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A World of Our Own: William Blake and Abolition

by

Lisa Karee Parker

Under the Direction of Christine Gallant

ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the influence of the abolition debates on two of William Blake's early writings, "The Little Black Boy" and *The Visions of the Daughters of Albion*. It also considers Blake's engravings for John Gabriel Stedman's *Narrative of a Five Years Expedition against the Revolted Negroes of Surinam* as proof of his abolitionist interest. Chapter one provides an overview of current Romantic criticism which situates Blake and other Romantic writers within a historical context. Chapter two summarizes the abolition movement in the late eighteenth century. Chapters three, four and five specifically discuss Blake's work as abolitionist in intent.

INDEX WORDS: William Blake, Slavery, John Gabriel Stedman, Songs of Innocence and Experience, The Visions of the Daughters of Albion, Abolition, Anti-slavery literature, Engravings, Romantic criticism

A WORLD OF OUR OWN: WILLIAM BLAKE AND ABOLITION

by

LISA KAREE PARKER

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

Master of Arts

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2006

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2006

A WORLD OF OUR OWN: WILLIAM BLAKE AND ABOLITION

by

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Dedication

I will receive many rewards in life for this scholastic achievement, so I would like to take this opportunity to recognize my amazing friends and family who have been overwhelmingly supportive throughout this trying process. Without the emotional and financial support of my family, I would not have been able to accomplish this task. I am achieving my goal not only because I was determined, but because I had a tremendous support system behind me. Thank you to all of you who have kept me focused and who have encouraged me along the way. This thesis is dedicated to my husband, Greg Brownlow, who lovingly supports me in all my academic endeavors. Without his strength and inspiration, the completion of this project would not have been possible.

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Chapter One

Critical Approaches to William Blake: Historical Premises

This thesis, which proposes that William Blake's early writings were influenced by the slave trade and the abolition debate, is a contribution to the most recent trend in Romantic literature studies where critics have shown an interest in the effects of slavery and abolition on Romantic works, including visual and written art. This study will show that Blake specifically responds to slavery, the slave trade, and the abolition debate in his work. Scholarship which takes a historical approach to reading Blake is an important introduction to this project. As a way of situating my work within the current scholarship, this chapter surveys those studies which relate Blake's work to his own historical context, and especially to slavery and abolition. Chapter two will summarize the historical context of Blake's two poems "The Little Black Boy" and *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*, and chapters three and four will discuss those works respectively. An analysis of Blake's poems, as well as his engravings to John Stedman's *Narrative of a five Years Expedition against the Revolted Negroes of Surinam*, will show that his knowledge of the slave trade and abolitionist rhetoric is more complex and advanced than previously recognized.

The influence of the slave trade on Romantic poets and their work is not an entirely new topic of discussion in literary scholarship. The work of Joan Baum, Clare Midgley, Alan Richardson, Debbie Lee and Moira Ferguson, for example, paved the way for more specialized studies in Romantic scholarship and the slave trade. Scholarship on the topic of slavery and abolition has its beginnings in studies that consider the British empire, colonialism, and imperialism (See Kitson and Makdisi). The scholarly focus on

British expansion, and on colonialism and imperialism, prompted critics to read Romantic literature from a new historical perspective. Formerly accepted as works of imagination and self exploration, Romantic literature once seemed an unlikely source for topical inquisitions in early critical discourse (pre-1970). A shift in scholarship to a more historical focus allowed the Romantic artist to be recognized his or her involvement in political, historical and social events. Historical studies of the Romantic period identify and define the public consciousness, the national position, and the effects of Empire on other nations. An inevitable part of history, the literature from the period is an important consideration in historical scholarship. The poet's reflection on slavery, and especially abolition, had been easily looked over in earlier scholarship since early scholarship coined Romanticism a literature strictly of the imagination. When scholarship began to show an interest in Romantic history, it invited literary critics to investigate the effects of that history on Romantic literature.

Early critical thought, from Victorian days until the mid-twentieth century, (mis)construed Blake as a mystic. However, beginning with David Erdman's influential historical study Blake: Prophet Against Empire (1954), and continuing up to the present day, scholarship shows a growing interest in Blake as a poet of "social vision" (Erdman, xi). Critics such as Hazard Adams, Stephen Behrendt, Jerome McGann, David Punter, Jeanne Moskal, Harold Bloom, Helen Bruder, Robert Essick, Saree Makdisi, Robert Gleckner and Jon Mee follow Erdman's historical lead. A methodical study of Blake's work in relation to its social context, argues Erdman, offers a new perception of him, not as a bard, but as a man with a public opinion (xi). Erdman's study of Blake is thorough

(for its time) and heavily cited throughout Blake criticism. Although Erdman has been accused of being “overly topical” by some critics like Jacki DiSalvo (3), his work is highly respected in the academic community as it illuminates the important historical and political context of Blake’s work.

Erdman’s historical approach is a necessary response to early critics who see Blake as nothing more than a mystic located in a world of visionary ideals. S. Foster Damon, for example, begins his 1924 study by asserting that to understand Blake one needs to understand only his mysticism. A historical study such as Erdman’s weakened the early trend to read Blake as disjointed from the real world. Erdman admits that Blake’s complex writing style sometimes veils historical references but insists that it is possible to trace those references throughout much of Blake’s work (xiii). Erdman’s text, organized by historical events such as the French, American, and Industrial revolutions, connects Blake to the real world so firmly that to discuss Blake as only a mystic poet is to use an outdated and outmoded critical discourse. Though Erdman does an excellent job of matching Blake’s work to coinciding historical events, his discussion of the abolition movement and Blake’s involvement in abolitionist print culture (for example his work in the *Stedman Narrative*, “The Little Black Boy,” and *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*) is quite brief.

An unavoidable part of historicizing Blake in light of abolition is tracing his knowledge of slavery, the slave trade and abolition debates. The most direct (and graphic) source, as Erdman says and as discussed by Rubenstein and Townsend, came from Blake’s employment as an engraver for John Gabriel Stedman’s *A Narrative, of five*

Years' expedition, against the Revolted Negroes of Surinam. Blake engraved sixteen plates for Stedman, most of which illustrate plantation life and slave conditions (230). Blake designed his engravings from Stedman's own brief sketches and his manuscript, a version probably more graphic than the one that was eventually published (Price, xi). Blake's familiarity with the narrative, his personal interactions with Stedman and his own interpretation of Stedman's observations contribute to Blake's knowledge of slavery. Blake's interaction with Stedman and his manuscript provided Blake with a more direct source than propaganda and biased reports in pamphlets and newspapers. Erdman believes that the knowledge Blake gathered during his time with Stedman is a likely source for the characters and issues in *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*.¹

DiSalvo reminds us that Erdman's study was the foundation for scholarship which links Blake to the political and historical context of his own "tempestuous times" (xvii). DiSalvo's collection of essays, Blake, Politics, and History (1998), is a self-identified contribution to an ongoing trend in criticism that attempts to re-center Blake studies around history (xv). Still, the topics of the slave trade and abolition barely surface. In a collection of seventeen essays, only two fill the heading "Blake, Empire and Slavery." G.A. Rosso's article (obviously the "empire" in DiSalvo's heading) reads Blake's "King Edward the Third" as a parody of Shakespeare's *Henry V*. Rosso considers an imperial context (which is out of the scope of this study) which includes the Spanish Armada, the Napoleonic wars and examples of British "imperial power" (259).

¹ I will return to this argument in Chapter 5 of this study.

Anne Rubenstein's and Camilla Townsend's contribution to the collection is more useful to this study. Rubenstein and Townsend note that Stedman's *Narrative*, which became available to the public in 1796, chronicles the horrors of slavery in such detail that it became useful ammunition for the anti-slavery campaign. Blake provided illustrations for some of the most graphic scenes of slave torture in Stedman's work (273). Rubenstein and Townsend make clear that Blake was concerned with slavery, which is especially obvious in the engravings Blake did for Stedman's writing where Blake manipulates Stedman's descriptions by making the slaves human and unbounded by "racial or sexual categories" (291). Rubenstein and Townsend are unsure of Stedman's position—stating that his comments conflict with his actions—but argue that Blake thought slavery was a "blotting horror" (294).

Rubenstein and Townsend suggest that Blake's involvement with Swedenborgian dissenters points to his favor of abolition as well (295). Swedenborgs hoped that colonization in Africa would help organize newly freed slaves. The Swedenborgian hope about slaves colonizing Africa most likely connects with the contemporary movement by the government to send British ex-slaves to Sierre Leone to colonize it. While the idea may seem to come from fear of interaction with the "other," Blake and other Swedenborgs nevertheless wanted slaves to be freed (even if they did not want to cohabitate with them).

Along with the Swedenborgian belief that Africans were not evil but in fact inherently good (because they were human), was the belief that the controlling premise of slavery could be found in English family life—between man and wife. Rubenstein and

Townsend say Blake disliked slavery's characteristics of "indifference" and "dissimulation" and suggest that he thought about marriage in the same terms (283). Rubenstein and Townsend believe that Blake made connections, as did other abolitionists, between the social roles of slaves and married women—their husbands akin to oppressors. Although Rubenstein and Townsend write about marriage in relation to Blake's engravings, their argument is also an implicit reminder of the critical discourse most associated with Blake's *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*. A popular critical argument is that *Visions* is a poetic response in favor of the feminist rhetoric Mary Wollstonecraft puts forth in her "Vindication of the Rights of Man." It has also been noted that Wollstonecraft uses abolitionist rhetoric in her prose; the conclusion should be made that Blake's long poem has more than just a feminist message.

Erdman was one of the first critics (along with Geoffrey Keynes) to make definite connections between Blake's early works to the abolition movement. Erdman identifies Blake's *Visions* as the site for this connection. The most popular readings of *Visions* are limited, according to Erdman. Blake's long poem is about much more than a "debate on free love" with "passing allusions" to women's rights and sexual prohibition (228). Erdman calls this reading superficial and concludes that the poem is best understood when read in relation to the slave trade debate. Ann Mellor agrees that Blake's long poem is more than a response to Wollstonecraft when she concedes that Blake makes direct allusions to the British slave trade and the abolitionist movement (69). According to Erdman's reading of the poem, Theotormon, Bromion, and Oothoon's "triangular relationship and their unresolved debate" should be recognized as "poetic counterparts"

of the debates on the abolition of the slave trade (228).² D.L. Macdonald also sees that *Visions* is Blake's "most explicitly abolitionist poem" (a conclusion for which he credits Erdman). In addition to *Visions*, Macdonald and Erdman also propose that Blake's "The Little Black Boy" should be considered as a poem with abolitionist proclivities (Macdonald 166).

Despite the poem's relevance to abolition, Alan Richardson notices a "critical reticence" to include "The Little Black Boy" as one of Blake's abolitionist poems (233).³ Debbie Lee, in her one page devoted to "The Little Black Boy" confirms Richardson's observation that critics often skip over or briefly mention "The Little Black Boy." Lee also calls the poem a "knot of contradictions;" however, her response is better understood as a description of the criticism surrounding "The Little Black Boy," rather than the poem itself, since interpretations rarely concur (118). Lee's own reading of the poem is rooted in her examination of the Stedman *Narrative* and Blake's engravings.

One characteristic of abolitionist rhetoric, Brycchan Carey explains, is a discourse of sensibility. Carey explains that the rhetoric of sensibility was a tool of the abolitionist argument. Carey's position supports Peter Kitson's idea of "colonial guilt" (15). The empathy solicited by abolitionist literature was made effective through a "depiction of physical and emotional suffering" (18). By describing suffering, Carey says, writers hoped to alter their audience's perception of the slave—as human (rather than beastly)

² Erdman refers to the debates that took place between 1789-1793.

³ Richardson says that "The Little Black Boy" is mentioned only in passing or not at all by Heather Glen in *Vision and Disenchantment* (1983), Stewart Crehen in *Blake in Context* (1984), Edward Larrisy in "William Blake" *Rereading Literature Series* (1985), and Michael Ferber in *The Social Vision of William Blake* (1985). I will return to Richardson's study in a later chapter.

and as neglected (rather than articles of trade). Carey notes that Romantic verse (poetry) both “used” and “denounced” sentimental language as a strategic method to counter pro-slavery arguments (15). Carey’s “used” and “denounced” sounds a lot like Lee’s “mocks” and “mimics,” which points to an ironic or satirical quality in some Romantic literature.

Lee’s use of the term “mock-mimicry” indicates, on one level, Blake’s use of contradiction and irony which is especially apparent in “The Little Black Boy.” Recognizing his use of irony is fundamental for understanding Blake’s method of contributing to abolitionist print culture, for the irony appears in both his visual and written art. Lee sees “mock-mimicry” in much of Blake’s work.⁴ In the engravings for Stedman’s work, Blake works to both mock and mimic the English perception of slavery. On one hand, slavery does not seem like an English matter, it is a colonial matter, and this can be seen in the engravings that capture eerily docile slaves and masters. The slaves in some of Blake’s engravings are disconnected from their conditions. This is not Blake overlooking their torture, but, in fact, calling most attention to it because it is missing from the picture. Blake depends on his audience to read the image with a specific knowledge of slavery, to bring their own knowledge of abuse to the picture, which causes them to think on it—to contemplate the slave’s condition. Just as the monkeys in Stedman’s narrative are said to undermine humans, so too does Blake undermine the

⁴ For more on “mock-mimicry” see pps. 66-119 of Lee’s work. Briefly summarized, Lee considers, as the subtitle to the chapter tells us, “Monkeys in Blake’s Engravings for Stedman’s *Narrative*.” Lee presents a comprehensive study on monkeys and apes as “complicated symbols in London at the time Blake executed his engravings for Stedman” (72). The term “mock-mimicry” is taken directly from Stedman’s *Narrative*. Lee writes: “Monkeys in Blake mock and mimic, something Stedman calls repeated attention to with his own clever short-hand, ‘mock-mimicry.’ Stedman announces their unnerving ability to copy and undermine humans (70).”

English reader who sees a docile slave but is reminded (by Blake's manipulation) of the horrors of slavery. Really, Blake's engravings provide an instance of insecurity for the British reader, "where the eye sees only when the heart tears itself away from what it conventionally knows" (Lee 70). Though Lee does not specifically relate her discussion to Blake's *Visions*, her statement alludes to Blake's subtitle "The Eye sees more than the Heart knows." With this reading, Blake, both in the Stedman engravings and his literature, asks the audience to "tap into the transformative potential of interpretive doubleness, to bring their *subject* close up by disentangling themselves from the self-centered heart" (emphasis added, 99). The subject (for Blake, for Lee's study, and for this one) is the African slave.

One of the most prominent historical events of the period, next to the French Revolution, slavery (and its abolition) are apparent subjects for scholarly debate. Yet, only in the past fifteen years has abolition been a concern of Romantic critics. Slavery and the question of abolition was obvious subject matter for abolitionist writers like Hannah More, Ann Yearsley, Robert Southey, and William Cowper, who made the literary marketplace a public forum for debating the abolition of the slave trade. The Romantic era is also home to some of the most influential slave narratives, Olaudah Equiano's being the most widely recognized. Thomas Clarkson's writings, too, (which effectively documented the slave trade, its horrors, and the fight against the trade) made slavery a concern of Romantic ideology, and thus important to historicist studies. These abolitionist writers, whose focus on slavery was unmistakable, were the first authors considered by critics studying Romantic literature and slavery.

Works like Clare Midgley's "Women Against Empire" (1992) and Eamon Wright's "British Women Writers and Race" (2005) focus on women's responses to the trade. Both Midgley's and Wright's works suggest that British feminism matured within the larger context of racial and social conflicts (i.e., the slave trade and the French Revolution). Midgley points out that the anti-slavery debates were an appropriate public forum for women to begin to speak on political business (158). Allowing women to fully participate in the British Foreign Anti-Slavery Society (1840), says Midgley, prompted men to publicly address "the woman question" (159). Midgley describes the similarities between the abolitionist and the feminist argument by way of Elizabeth Pease who said that excluding women from anti-slavery assemblies was "anti-christian" and "ill-founded" (163). Wright seems to be on the same page as Midgley but addresses the correlation between racial tension and British feminism more directly. Wright's work, while still addressing literary responses to slavery, has a more historical focus than Midgley's literary approach. Yet, Wright clearly understands the relationship between literature and society to be mutual. The power of the written word, says Wright, may be used as a force of social change (13).

Maira Ferguson's Subject to Others (1992) also considers how women writers of the period dealt with slavery in their work. Ferguson agrees with Midgley that women's participation in the antislavery debates (through various mediums, including literature) created for them a experience with political activities, which could then be applied to other public and political affairs. Brycchan Carey in British Abolitionism and the Rhetoric of Sensibility (2005) bridges Midgley's and Ferguson's arguments by

addressing both the writer's response to slavery and the medium through which they were presenting their argument. Carey therefore delineates abolitionist print culture to involve the writer's position, the audience's response, and the type of text utilized. Carey's study has an obvious interest in literary responses to the abolition debates as represented in letters, novels, poetry, pamphlets, and legal documents. Carey hopes to offer a more comprehensive study by not confining his work to only the examination of literary works. While Carey includes a more comprehensive study of print, he does not offer a variance on Romantic writers. Carey both limits and expands his argument based on the scope of his project.

Carey limits the scope of British Abolitionism and the Rhetoric of Sensibility to abolitionist writers who handed out "colonial guilt" to their readers by creating empathy for their subjects (15). By not addressing how that same rhetoric appears in other Romantic writers, Carey adheres to the safety of previous arguments which include only the most obvious abolitionist writings (by More, Yearsley, Cowper etc.). However, Carey does, in his seemingly comparable argument, offer a nuance of expansion as well. By extending the scope of "sensibility" to both female and male romantic writers, Carey implies that slavery appeared in more works than previously considered. Furthermore, Carey sees the rhetoric of sensibility as a subversive tool undermining intellect. In the case of women's rights, as women undermining political statutes (put forth by men) of inferiority. This is where Carey builds on past arguments like those of Ferguson and Midgley. Carey also begins to realize (as does Debbie Lee) that sensibility affects the reader just as much intellectually as emotionally. After all, abolitionist literature was

meant to do more than make the reader feel guilty. It was meant to affect change. Therefore, writers able to make an abolitionist appeal on both an intellectual and emotional plane made the most impact.

Carey is interested not only in what abolitionist writers wrote but also in which form of text their writings appeared. Carey's chapter on arguments made by abolitionists in prose reviews the works and criticism of Aphra Behn, Ignatius Sancho, and Thomas Day (among a couple of others) and is quite short. Carey's contribution to this study is mostly found in his chapter on writers who argued in verse. Carey includes Thomas Day (*The Dying Negro*), Hannah More (*Slavery, A Poem*), and William Cowper (*The Negro's Complaint* and others). Carey considers these to be canonical antislavery poets. Though he names Thomas Pringle, James Montgomery, William Blake, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, William Wordsworth, and Robert Burns as included in an antislavery canon, Carey only *names* them; he does not discuss their contribution. Perhaps out of the scope of his study, the "most valued poets," major (white male) Romantic writers, are largely ignored.

Joan Baum's important work Mind Forg'd Manacles (1994) considers writers like Byron, Coleridge, and Shelley as writers who also dealt with slavery in the literary marketplace. Until Baum's study, (and strangely even after her study) major (white male) Romantic writers are overlooked—and for good reason. What can they tell us, through their poetry on nature, the human imagination, and the individual, about slavery and abolition? Debbie Lee's work Slavery and the Romantic Imagination (2002) continues to explore canonical writers. Lee considers the work of Coleridge, Keats, Shelley, Wordsworth and Blake as interdependent of slavery. Calling slavery the "great moral

question” of Romanticism, Lee theorizes that the Romantic imagination was created because writers wanted to express creatively their understanding of a horrific, complex, unequal, and violent relationship between “Africans and Britons” (1-4). For Lee, slavery and the romantic imagination are interdependent.

Another key importance of Lee’s theory is her distinction between abolitionist and Romantic poetry. She says directly what Carey implies when his book about sensibility applies to abolitionist writers (More, Cowper, Day) and ignores Romantic writers (Blake, Coleridge, Wordsworth). Lee’s separates the abolitionist writers from the Romantic writers by considering works not only *of* the imagination but *about* the imagination. Lee reviews a previous critical thought (which has been discredited) that the aesthetic quality of Romantic literature often masks signs of slavery. While past critics believe that Romantic language and style masked historical references (such as to slavery), Lee believes slavery had a tremendous influence on the Romantic poet’s imagination. Lee is able to see behind the mask of Romantic language as she applies a critical discourse usually reserved for discussions of abolitionist poetry to a discussion of canonical Romantic poets. Lee recognizes, while admitting her own hesitations, that previous scholarship resists putting the Romantic imagination close to the horrors of slavery (1). While historicizing Romantic poets has become commonplace in literary scholarship, pairing them with the subject of slavery has not. However, Lee calls slavery “the great moral question” of the romantic age (1). By tracing the signs of slavery in imaginative works, Lee investigates the writer’s response to, or their literary interaction with, slavery.

Building on previous criticism, Lee identifies three types of response to slavery from nineteenth-century (British) writers: “complicity, resistance, or anxiety” (2). Most directly, the categories of responses come from Tim Fulford and Peter J. Kitson’s collection of essays Romanticism and Colonialism (1998), which Lee cites heavily. Kitson discusses a change in colonialism signified by the Britain’s change in goals—from discovery and conquest of land to the terrorization and exploitation of people (13). Accordingly, the nation’s change in goals initiated a new consciousness which altered the ways in which Europeans understood themselves, others, and their place in this world (13). Expansion inevitably led to a higher cultural consciousness in which interaction with other cultures became a central issue (14). Kitson cites an important historical event, Burke’s impeachment speeches of the Governor of Bengal Warren Hastings, as the catalyst for a “new variety of British imperialism” (14-15). Burke’s speeches, Kitson says, facilitated “colonial guilt” (15). Guilt, morality and empathy were emotional ammunition aimed at the fall of slavery.

Kitson’s discussion of “colonial guilt” leads him to a discussion of race, an important factor in determining someone’s worth in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Britain (15-18). Kitson outlines the ideas about race in eighteenth-century Britain as three separate points of view. One view postulated that humans, no matter their color, were of the same species. The idea of different species within the human race implied mixed origins which in turn conflicted religious beliefs and the Biblical account (18). Others held the view that there was a hierarchy of races within the species and that the ‘Negro’ was at, or near, the bottom (18). Still another view, a “new conception of race,” came

from J.F. Blumenbach (19). Blumenbach's biblical explanation was that the purist form of humanity was the white male and that all other forms were descendents of the white race (19). Blumenbach considered the European race the "most beautiful" and "least degenerate" (19). Kitson explains that Blumenbach's theory was an easy justification for imperialism and racial supremacy, an all too convenient argument for pro-slavery advocates (20).

