

“Theotormon hears me not”:

Shaming Women in 18th-century Rape Trials

In the eighteenth century, rape trials were scenes of obscene shaming of violated women. English rape law supported the rich and the male, therefore single women were at a disadvantage from the beginning. This phenomenon was commented on and challenged by writers at the end of the eighteenth century, including William Blake. In my paper, I will argue that his narrative poem, *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* [VDA], is a literary case study where he depicts the rhetoric of shaming. I will show how language was used as a tool of shaming in a courtroom setting through an actual script of a trial from 1793. William Blake, by giving voice to her violated female character, Oothoon, uses literature to envision how women could refuse to be seen as an object, defined by their chastity, or the loss of thereof, whether willingly or unwillingly.

Keywords: shame, language, rape law, rape, rape trials, William Blake, *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*

1. Introduction

Sexual violence was ubiquitous in the lives of women in the 18th century. Because of the attention rape cases got, a new moral trend paved its way into the public’s mind: virtuous women do not seek danger. In other words, they stay at home, where it is safe. For working-class women – especially single women – this was naturally not an option. Those who were sexually assaulted found themselves trapped; an honest and reputable woman would not speak about sexual matters, therefore seeking justice was often seen as a risk that might not be worth taking (Clark, *Women’s*, 2-3).

Those who took the risk and spoke up found themselves in extremely difficult situations.¹ Language and the narrative techniques used by men in the courtroom put women into an even more vulnerable position, forcing them after a physical assault, to endure mental

¹ “A historical analysis of rape law in early modern England reveals a legal culture that tolerated inordinate levels of male violence against women, even from men they did not know. The doctrines and criteria that constituted the common law of rape created extraordinary standards that, when coupled with popular attitudes towards women, made conviction for rape exceptionally difficult” (Block 25).

aggression. The questions violated women were asked seemed more like an attack than an attempt to deliver justice. As I intend to show in the paper, courtroom language was used to shame women and to lecture them on how to avoid further violent encounters. This is reflected in the literature of the period as well. In her novel *The Victim of Prejudice* (1799), Mary Hays shows the predicament of the victim with unflinching realism. Mary, the protagonist, abducted and raped, defiantly claims to be liberated after her violation: “I demand my liberty this moment; I insist upon being suffered to depart. No one has the right to control me. I will appeal to the tribunal of my country; I will boldly claim the protection of its laws, to which thou are already amenable. (...) I will go. Who dares to oppose me?” (Hays 41) Importantly, Mary is a single girl, and an orphan, therefore, no one’s ‘property’, and as Clark pointed out, “in the eyes of the law sexual assault was only significant when it involved the ‘property’ of a man – a virgin daughter or a wife. The law of rape, in fact, had evolved to protect theft of female sexual property, not to protect themselves.” (Clark, *Women’s* 47). When Mary suffers sexual violation from a man, she swears to seek revenge. She is confidently facing her assaulter, stating that it is her right to get justice; however, her rapist knows very well that her effort will be met with obstacles. He lets her know as much, thus being an agent of this way of oppression: “To whom and where would you go, foolish and unhappy girl? – Let no passion and woman’s vengeance blind you to the perils of your situation! (...) To what purpose, then, these pathetic appeals and unavailing recriminations? (...) Who will credit the tale you mean to tell?” (Hays 42) Hays’s novel formulates the sordid reality: if a single woman decided to prosecute her assaulters probably failed to get the justice she had sought², because although “the definition of rape was culturally constructed, (...) it was publically constructed by men and for men” (Clark, *Women’s* 24). This contradicts how rape was defined as a serious crime:

According to English law at the time, rape was a felony, punishable by death and without the benefits of the clergy, and is often described as ‘heinous’, ‘atrocious’ and ‘detestable’ crime. Simultaneously, however, the same texts tend to undermine the seriousness of rape by emphasizing its rare occurrence and the difficulties of securing reliable proof, as well as advancing a view on sexual assault as a venial offence, an understandable failure to control ‘what nature on all sides promotes’. In addition, juries tended to remain unconvinced by women’s testimonies, even when the crime resulted in bad injuries, making rape the crime that had by far the lowest conviction rate of all prosecuted crimes in the eighteenth century (Olsson 141).

² “Remarkably, even though the system was intended to favour the prosecution, this did not help females who prosecuted for rape. Gregory Durston examined records from London’s Old Bailey Court from 1700 to 1800 and found only forty-five convictions out of 281 indictments for rape” (Block 28-29).

