Fuseli and Lavater literary kindred spirits, who inspired him to take the bold step of openly declaring his call for sexual freedom. When Blake, through the inspiration of Lavater and Fuseli, spelled out his free love manifesto in *The Marriage*, he laid the foundation upon which most of the remainder of his work was built.

Interestingly, during the period in which he was spouting the fiery sexual rhetoric of *The Marriage*, Blake was also working on the story of the sexually timid young woman in *The Book of Thel* (c.1789). The young shepherdess, Thel, bemoans her naïve, simple existence:

The daughters of Mne Seraphim led round their sunny flocks,
All but the youngest. She in paleness sought the secret air,
To fade away like morning beauty from her mortal day.
Down by the river of Adona her soft voice is heard,
And thus her gentle lamentation falls like the morning dew. (3-7)

Thel despairs of her retiring, virginal existence and seeks the “secret air” of earthy experience. Blake uses the naïve, frustrated, and curious Thel as a symbol for English women whom he saw as laboring under socially driven sexual repression and fears. It is through Thel that Blake best articulates the empathy he feels for women. Thel’s combined curiosity and sexual reticence are Blake’s way of pointing to women’s fears. His theory of socially inflicted female fears was not idle speculation. A plethora of conduct books and philosophical treatises were published during the eighteenth century that explained how women were born with and trained from early childhood to be excessively modest. Philosopher Bernard Mandeville wrote in 1723 “it is very probable that at Six [females will be] ashamed of shewing her Leg, without knowing any Reason why such an Act is blameable...” (McKeon 302). Shame, according to David Punter, is the primary source of the socially instilled female fear of sex: “It is shame, the shame of the subject who is taught that desire is evil, which brings us back to Blake, whose strength lies so often in his refusal to exile desire” (475). Thel is ashamed of her desires

and fears what will happen should she seek fulfillment.

In Plate 5 Blake enlists the aid of sensual Mother Earth to lure modest Thel into exploring her sexuality:

‘Queen of the vales,’ the matron Clay answer’d, ‘I heard thy sighs,
And all thy moans flew o’er my roof, but I have call’d them down.
Wilt thou, O Queen, enter my house? ‘Tis given thee to enter
And to return; fear nothing; enter with thy virgin feet.’ (14-17)

Mother Earth, or “matron Clay,” as Blake names her, understands Thel’s simultaneous reticence and curiosity, gently encourages her to enter the world of experience, and alerts her to the secret that the young woman is meant to, indeed born to, indulge herself in sexuality. Matron Clay also acknowledges the fears society has bred into Thel, reassuring her to be afraid of nothing in the earthly world she is about to enter.

In Plate 6 Thel steps through the portal of sensual experience, where she “saw the secrets of the land unknown” (2). She quickly discovers that the sensual realm, while real and potentially fulfilling, is not always fresh, new, and immune to heartbreak: “She saw the couches of the dead, & where the fibrous roots / of every heart on earth infixes deep its restless twists” (3-4). Despite the matron Clay’s words of encouragement, Thel’s trepidation continues to grow and culminates later in Plate 6 with two sexually charged lines: “Why a tender curb upon the youthful burning boy? / Why a little curtain of flesh on the bed of our desire?” (19-20). In these two lines, Blake demands to know why society should “curb” the sexual desires of youth, and why the female hymen should serve as both the sole indicator of a woman’s sexual purity and her singular defense against a ruined moral reputation. Interestingly, Blake pairs the soft and gentle sounding

words of “little,” bed,” and “tender” with the passionate language of “desire” and “burning,” poignantly suggesting that passion and gentleness should go hand-in-hand in matters sexual and should not be constrained by curbs and “little curtains of flesh.”

Despite his tender protest against constraint, Blake demonstrates that he knows full well what Thel – and all women -- must do to preserve her respectability: “The Virgin started from her seat, & with a shriek / Fled back unhinder'd till she came into the vales of Har” (21-22). Thel is tempted, but because fear and shame have overtaken her desires, she flees back to her safe, though frustrating, virginal world. Thel’s swift and nervous retreat illuminates Blake’s theory that the mental manacles worn by women necessarily extend to men, making sexual freedom impossible for either.