Lee makes another important connection in her introduction, which must be understood as a foundation for her study, and for studies like this one, that discuss canonical Romantic poets and their relationship to slavery and abolition: imagination is about empathy (3). This idea is revisited in Carey's work when he explores the effect of sentiment in abolitionist discourse. Carey's concentration on abolitionist writers is complemented by Lee's focus on imaginative writers. Romantic writers used imagination to disconnect from their societal norms and pressing ideology in order to understand and be compassionate for their artistic subjects (Lee 4). So, imagination is fertile ground for empathy. Imagination is also a necessary tool for understanding in an ideology which upholds social hierarchy. Of course, it can be argued, that imagination is just as likely to spawn evil thoughts as it is to facilitate empathy, but in Lee's subjects (Shelley, Coleridge, Wordsworth, and Blake) imagination is a tool for creating empathy for subjects, not only in themselves but in their readers as well. Rather than distancing the writer from the subject, as one might think imagining would do, the writer is actually brought closer to the subject—especially when that subject is foreign to the writer. And

this is perhaps where Blake becomes separate from other Romantic writers since he had a more direct interaction with slave culture.

Blake's familiarity with slave culture came from his interaction with John Stedman. Lee acknowledges, in addition to his fascination with slave conditions, Stedman's observations of animal life, particularly monkeys. Just like the monkeys Stedman encounters, Blake, in his poem "The Little Black Boy," "mocks and mimics"—the monkeys mock and mimic foreign Englishmen in their land and Blake mocks and mimics surrounding ideologies through his poem (118). According to Lee, Blake's monkey-like vision makes way for an alternate conception of slavery where all parties involved—"both self and other"—are kept safe. Creating a safe environment for slaves may be an intended creative effect used by abolitionists who depended on the power of empathy and guilt to bring about change.

Lee (like Alan Richardson) exposes a lack of attempt in prior criticism to explain underlying theoretical similarities or differences between the Romantic and abolitionist movements (4). Lee's final assertion of her introduction suggests slavery (and our recognition of its effect on literature) changed the direction of Romantic criticism: "one of the things Romantic works chronicle is the death of Romantic illusions in the face of slavery" (6). No longer sedated by the Romantic metaphor, critics are able to make important cultural, historical, and social connections between slavery, abolition and Romantic literature.

Marcus Wood defines “two loci seen to constitute Blake’s most direct treatment of slavery:” the engravings in Stedman’s narrative and *Visions* (181).⁵ Wood is one critic who, more harshly than DiSalvo, sees that tying Blake’s exploration of slavery down to “precise historical events” is “of limited use” (as is tying it down to pornography, I suppose). Nevertheless, Wood does contribute to the current trend of discussing Blake and abolition. Wood is interested in the way Blake confronts “abuses of power, and the suffering of the innocent” (182). Even if his focus is unlike that seen in any other Blake studies, Wood still notices an abolitionist quality in Blake’s work and agrees that *Visions* is about slavery. Specifically, Wood describes *Visions* as a “pessimistic” examination of the practices of “Atlantic Slavery” (183). Additionally, Wood agrees with Lee’s argument that “The Little Black Boy” is an ironic rendering of “colonial mimicry” (198). His ultimate view is that Blake, through his ironic and unconventional approach to slavery, had a “potency which more historically specific and stylistically conventional abolition literatures lacked” (199).

Although differing in approach, method, and conclusion, all of the above critics make some connection between Blake and his historical world, especially the British slave trade. Since Erdman’s text, and the numerous studies which adjoin his historical study, divorcing Blake from his history seems inappropriate. Still, with as much critical attention that Blake receives through the historic lens, and especially with the references to slavery and abolition, some of his earlier work still lacks notice. “The Little Black Boy,” as Richardson mentions, is often only briefly mentioned or skipped. Additionally,

⁵ “Slavery and Romantic Poetry” Slavery, Empathy, and Pornography. Oxford: UP, 2002.

there has been little investigation into the development of Blake's thought between the Stedman engravings, Blake's conception of "The Little Black Boy" and his *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*. This study will show that Blake's attention to questions of race, slavery, and abolition is more clever than subtle and more radical than conservative. This study locates Blake not only in a world of imagination but, also, in a world of our own.

Chapter Two

Abolishing the Slave Trade

Historically, the defeat of the Spanish Armada in 1588 paved the way for English colonization of the New World (Morgan 6). In addition to their provincial ports, Britain secured shipping docks from the coast of present day New England all the way south to the Caribbean islands. With the acquisition of new land came new opportunities for economic growth and British expansion. Kenneth Morgan points out that there were several factors which lead to the colonization (and cultivation) of North American and Caribbean land. New found social mobility in England, the attractiveness of foreign lands, the lack of economic opportunities in England and religious divisions were all serious motivations for an Atlantic migration (6). Morgan estimates that by the end of the seventeenth century, over 300,000 people had left England to benefit from its colonies.

Britain's "Atlantic empire" (by 1776) consisted of thirteen North American colonies, four Canadian provinces, and a "cluster" of Caribbean islands (Morgan 7). The land had the same lure for those migrating as it did for those staying in England. For both the English government and those moving to new lands, the colonies had a completely economic purpose—all parties saw opportunity in the largely undeveloped lands. Britain's goal was to make use of the available land, agriculturally, in order to produce commodities for the "mother country" to use and export (7). There was one problem, though; who would cultivate the land in order to produce such profits? Before British defeat, the Spanish had encountered the same problem. English merchants imitated the Spanish, Portuguese, Dutch and French when they began enslaving Africans to work the

luscious, untapped soils of the Americas and Caribbean. The Spanish islands (Jamaica, Barbados, St. Lucia) were a useless luxury, says James Walvin, without a large labor force to turn the soil (34).⁶

Britain's dominance of the Caribbean allowed them to export and distribute tropical goods—namely, rum, tobacco, coffee and sugar—and so the consumption began. Britain's demand for sugar created a reciprocal demand for slavery, since slaves produced sugar in British colonies. Walvin begins his study of British slavery with a discussion of the sweet additive, noting that Britain's consumption of sugar increased from 4 pounds per person in the early 1700-1709 to 18 pounds in 1800-1809—consumption tripled and increased 2,500 per cent in 150 years (*Ivory* 6). The thousands of slaves held captive on sugar plantations fed the nation's addiction. At the end of the Seven Years' War (1763), Britain gained land in the West Indies and built more sugar plantations; Black slavery continued to be a means for white indulgence.

Before turning to African slaves, the British forced Native Americans to work. That labor attempt failed for two reasons, according to Morgan: the spreading of foreign disease (from the English to the Native Americans) killed the workers quickly and the Native Americans were not efficient enough as workers to maximize the plantations' output (7). Next, the English tried putting their own people to work through indentured servitude. The problem with this labor force, Morgan says, is that the workers became

⁶ Works by Walvin cited in this chapter include, England, Slaves and Freedom, 1776-1838; Black Ivory; and Black and White. Also cited, is Walvin's introduction to and his essay, "The Propaganda of Anti-Slavery" in the critical collection Slavery and British Society. These works will be referred to as *Freedom*, *Ivory*, *Black*, and *Slavery* in parenthetical citations.

independent after their service (presumably not to return to work on the plantation).

Furthermore, white workers had legal rights which allowed them to negotiate the terms of their contracts. Finally, when the economy improved in England, white workers returned home to work, abandoning the plantations. The next option, Morgan claims, was the “solution to the planters’ needs” (8).

A more capable, stronger and replaceable labor force was needed to work the plantations. The African people, meeting all logistical needs of plantation owners, quickly became fuel for the colonial machine. During the eighteenth century, 3 million slaves were shipped to the Americas (Morgan 10). Morgan notes that the transatlantic economy flourished once the African labor force was integrated into the system (12). Production increased and Britain’s capital economy began. Europeans carried goods to the 2,000 mile stretch of the west African coast (a free trading zone). Mostly trading for slaves, British crews exchanged goods for Africans and set sail for the Americas where they replenished the slave population and pick up goods to be taken back to England. The triangular relationship of Britain, Africa, and America proved the ideal economic conglomerate, albeit “retrogressive” in terms of humanitarian progress (Morgan 36).

Britain’s overseas market was strengthened, both directly and indirectly, by their involvement in transatlantic trading of slaves—the slave trade not only increased colonial profits but Britain’s general economic state as well. Transatlantic trade operation was a protected market for the British. Controlled by Navigation Acts (passed between 1651 and 1696), oceanic trade happened inside the British empire—British manufactures traded with “British-owned and British-manned vessels [. . .] all colonial and European

commodities were to be shipped to Britain or a British colony” (Morgan 13).

Capitalization in an unassailable market meant huge profits for all (British) parties involved. It also meant that capital gains stayed in British hands. Returns via the slave trade could be made in various ways. For one, the direct takings from the sale of slaves padded the pockets of shipping crews. Investors, too, who funded the voyages depended upon rewarding sales (*Slavery* 37). Substantial duty revenues were gained from the exchange of imports and exports, shipping taxes, and taxes on the sales of slaves. Banks and commercial investors supported the trade and were thus personally and financially devoted to the enterprise. Even the general public, those who could afford it, invested in colonial expansion, owned plantations, or somehow financed overseas expansion. Commodities made available by the trade (sugar, tobacco, rum etc.) were significant for British industry and economic growth (1). While the economy boomed and the slave market returned up to a fifty percent profit, small groups who doubted the economic worth of lost humanity began to challenge the system.

The economic benefits of slavery, a classic case of supply and demand, provided goods, salary, ownership, employment and power for those involved in all levels of the slave trade. Abolitionists, then, sought to undermine and dissolve perhaps the most profitable commerce in British history. Abolitionists did not only challenge the British government, but they also threatened English culture, its economic stability and its world dominance. The English government, for example, wanted currency to continue circulating globally with a steady rate of inflation. Morgan makes an important argument that it was not only those directly involved in the trade who profited, but the British

economy as a whole. The return on investments in the slave trade would prove immense. The Atlantic trading system built capital wealth for the British empire providing investment opportunities both at home and abroad. Abolitionists, then, had a rather prominent and powerful audience to sway.

Walvin affirms that the anti-slavery movement was started by the Quakers who opposed the trade's disregard for the natural rights of man (*Freedom* 97). With a noticeable influence beginning around 1770, the Quakers were powerful channels for encouraging anti-slavery on both sides of the Atlantic. Beginning as a single group that quickly grew into a chaptered organization, Quakers formed a framework of abolitionist correspondents and friends "spanning the English speaking world" (101). Representing one religious argument of abolitionist discourse, the Quakers argued that slavery was a denial of human rights; Their motto for their egalitarian point read "Am I not a man and a brother?"(101). Sometimes called the 'grass-roots' of the abolition movement, Quakers (along with philosophers and humanitarians) shaped a critique of slavery that would make it all the way to parliament (Dresser 130).⁷

Knowing that a widespread movement was necessary in order to challenge a profitable British industry, individual protestors formed a unified force, in 1787, as the Society for the Abolition of the Slave Trade (*Freedom* 97). The first objective of the campaign was to educate the public who either viewed slavery as a colonial issue, and disregarded the matter, or viewed slavery as an economic gift and discredited the humanitarian cause. The British public held a general ignorance about the slave trade—

⁷ Slavery Obscured 2001.

an open protest against the slave trade would educate them. With three influential members of its committee, William Wilberforce, Granville Sharp, and Thomas Clarkson, the Abolition Society was able to publicly address, including in Parliament, the inhumanity of the slave trade.

Clarkson's devotion to banning the slave trade began early in his life, as a college student. In 1785 Cambridge University held an essay competition that asked *Anne Liceat Invitos in Servitutum Dare?* (Is it lawful to make slaves of others against their will?) Clarkson wrote an essay for the competition and won. His essay, "On the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species," was published in 1786.⁸ Clarkson's essay outlines the atrocities African slaves endured while being forced to support British demands. A showcase of terror and despair, the essay seems to be enough to sway the toughest jury. However, Clarkson and other abolitionists were not debating with a fair or just opponent. No reasonable deliberation, or empirical report of human suffering, would likely convince shareholders to release African laborers (whom they saw as top producers of premium crops).

The members of the Abolition Society insisted on the essential humanity of Africans and were thus against the slave trade. According to their logic, "the slave trade went beyond the humanitarian limits of what should be bought and sold" (Jennings 26).⁹ The goal of early abolitionists, however, was not immediately to emancipate slaves but to

⁸ This historical description is taken from Brycchan Carey's resources on slavery and abolition. See Discourses of Slavery and Abolition and British Abolitionism and the Rhetoric of Sensibility: Writing, Sentiment, and Slavery, 1760-1807. See also his online source www.byrchancarey.com (accessed for this material Apr. 28 2006).

⁹ The Business of Abolishing the British Slave Trade 1783-1807. London: Frank Cass, 1997.

stop the trade and to improve the treatment of slaves already working on British plantations. If the trade was stopped, abolitionists reasoned, planters would be forced to take better care of the slaves they already had since additional slaves would be unavailable (*Slavery* 50). The Abolition Society felt that by aiming to remove both the trade and slavery itself might jeopardize their entire cause. Clarkson writes, “Now the question was, which of the two evils [the trade or slavery itself]” would the Committee “direct their attention with a view of the removal of it; or whether, with the same view, it should direct its attention to both of them” (Clarkson 284).¹⁰ Clarkson and the Committee reasoned that if the trade was abolished, then slavery itself would eventually fall. So, “by aiming at the abolition of the Slave-trade, they were laying the axe at the very root” of the problem (286).

Having defined its objectives, the Committee went to work. For the next two years, Clarkson gathered evidence against the trade. His documentation from his trips to Bristol, Liverpool, and Lancaster are remarkable.¹¹ In his historical narrative, Clarkson describes his anxiety as he approached Bristol:

I began now to tremble, for the first time, at the arduous task I had undertaken, of attempting to subvert one of the branches of the commerce of the great place which was then before me. I began to think of the host

¹⁰ In 1808, Clarkson wrote the comprehensive narrative which I reference here: *History of the Rise, Progress and Accomplishment of the Abolition of the African Slave Trade*. This book provides a detailed report of the abolition campaign, and is an important historical record of the movement.

¹¹ Although London was an extremely successful port city, Bristol, on the Atlantic side, replaced London as the center of operations for the slave trade. This occurred only after the trade outgrew the abilities of the Royal African Company in London. For more on the Royal African Company see Walvin’s *Black Ivory: Slavery in the British Empire*. 2nd edition pp. 29-33.

of people I should have to encounter in it. I anticipated much persecution in it also; and *I questioned whether I should even get out of it alive.*

(emphasis added 293)

In his meticulous investigation, Clarkson spoke with and interviewed crews of slave ships, captains, merchants, tradesmen, attorneys and anyone else his search led him to. Through his interactions with various participants in the trade, Clarkson was able to effectively gather evidence against the trade (based on its sheer inhumanity) and present it to the public. Clarkson's objective was to gain knowledge of the "nature and practices of" the trade (294). Clarkson went aboard slave ships, spoke with seamen, gathered material evidence, and produced the most comprehensive record of trade activities. He procured the assistance of captains, deckhands, and others involved; they revealed the nature of the trading business and even stated publicly all they knew concerning the practices of the trade (331). Clarkson not only confirmed that African slaves were being tremendously mistreated but also brought to light the number of Englishmen who died on slave voyages.

Clarkson set out to prove that "more persons would be found dead" on slave vessels, more than all other vessels put together (326). Seymour Drescher suggests that Clarkson's research was necessary in order to secure petition signatures; important because the repeated presentations of petitions and a growing number of signatures drew attention to the issue even before legal action was discussed (25). In order to secure signatures, the public would have to be aware that something horrendous was happening in the name of British expansion. Clarkson's research revealed the horrors commonly

associated with the slave's experience during the Middle Passage: malnourishment, physical abuse, human carnage, improper packing methods, and festering diseases. Clarkson cites that on one ship, an area of only thirty one feet long and two feet tall was used to stow seventy slaves (329). On other ships, slaves were "very ill and emaciated" (341). Killing all parties involved, tainting the morality of a nation, and corrupting a budding commerce, the trade, says Clarkson, was "one mass of iniquity from the beginning to the end" (326).

Walvin observes that the spoken word, through lectures and public address, was a "crucial" medium in the abolitionist cause (*Slavery* 51). Political life in Britain, during the years when slavery prospered, was characterized by a "vocal and insistent struggle for a wide range of political and social rights" (*Freedom* 17). Slavery seems like an obvious contradiction, then, but an easy one to overlook since (because of the *Somerset* decision) slavery was a "colonial" not a "domestic" issue.¹² Walvin notes that in his nationwide lecture tour Thomas Clarkson covered over 35,000 miles and relayed the horrors of the trade to thousands of people (*Slavery* 52). The committee made Clarkson's findings available to the public, printing over 25,000 accounts of the debates, over 50,000 books and pamphlets and launching numerous petitions (Jennings 58). The committee succeeded, as Walvin notes, in keeping the question of slavery in the public eye (*Slavery* 174). Or, rather, in both public eyes.

¹² *Somerset v. Stewart* (1772). The decision held that a slave brought to England could not be forced to leave. Granting a writ of habeas corpus, Lord Mansfield (presiding) declared that a master could not force his slave to leave "the kingdom" (*Ivory* 14). It is important to note that Mansfield's decision did not free slaves in England.

While abolitionists were educating the masses and making tremendous progress, considering the movement's humble beginnings, several people debated their cause. Antislavery arguments, which were mostly humanitarian or religious, had little impact on those economically or professionally committed to the trade. As Walvin reminds us, "the planters, merchants, bankers, brokers, traders and others whose livelihoods depended upon or were associated with slavery and the trade rushed to its defence" (7). One defense of traders pointed to the fact that there were fewer female than male slaves. Repopulation was not a dependable, or practical, method for keeping the slave population high enough to man the fields. The planters were dependent on the trade. (*Ivory* 259). Others believed abolition would bring about "economic ruin" and argued that while the trade was "unfashionable" in the press it was still an "economic and political necessity" (Dresser 154).

Another anti-abolitionist concern was that if the British abandoned the slave trade, it would benefit rival nations, particularly the French, since they would presumably capitalize on the abandoned market (154). Dresser recognizes that anxieties about Africans themselves were also an underlying factor for some anti-abolitionists. Pro-slavery advocates accused abolitionists of being more concerned about the welfare and future of slaves than the welfare and future of English or Irish workers (154).

Pro-slavery advocates never considered slaves as human beings—they were things, chattel, property, investments—a view accepted most broadly after the slave trade became a rewarding business. According to Walvin, the terminology used to describe Africans indicates the English attitude toward slaves. Sir John Hawkins, who is believed

to have sailed the first slave voyage in 1567, called Africans “merchandise” (38). Walvin states that aligning slaves with chattel and commodity became a political position in 1672 when the Royal African Company obtained a monopoly on the trade. Chartered along with the reinstatement of the Stuart monarchy, the Royal African Company officially accepted, condoned, and capitalized on the slavery market. Walvin writes that their charter at last reflected “the reality of the African’s chattel status” (38). The Company was permitted to “ ‘import any redwood, elephants’ teeth, negroes, slaves, hides, wax, guinea grains, or *other commodities*’ ” (39). Abolitionists sought to revolutionize Britain’s political idiom, which named African slaves commodities.

In the 1780’s (the time when Blake was writing *Songs of Innocence*), Britain (especially London) experienced what Carey calls a “pamphlet war” with over 100 titles in 1788 (107). Pamphlets answered pro-slavery arguments and urged the better treatment of slaves. Tracts by Granville Sharp and Thomas Clarkson shared the evidence of their findings and reported on Abolition Society and Parliamentary meetings. Some reports were firsthand accounts of slavery in the British plantations, such as James Ramsay’s *Essay on the Treatment and Conversion of African Slaves* (Carey 109). Carey commends Ramsay’s style which is “neither overtly evangelical, nor overtly sentimental” (110). Ramsay’s essay detailed the daily life on plantations. Like most recognized abolitionist literature, Ramsay’s essay is written to appeal to human sensibility and to solicit empathy from the reader. Carey calls this an “emotional subversion of the intellect,” a popular trope of abolitionist writing (111). A tactic that would ideally turn pity into influence.

Petitions, suggests Drescher, were an indication of public opinion (25). The petitions were the result of Clarkson's and other's intensive research which was presented at Society meeting in order to inform, educate, and influence public opinion. Once the petitions were signed, the Abolition Committee arranged for them to be presented in Parliament by William Wilberforce. Clarkson worked with Wilberforce as a team, gathering documentation of the trade against the lies of the pro-slavery lobby that Wilberforce could use in Parliament. Wilberforce's famous speech of 1789 contained almost two years of Clarkson's data.¹³ The slave trade, a now nationalized commerce, depended on backing from Parliament. Laws had been set in place to protect the trade; abolitionists encouraged laws that would dismantle a vast commercial system.

Wilberforce introduced the first bill to abolish the trade in the 1780s and did so every year until the bill to stop active trading was finally approved in 1807.¹⁴ Though it took decades to see any real results, two acts against slavery were passed in British parliament. One, in 1807, abolished the slave trade itself making it illegal to capture a sell slaves. Slaves still worked the plantations, however, and piracy ruled the seas as slavery continued illegally. It was not until 1833 that slaves were officially emancipated in the

¹³ Wilberforce's speech is available electronically through Brycchan Carey's online resource. The speech comes from 'Debate on Mr. Wilberforce's Resolutions respecting the Slave Trade' in William Cobbett, *The Parliamentary History of England. From the Norman Conquest in 1066 to the year 1803*, 36 vols (London: T. Curson Hansard, 1806-1820), 28 (1789-91), cols 42-68.

¹⁴ It is worth noting that historians identify two phases of abolitionism. The first began around 1770 and lasted until the slave trade was abolished in 1807; the second phase began just a few years after the bill passed until final emancipation in 1838. Walvin notes the highest activity during the second phase began in 1823 (*Slavery* 50).

British colonies. The interest of this study, however, is early abolitionists who protested the trade itself during the early stages of abolitionism.¹⁵

Carey, in his discussion of the pamphlet wars, notices that an appeal to human emotion was perhaps the most popular tool of abolitionists. If emotion was popular in political tracts, it was almost inevitable in anti-slavery literature. In abolitionist poetry, Carey notices a usually, but not always, simplified narrative which allows a higher focus on events and individual characters. Since poems are also a smaller space within which to present an argument and sway a reader, “emotional subversion” is key (73). Writers usually depended on a traditional narrative plot including, as named by Moira Ferguson, “human bondage, split families, atrocities, unchristian traders, the demeaning of Britain’s ‘name’ to parliamentarians and appeals to philanthropy” (qtd. in Carey 85). Readers were accosted by images of physical and mental abuse and pitied the slaves who were split from their families, whose babies perished in the Atlantic voyage. Abolitionists hoped that an emotional response from the reader would cause them to “adopt political positions on the strength of those emotions” (73).

In addition to lectures and speeches, abolitionists also used printed media in the form of pamphlets, newspaper articles, anti-slavery periodicals, petitions, tracts, and literary writing to protest the trade. The general public knew about slavery, they knew about the trade and it was the abolitionists goal to inform them of the horrors behind it. Newspapers reported on the slave cases in courts and also ran advertisements for slaves

¹⁵ Blake’s contribution to literary abolitionism occurred between the years of 1780 and 1795.

sales (*Slavery* 7). Abolitionist pamphlets and essays were heavily circulated during the campaign (Carey 107). Abolitionists had expected the treatment of slaves to greatly improve after the 1807 bill, since the sales of Africans had ceased, but detecting change was difficult. Accordingly, abolitionists reorganized and began again (though some, presumably, had never been satisfied with only abolishing the trade).

Rawley writes that abolitionist ideas came from religious, philosophical and humanitarian thought (163). Humanitarians had compassion for sufferers, Quakers rallied for brother love, those of the Enlightenment had faith in the natural rights of man, and Evangelicals fought for their “belief in conversion and sanctification” (Rawley 163). Evangelicals were conservative on many social issues but spoke out on the abolition debate. Hannah More, perhaps the most well-known Evangelical abolitionist, addressed slavery in many of her poems. Her *Cheap Repository Tracts* (1795), contain anti-slavery and pro-revolutionary rhetoric, though sometimes “her fear of revolution spreading to Britain undermined her commitment to the anti-slavery cause” (Midgely 28). Midgely also points out that More’s *Tracts* were published with the aim of providing books for use in Sunday schools and to teach literacy to the poor. Key values stressed in More’s poems were morality, loyalty and religion. Facilitating these values also implied a value of compliance over resistance. More’s poems taught her readers not to challenge the “established order” which sometimes suggested her own “implicit acceptance of slavery,” says Midgely (28). While More critiques the hypocritical Christian slave trader, she also encourages suffering slaves to endure the lot they have been given, insisting that religion

can make them comfortable despite their situation (28). Blake, however, doubted religion's ability to numb the horrors of slavery.

Parties involved in slavery had different opinions on Christianity and slavery. James Walvin addresses the varying opinions in two of his works.¹⁶ The planters feared conversions would allow slaves to become more united. A black preacher leading a powerful black congregation was a scary thought. For the planters, then, "missionaries were agents of social and racial discord" (132). Black congregations meant slaves "collected into a crowd" where "ideas easily circulated and charismatic leaders emerged to prompt slaves to question their lot and even to strike out against their bondage" (*Ivory* 155). Walvin writes that slave-owners had a reason to distrust the missionaries since they often objected to the horrific punishments handed out by the owners. (160)

The risk of revolt was worth civilizing African heathens, though. The missionaries had a duty to convert slaves to Christianity; "From their inception, the English colonies were deemed to be Anglican" (159). In one of Stewart Crehan's two references to the poem he makes a comment pertinent to this study, that "Evangelicals, whose hope of imposing 'civilisation' and Christianity on the benighted heathen was more important than a recognition of common humanity *with* the 'heathen'—a common humanity so often obscured by the apparently alien nature of 'savage' customs" (99). Walvin calls the conversion of slaves "a clear case of cultural imperialism" (167). Non-Christian slaves were "living in as profound ignorance of what Christianity really is as if they had remained in the midst of those barbarous Heathen Countries from whence their

¹⁶ See England, Slaves and Freedom. Pps 131-135; Black Ivory 165-169

parents had first been imported” (159). Mostly, slave religions were seen as an unhealthy and superstitious as well as threatening to the English people who observed their mysterious rituals (151). Christianizing the slaves, then, was a way to calm English fears since “African religious beliefs seemed more like witchcraft to a white society” (154). Just as the slaves left their families and homes behind so too did they leave their religion.

Surrendering their hearts to Jesus meant living a life of restraint. Walvin says that “Missionaries tried, at all times, to stress the importance of obedience, and the Bible had an abundance of suitable quotations to support their case [...] Christian visions of heaven and hell had a resonance for slaves; but hell was on earth while heaven offered the happiness denied them on earth” (166). Blake’s “The Little Black Boy” Brychaan Carey says, “asserts the familiar abolitionist argument that black and white skins are physical attributes only and that souls are equal before God” (97). But, as we will see, Blake undoes this familiar argument when the black boy stands behind, not beside, the English child in heaven.

Blake’s lyric “The Little Black Boy” and his long narrative poem *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* address the complexities of the slave trade and its abolition. In Blake’s shorter poem, the audience witnesses the young slave speaker’s difficulty in reconciling the difference between the oppression of his current life and his promised afterlife of equality. Blake’s shorter poem explores the slave’s mental and physical identity; in his longer work, *Visions*, Blake expands beyond a demonstration of the slave’s perception and includes the attitude of pro-slavery advocates and abolitionists.

Chapter 3

It Will All Be Over Soon: The Christian Promise and William Blake's "The Little Black Boy"

Few critics openly describe "The Little Black Boy" as Blake's critique on the hypocrisy of a Christian abolitionist approach which promised deferred gratification as a reward for worldly suffering. And, as Alan Richardson notices, critics often avoid the poem altogether (233). A poem from Blake's *Song of Innocence*, published in 1789, "The Little Black Boy" can be historically situated near the beginning of the antislavery debates.¹⁷ Blake's focus in the poem is on the black child; specifically, his internalization of traditional Christian doctrine (which teaches him that skin color is irrelevant), and the boy's relationship with a white world. Constructed around images of contrast, mostly between dark and light, the poem delves into the black boy's mentality—where he reconciles his physical (black) and spiritual (white) identity.

Blake's placement of the poem in *Songs of Innocence* (rather than *Experience*) means that his speaker, "the little black boy," possesses a naïve blindness. This is true for all the speakers in *Innocence*. The problem of the poem (the conflict between the boy's [mis]understanding of equality and the reality of oppression) remains unresolved since the boy remains in a state of innocence, an effective method for a poem that solicits a response from its readers. Blake guides the reader to recognize the speaker's innocence not as Christian acceptance but as an almost sickening passivity. The child's innocence

¹⁷ The Society for the Abolition of the Slave Trade was officially chartered in 1787

triggers an instinctual response from the more experienced reader, who can immediately detect the complexities within Blake's seemingly simple lyric. The reader yearns for the boy's justice more than the speaker himself, making Blake's poem an engaging antislavery poem as well as an effective abolitionist piece of literature.

Even with its obvious focus on slavery and racial identity, recent Blake scholarship, which examines the "ideological significance and sociopolitical contexts" of his work, largely overlooks or ignores "The Little Black Boy" (Richardson 233). Richardson suggests that the "critical reticence" demonstrated by critics such as Stewart Crehan and Heather Glen stems from suspicions, first expressed by S. Forster Damon in 1924, that "The Little Black Boy" "reflects the racist assumptions underlying much antislavery writing" (233).

Damon's early work concludes that Blake does not believe in equality. The scene at the end of the poem, says Damon, reflects a negative image of Africans—since the black boy is still subservient to the white child. For Damon, Blake's poem is typical of the antislavery literature which attacks slavery but is also implicitly condescending. David Simpson suggests that Damon's criticism can be valid if the irony in the poem is neglected (51). The poem makes sense, Simpson claims, as an "ironic exposure" of the effects of Christianity on slaves, but the poem also makes sense to those who believe that an afterlife makes up for "shortcomings" on earth (51). Blake's intention may have been to appeal to both sides of the argument—a dangerous strategy that can lead to muddled interpretations of the text. His subtle manipulations of contemporary ideology, however, make it more likely that he questions, rather than accepts, the Christian antislavery

tradition. Furthermore, Blake's ambiguity seems appropriate in a poem meant to invite the reader's own morality into the equation.

Let us briefly return to Alan Richardson's comment that Stewart Crehan and Heather Glen, among others, avoid discussing "The Little Black Boy" (233). Crehan's first mention of the poem comes in a parenthetical citation where he notices that "The Little Black Boy" is the only poem in *Songs of Innocence* with a "decasyllabic line" (31). Crehan's next comment on the poem is more useful to this study but still quite brief. Crehan notices that the poem is Blake's most Swedenborgian. According to Crehan, the poem looks forward to a more harmonious time when the "spiritually black boy" will have educated the white boy in the "ways of spiritual love" (99).

Crehan also makes a more general note important to this study; the sentiment which perceives humanity as one is now the "stock-in-trade" of "liberal humanists," but in Blake's time it was the sentiment of "revolutionary democrats" (99). Cultural politics are obviously not out of the context of Crehan's study, yet he still devotes less than a page to "The Little Black Boy." Heather Glen, who discusses the *Songs* at length, also avoids the poem. Her first comment (parenthetical like Crehan's) simply notes that Blake's speaker addresses a social problem (14). She doesn't even name slavery or race. Her second glance at the poem, within the same chapter, calls the speaker "unprivileged" (31). Crehan's and Glen's avoidance of the text seems innocent but, as Richardson says, critics most likely ignore the poem at the risk of addressing a poem once coupled with racism.

Damon's criticism, that Blake inevitably reflects a racist ideology, is most recently supported by Ngugi Wa Thiong'o. Ngugi makes a brief, yet unforgettable, statement about Blake's poem within the context of his study on literature and society. Blake, suggests Ngugi, is no different from those who were part of the Christian antislavery movement. Treating African slaves with sympathy, says Ngugi, is a literary strategy which appeals to "the European liberal conscience" and an approach that interprets "Africa for the Africans" (19).¹⁸ According to Ngugi, Blake reaffirms the misconception that Africans needed to be civilized, that they needed to be enlightened, and that they were savages (19). Ngugi states that Blake's poem creates the illusion of a "painless escape," an escape where class conflicts are inappropriately blurred (20). What Ngugi neglects, perhaps, is the difference between the speaker in Blake's *Song of Innocence* and Blake himself. Nicholas Marsh explains that, in most of the *Songs*, the world is presented by a speaker who has a "limited" and "subjective" perception (29). Such a perception causes "the little black boy" to slightly misinterpret the message from his mother. The boy is taught a lesson specifically for slaves and mistakenly applies it to the white child as well. It is "the little black boy" who blurs the lines of class, because this is what he has been taught to do by English missionaries (though doing so does not secure him better treatment). In the poem, skin color dissolves in the name of God, not in the name of Blake's liberalism.

¹⁸ For more on the use of sentimentality in abolitionist literature, see Brychhan Carey's work discussed in Chapter 2 of this study.

Though Marsh does not address “The Little Black Boy” (an example of what Richardson calls a “critical reticence” towards the poem), his introduction to Blake’s “social and political thinking” leads to a better understanding of the poem (121). Blake criticized the “established Church,” says Marsh, for upholding a “corrupt and unjust status quo” (107). Blake was not one who supported, as Damon and Ngugi suggest, oppression or injustice. Rather, Blake was a revolutionary thinker who challenged the hypocritical nature of an entire system. Marsh’s general argument about Blake’s Chimney Sweeper poem can be applied to “The Little Black Boy” as well, since they are both poems about the ills of society. Once the horrors of the trade were revealed by Clarkson and the Abolition Society, slavery could be seen, just as the child sweeps were seen, as a “scandalous system” and a “social obscenity” (Marsh 111). The trade was scandalous and obscene for a society which projected a moral superiority and used authority for what Marsh calls “moral blackmail” (112). Blake did not agree that mind and body were separate, therefore, Blake would not have agreed with oppression on the basis of skin color (99). Marsh explains that “by setting the soul against the body, the teaching of the Church was responsible for creating painful division within people” (99). So, for Blake, “moral blackmail” was more than a religious error, it was a social injustice. The young slave in his poem, then, is trapped within a corrupt system which Blake intends to expose.

Marsh’s rationale can be applied to a reading of the “The Little Black Boy.” Blake criticizes the Christian assurance of a heavenly freedom as alleviation for worldly injustice. “the little black boy” believes he will (someday) be respected and loved by the

English child. He believes the story his mother tells him and sadly the story satisfies him; he is happy to know he will be “on earth” but “a little space” (13). The boy’s contentment is sickening to the reader who knows that the promise of eternal equality is no substitution for humanity on earth. Stolen from his home presumably to live a life of servitude, abuse, and oppression, “the little black boy” rejoices at the *thought* of future acceptance. The boy is taught that his physical difference (and its social implications) are temporary, and therefore tolerable. Blake’s ending shows the Christian promise to be elusive when the boy’s position of servitude follows him even to his Father’s knee, as we see him attending to the English boy who stands closer to Jesus.

Blake’s poem is obviously about slavery, yet his approach differs from the long narration of African complaints made in more popular antislavery literature. Moira Ferguson identifies six main issues that appear and re-appear in the narrative bodies of antislavery literature: Africans being ambushed and taken from their homes; Africans crossing the Atlantic Ocean, or Middle Passage; Africans being sold; torture devices and cruel treatment of Africans (to include relationships, sometimes sexual, between planters and slaves); influence of missionaries on Africans; and the encouragement of abolition (150). Blake’s poem captures the *result* of the six experiences usually addressed in antislavery literature: while other poems list the inhumanities of slavery and imply the effect; Blake poetically creates the effect and assumes we already know the list. Blake’s assumption is risky and makes it reasonable to argue, as D.L. Macdonald mentions, that one can read the poem without noticing that the speaker is a slave (168). Macdonald is correct in saying such a reading is possible, but it is not likely.

Blake's method forces the reader to consider the context of the poem, and it is the context that he calls attention to. Blake's poem may 'say' less than popular antislavery poems do, but he is able to imply, quite effectively, the boy's experience. The poem's limits are an effective method, too, if we consider that Blake is writing about the limitations of Christianity within an antislavery argument. Just as the reader may want more from the poem, Blake wants more from the Christian abolitionists who offer lessons in contentment, rather than an eradication of the problem. The horrors of the slave trade, usually specifically outlined by Christian writers, seem hidden in Blake's poem about the influence of religion on slaves. Perhaps this is Blake's hint which leads the reader to question the approach of Evangelical writers (like Hannah More) who present Christianity as a saving grace rather than an effective antislavery campaign. Blake sees that offering slaves a heavenly reward (one that may not even exist), is cruel. Blake's approach to the abolition debate differed from the prevailing "religious theory of blackness" in that he supported a more "secular theory" which was not reactionary but progressive (Macdonald 178).

Macdonald does not explain why Blake's theory is secular or progressive, but he probably notices Blake's liberal approach in his manipulation of popular images in antislavery literature. Richardson more specifically outlines Blake's approach; he notes that "antislavery literature of Blake's time [...] relied extensively on two related tropes critically addressed in Blake's lyric: Africa (and African) as culturally "dark" and the "savage" as uncivilized or "untutored" (237). Besides calling attention to the hypocritical message of Christianity, which perpetuated this idea of darkness (cultural and spiritual),

Blake also challenged the notion that Africans were ignorant. Blake does not depict “the little black boy” as ill-bred, uncivilized, or morally “dark” and shows the child to be teachable. The child comprehends the mother’s story (even if he mistakenly applies the story to the white child). The reader never feels that “the little black boy” is a heathen (he is not “wretched” like More’s Yamba).

Blake’s approach is clever, and it works. We are not told what has happened to this boy or how exactly he’s come to his current situation. But, what would be the purpose of re-listing what was then common knowledge? We know “the little black boy” was born in the “southern wild” (1). His knowledge of the “English child” (3) means that he is a slave—how else would he have interaction with a white child? His knowledge of the English child indicates that he has been taken from his home. And as Macdonald points out, after the boy’s mother relays the Christian message “she vanishes from the poem—as if he had been taken from her” (168). Macdonald notes too, that broken families were a favorite subject of abolitionists “since it lent itself to the sentimental rhetoric they favoured” (168). Finally, the boy’s focus on a spiritual escape from oppression suggests that he has experienced suffering on earth, or that he has been taught to anticipate it. Another indication that the boy has been brought to an English colony is the little black boy’s fractured grammar. From his speech, we can tell that English is not the boy’s native tongue (Macdonald 168). Phrases like “And thus I say to little English boy,” (22) where the article “the” should come before “little,” and in line 23, “When I from black and he from white cloud free” which should read “When I from *my* black and he from *his* white cloud *are* free,” imply the boy’s unfamiliarity with English (168).

Blake involves the reader by gently guiding him/her to conclude the boy is a slave. As Erdman puts it, “however it may be interpreted, a poem on such a subject, issued in such a year must be interpreted in light of the abolition movement” (132).

Blake’s poem works against the assumption that Africans are heathens, that they are ignorant, wild, and in need of direction. In fact, at the end of the poem, the little black boy becomes the teacher. “Thus did my mother say, and kissed me. / And thus I say to little English boy” (21-22). By making the mother a teacher too, Blake “subverts the racist stereotype of the African as ‘untutored savage’” (Richardson 239). This racist stereotype is even evident in the missionaries’ (or whomever the religion teachers may be) pedagogical approach. Walvin points out that missionaries were “using children’s catechisms which taught by rote-learning” (*Ivory* 166). We see this method explicitly in “The Little Black Boy”: the boy has been taught a lesson from his mother, memorizes the story and tells it to the English child. The impact of the message is especially negated since the black boy tells it to a white child. This type of pedagogy focuses on memorizing the material so that it can be recalled by the learner exactly the way it was read or heard—recall is more important than comprehension. Rote learning is not an effective way to teach the complexities of religion and spirituality (and especially ineffective for teaching the concept of an afterlife). Even in religion, the slaves were victimized—taught the rules but discouraged from developing their own congregation. Religion was yet another way for the English to control them. Slaves were expected to value docility, passivity, and sacrifice all with the promise of equality: “The simple message of the brotherhood of Christ, of the equality of all believers and the fraternity of the life-

hereafter sent a fizz through the slave quarters—and a cold chill through the slave owning community” (*Ivory* 167). Religion was not a comfort for slaves; it was just a way to keep them happy.

While some abolitionists sought moral redemption for slaves, others demanded social and political liberation. White English writers were not the only ones to use the literary marketplace as a place of political debate. Africans formed a literary community in London in order to deny allegations about their nature as directly as they could and to affirm their humanity. Through literature, then, Africans could have a voice, an uninterrupted appeal to English readers. For those critics who do approach Blake’s poem, a comparison to contemporary African literature is often the preferred approach. Laura Henry, for example, calls Blake’s poem “problematic,” but offers a way to “a better understanding of Blake’s child speaker and of the intense irony used to portray his situation” (67).

Henry believes that Blake understood that imitations of African slaves and their oppressors were “painful” and representative of the sacrifices slaves made “particularly in the realm of religion” (73). Henry suggests that Blake would have been familiar with Phyllis Wheatley and would have read her work. Wheatley’s style is much like Blake’s, says Henry, especially their use of irony. Wheatley uses irony and “subtle manipulations” to criticize the society that enslaves her in the same way that Blake uses irony to expose “the little black boy[’s]” enslavement (73). Wheatley’s personal expression communicates her complex feeling about nature and religion just as the speaker of Blake’s poem communicates the complexities of religion within a simple narrative poem.

The most resonant comparison that Henry makes between Blake's and Wheatley's poems is the slave's attitude toward the sun—both Wheatley and “the little black boy” are comforted by and need protection from the sun (74).

The contradiction between the sun's comforting and scorching light stems from the association of God's love with light. While spiritual light may be comforting, the sun (a symbolic representation of the light of God) is scorching as it also represents work and the unbearable heat of the fields. Therefore, the sun is at once comforting and disconcerting and yet another mixed message the slaves received from their white teachers. Henry also notes the similarity between Blake's and Wheatley's images of “the shady groves,” (which protect them from the burning heat), “mother figures [...] who ask that the children in their care adhere to repressive ideologies” and the experience of “childhood in [and out of] Africa” (78-83).

Alan Richardson also connects Blake's poem to literary sources. Specifically, Richardson connects Blake's poem to the development of children's literature in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (234). Richardson considers a related, and perhaps more influential, topic (since children's literature was almost always religious and didactic) that “the Christianizing of Africans made a key aspect of antislavery ideology.” Because abolitionists often relied on Christianity as a means to communicate with slaves, “questions of race and religion in the lyric should not be treated separately” (234).¹⁹

Jon Mee agrees that religion and politics were certainly seen as intimately connected in Blake's time (136). Additionally, Kitson notes that “for evangelicals [...]

¹⁹ It is worth noting that the Bible would be considered an implied literary source.

anti slave-trade agitation was part of a larger attempt to effect a moral reform of the governing classes,” a strategy which Blake realizes and responds to in “The Little Black Boy” (25). Richardson suggests that Blake’s poem “critically addresses the racist and colonialist attitudes informing most antislavery literature of the period” (234). Blake works against an attitude present in most antislavery literature which depicts “Africa (and Africans) as culturally dark” and as “uncivilized or untutored” (237). In Hannah More and Ann Yearsley, Richardson finds “the same underlying attitude of condescension” where the African is “uncivilized” and “childlike” (238). Rather than taking the common approach to antislavery literature, rather than following the narrative techniques of popular antislavery literature, Blake addresses the hypocritical nature of Christian antislavery messages, which call for abolition on the grounds of inhumanity while encouraging slaves to turn the other cheek to horrific physical and mental abuse.

There is a difference between what “the little black boy” is told, what he believes, and what the reader knows to be true. It is that gap in his perception that makes Blake’s poem ironic—by exposing evils within a poem that articulates a Christian point of view. The reader, especially the contemporary reader, notices Blake’s imitation of the traditional Christian message: obey now, be rewarded later. Henry says that “the little black boy” “has learned that in order to be tolerated by this society, he is expected to embrace Christianity, but not to expect too much out of Christianity in return” (82). The boy’s mother, obviously influenced by missionaries, teaches her son that although he is black, his “soul is white” (2). The black boy thinks he is white on the inside. The whiteness he possesses must be the light of God. The spiritual goodness inside of him

makes up for his blackness which makes him seem “as if bereav’d of light” (4). The boy knows he is black but thinks his white soul is more valuable than his skin. Also, more generally implied, he has learned that “white” is better than “black.” The idea that what is on the inside matters more than what is on the outside is the message of Christian missionaries and abolitionists alike. Walvin explains that missionaries “felt they had begun to win the battle when they convinced slaves that they had a soul, the salvation of which they worked to secure” (*Ivory* 166). Perhaps Blake’s problem with this approach, is that slaves needed to be saved now, not later.