According to Bentley and most other critics, the years between 1787 and 1794 were Blake’s most creative and profitable (137). Critics frequently and correctly attribute that success to social and political influences from the period, including the French Revolution and Mary Wollstonecraft’s *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (Bentley 111-114). There were other, subtler influences involved as well. Blake’s friendship with Fuseli and the subsequent exposure to Levater’s work encouraged Blake to express his inner turmoil in his work. *Thel* represents Blake’s tentative first steps in openly addressing his agenda in favor of sexual freedom. Like Thel herself, Blake does not at first directly confront the male-female disconnect. He comes close to confronting the despised social mores only to retreat along with the virginal shepherdess. Within one year, however, Blake summoned the courage to allow Thel’s successor into the realm of sexual freedom. *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* was first published in 1793, but two events taking place in the previous year may be at least partially responsible – along with

the groundwork Blake had already laid with *The Marriage and Sol* – for the bold leap into sexual freedom found in *Visions*.

Wollstonecraft's *Vindication* was published in 1792, ushering in debate over the latest answer to the "woman question." Blake's biographers are largely silent with regard to any friendship or regular contact between Wollstonecraft and Blake, or if he even read the *Vindication* (Bentley 111). However, it may be conjectured that he did based on a variety of factors from Blake's life. His friendships with Fuseli and the publisher Joseph Johnson may have brought Blake into contact and conversation with Wollstonecraft. Blake may even have been part of the "Johnson Circle," a group of erudite and free thinking intellectuals led by Johnson and among whose membership included Wollstonecraft, her husband William Godwin, Fuseli, and others (Bentley 110-111). Additionally, Blake's interest in equality between the sexes and other revolutionary ideas strengthen the argument that he may have read the *Vindication* and taken from it inspiration for *Visions*.

Certainly when the *Vindication* was published, numerous positive reviews appeared in English publications (Janes 294). Wollstonecraft's call for equal rights for women came on the heels of her highly successful *Vindication of the Rights of Man* (1790). Both *Vindications* were responses to the political and social foment brought on by the French Revolution (296). Such public enthusiasm for a subject dear to his heart likely proved irresistible to Blake. Indeed, concepts and language similar to that of Wollstonecraft appear repeatedly in *Visions*. While several of these similarities will be discussed later in this chapter, one significant similarity must be addressed before examining the text of *Visions*. Wollstonecraft's descriptions of "female cunning"

significantly help to illuminate what Blake calls “Female Will.” It is also possible that her discussion in the *Vindication* of female “trickery” informed Blake’s development of the concept. Blake’s definition of “Female Will” and his insistence that it be subsumed into the male are topics of vigorous debate among critics. Many critics interpret Blake’s definition of “Female Will” as female domination over males, and as a characteristic designed and driven by females against males. Blake’s work, however, suggests otherwise. The tender respect shown to characters such as Thel and Oothoon serves as evidence of Blake’s sympathy and perception of the plight of females. Wollstonecraft writes, “From the tyranny of man, I firmly believe, the greater number of female follies proceed; and the cunning, which I allow makes at present a part of their character, I likewise have repeatedly endeavoured to prove, is produced by oppression” (*Vindication* 323). Wollstonecraft suggests, as does Blake in the characters of Thel and Oothoon, that women have been compelled to use skills of cunning in order to survive in a patriarchal world. Both authors acknowledge the existence and negative qualities of “Female Will,” and both agree that the originating source of the behavior is male oppression. In light of their shared views and their shared circle of friends, the following passage from the *Vindication* is interesting:

I have dwelt on an observation, that several sensible men, with whom I have conversed on the subject, allowed to be well founded; and it is simply this, that the little chastity to be found amongst men, and consequent disregard of modesty, tend to degrade both sexes; and further, that the modesty of women, characterized as

such, will often be only the artful veil of wantonness instead of
being the natural reflection of purity... (323)

Wollstonecraft discussed her theories concerning female behavior with “several sensible men,” and they agreed that the degradation perpetuated by both sexes in the forms of indecency and vulgarity on the part of males and the false, artful modesty of females created a fracture between the sexes that disallowed freedom for either. Such similarities between Wollstonecraft and Blake strengthen the argument that Blake not only read the *Vindication*, but he also took from it inspiration to write *Visions*. Indeed, he may well have been one of the “several sensible gentlemen” with whom Wollstonecraft consulted.