Blake disagrees with deferred gratification; freedom should be granted not at some distant time, but now. The missionaries taught the slaves to concentrate on the “hereafter” rather than the “here and now” (*Ivory* 69). Believing that the “hereafter” will offer him an equality unavailable on earth, “the little black boy” seems cheerful in Blake’s lyric. Walvin offers some disturbing evidence which explains the emotions in the poem. Walvin writes about special prayers and hymns written especially for slaves which he takes from *Christian Directions and Instructions for Negroes*. This specialized religious instruction encouraged a life of work and discipline. One prayer Walvin cites reads: “O, Merciful God, grant that I may perform my duty this day faithfully and cheerfully; and that I may never murmur, be uneasy, or impatient under any of the troubles of this life” (Walvin 69). A hymn reads: “Awake my soul and with the sun / Thy daily stage of duty run / Shake off dull sloth, and early rise / To pay they morning sacrifice.” Walvin writes, “much of the ideological content of evangelical religion was little more than a crude psychological pacification programme” (*Black and White* 69).

The mother's message to her son is quite similar to the religious instruction Walvin cites.

She tells him to:

Look on the rising sun: there God does live
And gives his light and gives his heat away
And flowers and trees and beasts and men receive
Comfort in the morning joy in the noon day. (9-12)

"The rising sun," symbolizes a saving grace. The child and the sun are infused spiritually in the obvious narrative, but they are also fused physically, though it is only implied. The "rising sun" gives "comfort" in the "morning" and "noon day." But what of the darkness? The sun cannot physically reach the boy under his "shady grove" of black skin and he is black "as if bereav'd of light" (4). The boy's mother tells him that God is light and light is good. Blake tells the reader, though, that the sun does not apply to him, that it cannot reach him. In order to "bear the beams of love" he must suffer in spiritual, physical, and psychological darkness.

The boy's black skin is a "cloud" that provides shade from the heat—it does not bring him any closer to God. There is an obvious contradiction here. As Richardson writes, "The mother's view of black skin as a 'shady grove,' at once a sign of the African's closeness to god and a defense from god's excessive light and heat, helps the "Little Black Boy" throw the colonialist mentality imposed upon him—"But I am black as if bereav'd of light"—back into question" (244). Blake means for us to notice the discrepancy between the first stanza, where the child is black on the outside and white on the inside, and the fourth stanza, where his blackness protects him from the bright beams of gods love. Once congregated in one entity—the black boy's body—the difference

between black and white is now exposed. Those bright beams of the sun (God) are not warming, but scorching. They burn the boy's skin and face and bring an unbearable heat. The boy is taught that his purpose for being, his existence, is altogether dependent on his ability to bear the heat. Henry explains that "it is difficult to discern the true nature of the mother's relationship to this sun/God because, [...] she presents Him both as an object of devotion and as an entity from which she and her child need protection" (79). He As his mother explains, "we are put on earth *a little space*" (emphasis added, 13). Blake's term "little space" leads to several associations with the slave trade: The middle passage, for one, and its dark, cramped space; also, the lifespan of a slave, usually short lived but surely long endured; the slave's freedom, not even a sliver of personal space. Blake targets such a large audience, addresses a global issue, and questions a giant economic system—all with the words, "little space." The irony in Blake's temporal, physical, and spiritual darkness is astonishing.

The reader may see the irony, however, "the little black boy" fails to notice the inadequacy of the Christian promise as relief for his suffering on earth. Only after slaves have learned to bear the heat—the awe of God? The planter's field? The sting of the lash?—after they have suffered quietly, "the cloud will vanish" and then "like lambs" they will "rejoice" (17-20). The boy thinks he will rejoice in heaven, but the reader may think of a time when he will rejoice on earth. As Frank Klinberg points out in his study, the "white man" was delighted by "the negro becoming a good servant and a good Christian. And *for the benefits of religion* he was to enter a life of servitude, until that day when a changed moral feeling and new economic condition forced the annihilation of

slavery” (emphasis added, 21). Our pity for the black boy comes at the end of the poem when we see that the Christian promise is false since the boy still pictures himself as a servant even after the “cloud” of skin color is removed.

Howard Hinkel agrees that the mother’s message in the poem is “based squarely upon the essentially Christian promise that God the Father will pass just, equal, loving judgment on the soul after the death of the body” (40). While this message may be a pleasant thought for earthly sufferers, it is not an appropriate approach, Blake implies, for the antislavery campaign. Blake guides his audience to question the hypocritical message of some evangelical abolitionists who value suffering as a way to Christ. The absurdity of that notion is exposed by Blake, who obviously believes that an introduction to God does not soothe oppression on earth. Rather, the boy and his mother are victims of a repressive Christian doctrine. Henry believes that the two are “chained by the Christianity of [their] oppressors” (72), binding them to a religious code that feeds an exploitative political system. They are even chained to its dialogue. Blake, in “The Little Black Boy” exposes the African’s oppressed voice: the boy tells a story, which heard from his mother, who heard from missionaries, who read it in the bible. The story offers deferred freedom, which only exists through faith.

Blake questions the value of religious education and exposes the hypocrisy of Christianity’s message to slaves which told them to behave now so that they could be rewarded later. The boy learns the story of heavenly reward from his mother who has obviously been introduced to English religion. The message she teaches her son represents the same ideology present in some Evangelical abolitionist literature (Hannah

More comes to mind). One of More's most famous slave characters, Yamba, is thankful for slavery because it allowed her to be introduced to Christ: "Now I'll bless my cruel capture / (Hence I've known a Saviour's name) / Till my grief is turn'd to rapture / And I half forget the blame" (125-28). Blake's attention to the negative influence of Christianity on slaves shows that he is unprejudiced and that he is keenly aware of and involved in the abolition movement. Blake suggests that a belief in equality in heaven, when the little boys' clouds of skin are removed, is an inadequate solution to slavery. That is why, at the end of the poem, the reader feels an emptiness or sense of incompleteness. The little boy's story does not play out like he (or we) expect it to. In fact, at the end of the poem, "the little black boy" is still in a subservient position to the English child. The black boy imagines his ultimate position and he is still behind the white child: "And then I'll stand and stroke his silver hair" (27).

Unfortunately, the Christian promise is not fulfilled in Blake's last lines of the poem. The black boy stands behind the white child in a position of subservience, stroking the white boy's "silver hair," still waiting for the boy to accept him despite his skin color. Blake's last line shows the black boy still wanting physical acceptance despite his supposed spiritual fulfillment: "And then I'll stand and stroke his silver hair, / And be like him and he will *then* love me" (my emphasis 27-28). The irony, which Blake shows us throughout the poem, is that "the little black boy" will never be like the little white boy. The suggested spiritual whiteness of God's love cannot, does not, or will not replace the black boy's negated skin: "But I am black as if bereav'd of light," says the boy (4). The black boy's equality is still dependent on the white child's acceptance. Furthermore,

Blake's use of the word "then" in the line "and he will then love me" is a temporal clue that shows the reader that even in heaven, where the clouds of skin color should be removed, the black child still looks forward to a day when he will be accepted by the white child. Blake exposes the falsity of the Christian message for slaves, which offers eternal equality, when the black boy still awaits acceptance while at his "fathers knee" (26). Ironically, it is the black child, not the white child, who is accepting—the black child accepts his position as a servant (standing behind the white boy and stroking his hair).

Blake's focus in the poem is the promise of equality through white man's religion; yet, at the end, the black boy seems to accept his position—the white child does not accept the little black boy; the two boys are far from equal. The Christian promise offers "the little black boy" a method of coping with misery on earth. An intellectual puzzle, "The Little Black Boy" demands the reader to search for an answer—an answer of this world. Blake does not offer a solution to slavery, but strongly suggests that the promise of equality in heaven should not replace social justice on earth. Blake's method is provoking to the reader, who understands the simple narrative, yet is wary of its speaker's innocence. Lurking behind his religious frame, Blake places a scathing judgment on his society which boasts a moral superiority yet justifies an unethical degradation of humanity.

Chapter Four

Blake's Abolitionist Engravings

The most widely accepted interpretation of Blake's *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* posits the poem as a response to Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792). Critics who uphold this reading often see the daughters of Albion as an allegorical representation of oppressed British women. Henry Summerfield, Harriet Kramer Linkin, James Heffernan, Wes Chapman, Susan Fox, Nelson Hilton, Alicia Ostriker and Steven Vine have all provided excellent readings of the poem which support *Visions* as a representation of or response to Mary Wollstonecraft. In relating Blake's work to the social situation of women as explained by Wollstonecraft, however, some critics take up her feminism while leaving her abolitionist spirit behind. Wollstonecraft's entire argument rests on the suggestion that women are domestic slaves and that their situation is comparable to that of the African slave. In some feminist readings, however, slavery is appropriated metaphorically as instances of submission, oppression, and inferiority.

In addition to Wollstonecraft, critics such as David Erdman and Nancy Moore Goslee also consider John Gabriel Stedman as an influence on Blake's vision of slavery. Debbie Lee calls Blake's illustrations for Stedman's *Narrative of a Five Years' Expedition against the Revolted Negroes of Surinam* "some of the most terrifying images that would ever come before the eyes of the British public" (68). While engraving sixteen illustrations of slave life and vegetation in the British colony, Blake was also

creating his own masterpiece, *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*. The two texts, their illustrations, and engravings are often compared in discussions of Blake's long narrative. The parallel nature of the texts is perhaps the largest combined piece of evidence to suggest that Blake had an abolitionist intent. Powerful portrayals of slave torture, the Stedman engravings became ammunition for abolitionist camps who were now able to act out Blake's war cry in *Visions*: "The eye sees more than the heart knows" (plate 1). With Blake's disturbing engravings, abolitionists could show British eyes more than their hearts knew.

David Erdman is often credited with establishing the connection between Blake's *Visions*, Mary Wollstonecraft, slavery and abolition, and John Gabriel Stedman's *Narrative*. In his essential study of "Blake's Vision of Slavery," (1952) Erdman suggests historical sources for the narrative and characters of *Visions*. Chronologically, Erdman notes that the poem, published in 1793, coincides with the formation of The Society for the Abolition of the Slave Trade (1787), the first phase of the parliamentary debates (1789), the French Revolution (1787-1799), and the slave revolts of 1791 (243).

Erdman calls the three characters in *Visions*, Bromion, Theotormon, and Oothoon, "poetic counterparts" of the abolitionist debates on the British slave trade (243). Bromion is a pro-slavery advocate, who Erdman calls a "caricature" of the Anti-Jacobin and "various slave-agents" (ibid). Theotormon, a "wavering abolitionist" condemns the trade but will not openly denounce the institution of slavery (243). Erdman also calls Theotormon the "theology-tormented man" who is captive to a moral code which obstructs and judges his love for a slave (Oothoon). Erdman relates Theotormon's

confliction in *Visions* to the contradictions between the Abolition Society's "own humanitarian professions" and their decision to only battle against the trade (246).

Erdman's criticism seems harsh considering that conservative abolitionists thought it politically imprudent and impractical to push for emancipation of slaves during the early stages of the abolition debate (1789-1793). At first, most abolitionists believed that abolition of the trade would gradually eliminate slavery itself in the colonies.

The last character on Erdman's list, Oothoon "is not a person but a 'soul'" of slavery (249). In such a strictly historical argument, Erdman's designation of Oothoon is contradictory. One expects Erdman to call Oothoon a slave, for that is the only corner left in the triangular relationship of slavery Erdman introduces (since Bromion is the slave master and Theotormon the abolitionist). Erdman does call Oothoon a "pregnant slave" but only in explaining Bromion's perception of her (247). Oothoon is "triplex," says Erdman, a combination of the three female figures (Europe, Africa, and America) in one of Blake's engravings for the *Stedman Narrative* (249). As a European figure, Oothoon urges for racial tolerance. As America, Oothoon urges the British parliament to free her from slavery. As an African, Oothoon laments the conflict perpetuated by a foreign society which only sees her dark skin and not her inward purity (249). While Erdman's early critique labels the characters as historical figures and offers an excellent starting point for discussing Blake's attention to slavery, his conclusions are not entirely unquestionable. Erdman's suggestions on possible sources for Blake's work, however, remain solid.

In arguing for the poem's historical sources, most critics (Erdman, Debbie Lee,

Nancy Moore Goslee and Steven Vine, for example) agree that Blake's knowledge of slavery came from his experience as an engraver for Stedman's *Narrative*. Stedman and others were sent to Surinam to protect European planters from rebel slaves (Price xxi). The bands of escaped slaves, or "maroons," encouraged resistance and revolt among the plantations. Additionally, the maroons invaded plantations to steal slave women, tools, food, weapons and ammunition. Some plantations experienced a loss of labor (and more importantly to them, a loss of revenue) as slaves joined nearby maroons (xxii). In his log, Stedman's describes his years in Surinam noting aspects of his personal life, military activities, and details about the natural and social world around him. While with the planters, Stedman witnessed first-hand the monetary benefits of slavery, as implied by their decadent lifestyle, and he also witnessed the horrors of slavery seeing many slaves punished or murdered. While on his military expeditions, Stedman experienced the cruel nature of warfare and was faced with impenetrable jungles, malnutrition, sickness, and death (xxvii).

Blake was hired to produce most of the illustrations depicting slave conditions for the *Narrative* (Erdman 244). Erdman says Blake received the assignment for the Stedman engravings in 1791. Blake turned in most of the engravings for the Stedman text in 1792 and 1793, so he must have worked on them while he was writing (and engraving) *Visions* (ibid). Blake's engravings show the "dignity of Negro men and women stoical under cruel torture," says Erdman (244). Since Blake read the *Narrative* and was socially involved with Stedman, his knowledge of slavery was heightened. Through the experience, Blake was also afforded insight into the situation of an "English man

[Stedman] of sentiment entangled in the ethical code of property and propriety” (244-245). The illustrations of slavery from Stedman’s *Narrative* are an abolitionist text in themselves. An introduction to the Stedman engravings is therefore necessary as there are significant comparisons to be made between the two texts (*Visions* and the Stedman illustrations).

Debbie Lee suggests that the engravings, specifically their “interlocking relationships” and “unanswerable questions,” call attention to the same subjects Blake addresses in the poetry he produced at the time—for *Visions*, the subjects of “perception, seeing, and visual trickery” (92). Lee’s discussion of the slave illustrations is prefaced by a discussion of her theory of “mock-mimicry,” which she names both as Blake’s strategy for bringing slavery to the public eye and as the “interpretive lens” through which we should view the engravings (70). Blake mimics Stedman’s written description in order to produce an illustration for the scene, but he also mocks that description by soliciting a “double take” from the viewers (90). Blake does this by matching images, or creating a disconnect between Stedman’s text and his visual interpretation, or by “inscribing contradictory visual information” within the image (90).

Lee comes to the term “mock-mimicry” through Stedman himself who claims the monkeys he encounters taunt him, mocking and mimicking human behavior. Out of the sixteen engravings Blake was assigned, only four depict life outside of slavery (2 are of monkeys, one of a snake, and another of fruit). Lee dedicates a considerable amount of her discussion to the monkey engravings as she contextualizes her “mock-mimicry”

theory by explaining the monkey as a complicated symbol at the time Blake was working with Stedman.²⁰

The first engraving of Blake's to appear in Stedman is labeled "A Coromantyn Free Negro, or Ranger, armed" (figure 1). The "manumitted" slave is a volunteer "reputed to be of very good Character" (Stedman 82). The slave's "good character" is easily recognized; he does not appear threatening. In fact, the slave looks almost English except for the color of his skin and his lack of clothing. At first glance, the slave is strikingly similar to an illustration of "A private Marine of Col Fourgeoud's Corps" (figure 2). The most significant similarities and differences are in the soldiers' regalia and the landscapes behind them. The Ranger (slave soldier) is only partially clothed with no shoes. He carries a small satchel strapped to his chest with a thin rope. He holds a musket over his shoulder and sheaths a knife on his hip. A small branch sticks out of his helmet and he stands with one foot slightly forward.

Likewise, the English Marine holds a gun and sword, has a branch in his helmet and stands with one foot slightly forward. However, the Private's gun is larger, his sword is considerably longer and his clothes are more elaborate than the volunteer soldier's. His bags are considerably larger; he is altogether more decorated. The differences in attire and arms seem appropriate considering the slave soldier holds a lower rank as a Ranger. Lee suggests that the Private appears "weighed down" while the volunteer fighter "travels light" contrasting "casual readiness" with "military stiffness" (92). Lee does not mention that the branches on the two soldiers hats are on different sides or that the Private props

²⁰ See Lee pages 68-90

his weapon on the ground while the slave carries his on his shoulder. And though the two figures stand in the same positions, the Private places his right foot forward, the slave his left.

Stedman praises the volunteers' for their "fidelity to Europeans and their valour against the revolters" but Blake's illustration implies a suspicion of Stedman's assertion (82). Stedman calls the young man one of several "volunteers" yet he says that they were purchased from various plantations (82). That the slaves had a choice in protecting Europeans from slave revolts seems doubtful. Through simple similarities in the soldiers' appearances Blake indicates that they are mirror images, though viewers can tell that they are not identical. The purchased volunteer is displaced; he does not match his English counterpart. The landscapes of the two fighters clash as well. The volunteer fighter stands on a barren landscape, a desolate branch is at his feet, and two scrawny palm trees seem lifeless in the background. Two other soldier figures stand behind him, presumably volunteers as their appearance indicates. The Marine however, stands on safe grounds with what looks like a fort in the near background, its flag waving in the wind. There is also a ship on the water and two companion soldier figures on the shore. While Stedman tells his reader that the volunteer soldiers are loyal and happy to fight, Blake shows his viewer that the Marine is in a comfortable territory and well protected while his fellow soldier/slave stands unguarded fighting *for* the enemy and *against* his own freedom.

While the analysis of creative and artistic differences in the engravings proves useful in academic scholarship, such scrutiny in contemporary viewings seems unlikely and unnecessary for the scenes of slave cruelty and death. Before Stedman's *Narrative*

was published in 1796, few British citizens had experienced a visual representation of slave life, and if they had, not on such a grand scale as Stedman's *Narrative*. There are three engravings in particular which relay the grotesque nature of slavery: "A Negro hung alive by the Ribs to a Gallows" (figure 3), "Flagellation of a Female Samboe Slave" (figure 4) and "The Execution of Breaking on the Rack"(figure 5).

Blake's engraving of a male slave who is being hung alive by the ribs is perhaps one of the most powerful illustrations in *Narrative*. Though there is much to look at in the picture, the viewer's glance is drawn directly to the victim's eyes. Blake creates this effect by emphasizing the stark whiteness of the slave's eyes. The face of the slave is also emphasized since his arms are tied behind his back; otherwise, because of his position, his arms would flail in front of his face.

Strangely, this example of tyranny is one that most disturbs Stedman though it comes second-hand to him. Having witnessed another execution, he is bothered "and Surprized at the intrepidity with which the Negroes bore theyr Punishment" (103). A gentlemen pokes fun at Stedman's reaction and relays the "hung alive by the ribs" story as a more gruesome execution:

Sir—you are but a new commer from Europe—and know very little about the african Slaves without which you would testify both less feeling and Surprise—Not long ago [...] I saw a black man hang'd alive by the ribs, between which with a knife was first made an insision, and then clinch'd an Iron hook with a Chain—in this manner he kept living three days hanging with his head and feet downwards and catching with his tongue the drops of water [...] that were flowing down his bloated breast while the vultures were picking in the putred wound, notwithstanding all this he never complained and even upbraided a negro for crying while he was flog'd below [...] calling out to him [...] 'are you a Man you behave like a boy'—Shortly after which he was knocked in the head by the More

*Comiserating Sentry...as for old Men being broke upon the rack and
young women roasted alive chain'd to Stakes there can be nothing more
common in this Colony—* (my emphasis 103)

This is the exact description from which Blake engraved his illustration for the scene.

There are a few discrepancies. The vultures picking at the wound, the rain, and the man's bloated chest are all erased in the illustration. Perhaps Blake found it unnecessary to degrade the slave in his depiction as much as he was in the actual execution, an indication of Blake's own humanity and sympathy. Blake takes some control over the scene inscribing in the slave even more dignity than described by Stedman.

What is also interesting, especially after examining the backgrounds of the two soldier illustrations, is the landscape behind the execution sight. The same ship (as in the illustration of the Private) sits eerily in the background. This suggests that the execution spot may be at the fort where we saw the private earlier, what Stedman calls "the Damnable Spot of laceration" (104). Only, in the execution illustration, the land is barren and devoid of all life. The situation in the *Narrative* describes a different scene, one of spectacle and Dionysian indulgence. In Blake's illustration, skulls and bones litter the ground giving emphasis not to the spectacle, but to the human life that hangs boldly in the forefront.

Lee makes an excellent observation about the scattered bones in the engraving. Skulls appear in several of the slave engravings and symbolize the human carnage—of soldiers, slaves and maroons—which has become commonplace in the British colony. Lee notices an "unnerving quality" of the engravings in "their balance between subjectivity and subjection, between humanity and violence" (112). Lee suggests that

contemplating the central figure's pain is too much to bear and so the viewer turns to the "incidental detail" around the image (112). Blake does not let the viewer off the hook so easily. Just as the slave hung by the ribs is forced to suffer his environment, so too are we directed to his surroundings.

Another engraving, "The Skulls of Lieut Leppar & Six of his Men," shows that violence went both ways (figure 6). The obviously European skulls prove that slavery was a bloody business for all parties involved. Human skulls pepper several engravings, what Lee calls a visual underlining "of what Stedman's text says outright: the book is literally filled with skulls" (112). In the "Negro hung alive by the Ribs" illustration, though, the bones directly under the gallows are not human—this is Lee's best observation (112). The two skulls that rest atop sticks in the background are suggestively human as the exact images can be found in the "The Skulls of Lieut Leppar & Six of his Men" engraving. Lee explains that the bones under the feet of the executed slave, however, are more "simian than human: the hand at least, is a monkey's by Stedman's definition of it as having 'only 4 Fingers, without a Thumb on its hands or fore feet'" (qtd. in Lee 112). For Lee, the monkey hand "highlights" Stedman's relationship with the monkeys: both his "extreme violence" against them and his "intense identification" with them (113). Blake's inclusion of the mammal's skeleton in the illustration suggests a similar relationship between the Planters and slaves—identifying with them as humans but murdering them as wild animals.