There is one other known event that may have influenced Blake’s literary leap into sexual freedom, and it came in the form of personal tragedy. His mother, Catherine Blake, died in the autumn of 1792 (Bentley 136). The passing of the woman who had lovingly indulged his entire life, the woman who from his earliest childhood recognized and honored his creative spirit (25-26), must have been a stunning blow. Blake biographers suggest that Catherine Blake attained a certain level of education prior to her first marriage, and that the majority of the books in the Blake household belonged to her (Bentley 26). Bentley also suggests that it was Blake’s mother who understood William best and served as his chief source of familial encouragement (26). Blake often decorated his mother’s chamber with his sketches and watercolors, and it was she who permitted him to make his own childish annotations in the family’s expensive books (4-5) No known record exists that proves or suggests Blake’s mother experienced the sort of repression her son railed against in his work. However, if she is viewed in a context typical for her time, her gender, her possible educational background, and the Dissenter

society in which she lived, it is fair to suggest that her world had little tolerance for an educated, free thinking woman (3-4). Blake, with his keen observation skills, may well have recognized and grieved over the freedoms his mother might have been disallowed in life.

While many factors influenced the bold statements in *Visions*, I argue that the events of 1792 – both external and personal to Blake – were the catalysts that drove him at last to publish his outrage against the socially created “mind forg’d manacles”(“London” 8) that had punished his mother and that continued to punish him.

Visions represents Blake’s fully formed philosophy regarding sexual freedom; understanding his message in *Visions* is essential to understanding Blake’s later work. *Visions*’ story concerns a young woman’s (Oothoon) passage from innocence to sexual experience and the resulting societal punishment she receives for even contemplating such a venture. The book opens with Oothoon’s declaration of love and unashamed sexual interest in Theotormon:

I lovèd Theotormon,
And I was not ashamed;
I trembled in my virgin fears
And I hid in Leutha's vale! (2-5)

In spite of her bold assertion, Oothoon, like Thel, is at first fearful of exploring her sexuality. In line two, Blake emboldens Oothoon to defy the eighteenth-century behavioral code for women by throwing off the shame Punter insisted was innate in women. Trained to feel ashamed of one’s sexuality from early childhood practically guaranteed an adult reticence in expressing sexual interest. Such was the lot of most

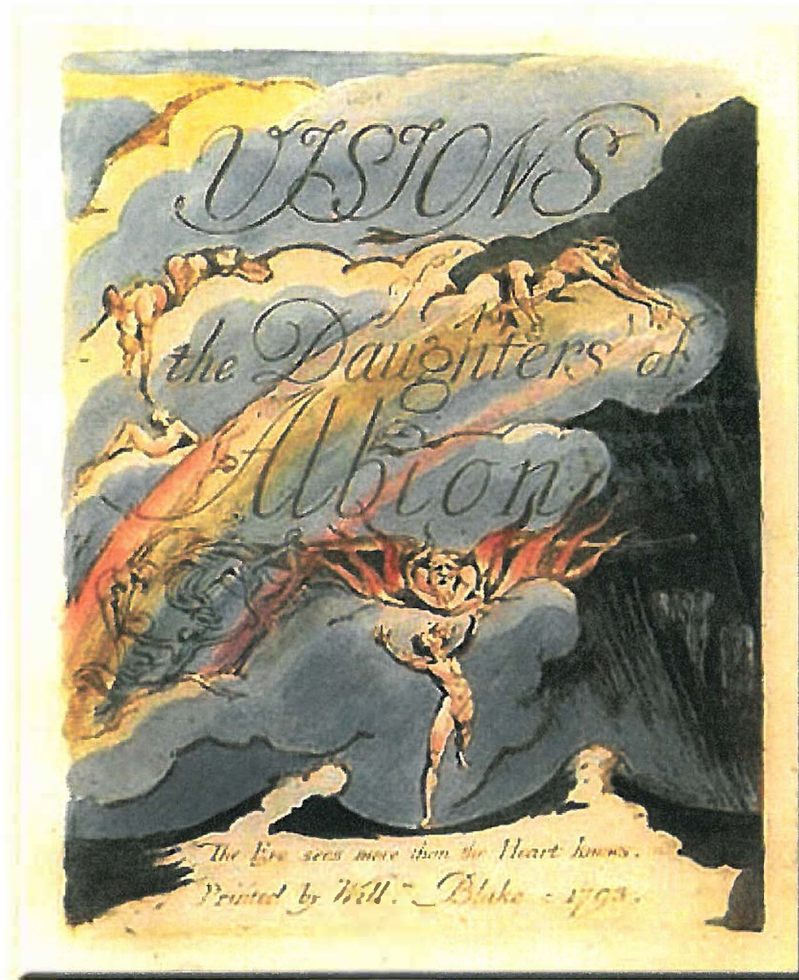
eighteenth century women, which is why Blake begins *Visions* with contradictory statements. The vale” in which Oothoon hides belongs to Leutha, who, according to S. Foster Damon, author of *A Blake Dictionary*, represents “sex under law” (Damon 118). Leutha is therefore positioned to advise Oothoon that her love for Theotormon is legitimate and worthy of consummation. Oothoon uses Leutha’s flower as a badge of sexual respectability and eagerly departs for her lover (15-17).

At this point Blake introduces the daughters of Albion: “Enslav'd, the Daughters of Albion weep; a trembling lamentation / Upon their mountains; in their valleys, sighs toward America” (2-3). These female characters function as a chorus to reinforce Blake’s conviction that the women of England (Albion) are “enslav’d,” and that the ideals represented by the New World and the American Revolution will supply a solution (Bentley 138-39). He then returns to Leutha to reinforce the legitimacy of *sexual* freedom for women: “The Golden nymph replied: `Pluck thou my flower, Oothoon the mild! / Another flower shall spring, because the soul of sweet delight / Can never pass away.' She ceas'd, and clos'd her golden shrine” (10-12).

Leutha reassures Oothoon that her current desire is perfectly normal and that she should expect her future desires to be the same. Filled with excitement, Oothoon plucks the flower of her desire, “And thus I turn my face to where my whole soul seeks” (15). These words are Blake’s way of alerting the reader that not only does Oothoon recognize her desires as legitimate, but she also seeks to fulfill them with her entire being. Oothoon here asserts that women desire sex every bit as much as men, that both male and female desires are normal and should be indulged. Wollstonecraft’s *Vindication* uses similar language to describe the legitimacy and naturalness of sexual indulgence:

“Nature, by making the gratification of an appetite, in this respect, as well as every other, a natural and imperious law to preserve the species, exalts the appetite, and mixes a little mind and affection with a sensual gust” (301).

Importantly, Oothoon’s declaration signifies that she goes to her lover by freedom of choice and thus has no need to impose “Female Will.” She then flies “Over the waves...in wing’d exulting swift delight” (16). On her way to meet Theotormon, she is attacked and raped by Bromium (18-19), who serves as a symbol for the societal mistreatment of women and the profound miscommunication between the sexes. The opening plate of *Visions* shows Oothoon dancing over waves and in a posture suggesting openness and physical freedom. Her arms reach skyward as she leaps with joy toward her lover. Looming over her uplifted head, however, is Bromium, who perceives her – as would most eighteenth-century men, as unattended property which he can easily and rightfully claim (Fig. 5).



(Fig. 5)

Once Bromium rapes Oothoon, he makes a statement reminiscent of the eighteenth-century social mindset of exploration and geographic conquest: "Bromion spoke: `Behold this harlot here on Bromion's bed / And let the jealous dolphins sport around the lovely maid! / Thy soft American plains are mine, and mine thy north and south:" (20-22). The "thin curtain of flesh" (*Thel* 20) which Blake pointed to as an absurdity in *Thel*, has been rent, and with it, Oothoon's respectability. Having "branded" her thusly, Bromium makes full claim to Oothoon's body and boasts of how she is now sexually inaccessible to others. Married women in Blake's time shared a similar situation. Eighteenth-century

husbands owned their wives bodies as properties, and the sexual favors of wives were not to be shared with any “jealous, sporting dolphins” (Barker 78).

Bromium’s expression of the joy he takes in Oothoon’s inaccessibility is specifically directed to Theotormon, who is aware of the rape and now regards Oothoon as damaged goods: “Then storms rent Theotormon's limbs: he roll'd his waves around / And folded his black jealous waters round the adulterate pair. / Bound back to back in Bromion's caves, terror and meekness dwell” (5-7)

Theotormon is outraged in two ways: first, his property (Oothoon) has been stolen from him, and second, he blames his loss on the woman herself. Blake provides here an example of the typical perceptions of women’s sexuality, as discussed in chapter one and addressed in the theories of Thomas Laqueur. Moral weakness and overpowering sexual desires were qualities often attributed to eighteenth-century women (Laqueur 194-96). In Theotormon’s mind, Oothoon – in all her showy exuberance – *invited* Bromium’s attack. Therefore, she is doubly punished by not only being chained but also by being chained to her rapist. All this transpires while her lover sulks. Blake’s image of the scene captures the depth of Theotormon’s self-centeredness, his pouting head buried in his tensely muscled arm that ends in a clenched fist (Fig. 6).