In another example of arbitrary cruelty, Stedman tells the story of a young female slave who is whipped for "refusing to submit to the loathsome Embrace of her

despicable Executioner” (266). The “Flagellation of a Female Samboe Slave” illustrates yet another discrepancy between Stedman’s description and Blake’s visual representation of the scene (figure 4). Stedman describes her as “literally died over with blood” (264). He says her head was hanging down and that she was tied up by both arms to a tree (264). Even in this state, Stedman calls her “beautiful,” an inappropriate description of the tortured slave (264). Blake depicts the girl without blood, and though her hands are tied, her feet touch the ground. Additionally, her arms are not tied as violently as Stedman implies. The girl’s wrists are tied with a thin rope which is tied in a bow at the top of a weak branch. Blake seems to be encouraging her to break free. The girl’s head does not hang downward, rather, we see her entire face her bright eyes gaze upward and the only indication of horror is her gaping mouth. The sadness and disbelief in her face is a sign of her innocence.

Mario Klarer labels Stedman as the girl’s “unsuccessful protector” since he tries to intervene the lashings but by doing so causes her punishment to be doubled (562). The female slave dies because of the additional punishment. Stedman intends to help the slave, but only hurts her: “Stedman, and we as compassionate readers, indirectly inflict pain on the female slave through our humanitarian actions” (Klarer 562). Stedman is in Surinam to help, but this scene makes it clear that he is not there to help the slaves; his presence (and the English presence in general) is detrimental to the slaves’ existence. Blake portrays the indirect abuse that Klarer cites in the figures behind the female slave who are obvious threats to her, yet they do not face her. The murderous villains are behind her, at her back, and do not *see* her pain, her humanity, or the innocent expression

on her face. The human figures in the background appear close by, yet they are tiny compared to the female slave. Is it our perception that is off, or is Blake trying to make us see more than Stedman tells us?

Blake's rendering is ironic since the powerful subjects (the Englishmen and the executioners with whips) are reduced, both literally and figuratively. Blake refuses to emphasize their power or allow them to control the image as they have controlled the life of the young girl. With Blake in charge, they become insignificant and frivolous as they prance around looking quite foolish. Thus, Blake irony lends agency to the slave whose frozen body and silence speaks more to the viewers than the actions of the animated figures in the background.

Blake's engraving of yet another execution simultaneously displays the slaves' dignity making the scene a blatant depiction of inhumanity. In "The Execution of Breaking on the Rack" the victim is tied to a wooden rack on the ground while another slave, the executioner, stands above him with a forked bar (figure 5). The victim's left hand has been severed, presumably with the axe that lies nearby, and blood pours from his cut off wrist. Stedman explains that the man on the rack was "no Slave, but his own Master, & a carpenter by Trade" (546). His crime is murder, he "having kill'd the Overseer of the Estate Altona [...] in Consequence of some Despute he Justly Lost his Life with his Liberty" (546). Stedman draws an uncanny correlation between the emancipated slave and his death, implying that liberty is more dangerous than enslavement. Stedman does not explain why the man's executioner is "also a Black" (546).

The landscape in this illustration is similar to the “Hung by the Ribs” engraving; the landscape is barren. In the distance, however, there is a faint image of another body hanging in what appears to be a lynching. The “Breaking on the Rack” execution is far more gruesome. As Stedman narrates, the executioner “took up a heavy Iron Crow or Bar, with Which Blow After Blow he Broke to Shivers every Bone in his Body till the Splinters Blood and Marrow Flew About the Field, but the Prisoner never Uttered a Groan” (546).

Though the victim has been completely mutilated, his facial expression emits the same nothingness as seen in the other torture scenes. Even the executioner bears no signs of rage or hatred or even sorrow or remorse (for having to kill a fellow countryman). The visual scene is overly monotonous as Blake’s irony again creates suspicion of Stedman’s point of view. Lee also notices the identical expressions on the faces of slaves in various scenes from contentment to torture. Lee writes that the expressions of “slave happiness” and “slave horror” are indistinguishable perhaps because they are both “imposed by white culture” (105). Where Stedman describes the possibility of happy slaves and the reality of slave torture, Blake assigns the same emotion to every face suggesting that enslavement is both a seen and *unseen* persecution.

Stedman’s description of the execution is immediately followed by a narration of his own self pity. The tortured scene seems too much for him to bear, yet he had stayed and watched for over three hours, a spectator to the astonishing torture, and even returned to see if the man had died yet (549). Stedman cleanses his perception by asserting his own goodness: “I Should be rather inclin’d to think That Britain is the standard of

humanity, by being the first nation /Whether Politically or not/ that Attempted the Abolition of the Slave trade” (549). Does having a fellow slave execute his brother instead of a white man make Britain the “standard of humanity?” Surely Blake was agitated by such comments as he engraved scenes which completely negate Stedman’s claim of humanitarianism. The common practice of having a slave execute another was just one more way to manipulate the slave’s behavior. The public spectacle of one slave torturing another was meant to keep other slaves in line. Blake’s disagreement with Stedman’s rationalization is so strong that Blake refrains from signing his name to the “Breaking on the Rack” engraving; Blake wants no part of slavery.

Chapter Five

Visions of the Daughters of Albion: Seeing Slavery, Seeing Freedom

In his undercutting of Stedman's narrative Blake favors the slave, undercuts figures of white power, and opens the viewer's eyes to the realities of slavery. With Blake's intense knowledge of slavery, and with his new understanding of the personal relationships between English men and slaves in British colonies, Blake expressed his distaste for the inhumanity of the trade in his own creative work, *The Visions of the Daughters of Albion*. With an understanding of Blake's abolitionist propensity in the Stedman engravings, let us move on to explore the critical interpretations of *Visions*, other historical premises, and Blake's poetic counterpart to the Stedman *Narrative*..

In his long narrative poem, Blake addresses slavery through Oothoon, who suffers both physical and mental enslavement. The poem's form, an allegory, is Blake's mode for connecting social and individual repression, as Graham Allen suggests (222). Blake strategy is similar in *Songs of Innocence and Experience*, where a lone chimney sweep's "psychological repression," for example, indicates a larger "social repression" (ibid). Allen's comments on Blake's use of allegorical form fit with a model of psychological and physical enslavement. Blake's objective, in Allen's reading, is to convey to his readers the "inter-relatedness" of three dimensions of human existence: "the ethical (individual), the historical (social, political) and the apocalyptic (spiritual) dimension" (222). Allen focuses his general reading, as most critics do, on the slave-like position of women. Unlike Susan Fox, who believes Oothoon is less powerful than often considered

in current criticism, Allen concludes that Oothoon moves past Bromion's and Theotormon's repressive ideologies (223).

If Oothoon is a slave, then her movement is (necessarily) conditional and she, legally, can only achieve spiritual and psychological liberation. Blake purposely leaves Oothoon physically enslaved and does not end the story because he creates a vision of emancipation. More like a call for action than a re-telling, *Visions* is a poem which awaits an answer. Blake's allegory is a narration of slavery and a showcase of conflicting perceptions, perceptions which parallel arguments for and against abolition. The readers are not just listeners in Blake's poem, they are intended to be responders. Blake addresses his contemporary society, his culture's ideology and their perceptions of slavery in his work. Allen points to the abolitionist purpose of the poem when he explains why Oothoon's liberation is not "fully realized" (222). In order for Oothoon to be truly free, Allen writes, "society itself must become equally enlightened and liberated" (ibid).

Henry Summerfield agrees that Wollstonecraft's 1792 protest is a likely source for Blake's *Visions*. Summerfield notes that both Blake and Wollstonecraft belonged to the same publishing circle, that of Joseph Johnson, who was well known for endorsing radical projects (392). Blake's figurative character, Oothoon, much like the existent victims Wollstonecraft writes about, lives in an environment where women are physically and mentally oppressed. Blake's poetic response, according to feminist interpretations, specifically refers to the woman's position in marriage—bonded by her husband in legal and physical matters. Joan Baum also notes Wollstonecraft's influence on Blake, citing that they attended weekly dinners with their publisher, Johnson. Aside from personal

interaction, Baum further suggests that Blake and Wollstonecraft were of the same political mind (155). Therefore, Baum calls Blake's long narrative an "echo" of Wollstonecraft's call for women's freedom (155).

Chapman suggests that although Blake agreed with Wollstonecraft's criticism of women's oppression he disapproved of her "faith in reason" and opposed her "distrust of sexuality" (4). Chapman believes Blake appropriated Wollstonecraft's statements for "his own political purposes" though Chapman fails to define exactly what Blake's political purpose may have been (4). Chapman retells Wollstonecraft's argument with a special interest paid to reason, which Wollstonecraft believed should "lead its possessor to virtue" (qtd. in Chapman 5). Because Chapman understands "virtue—not liberty, or equality"—as the "end of Wollstonecraft's argument, its final cause," he sidesteps her comments on slavery (5). Chapman's emphasis on virtue and his disregard for Wollstonecraft's abolitionist stance seems to be careless reading, especially if one agrees that slavery is "the master trope of *Vindication*" (Hilton 78).

Wollstonecraft's feminist-abolitionist argument in *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* employs the same persuasive strategy as seen in Blake's *Visions*. Wollstonecraft refers to women as "slaves" in a "political and civil sense," claiming that her sex is enslaved by the social construction of gender (qtd. in Hilton 78). In comparing Blake's text to Wollstonecraft's, then, Hilton sees the political, civil, cultural, psychological, and ethnological enslavement through Oothoon, who is a slave in *Visions* (78). Women are slaves to their own "bodies," and to "lust," to "prejudice," and "sensibility," to their "own feelings" and they are "the slaves of men" (qtd. in Hilton 78). Wollstonecraft argues for

the woman's inclusion in "the community of enlightenment from which they are excluded" (Vine 45). Yet, as Chapman notes, Wollstonecraft's request is paradoxical since she denied "sexual difference" (6). Blake picks up Wollstonecraft's insistence that equality should be blind to gender and, in *Visions*, emphasizes a blindness to race as well. Positioning Oothoon as the heroine of the work, as the only character who evolves and experiences enlightenment, Blake makes a clear statement for the fair treatment of women and slaves alike, as the character is both in his work. It may be, in fact, that Blake affords more attention to Oothoon's position as a slave than he does to her position as a woman, or perhaps he agrees with Wollstonecraft in categorizing the woman's and slave's situation as analogous.

According to Mark Anderson, Blake's narrative is framed by a "somasochistic hierarchy of dominance and submission" (6). Anderson's delineation is a psychological description of the master / slave relationship and suggests that *Visions* is indeed about slavery. Anderson only briefly associates the psychological enslavement with literal slavery calling Bromion a "kingly slave holder" and a "priestly moralizer" (2). Bromion's "hierarchy of oppressive power" leaves him at the top and Oothoon at the bottom, which places Theotormon in the middle, a perfect position for the static character whose only movement is in the wavering of his own thoughts; he takes no physical action (2). Theotormon is also an oppressor to Oothoon as he believes Bromion's designation of his lover as a "harlot" and unjustly punishes Oothoon (2.24). Anderson faults Oothoon for entering the discourse of Bromion's and Theotormon's dominance, though making sense

of her situation in their terms seems to be a rhetorical strategy—albeit one that she abandons in the last stage of the poem in order to psychologically free herself (3).

Like Anderson, Hilton also faults Oothoon for adopting the strategies of her oppressors arguing that doing so is destructive and infects her with passivity. Yet, Hilton also assigns Oothoon some power since he labels her the means by which the reader sees the “bases of enslavement” in the poem (78). Chapman notices the same rhetorical strategy (neither Chapman nor Hilton label the rhetorical move a strategy, they call it a flaw) in Mary Wollstonecraft’s argument. In a conservative feminist approach, Chapman says Wollstonecraft’s arguments for better treatment of women inadvertently confirm social prejudices. In assuming a male norm, argues Chapman, Wollstonecraft weakens her argument and consents to “the conventional morality that [...] would be used to condemn her and her work” (6). Likewise, Oothoon sometimes seems to accept the guilt forced upon her by Bromion and Theotormon (Linkin 188).

Susan Fox notices that in Blake “images of females” are “artistic and philosophical principles” (75). Fox concludes that the females in Blake’s work are “inferior” and “dependent” and that they represent weakness (75). Blake undermines his seeming “philosophical principle of mutuality,” says Fox, by allowing stereotypical views of women to seep into his work (76). Fox sees Blake’s study of “human relations, including the sexual,” as both a universal argument and as a discussion the “particulars of daily life” (77). Accordingly, Fox recognizes the long line of criticism that reads *Visions* as an “affirmation” of *Vindication* and understands reading Oothoon as proof of Blake’s feminism, though she does not agree with previous criticism (81).

Fox acknowledges the popular feminist interpretation but suggests that Blake's attitude towards women is more ambiguous than previous scholarship understands (81). Fox admits that Oothoon has powerful qualities, that she is "noble," courageous, and strong (ibid). However, Fox also reminds her readers that Oothoon is helpless as a victim of male tyranny (81). Not even as the strongest of his female characters is Oothoon powerful enough to end the oppression (81). For this limitation, Fox doubts Blake's feminism. While Oothoon's gender does, in fact, trap her—her gender is not her only bondage. The burden of proof for such an argument lies in defining Oothoon as not only a woman, but as a slave.

Wollstonecraft's writing to vindicate women has a foundation in the abolitionist debates. Having the same oppressive ideology in the treatment of women and slaves, the women's suffrage movement gained additional agency when coupled with the anti-slavery movement. As Robert Essick reminds, even without his experience with Stedman, Blake knew about the antislavery movement in which women played major roles (40). The connection between English women and African enslavement, says Essick, "form the historical matrix for Blake's metaphorical connections" (40). An abolitionist first, Wollstonecraft used the rhetoric of anti-slavery arguments and the rationale of the abolitionist Committee to incorporate an argument for women's rights. The long standing critical tendency to link Wollstonecraft's and Blake's arguments together, then, is an indication that *Visions* is indeed abolitionist in intent. Additionally, Blake reflects what Wollstonecraft ascribes as the enslavement of women in his character, Oothoon. Wollstonecraft parallels women and slaves because neither were free. Weakened by their

oppression, both women and slaves are conditioned to accept “the values of their oppressors” (Chapman 7). Blake uses Oothoon’s individual oppression in the narrative to represent, as Allen suggests, a larger social tyranny.

Blake’s characters in *Visions*, especially Oothoon, experience the same situations as African slaves: rape, branding, confinement, physical and mental abuse, and being shackled. Bromion, who rapes Oothoon, is compared to a slave-owner by Blake, and Bromion brands Oothoon making her his slave. Blake’s engravings feature whips (figure 7), shackles (figure 8), bound bodies (ibid), slaves (figure 9) and more complex symbols of slavery. In *Theotormon*, Blake inscribes the moral torments of the religious white man as he addresses the moral conflict of national advancement through slavery which clashed with personal religious peace. Through *Theotormon*, Blake also voices his frustrations with the abolitionist campaign (and perhaps the abolitionist’s own discontent) since, at the time *Visions* was published (1793), the campaign was virtually failing. Blake’s admits that the outcome of the abolitionist debate is unknown through *Theotormon*: “Wilt thou bring comforts on thy wings, and dewes and honey and balm: / Or poison From the desert wilds, from the eyes of the envier.” (4.9-10). While abolitionists had made society aware that slavery was immoral, they had not succeeded (and would not for another 18 years) in making it illegal.

Direct allusions to the slave trade, slavery, and abolition come early in Blake’s poem. The first line, in fact, begins with the word “Enslav’d,” an opening Summerfield defines as more direct than most of Blake’s verse (83). Blake’s focus on slavery is not denied in current criticism. There is the longstanding interpretation by Erdman, of course,

as well as the feminist readings which question or support Blake's feminism but do not doubt his abolitionist concerns or, at the very least, his attention to slavery. Slavery, even if only mentioned in passing, constantly appears in various interpretations of the poem. Whether literal or figurative, slavery proves an undeniable focus of the poem.

Helen Bruder's feminist reading compares Oothoon to one of Blake's less powerful female characters, Thel. Bruder comes at *Visions* with a focus on the history of sexuality, analyzing Oothoon's physical desires. The men in Blake's poem have "real power" simply because of their gender, an observation which leads Bruder to conclude that Oothoon's enslavement is "literal, not purely mental" (77). Oothoon's sexuality, or rather Blake's interest in the sexual aspect of slavery, should be seen as an addition to his primary discussion of the damaging effects of slavery and the abolition debate.

Steven Vine shares Bruder's interest in *Visions* sexuality motif but he expands his historical study to include "structures of sexual and colonial enslavement" (41). Vine acknowledges the conventional feminist reading of Oothoon, but calls her sexuality "an addendum" to the "political revolution" documented in Blake's work (42). Marrying sexual and colonial enslavement in his argument, Vine sees Oothoon's body as a prison. Fundamentally, it was the slave's body which made them valuable so when Vine yokes Oothoon's body and her enslavement, he alludes to, quite literally, her physical slavery. As a healthy young woman, Oothoon would be an effective tool for labor. The rape is therefore detrimental to her existence. Her pregnancy jeopardizes her ability to work in the fields. Blake understands that, to the slave holder, a slave's body is most valuable. Being raped makes Oothoon less valuable to Theotormon because she is no longer pure,

and less valuable to Bromion as a field laborer. Thus, Oothoon's identity is illusory, as it is determined by outside forces which refuse to validate her existence.

In the Stedman *Narrative* as well, the slippery nature of slave identity (both physical and sexual) comes into play, but in the more literal form of mixed races. Stedman's love interest, Joanna, wears "a Shawl of finest indian Muslin the end of which was negligently thrown over her polished Shoulder gracefully cover[ing] part of her lovely bosom" (88). Joanna is immediately set apart from the other slave women—only one of her breasts is exposed. Marcus Wood argues that Joanna's "one nude breast" is an implication of her partial blackness, as she is a mulatto slave (129). In Blake's poem, too, the slave/lover, Oothoon, is a daughter of Albion and presumably white. Yet she is also described as a slave.; all "the swarthy children of the sun" are "stamp'd with [Bromion's] signet" (1.21). Blake uses the word "swarthy" to denote Oothoon's black or darkened skin and also calls Bromion's captives (which she is) 'children of the sun' (OED a.1).

While the characters are distinguishable by gender, they are not distinguishable by race in the cave illustration of Blake's poem (figure 8). Bromion has slightly darkened skin but context bids us to assume the slave owner is of English decent. Theotormon's skin is a pale gray; his wishy-washy appearance mirrors his inability to act in the narrative. He sits with his head covered and we do not see his face. Instead, the focus is Theotormon's illuminated golden hair which suggests some sort of potential goodness despite the fact that his physical body is completely shaded. Oothoon's body color is a mixture of lightness and darkness; her cheek and shoulder glow bright while the front of her body, including her chest and inner thigh, is obscured by darkness. Like the others

she is not entirely revealed since one side of her face remains hidden. Of all the uncertainty, one thing is unmistakable. They are all human.

The racial identities of individual slaves in the Stedman engravings are not as questionable as those of the *Visions* characters. However, Blake obscures distinction between the bodies of a group of slaves in one particular engraving where they are herded to auction (figure 10). Oothoon's clouded racial identity in Blake's verse proves consistent with the blanket expressions and generic limbs he assigns to the mass of slaves in the Stedman engraving. This is not to say that Blake intended a parallel between the two texts, but that his representation of the slaves' identity is consistent in both works, as understood by the society he was trying to enlighten—as an undefined mass in a “protoindustrial process of production” (Makdisi 100).

The generic visual representations of the slaves indicate Blake's concern with their social condition and represent the slaves' role as a controlled workers, rather than humans with individual rights. Blake draws their subjectivity. If Oothoon represents the slave body as a whole, that is as an entire population, then her vagueness rightly represents her social identity both as an unknown foreign entity without definition (to Bromion) and a *necessary* social worker in society (which accounts for Theotormon's dilemma). Jacki DiSalvo's comment on Blake rings true: “Blake is a Bakhtinian ventriloquist attentively listening to and communicating to the reader the voices of an entire culture” (xxiv). In this case, Blake speaks for the estranged slave, whose community who has no voice, has no identity, and exists as a political energy rather than a social class.

Blake's interpretation of how slaves are identified (as a mass, not as individuals) can also be seen in the Stedman engraving mentioned above where the slaves have the same hair; the women and men have similar body frames and the women are only identifiable by their breasts. Every head bobbles on top of a gangly body. A few of them point as if communicating something though none of them appear attentive. And although the bodies are shades darker than the white man who directs them, their faces are strangely similar. The white face is fuller than the slave faces but their features are easily interchangeable. Blake successfully manipulates the engraving so that the group's distinction from the white male directing them is both identifiable and hidden. In his generalization, Blake perpetuates his vision of/for slave identity where all beings, white and black, male and female are relatively equal.

Oothoon's identity is appropriately illusory since, being a slave, her worth is determined by external forces. Both Bromion and Theotormon see Oothoon as damaged goods while she sees her inner purity, thus making her identity an ideological clash of social definitions. And she deals with this discrepancy between her individual and class identity on a physical and sexual plane. Nancy Moore Goslee also recognizes the "double force of racial and sexual victimization" in Blake's narrative (103). The 'double force' of slavery originates in Bromion when he rapes Oothoon, sexually enslaving her, and then brands her as his slave (racial and literal enslavement). Goslee freely refers to non-figurative slavery in her article using phrases like "black slaves," (108) and "literal slavery" (109) throughout. Connections made between *Visions* and literal slavery in previous scholarship give precedence for an argument that Blake deals with slavery in the

work. Yet, few critics are willing to use the word “abolitionist” to describe his attention towards the subject. However, even studies which avoid discussing the literal references to slavery in the work can be linked to the factual British slave trade as they actually consider the consequences of slavery. Critics who prefer to discuss figurative or metaphorical slavery in the work are often speaking about slavery’s effect on the slave rather than a separate problem; while the approach is different, the subject of slavery remains shackled to Blake’s poem.

Thomas Vogler’s post structuralist essay on *Visions*, for example, does not address Oothoon’s literal enslavement. Rather, Vogler argues that Oothoon is stuck in a “synchronic system,” linguistic enslavement (302). However, Vogler’s description of Oothoon’s subjugation corresponds to the experience of a slave:

Oothoon’s story and her system reflect the same structure of suppression, in which an exterior alienating force is imposed on subjects that would otherwise presumably have their own free and liberated form. By telling the impossible story of how we could become free, it becomes a different kind of enabling discourse for the story we tell of ourselves as victims.
(302)

Though stated for different reasons, Vogler notices the same element of audience involvement which an abolitionist reading perceives. He even concludes with the suggestion that the “liberating potential” of *Visions* may be its “ability to help us see ourselves seeing it” (309). Vogler therefore validates the idea that Blake’s poem is more than a story, more than entertainment or a mystical tale. Vogler’s word choices of ‘exterior,’ ‘alienating,’ ‘imposed,’ ‘subjects,’ ‘free,’ and ‘liberated’ can easily refer to literal slavery though he concentrates on linguistic bondage (302). Blake’s poem has a

social purpose and was designed to solicit a specific response from those who engage in its language. Vogler does not discuss the issue of foreign language, but his argument that Oothoon is trapped in a suppressive discourse hints at her unfamiliarity with the English language—she has not mastered it and is enslaved to its system. Vogler’s implication, however, is contradicted by Oothoon’s long, eloquent monologues in which Blake gives her a very intelligent voice.

Blake’s long narrative poem begins with Oothoon who “sighs toward America” (1.2), presumably for the nation’s freedom. Kevin Hutchings notes that Oothoon longs for “political emancipation” and for the same opportunity associated with the American Revolution (1). She seeks the same freedom on Albion’s shores but “wanders in woe” (1.3). Blake sexualizes Oothoon’s desire for freedom within the first lines of the poem, an imperative narrative strategy since Bromion will later rape Oothoon. Bromion ravages her virginity and thus punctures her dream of freedom: “in their valleys” (not their hearts, souls, or minds) “sighs toward America” emanate (1.2).

Before Oothoon begins her search for Theotormon, she plucks a suspicious flower from “Luetha’s vale” (iii, 4). The flower seems to give Oothoon some sort of agency, lending her power and allowing her to rise “up from the vale” in search of liberation (iii, 6). In Blake’s illustration for this scene, however, the flower appears dangerous (figure 11). Twisted and wrapping, the plant looks like a trap. Its petals are pointed and sharp, its color is red, and it does not look pretty or soft but, rather, it looks dangerous and poisonous. Oothoon voices her suspicions saying, “Art thou a flower! Are thou a nymph! I see thee now a flower; / Now a nymph!” (1.6,7). The nymph persuades her to pluck the

flower, convincing her that “another flower shall spring” (1.9).

Once Oothoon takes the flower, she places it between her breasts and is pollinated with supposed freedom. Blake’s peculiar flower, Oothoon’s interaction with it, and her immediate turn to the ocean (“Over the waves she went in wing’d exulting swift delight”) create a mythological representation of the African’s voyage from freedom to slavery (1.14). At once an attractive bloom for some (Englishmen) and a baneful trap for others (Africans), slavery spawns a duplicitous flower. Blake, as Hutchings suggests, questions America’s “pastoral image” which only disguised the fact that “much of its colonial prosperity depended upon slavery” (1). Oothoon’s hesitancy to pick the flower, her misunderstanding of its nature and her acceptance of its noxious bud indicates the exploitation of Africans by the British. Either coaxed, trapped, or stolen from their homes, Africans had a strange interaction with English traders—as does Oothoon with her flower.

Oothoon leaves her home for what she thinks will be opportunity. Instead, she is immediately raped, branded, taken by Bromion, devalued (in Theotormon’s eyes), impregnated (making her more valuable to her master as an item of sale but less to him as an able worker), and her eloquent verse quickly turns to an animalistic “howl” (2.12). It is important to note, however, that Oothoon only wails in the first section of the poem which is a narration. When Oothoon speaks for herself, she does so intelligently.

Blake’s rendering of the flower Oothoon plucks could also reference some of the strange vegetation Stedman introduces him to with his *Narrative*. The vine-like quality of Blake’s flower is similar to the snaking vines and branches that appear in the Stedman

engravings.²¹ Again, the flower's trickery in appearance, intent, and reality parallels the dishonesty and confusion experienced by Africans—some Englishmen were missionaries and promised relief while others raided African homes, raped African women, and sold them into slavery. Slaves were taught that “white” was valuable, that white people could save them from their barbaric ways. Slave women, like Oothoon, became daughters of Albion: “They are obedient, they resist not, they obey the scourge: / Their daughters worship terrors and obey the violent” (1.22,23).

Ready to experience the “sweet flower” of freedom (possibly of sexual and literal freedom) Oothoon turns her “face to where [her] whole soul seeks” (1.12,13). Oothoon seeks Theotormon, her only hope for liberty. Blake's setting is “Theotormons reign” which makes Bromion's interruption even more violent (1.15). Most likely the story of Oothoon's search for freedom, Blake creates, in *Visions*, a strong relationship between the slave and her desire to be free. Her desire for freedom is represented by her love for Theotormon, albeit a star crossed relationship that never fully evolves in the story. Such was the contemporary situation of the abolition debate; the abolition bill courted parliament without coming to fruition as far as Blake would have known.

Bromion (the slave master) is the next character to enter the poem and the force from which Oothoon will need to be freed. Thus, Theotormon becomes at once her original desire and her only hope for redemption. After raping her on “his stormy bed,” Bromion demonstrates the evil possessiveness which characterizes chattel slavery (1.17). Oothoon is introduced as seemingly innocent, entertaining her lofty thoughts and flying

²¹ See illustrations (Stedman); pls. 18,19,35,49,55; illustrations 12-16 of this study

over Albion “exulting swift delight” (1.14). Bromion, however, damages her free spirit “with his thunders” and names her a “harlot” (1.16,18).

Bromion immediately claims Oothoon’s “soft American plains” as his, and his her “north and south” (1.20). Oothoon’s rape perfectly represents the lack of respect given to the English woman, as feminist critics have argued, as well as the controlling environment of marriage—where the man dominated both the woman’s mind (north) and her body (south).

But Bromion’s rape can also be read in a political sense, as Saree Makdisi suggests. Bromion is the master who rapes his slave hoping to impregnate her and increase her “market value” (32-33). Soon after Bromion’s rape of Oothoon, the poem shifts from dialogue to a series of monologues. Essick suggests that perhaps Oothoon’s rape initiates a “stasis in activity and a breakdown in verbal interaction” (43). The character’s failure to communicate successfully with each other allows the reader to interpret the varying perceptions of the characters. Oothoon, as Essick notes, defends herself consistently throughout the poem and does not accept Bromion’s argument that his assault diminishes her value (43). While Bromion loudly claims his dominance over her, Theotormon represses her silently. Bound to a system that wrongly classifies her, Oothoon fights to define her own identity.

Although Oothoon is defiled by Bromion, dismembered by Theotormon’s eagles, and abandoned by Theotormon himself, her voice, agency, and argument for freedom remain strong. Like the figures in the Stedman engravings who bear torture without a grimace, Oothoon refuses to surrender her grace. Oothoon’s extensive monologue

addresses her oppressors' rationale. However, as James Heffernan reminds us, she fails to reach either Bromion or Theotormon with her speeches (9). Heffernan hypothesizes that Oothoon's lament calls on deaf ears because she speaks a language unknown to Bromion and Theotormon: a language of "radical indeterminacy" (9). Thus, Oothoon becomes her own agent in perusing her freedom, "a solitary shadow wailing on the margin of non-entity" (7.15).

Oothoon's ability to free herself arises, as Fred Hoerner suggests, from her knowledge of what brands her—Bromion's blatant rage and the hypocrisy of Theotormon's 'secret enjoyings of self denial' (7.8). Oothoon first directs her argument to Bromion, the figure of empiricism which "inclos'd [her] brain into a narrow circle," reducing her to a only a physical body (2.32). "Obliterated and erased" by Bromion's controlling terror, Oothoon at first accepts his literalism (2.34). She regains her strength and retorts to Bromion: "Thy joys are tears! Thy labour vain, to form men to thine image" (5.4). Oothoon chastises Bromion for exploiting humans in the name of labor and advancement: "How can the giver of gifts experience the delights of the merchant?" (5.12). Oothoon understands that slave labor provides goods but that the relationship between producer and receiver is not reciprocal. Bromion hears her ("And none but Bromion can hear my lamentation") but he does not acknowledge her (3.1). Heffernan suggests that Oothoon's language of "happy Love!" and "free born joy" (7.17; 7.2) contrast with Bromion's language which is "rigidly univocal, exclusive and divisive—like his actions" (11).

In this gift economy, providers are trapped with “nets” and surrounded “with cold floods of abstraction, and with forests of solitude,” (5.18;19). Here, Oothoon describes the loneliness of slavery and the forced self sacrifice of the slave made to “build him castles and high spires. where kings & priests may dwell” (5.20). Oothoon ridicules slavery as a flaw of the British constitution where she is “bound / In spells of law to one she loaths” (5.21). Oothoon is at once the executioner and victim figures in “Breaking on the Rack,” “driv’n to madness, bound to hold a rod / Over her shrinking shoulders” and “and must drag the chain” (5.26; 5.22).

In the illustration, “The Execution of Breaking of the Rack,” in the Stedman engravings, Blake captures the physical dismemberment and killing of one slave by another. One slave, identical to the other, stands as an executioner while the other one lies spread eagle on blocks of wood. The slaves’ identical appearances suggest a self torture similar to Oothoon’s. The physical likeness of the slaves also indicates that they are interchangeable, another example of illusory identity. Physically, the positions of Oothoon’s body in plate 3 of *Visions* and the victim’s body in plate 71 of *Narrative* are the same.²² Blake must mean to suggest that they are in the same physical and mental position which insinuates that Oothoon is indeed a slave.

The discrepancy between Oothoon’s perceived goodness and the outside perception of inherent darkness is enough to drive her to self-mutilation. Though she does not physically inflict the wounds herself, Oothoon calls on Theotormon’s eagles to pluck away her “defiled bosom” so that she “may reflect / The image of Theotormon on [her]

²² Figures 17 and 5

pure transparent breast” (2.15-16).²³ Oothoon’s demented rationale indicates the same psychology seen in ‘the little black boy’ who believes that though his skin is black, his soul is white. Oothoon believes that once her skin is removed, her purity will be revealed. Blake resisted the preying bird image in the Stedman engravings where the vultures which pick at the victims wounds in the narration are left out of the visual representation. He allows the image for Oothoon because the act is self inflicted since she calls on the birds herself. While Blake would not allow the slaves in the Stedman engravings to be preyed upon, he supports Oothoon’s wishes to cleanse Theotormon’s perception of her by allowing him, literally, to see her flesh torn off to expose her inner purity.

Theotormon, however, is not interested in seeing her. Theotormon is more interested in his own self pity (similarly, Stedman often follows descriptions of slave torture with his own lament). Oothoon holds him accountable for his misidentification of her. Seeing her as damaged because she has been raped, Theotormon endorses the ideology of Oothoon as nothing more than a physical being. She reprimands him for his lack of assertiveness, his inability to speak his mind, and his general blindness; “Wilt thou dissemble they secret joys / Or wert thou not awake when all this misery was discols’d!” (6.9-10). Oothoon deems Theotormon a “knowing, artful, secret, fearful, cautious, trembling hypocrite” (6.16). Oothoon dismantles her faith in him and rejects his perception of her:

But Oothoon is not so, a virgin fill’d with virgin fancies
Open to joy and to delight where ever beauty appears
If in the morning sun I find it: there my eyes are fix’d (6.21-23).

²³ Figure 17

Theotormon's role in *Visions* is perhaps the most complicated. Erdman suggests he is the ineffectual abolitionist and that he represents British hypocrisy—as a nation that parades a seemingly rounded progressiveness while supporting a degenerate trade of human lives. Theotormon's argument, if he is an abolitionist, is also a representation of his frustration with the abolition debate itself. Blake effectively recreates and personifies what every abolitionist must have felt—that they were fighting against all odds. The repetition of the phrase “tell me” in Theotormon's speech is the proof of his frustration, of his inner battle, of his search for the answer: “Tell me what is the night or day to one oerflowd with woe? / Tell me what is a thought? & of what substance is it made? / Tell me what is a joy? & in what gardens do joys grow?” (3.22-24). However, his questions can also be read as useless philosophical quandaries which cannot emancipate Oothoon. His questions ask why and address curiosity rather than slavery. His response is similar to Stedman's pondering on how slaves endure rather than how they can be freed: “Now How in the name of Heaven Human nature Can go through so much Torture, With So much Fortitude is truly Astonishing” (547).

In plate 4 of *Visions* Oothoon hovers above Theotormon, shackled to the ground and surrounded in blackness (figure 18). Within a “shadow of discontent,” Oothoon floats bound to her torment while Theotormon sits in deep contemplation of his own woes (4.1). Again, Theotormon can be compared to Stedman who often focuses on his own response to slave torture. As Oothoon floats above Theotormon, shackled to the ground, her body is in the same position as the slave in the Stedman engraving which shows “A Negro

hung alive by the Ribs to a Gallows” (figure 3). The likeliness that Oothoon, as a slave, could be executed in the same manner looms when both engravings are consulted.

Stedman experiences the same fear for his slave lover, Joanna. When he thinks about slavery and Joanna, Stedman imagines how she would be (mis)treated if she were a field slave—an unbearable thought. At the thought of Joanna in the “Tyrannical Master or Mistress” he could “not help cursing the barbarity” of slavery (90).

However, Stedman’s curses are contradictory to his actions since he owns slaves. It is this moral and emotional conflict which Blake depicts in Theotormon’s love for and desertion of Oothoon. Although he may wish to free her, he cannot do so without accepting Oothoon as a human being in her own right; individuality and slavery cannot be coupled. In order to free Oothoon, Theotormon would have to see her correctly. However both Bromion and Theotormon refuse to face her in the skull shaped cave where contemplations of slavery take place (figure 8). Blake represents Theotormon’s failure to physically notice Oothoon as he depicts the character in a crouching position with his eyes, ears, and mouth “completely closed to the life of the senses” (Hutchings 5). As Blake’s introduction to the poem suggests, Theotormon will not be enlightened enough to emancipate Oothoon since he will not/cannot see her: “The Eye sees more than the Heart knows” (plate ii).

Erdman’s suggestion that Theotormon is an abolitionist is difficult to validate; his contention that Theotormon’s “moral paralysis” is a reminder of “Stedman’s anxieties” is a better argument (246). Theotormon, after all, physically enslaves Oothoon and Bromion by binding them together in the cave. Stedman, too, owns slaves: “like the wavering

Stedman, [Theotormon] weeps for those laid low by slavery, but reproduces nevertheless the thing he abhors” (Vine 53). Both men are, as Vine says, “deeply divided” (52). Theotormon is obsessed with purity, he is pious, and acts as an image of colonial violence (51-52).

His tremendous jealousy proves his disgust for things impure, and specifically, for Oothoon’s sexual and physical darkness. Theotormon is imprisoned, according to Gleckner, by his “jealousy and despair” (*Bard* 214). But these emotional responses do not explain Theotormon’s relationship to slavery. Vine believes that Theotormon’s love is inseparable from his self-love (57). With Vine’s explanation, Theotormon’s selfishness parallels the English system which enslaves, enjoying the benefits of slavery and ignoring its horrors—or even Stedman who enjoys the female slaves physically and then abandons his slave wife and child. Theotormon’s crime is therefore his refusal to act and the effect of his “ignorance” on Oothoon (Gleckner 215). Theotormon also refuses to address slaves in general, as they are beneath him:

Theotormon sits wearing the threshold hard
 With secret tears; beneath him sound like waves on the desert shore
 The voice of slaves beneath the sun, and children bought with money,
 That shiver in religious caves beneath the burning fires
 Of lust, that belch incessant from the summits of the earth.

(2.6-8)

Hutchings calls Theotormon “grimly ascetic” and suggests that he should be aligned with “a self-righteous and hypocritical imperialist evangelism” (4). Theotormon’s obsession with his own plight and thoughts shows him to value “solitude over socially engaged action” (Hutchings, 4). Theotormon values “The self enjoyings of

self denial,” a philosophy which disallows him to see Oothoon as a physical and sensual being (7.10). Theotormon’s inability to find a balance between his religious beliefs and the institution of slavery torments him. Stephen Behrendt argues that Theotormon’s self-inflicted punishment is proof of his torment.

Behrendt’s suggestion stems from the image of Theotormon whipping himself in plate 6 of *Visions*.²⁴ Behrendt argues that the scene has a religious connotation. The whip, or “cat-o-nine-tails,” was used by “religious fanatics for purposes of self-flagellation” (66). Also a conventional device for slave punishment and torture, Theotormon’s use of the whip means that he literally turns the violence of slavery upon himself (while Oothoon watches). Theotormon champions himself as his own punisher in this self-righteous act. He is at once the punisher and the punished, riding the margin of power and submission; in other words, as Hoerner writes, “overseers and worshipers alike destroy existence to preserve Selfhood, the narrow circle of a slaver’s scourge” (123) Thus, he wears “the threshold hard,” sits “weeping upon the threshold” with what Oothoon calls “hypocrite modesty” (2.8; 2.23; 6.18).

Another possible reading (implied by Hoerner and stated by Goslee and Lee) suggests that Theotormon could be a “black slave” (Goslee 111). Goslee identifies a fine line between Erdman’s reading that Theotormon is an ineffectual white abolitionist and the possibility that Theotormon is “a black slave who fails to follow the literary models of vengeance and suicide” (111). Goslee believes this only to be true in the first part of the poem. Theotormon turns his focus away from race and towards gender, Goslee says,

²⁴ Figure 7

in the last two section of the poem (111). If Goslee's reading is correct, Theotormon may be like 'the little black boy' who endures the scorching light of God's love in order to achieve an eternal release from tyranny. Such a comparison is understood by Hoerner who notes the "perverse logic" of those who "worship the whip when they cleave to the force of an authority believed to complete them even as it actually *cuts* (131).

The difference, of course, in Hoerner's statement about slaves and Theotormon is that Blake's character enslaves himself. The character's narcissism—noted by Chapman (15) and Hilton (102,104)—enslaves Theotormon to his own image, limiting his perception. In that case, as Allen suggests, Theotormon views the world through Bromion's lens. Bromion justifies "violent oppression" and Theotormon is "dominated by the same ideology" literally depicted when he turns the whip on himself (221).

Possibly one of the most eminent illustrations from the work, Blake's rendering of the cave scene perfectly captures Bromion's mental state.²⁵ His rage can be seen in his face. His open mouth, his undefined eyes, large ears and nose, wiry hair, large feet, and muscular physicality make him beast like. His strength is apparent, yet he remains shackled to Oothoon, bound in the relationship of slavery. With a look of shock upon his face, Bromion is turned away from Oothoon and Theotormon, unwilling to face his counterparts. Although he is close to both of them, they are behind him, out of sight and without consideration.

Bromion's disregard for both Theotormon and Oothoon is reminding of the master/slave relationships captured artistically in the Stedman engravings. Slaves and

²⁵ Figure 8

masters in the Stedman engravings never see eye to eye, neither literally nor figuratively. The planter looks past the slave though she looks directly at him.²⁶ Another illustration shows a group of slaves being herded by a white man and while he points his finger and a stick at them, his face and eyes are shifted so that one cannot tell what his focus is, though it is not the slaves he oversees.²⁷ In another engraving, a female slave hangs from a tree while the white men in the background point both of their hands in the opposite directions from her—though she is the obvious focus in the landscape.²⁸ One soldier has his back turned to her while the other faces her directly yet turns his head away from her. The same observation is true for several other illustrations as well, the eyes of most soldiers are diverted as to not recognize, validate, or admit the slave's existence as a human being. So too does Bromion sit wide eyed and blind.

According to Bromion's philosophy, he does not need to open his eyes for a wider perception. He tells Theotormon that "ancient trees" are "seen," justified and perceived by their literal appearance (4.13). "But knowest thou," Bromion questions, of "trees and fruits" that "gratify senses unknown?" (4.15). The immediate answer is no. Bromion depends on an exterior logic, one controlled by empiricism. He must also depend on the relationship of oppression for his natural law to work. David Aers suggests that Bromion "reports the possibility that the repressed internalize the ideology and values of the oppressor" (30). If he is correct, then Bromion himself is oppressed since he internalizes the 'ideology and values' of his society and its class system.

²⁶ See Stedman plate 49; figure 19

²⁷ Stedman plate 22, illustration 10

²⁸ Stedman plate 35, illustration 4

Slave owners or pro-slavery advocates refuse to see slavery for what it truly is—a nasty trade which defiled an entire population. The lack of focus of the eyes suggests the missing connection between master and slave. The refusal to look directly at the slave, in Blake's illustrations, represents a lag in perception. Most simply, Blake illustrates that the two sides of the debate cannot see eye to eye because they are enslaved to corrupted logic. Free thinking is not an option. The planters guard themselves from breaking their lenses of perception by refusing to identify the slaves as humans. Thus, the lack of eye contact in the Stedman engravings and Bromion's and Theotormon's lack of perception in *Visions* visually and psychologically explain the oppressor's lack of vision. Without which, Blake suggests there can be no progress. The masters may refuse to make eye contact with a slave for fear of recognizing their pain, an act that would most likely spark sympathy, the essential emotion of abolition.

Bromion's role as the pro-slavery advocate can also be seen in his response to Theotormon's "tell me" speech (3.22-4.11). Bromion cannot answer Theotormon's philosophical and humanitarian questions because his tyranny keeps him from being familiar with the concepts involved: "Tell me where dwell the joys of old? & where the ancient loves? / "And will they renew again & the night of oblivion past?" (4.3-4). Bromion, instead of addressing Theotormon's selfish wonderings of love and joy, tries to persuade Theotormon that slavery is necessary. Bromion argues that "places yet unvisited by the voyager" may hold even better "trees beasts and birds unknown" (4.16; 4.14).²⁹

²⁹ Besides the engraving of slaves, Blake also did some "unadorned engraving of local fruits and vegetables," as well as of plants and animals (Price xxxix).

“But knowest thou[,]” Bromion says, “that trees and fruits flourish upon the earth / to gratify senses unknown?” (4.13-14). Bromion tries to show Theotormon the good in slavery, calling it a fruit and suggesting that more foreign fruit is theirs to enjoy. Victor Paananen suggests that Bromion’s speech is similar to the pro-slavery argument of venture capitalism. Bromion is not satisfied with possessing “one physical world” he wants more opportunity to seize nations and exploit labor of captured foreigners (69).

Oothoon recalls her objective worth: “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 inclos’d my infinite brain into a narrow circle” (2.30-32). Oothoon orates how Bromion’s perception of her threatens her spirit. She “had five senses,” “a narrow circle” (skull), and a “heart” until, Oothoon cries, “all from life I was obliterated and erased” (2.31-34). Bromion reiterates that she should not want to be more than a physical body. Heffernan identifies Bromion’s “Urizenic dogma” which understands that all creatures “experience the same sensations” (15).