(Fig. 6)

Bromium casts a look of confusion, as if to say, “Why am *I* being punished?” Oothoon hangs her head in sadness, but her expression suggests she is busy thinking of ways to convince Theotormon of her innocence. The daughters of Albion are not present in this image; they have flown in terror of losing their own tenuous respectability. It is only the oddly positioned sun, surrounded by clouds suggesting the form of a human eye, which looks upon the scene. Blake probably intended this “eye” to serve as a symbol of “divine

truth” glaring its disapproval.

Oothoon attempts to persuade Theotormon to recognize that her purity comes from within and that it remains yet with her. She calls eagles to rip her defiled flesh from her chest in an attempt to suggest that her flesh might be defiled but her spirit remains pure and intact:

Oothoon weeps not; she cannot weep, her tears are lockèd up;
 But she can howl incessant, writhing her soft snowy limbs,
 And calling Theotormon's Eagles to prey upon her flesh.
 ‘I call with holy voice! Kings of the sounding air,
 Rend away this defilèd bosom that I may reflect
 The image of Theotormon on my pure transparent breast.'
 The Eagles at her call descend and rend their bleeding prey:
 Theotormon severely smiles; her soul reflects the smile,
 As the clear spring, muddied with feet of beasts, grows pure and smiles. (13-21)

Oothoon’s masochism reveals a stark reality in the lives of women. Blake demonstrates here that without personal autonomy and sexual freedom, women come to devalue *themselves*. Trained from childhood to believe that even actions forced against her by others are her own fault (Punter 196), Oothoon mutilates herself in an attempt to obtain forgiveness from her lover. Frustrated that her extreme attempt to convince him has failed, Oothoon confronts Theotormon directly with accusations against the society that formed her:

Arise, my Theotormon! I am pure,
 Because the night is gone that clos'd me in its deadly black.

They told me that the night and day were all that I could see;
 They told me that I had five senses to enclose me up;
 And they enclos'd my infinite brain into a narrow circle,
 And sunk my heart into the Abyss, a red, round globe, hot burning,
 Till all from life I was obliterated and erased. (30-36).

Oothoon blatantly accuses society of suppressing her entire being. Blocked and smothered are her sensuality, her intellect, her curiosity, her hope, and at last, her very existence. The above passage is the section of *Visions* to which critics most often point when comparing Blake's work with the ideas in Wollstonecraft's *Vindication*. Even a cursory read of *Vindication* suggests these comparisons have validity. Wollstonecraft rails against patriarchy with examples of contemporary behavior and expectations that align closely with Oothoon's cry against the suppression of her female sex and intellect.

Indeed, the term "civil death" was applied to married women of Blake's time. Legally speaking, upon marriage they were subsumed into their husband's identity and their husband's will (Kirp 31). Married women could not hold title to personal property or land, even if it was a part of or purchased before the presentation of her dowry. Married women held no title to wages earned, nor could they bring legal suit in their own name. If the marriage ended in divorce, a woman could not sue for custody of her children. Her very body was considered the personal property of her husband (Barker 78).

Oothoon continues to describe her bleak existence, one where day is night and night is death, and where no one but those who would abuse her can hear her cry:

Instead of morn arises a bright shadow, like an eye
 In the eastern cloud; instead of night a sickly charnel-house,

That Theotormon hears me not. To him the night and morn
 Are both alike; a night of sighs, a morning of fresh tears;
 And none but Bromion can hear my lamentations. (37-40)

Oothoon stresses that the one person with whom she most desires communication, Theotormon, hears her pleading as whining, complaining annoyances. Wollstonecraft sees a similar pattern in English society, blaming patriarchy for leaving women in a position where they must use emotion and trickery to achieve their goals, and in many cases, in order to survive (*Vindication* 306). Blake, too, recognizes the life skills women feel compelled to use and which he terms “Female Will.”

Blake then has Oothoon compare the instinctual behavior of the natural world with that of “manacled” humankind:

‘With what sense is it that the chicken shuns the ravenous hawk?
 With what sense does the tame pigeon measure out the expanse?
 With what sense does the bee form cells? Have not the mouse and frog
 Eyes and ears and sense of touch? Yet are their habitations
 And their pursuits as different as their forms and as their joys.
 Ask the wild ass why he refuses burdens, and the meek camel
 Why he loves man. Is it because of eye, ear, mouth, or skin,
 Or breathing nostrils? No! for these the wolf and tiger have. (3-10)

Blake’s emphasis here is that creatures following the ways of nature and ignoring the strictures of social codes live happier lives. The final line of Oothoon’s lengthy *pean* to nature intends to startle humanity into the realization that *all* creatures are part of nature. It is only the humans who have forgotten: “And then tell me the thoughts of man, that have been hid of old” (14). Such hidden

thoughts are the suppressed natural instincts of human behavior. For Blake this translates to the societal suppression of sexual freedom. He views humans as part of God's creation, part of nature, and thus he and *all* humans should follow the instinctual behavior that is everywhere observed in nature. Instilled in him since his indulged childhood, Blake's philosophy was always one of doing what comes naturally. According to Oothoon, suppressed instinct and desire lead to misery:

Till she who burns with youth, and knows no fixèd lot, is bound
In spells of law to one she loathes? And must she drag the chain
Of life in weary lust? Must chilling, murderous thoughts obscure
The clear heaven of her eternal spring; (22-25)

Blake juxtaposes words associated with sex – “burns,” “youth,” and “lust” -- with words of repression: “bound,” “law,” “drag,” “chain,” and “weary.” Bound in such a marriage, Oothoon's sexual youth and vitality burn away, as she buries her playful spirit in anger and resentment. Like Blake, Oothoon desires, but is denied. She must live with what society has forced upon her. Her “shrinking shoulders” (27) represent the wasting away of her sexuality, yet she feigns desire for a man she does not love, and bears children she does not wish to have:

To bear the wintry rage
Of a harsh terror, driv'n to madness, bound to hold a rod
Over her shrinking shoulders all the day, and all the night
To turn the wheel of false desire, and longings that wake her womb
To the abhorrèd birth of cherubs in the human form,
That live a pestilence and die a meteor, and are no more; (25-30)

“Abhorred birth” serves as yet another example of Blake's contraries. First, the lack of

birth control and a husband's physical control of his wife's body insured that many married women were continually pregnant or nursing an infant (Barker 80). Exhausted and drained, many women came to "abhor" pregnancy and childbirth. Second, "abhorred birth" points to the dread felt by every mother that her child would not live out its first year, or even first month. The record of infant mortality rates for the eighteenth century is incomplete, largely due to the fact that infants often died before they could be registered at the local parish (Jones 309). Registered infants aged twelve months and under from rural parishes of England had a mortality rate of approximately 125 out of 1,000 registered births (310). Crowded and polluted London parishes reported even higher rates of infant mortality (315). Again, the official record does not account for unregistered infants, including children of Dissenter parents (or children of non-Christian parents), infants who died before registration could take place, stillbirths, miscarriages, and abortions (311). Blake likens these infants to "meteors," sudden and bright, but ultimately ephemeral, sinking a weary mother's desperate hopes again and again. Such women, Blake insists, are chained in multiple ways. Trapped in a loveless marriage, required to feign desire, weary from continuous and often unwanted pregnancies, these women find little hope. Any comfort expected from the restorative warmth of maternal love becomes dashed along with the shards of her shattered heart. This passage is Blake at his bleakest, for if humanity cannot realistically hope for maternal love, what hope can there be for male and female unity, let alone sexual freedom?

Importantly, Blake then suggests that the unnatural cycle of suppressed desires and loveless marriages of *both* sexes is self-perpetuating: "Till the child dwell with one he hates, and do the deed he loathes / And the impure scourge force his seed into its

unripe birth / Ere yet his eyelids can behold the arrows of the day?" (31-33). The child grows up and follows the same socially mandated path of his parents. To please his parents and his social group rather than himself, he marries early and well, but without having explored who he is and what he really wants, sexually and otherwise. He is miserable, but does his duty and produces yet another generation of mentally manacled humans. Blake's treatment of humanity's plight is particularly poignant because he imbues his verse with his own heartfelt emotion. He is able to convey the tragic state of relations between the sexes because he has experienced it personally.

By Plate 6 of *Visions*, Oothoon is ready to offer an antidote to the ills caused by society and religion: "Take thy bliss, O Man! / And sweet shall be thy taste, and sweet thy infant joys renew!" (3-4). The answer to the female – and *male* -- question, according to Blake:

Infancy! fearless, lustful, happy, nestling for delight
 In laps of pleasure: Innocence! honest, open, seeking
 The vigorous joys of morning light, open to virgin bliss,
 Who taught thee modesty, subtil modesty, child of night and sleep?
 (5-8)