With what sense is it that the chicken shuns the ravenous hawk
 With what sense does the tame pigeon measure out the expanse?
 With what sense does the bee form cells? have not the mouse & frog
 Eyes and ears and sense of touch? yet are their habitations, (3.1-4)

Perception through the senses, through emotion, or even through sensuality is foreign to Bromion. His perception is provided by law and social standard, as he explains to

Theotormon. Bromion finds pleasure in a static form of perception. He favors “one law for both the lion and the ox” and “eternal chains” (4.22-23).³⁰

Oothoon is therefore the only character who perceives correctly. Theotormon refuses to look at her and Bromion cannot see her because his ‘Urizenic dogma’ will not let him. On the last plate of the poem, Oothoon rises above the daughters of Albion as they huddle together on a shore. Oothoon’s arms are spread wide open in an accepting gesture revealing her open mind which “looks on all life as holy, which loves every object for its unique and infinite capacities” (Mellor 147). Just as the ‘little black boy’ in Blake’s earlier poem seems closer to God’s image, so too does Oothoon in *Visions* seem closer to an abolitionist image. Gleckner writes that “The daughters of Albion and Theotormon see but the defilement of her flesh; Blake and Oothoon know the purity of her soul” (216).

Triumphing over Bromion’s scorn and abuse and Theotormon’s failure to rescue her, “Oothoon shall view his dear delight, nor e’er with jealous cloud. Come in the heaven of generous love; nor selfish blightings bring” (7.28-29). Though she remains physically bound at the end of the poem, Oothoon is imaginatively emancipated. As Heffernan writes: “Bound in Bromion’s cave, she nonetheless speaks a language of triumphant independence” (18).

The final engraving of the Stedman *Narrative* features the daughters of Albion as “Europe supported by Africa & America” (figure 20). The three nations, represented by

³⁰ Line 4.22 is an allusion to the last line of Blake’s poem *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*: “One Law for the Lion & Ox is Oppression.”

naked female bodies, stand as one. Africa and America support Europe as she closes her eyes but feels their hands. The scene is loving and sincere and the landscape inviting, unlike the treacherous environments of the torture engravings. Blake's final engravings in both pieces seem to suggest a peace not found inside the texts themselves.³¹ Roses grow at the figures feet suggesting new growth between all nations. Blake's abolitionist hand is obvious in both engravings as he leaves the reader with an uncertain yet identifiable sense of better things to come. Even though America is free, the female figure who represents her is shown tied into slavery by her sisters who still wear shackles on their arms. Still, Blake's hope for his nation, and for all of humanity, can be seen in the gentle nature of the engraving which opposes the gravity of the others. While Blake's frustrations with the lack of progress show throughout his poem and through his engravings, he leaves the reader hopeful as his figures triumph over adversity—but only through human support:

Thus every morning wails Oothoon, but Theotormon sits
 Upon the margind ocean conversing with shadows dire.
The daughters of Albion here her woes, & echo back her sighs.
 (my emphasis 8.11-13).

That Blake's long narrative poem derives directly from the arguments of the abolitionist debates, from Stedman's *Narrative*, and from Mary Wollstonecraft's feminist-abolitionist arguments is clear. Blake's work transforms, from the ironic explication of religion's role in slavery in "The Little Black Boy," to the comprehensive address of the trade and its emotions in *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*. His

³¹ Figures 20 and 21

complicated composition in *Visions* seems created by a mature adult compared to the simplistic nature of Blake's earlier poem; in *Visions* Blake makes a fully grown attack on the inhumanity of trade. With his new knowledge of the trade at hand, Blake is better equipped to appeal to the human emotion. He successfully draws empathy from the reader, and he successfully attacks anyone who would waver in their political ideas of slavery. His readers undoubtedly feel his passion and his desire to live in a world where everyone is valued and everyone is free. Blake frees Oothoon's spirit and makes her the heroine of his poem, creatively emancipating her as well as the figures captured in the torture scenes of Stedman's *Narrative*. In *Visions* he creates a Romantic petition for the freeing of all "children bought with money," "for every thing that lives is holy" (2.10; 8.11).



Figure 1
Stedman Plate 7



Figure 2
Stedman Plate 13

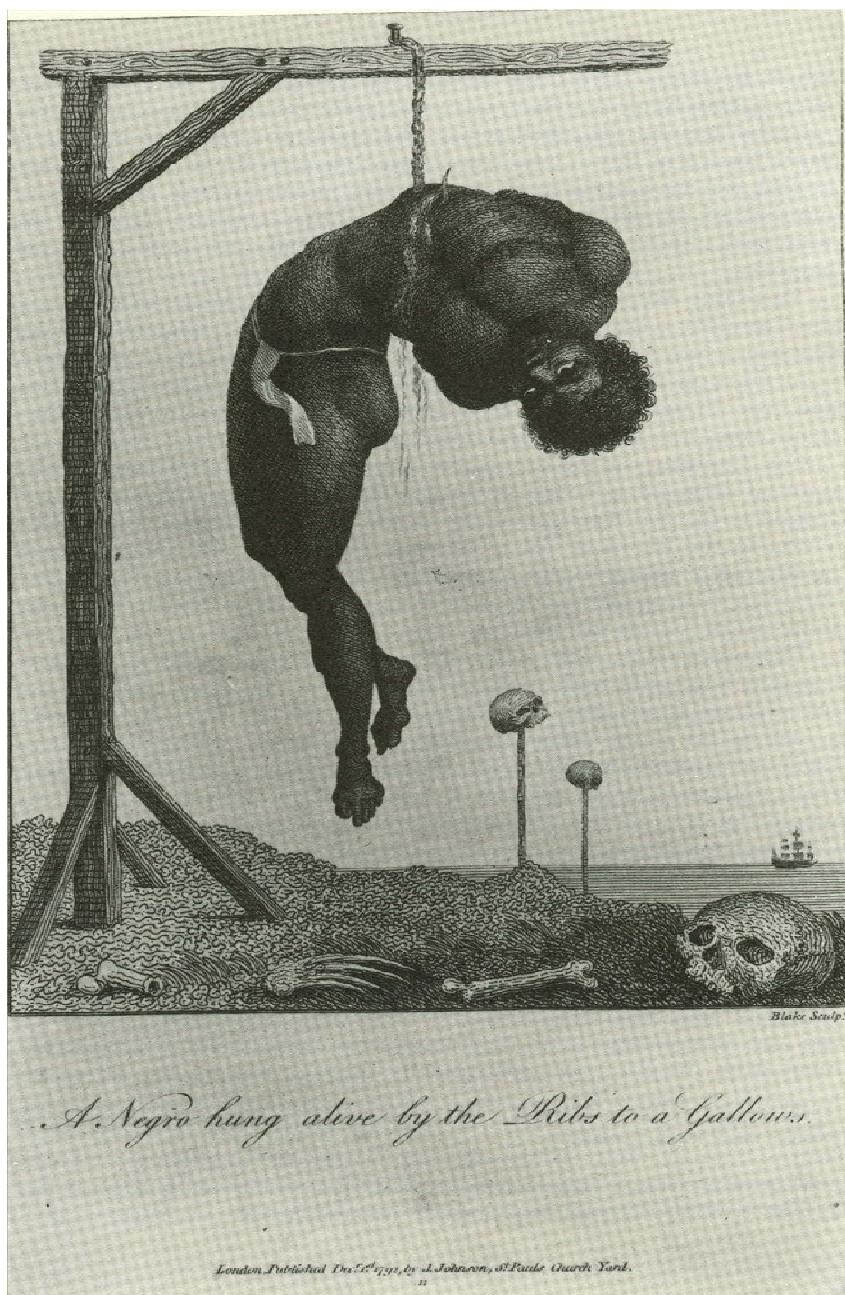


Figure 3
Stedman Plate 11



Figure 4
Stedman Plate 35

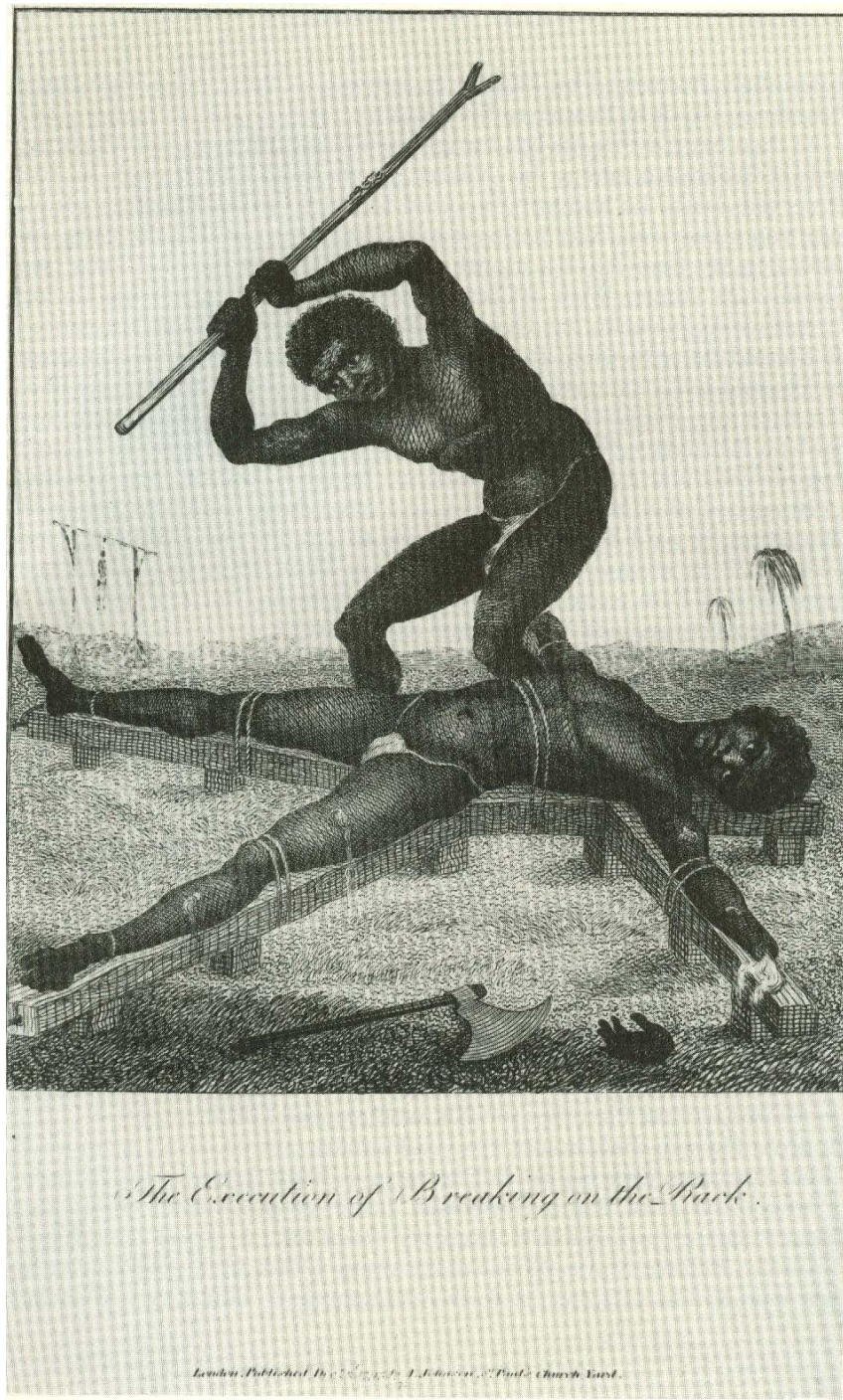


Figure 5
Stedman Plate 71

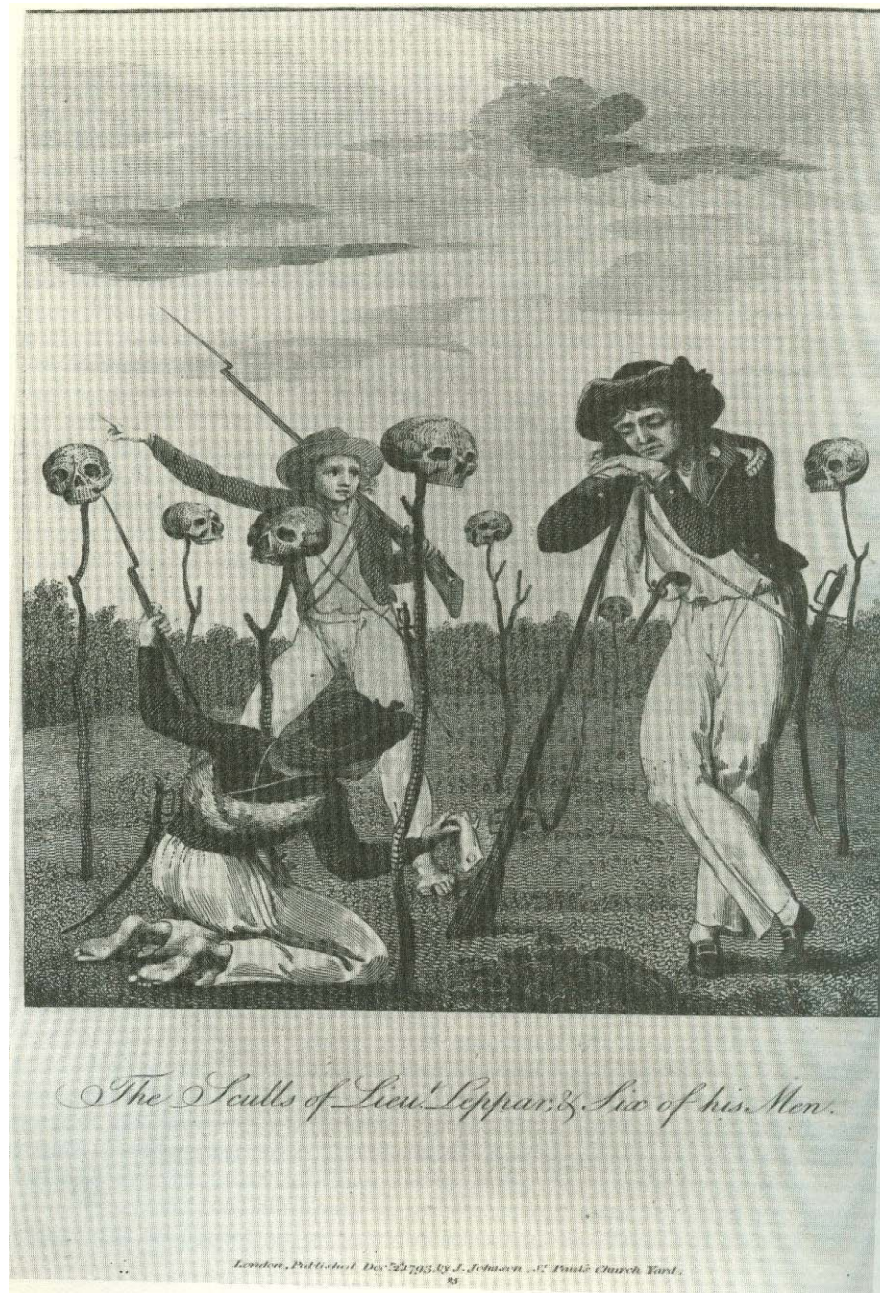


Figure 6
Stedman Plate 25

And a palace of eternity in the jaws of the hungry grave
 Over his porch these words are written. Take thy bliss O Man!
 And sweet shall be thy taste & sweet thy infant joys renew!

Infancy, fearful, lustful, happy! nestling for delight
 In laps of pleasure; Innocence! honest, open, seeking
 The vigorous joys of morning light; open to night, bliss,
 Who taught thee modesty, subtil modesty: child at night & sleep
 When thou awakest, wilt thou dissemble all thy secret joys
 Or wert thou not awake when all this mystery was disclosed?
 Then canst thou forth a modest virgin knowing to dissemble
 With notes found under thy night pillow, to catch virgin joy,
 And brand it with the name of whore; & sell it in the night,
 In silence, even without a whisper, and in seeming sleep,
 Religious dreams and holy whispers, light thy smoky fires;
 Once were thy fires lighted by the gaze of honest men
 And does thy Theotarmen seek this hypocrite modesty?
 Thus knowing, artful, secret, fearful, cautious, trembling hypocrite.
 Then is Oothoon a whore indeed; and all the virgin joys
 Of life are harlots; and Theotarmen is a sick man's dream
 And Oothoon is the crafty slave of selfish holiness.

But Oothoon is not so, a virgin filled with virgin fancies
 Open to joy and to delight where ever beauty appears
 If in the morning sun I find it: there my eyes are fixed