Here Blake goes beyond his earlier demand that sexual freedom for both sexes is the way of nature. He now equates sexual freedom with *innocence* and *infancy*, or, the state in which humans exist before society forces manacles on curious young minds. Line 8 sarcastically points to the differences between natural modesty and the socially-wrought "cunning" masquerading as modesty against which Wollstonecraft railed (305). Oothoon continues her speech with words highly reminiscent of those

coming from Wollstonecraft's pen:

Once were thy fires lighted by the eyes of honest morn.
 And does my Theotormon seek this hypocrite modesty,
 This knowing, artful, secret, fearful, cautious, trembling hypocrite?
 Then is Oothoon a whore indeed! (16-19)

Blake here acknowledges the destructive powers of "Female Will," but allows Oothoon haughtily to point to both the cause and result of her socially created nature. She recalls a time when honesty and openness existed between the sexes. At some point male repression of females began, thereby ending sexual freedom for both. It was at this point that the artfulness and trickery of "hypocrite modesty" or "Female Will" was created. Oothoon demands to know why Theotormon should prefer the latter to the former, and if he and other men persist in favoring hypocrisy females will remain as whores to men, and both sexes' will remain enslaved. Oothoon rages against jealousy, the root cause of both sexes entrapment: "Father of Jealousy, be thou accursèd from the earth! / Why hast thou taught my Theotormon this accursèd thing" (12-13). Wollstonecraft's *Vindication* also rages against how the patriarchal world warped the relations between the sexes with jealousy (Essick 620). Oothoon abandons her repression for a moment with words that burst forth in violent demand, "I cry: Love! Love! Love! happy happy Love! free as the mountain wind!" (16) Here Blake makes his most impassioned plea for sexual freedom, but quickly retreats to what might have been his personal reality: "Such is self-love that envies all, a creeping skeleton, With lamplike eyes watching around the frozen marriage bed!" (21-22). Such a juxtaposition of opposing phrases cannot escape notice. In a single

passage Blake expresses wild personal freedom and a sexuality that is frozen. The words “lamplike eyes,” “envies,” “creeping skeleton,” and “frozen” appear to be of a personal nature when contrasted with “free,” “happy,” and “wind.” Interestingly, Blake offers a view of a world without jealousy in the passage immediately following the “frozen marriage bed”:

`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, and view their wanton play
In lovely copulation, bliss on bliss, with Theotormon:

Oothoon shall view his dear delight; nor e'er with jealous cloud
Come in the heaven of generous love, nor selfish blightings bring.

(23-28)

John Sutherland views the above scene as Blake's recanting a popular male sexual fantasy (427). Feminist critics unsurprisingly read the passage as evidence of Blake's misogyny (Fox 510). I argue that it represents neither view, and should be viewed in the context of an individual whose marital bed is “frozen.” Oothoon's offer to Theotormon may indeed be Blake's male fantasy, but so too could it be the fantasy of a female such as the sexually free thinking Mary Wollstonecraft.

Having, at least for the moment, presented his case and exorcised his frustrating sexual demons, Blake offers a final charge and benediction: “Arise, and drink your bliss, for everything that lives is holy!” (11). Clearly, Blake fervently continues to hope that humankind will break the social and religious bonds that allow

so much misery for and between both sexes. Despite his continued hope, Blake allows the pessimistic current represented by the Daughters of Albion to have the final word: "Thus every morning wails Oothoon; but Theotormon sits Upon the margin'd ocean conversing with shadows dire. The Daughters of Albion hear her woes, and echo back her sighs" (12-14). Blake realizes that the "mind forg'd manacles" ("London" 8) may never release, and the sexes may remain eternally estranged. Blake's hopeful optimism ceases with the conclusion of *Visions*. In the work that follows, he becomes sarcastic, angry, and dark. The vivid thread woven through *Poetical Sketches*, *The Marriage*, *Thel*, and *Visions* will afterward take on a darker tone, until Blake's frustration reaches for shades of black in *The Four Zoas*.

CONCLUSION

More than two centuries have passed since William Blake began his literary and artistic call for sexual equality for both sexes. During that time, critics have usually overlooked or dismissed his relentless efforts; fewer still recognize that the source of his intense, repeated demand was his own sexual frustration. While some critics notice the presence of Blake's interest in sexual freedom and the emphasis placed upon it in much of his work, very few have connected the intensity of his call with the distinct *lack* of sexual fulfillment portrayed in his work.