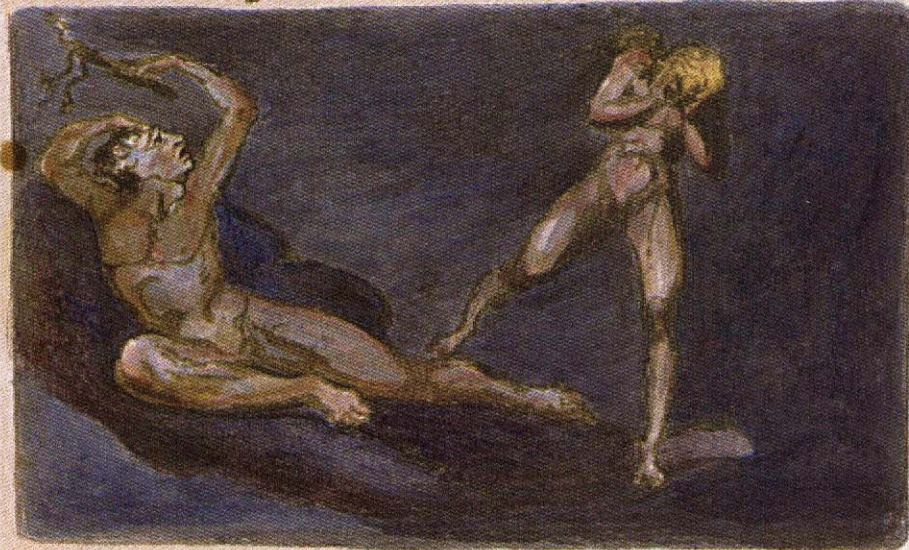


Figure 7
 Erdman Plate 6

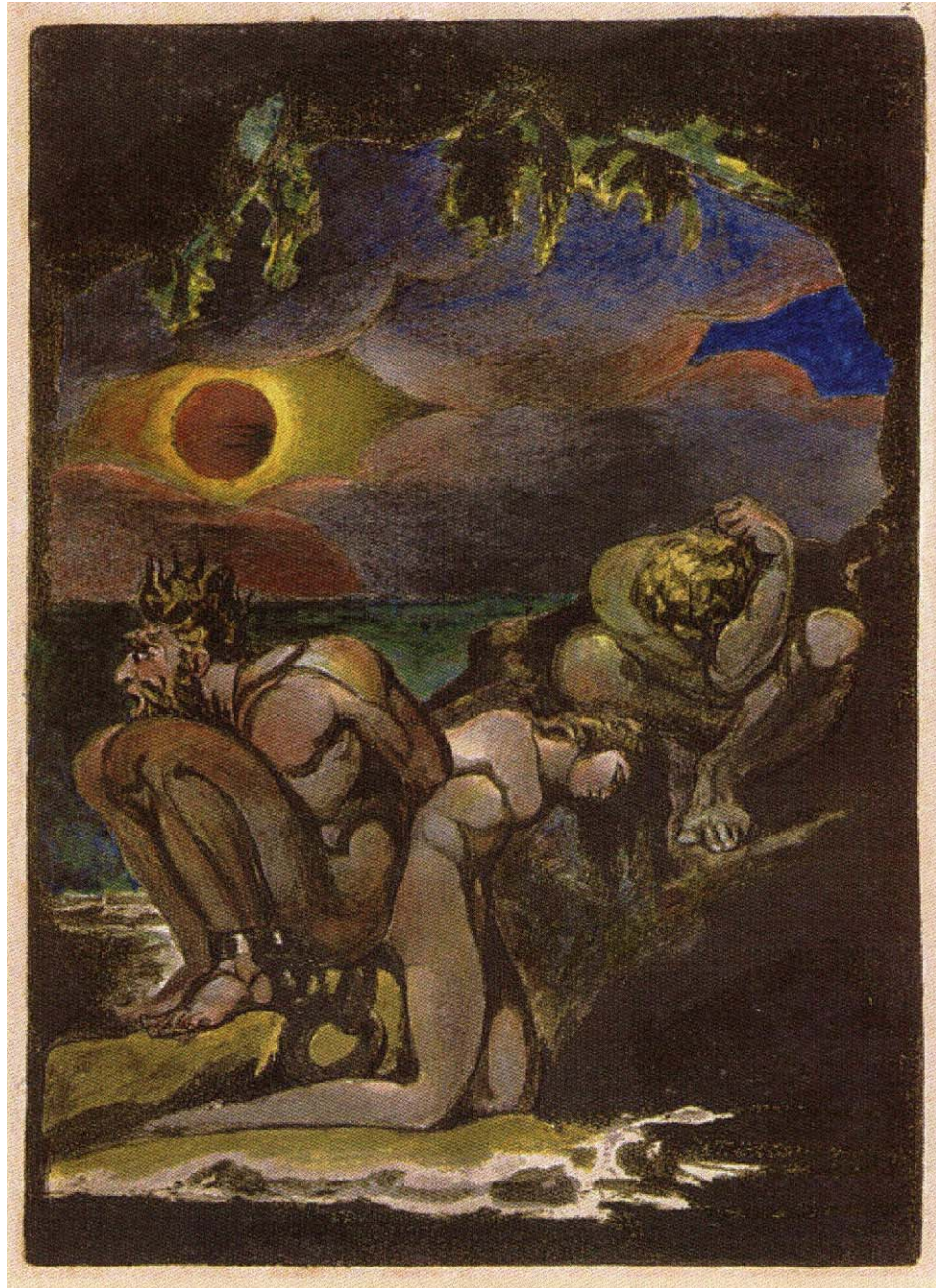


Figure 8
Erdman Plate i

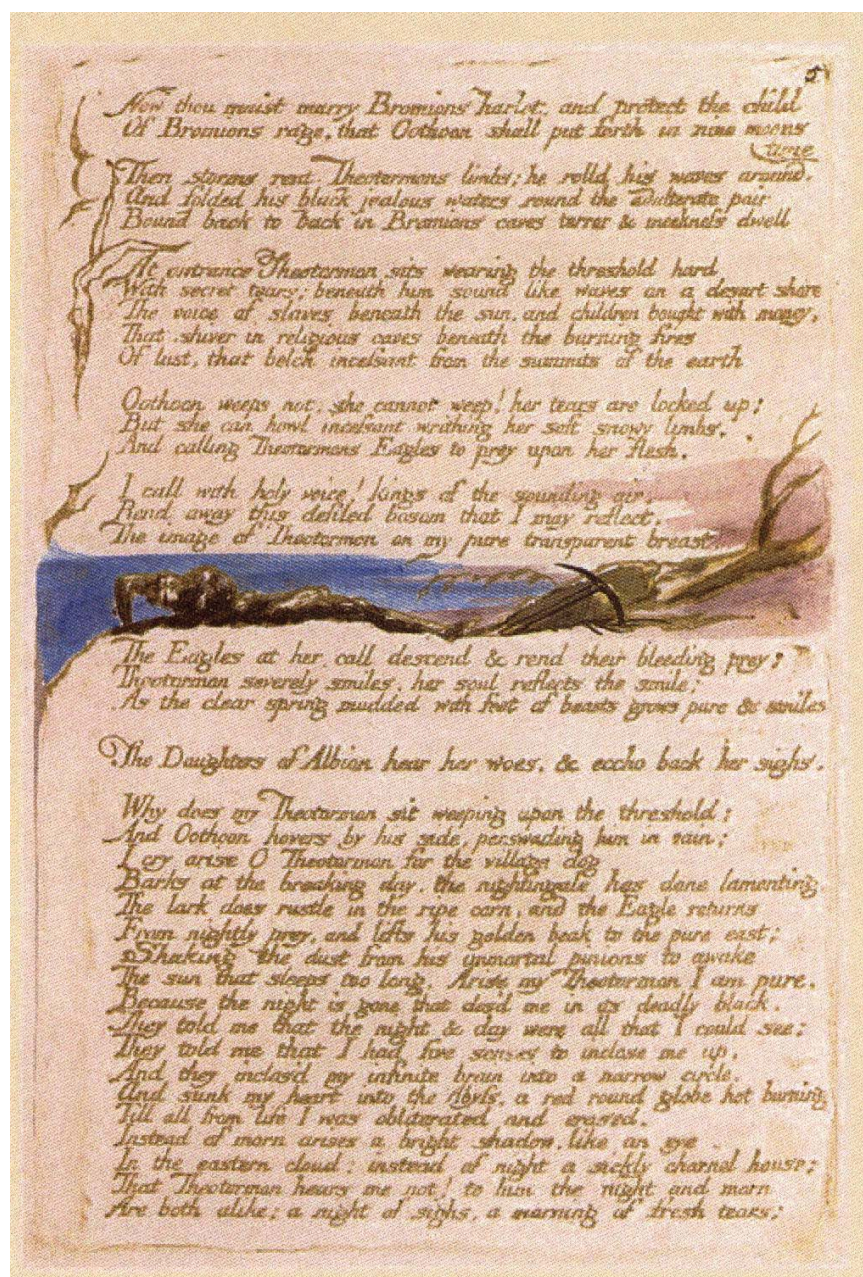


Figure 9
Erdman Plate 2



Figure 10
Stedman Plate 22

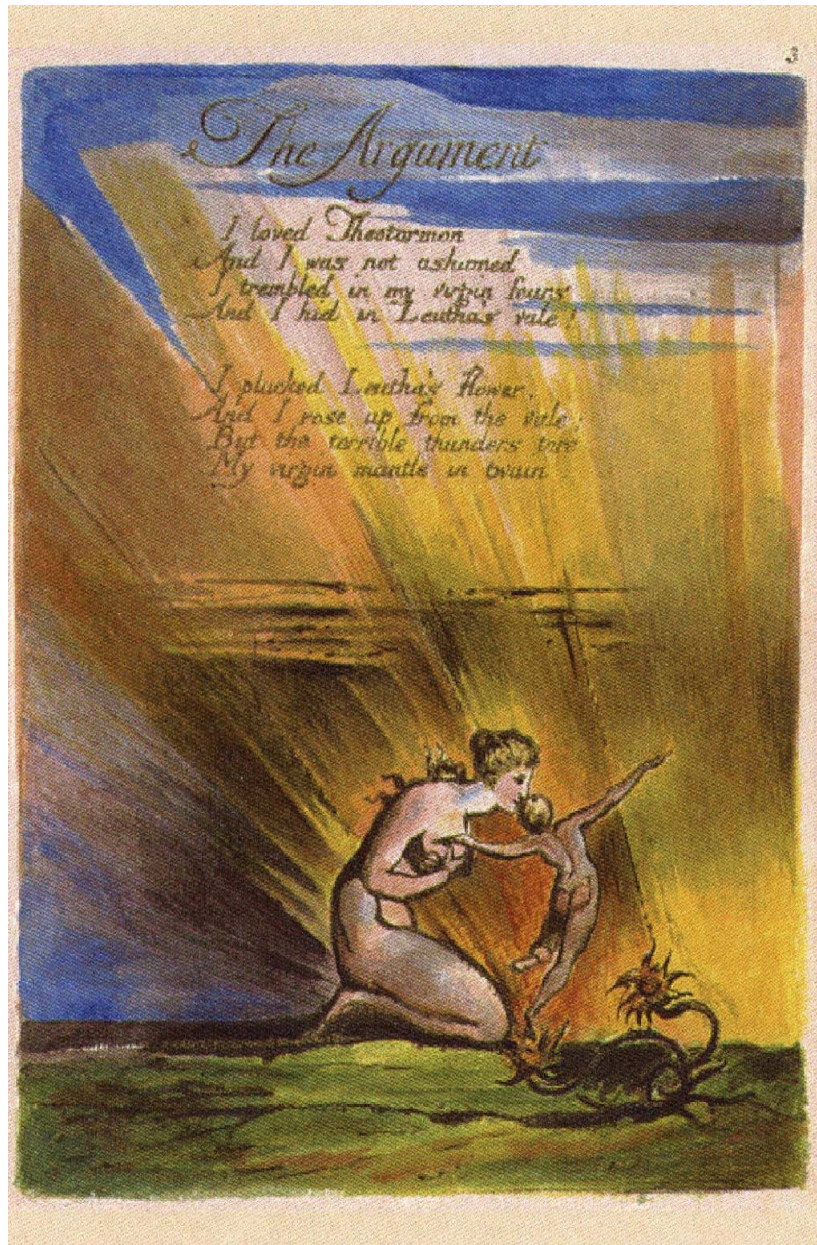


Figure 11
Erdman Plate iii

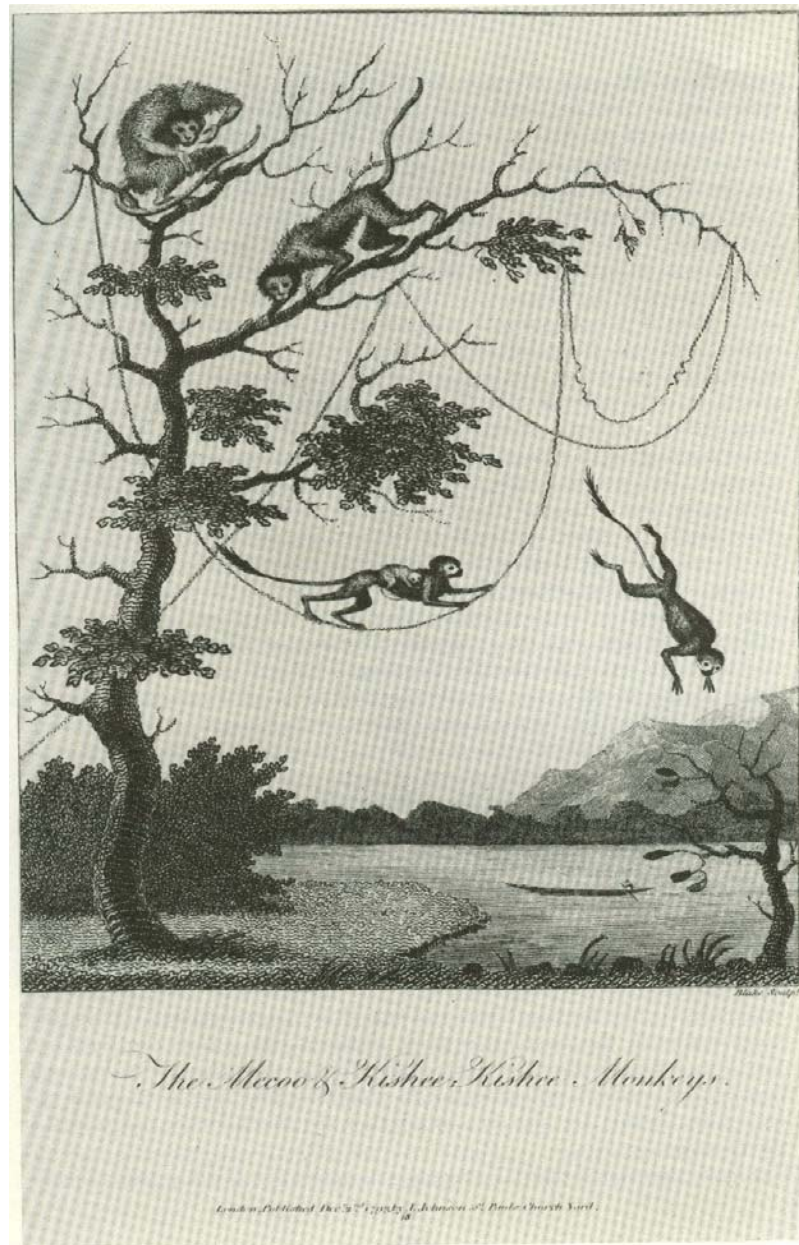


Figure 12
Stedman Plate 18



Figure 13
Stedman Plate 19

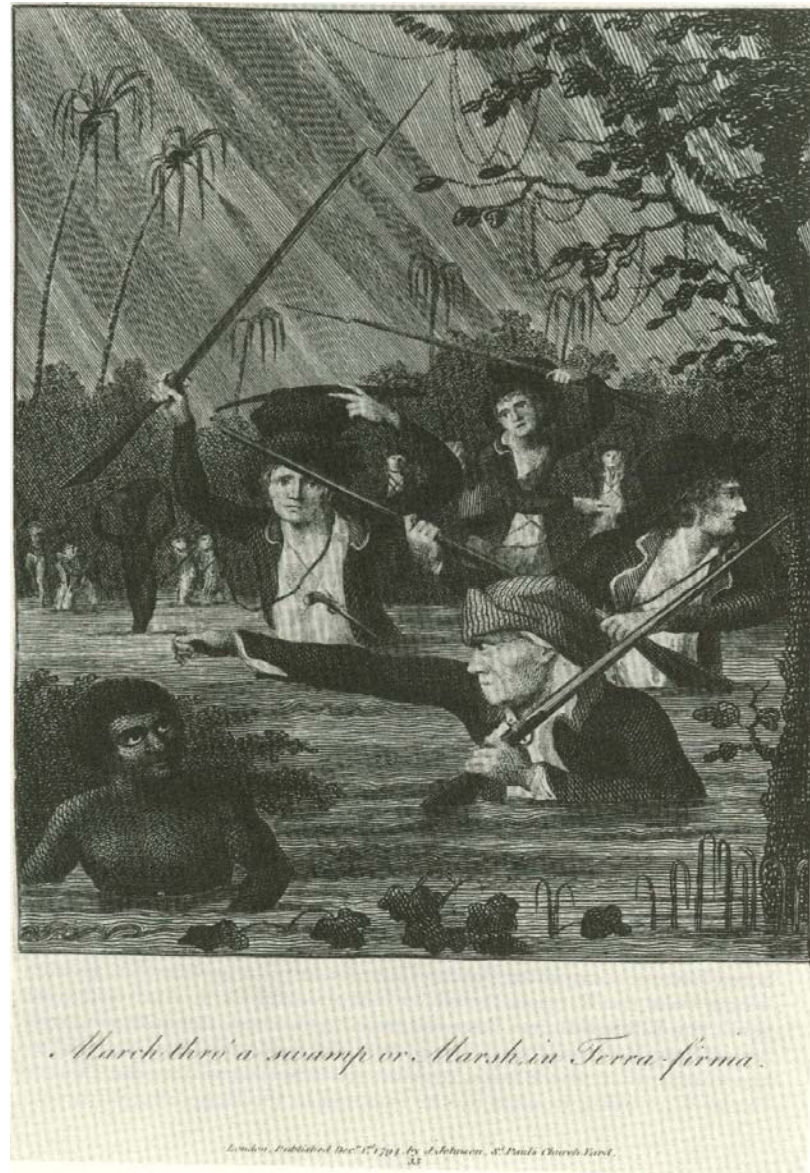


Figure 14
Stedman Plate 55

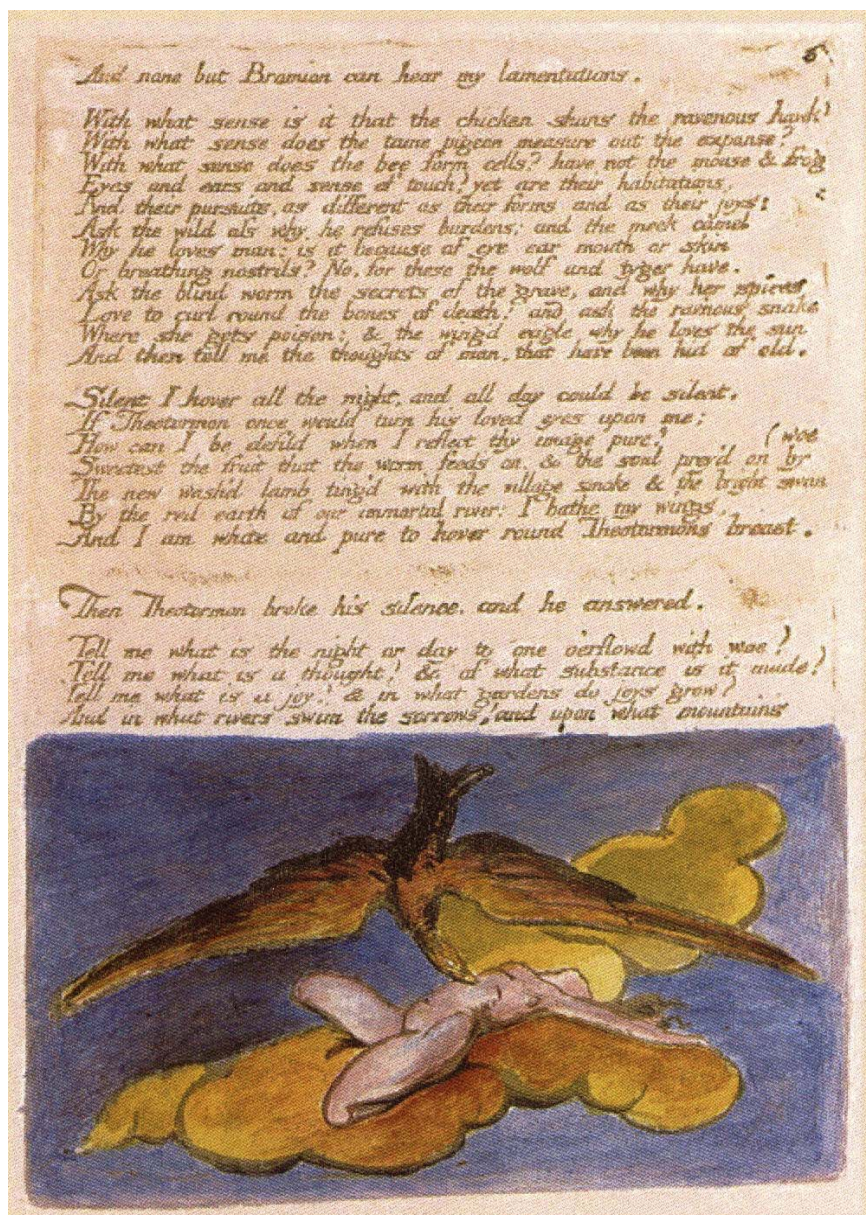


Figure 15
 Stedman Plate 3



Figure 16
 Erdman Plate 4

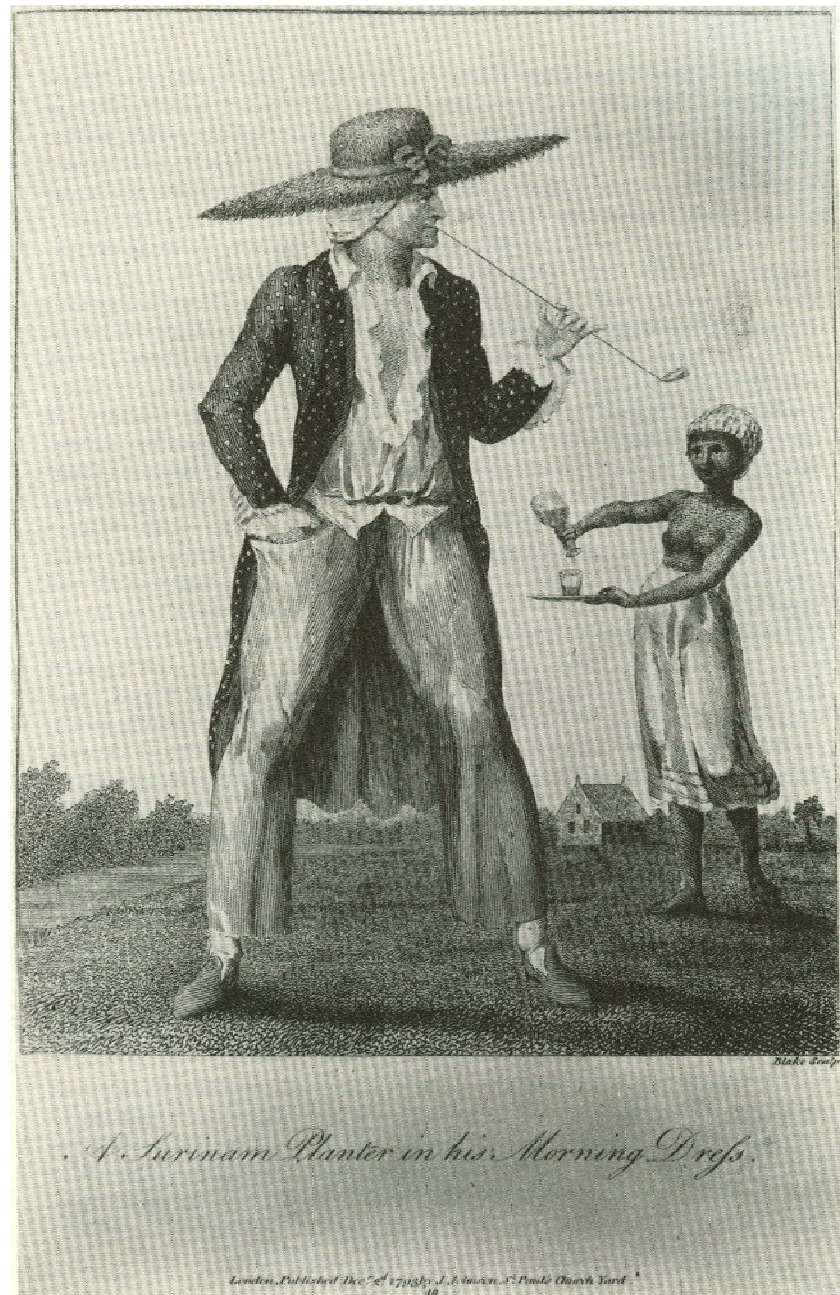


Figure 17
Stedman Plate 49



Figure 18
Stedman *Finis Page*

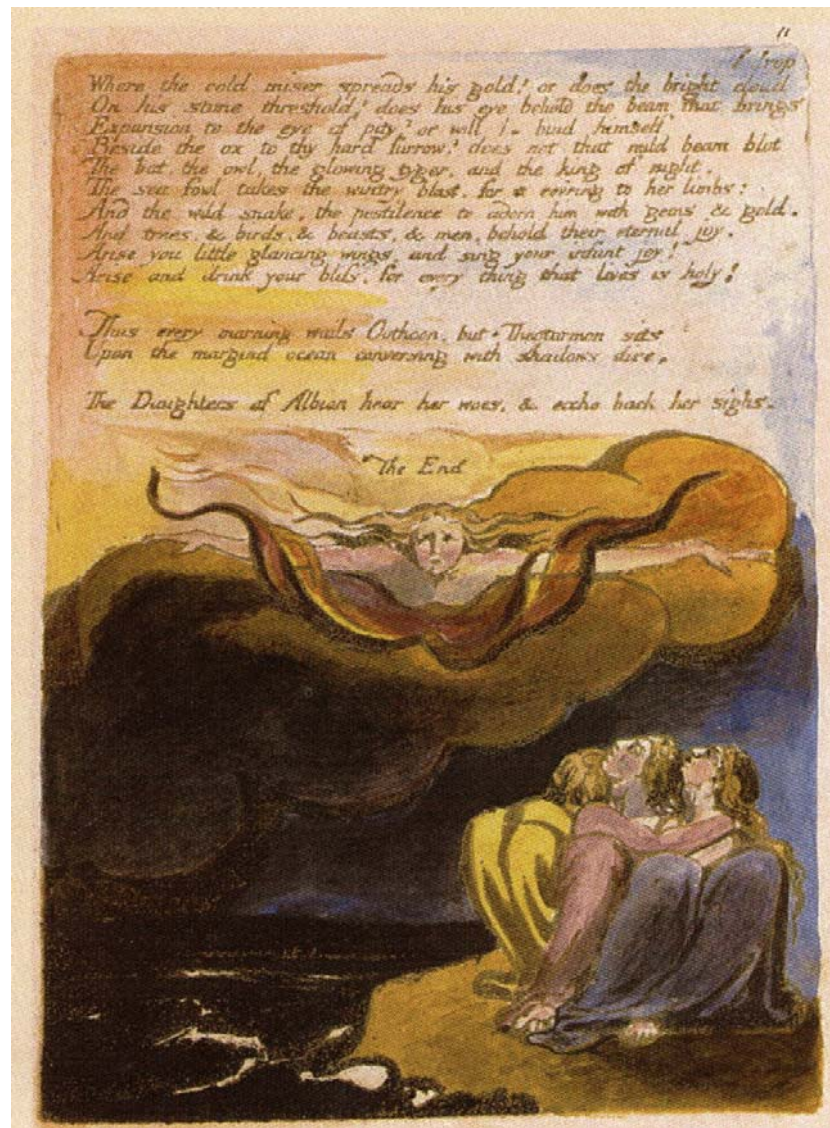


Figure 19
 Erdman Plate 8

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