Yet his characters long desperately for such fulfillment. Some, like Thel, acknowledge their longing but remain eternally and fearfully frustrated. Brave characters, such as Oothoon, indulge their longings and are punished for it, just as her rapist, Bromium, is punished. Still others, such as Theotormon, are too bound up in jealousy to exercise sexual freedom or offer it to others. His characters are symbols of a dysfunctional society that has created legions of mentally manacled men and women. Even those who are "enlightened" enough to desire sexual freedom – and Blake clearly considered himself to be among them -- are socially forbidden to fulfill their desires. They are forced to remain manacled with the rest of humanity.

Blake's theme of sexual freedom was consistently present in his work, but buried in the mystical, mythical, and multi-hued tapestry of the rest of his work. Blake placed it in such a manner deliberately, for as a married man living in polite Dissenter society, putting forth such a radical idea, even in an age of revolution, would have been untenable. Confronted with Blake's confusing contraries and his mix of Christian, pagan, and invented pantheon of characters, critics often describe his work as mystic rather than

cryptic. Some critics discover and take hold of Blake's interest in sexual freedom, naming it "feminist" or "misogynist." It is neither. His interest represents Blake's wish for all of society to achieve sexual freedom so that he may at last indulge his own sexual desires.

I came to this conclusion early in the research for this thesis, but was at first apprehensive over revealing the earthy humanity of a literary icon, especially one who cloaks so much of his work in religion. David Sutherland, who regards Blake as a misogynist, was the lone critical voice suggesting that Blake's personal interest in sexual freedom should be a topic for further research. From my first reading of *Visions*, I detected Blake's thread of sexual longing, and then followed it through *Thel*, *The Marriage*, *Songs of Experience*, and pertinent passages from his later work. The intensity, repetition, and craving for sexual freedom are of a nature that is both poignant and pitiful. I became convinced that a writer who displays such obsession, over a period of more than fifty years (from early youth to old age), must have an enormous personal interest in the theme of sexual freedom. However, as I was often reminded during my research, Blake's biography provides scant evidence of his sexual interests and habits. But the lack of a record of such activity, considering that matters sexual are generally of a *private* nature, does not suggest sexual *inactivity*. Furthermore, while Blake lived his life in a city known for licentiousness, he was as socially constrained as any other eighteenth-century man of the middling classes.

Setting his sexual life aside, I researched Blake's early years and family background. His biography revealed ample evidence of an exceptionally bright, but terribly spoiled child whose parents denied him nothing. The image of a child who

always got his way fits neatly with the poet who endlessly sulks and demands his sexual freedom. As a child and as an adult, Blake demonstrated knowledge of how to couch the terms for his demands. The boy who convinced Christie's auctioneers to cut their prices for the sake of the future of art (who but the youthful artist will bring about said future?), became the man who used the same pragmatic technique to get what he wanted. Sexual freedom for *all*, while far-fetched, convinces many more than a call of sexual freedom for *me*. While my research on this point demonstrated Blake's lifelong need to be indulged, questions remained as to why he was obsessed with indulging himself in sexual ways.

Once more I returned to Blake's childhood and his habit of wandering the streets of London. I found that young Blake was permitted to wander extensively and freely throughout a city teeming with overt sexuality, but his apprenticeship to an engraver located just off Covent Garden also placed the teenage Blake in the heart of what could be termed London's "red light district." The evidence that Blake was granted and came to expect personal and sexual freedom at an early age is worthy of consideration and further research.

Despite the volumes of research detailing every known aspect of Blake's life and work, no critic has explored the possible connection between Blake's indulged childhood, his early and frequent exposure to overtly sexual situations, and his adult sexual frustration. The connection suggested in this thesis will hopefully encourage further research, including close readings of his letters and his *Notebook*. A similar reading of the letters and journals of Blake's close friends Henry Fuseli, John Stedman, and others may reveal additional details of Blake's sexual discontent. Further research in these and other areas of Blake's life and work will potentially encourage critics to view Blake and

other authors as humans, rather than as static icons, who are fully capable of expressing the wide range of emotions evident in their work. Blake's determination to cloak his desire for personal sexual freedom in layers of ambiguity and religion presents a special challenge to researchers. It is often said that Blake was ahead of his time. Perhaps he remains so today, but that is no excuse for scholarship to rest upon its laurels. Therefore, today's critics are especially obligated to exercise an open mind when considering Blake. His biographer, G.E. Bentley calls Blake, "A Stranger from Paradise in an alien world" whose "real life was in the imagination, in the realms of gold" (438). Thus, William Blake's imagination lives on in the longing found in *Songs of Experience*, the gentle reticence of Thel, the bravery of Oothoon, and in the dark, raw energy of his later work.

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