Rape law in 18th century England did not serve to protect women; it was to protect the property of men, and thus, protected men's honour, because, as Anna Clark states, "the loss of a woman's chastity was believed to damage her father or husband's honour and financial interest" ("Rape" 2). 18th century English rape law did not know what to do with a woman who had no husband or father – they were no one's property, so according to the law, no one's honour, or interest had been violated explicitly. As Mary R. Block explains, "the most sustained and consistent grievance with English rape law is that it did not adequately define 'rape' or explain what was necessary to prove it" (23). If the violated woman proceeded with the courtroom hearing, she most likely found herself facing a barrage of questions, which were not necessary to aid her cause. Women were taught that speaking about sexuality was shameful and dirty; they could not put into word what happened to them, which only made their plight more difficult, as it was assumed that a chaste woman could not describe sexual acts. Furthermore, it made a huge difference whether the woman was a virgin or had sexual experience before. It was believed that "a woman with a less than perfect reputation simply could not have been raped, since her sexual experience meant that she was already, in a sense, considered communal property" (Cogan 379) and only chaste women could have been raped, thus the violated woman already started with a disadvantage in the courtroom (Clark, *Women's* 8)³.

William Blake in his poem *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* created a fictitious courtroom to highlight on and expose the harsh rhetoric with which violated women were treated. In what follows, I will present the characteristic features of an eighteenth-century rape trial through a case study, then proceed to analyse Blake's poem. I will use the Old Bailey transcript of a rape that occurred in 1793, which will "show the eighteenth century courtroom as a place of a 'second assault' where alleged rape victims were 'violated first by the actual, physical act of rape and then by a legal system that does not take them at their word but demands further proof" (Krueger 152).

2. "Because I was ashamed" – The rhetoric of shaming

In 1793, Sarah Tipple, an eighteen-year-old maid accused John Curtis of raping her (Old Bailey Proceedings Online, <https://www.oldbaileyonline.org/browse.jsp?div=t17930220->

³ For further reading on the topic, see Clark 1987, especially Chapter 3.

48). Tipple was at a disadvantage from the very start; she was the servant of John Curtis, a dependent of the wealthy male she had just accused. Sarah Tipple did not have a husband or a father in London – she was on her own as a working-class woman. She is instantly called a “spinster” (Old Bailey Proceedings Online, oldbaileyonline.com), a word associated with shame. Because of what is referred now as the “blackmail myth”, juries easily could have had the impression that Tipple’s accusation is baseless, and she only wanted to extort money off Curtis (Simpson 106). The “blackmail myth” was “the assumption that the complainant in a rape prosecution is quite likely to have made her charge from motives corrupt, vindictive, or otherwise dishonest” (Simpson 106). This idea is reflected in the interrogator’s questions in the courtroom: “*You ever applied to your master for money? “Did you ever send to your master for money?”*” (OBP, oldbaileyonline.com).

According to the official document, John Curtis “in and upon Sarah Tipple, spinster, violently did make an assault, (...) and violently and feloniously did Ravish and carnally know (OBP, oldbaileyonline.com). In here, the word “ravish” is used instead of rape, thus already diminishing Sarah Tipple’s accusation. As Mary R. Block pointed out “rape referred to the forcible violation or defilement of a female. (...) Ravishment referred to abduction or elopement. Both rape and ravishment entailed a seizure or taking of a person, but (...) ravishment was not gender specific. While either male or female could be ravished, only a female could be raped. (...) ravishment did not necessitate a sexual violation or even sex” (24-25). From the beginning, the attitude with which the supposed crime and the violated woman in question were treated clearly showed that it was rather Sarah Tipple who was on trial and not John Curtis. She was asked whether she showed any signs of resistance, to which Tipple answered yes. Throughout the trial most of the questions aimed to find out how she resisted (or did not resist). The questions she were asked correlate to the idea of the “rape myth” or “the myth of the unrapeable woman”, according to which “it was physically impossible for a single man to rape a conscious, ‘genuinely’ resisting woman, because she always had the power to avoid being penetrated as long as she remained resolute in her defence” (Olsson 142) – so, rather than asking Tipple whether she consented or not, assumptions were made based on one-word answers. She is asked more than once whether she resisted or not:

What passed then, did you make any resistance? – Yes.

How did he manage to keep you down on the bed, did you resist? – He forced me down, and he laid on me in such a manner that I could not get away.

Did you make all the resistance in your power? – I resisted as much as I could. (OBP, oldbaileyonline.com)

Tipple answers these questions positively, stating that she resisted as much as she could. However, given the “myth of the unrapeable woman”, her unsuccessful resistance was presumed to be consent by the jury. To further investigate whether or not she resisted, the barrister directly asked her whether she fought back or used physical violence against her attacker:

Did you slap his face? – I did not

Did you pull his hair? – I could not get away

Did you kick him at all? – I kicked him all that lay in my power (OBP, oldbaileyonline.com)

Paradoxically, these questions were all aimed to find out what the woman did, how she hurt or attempted to hurt her rapist – whether the rapist used any other forms of physical violence, was never asked of her. This “rapid-fire rhetoric” technique had further intention as well; by asking very similar or the same questions repeatedly, the courtroom challenged the violated woman’s coherence of her claims – one slip or a small discrepancy could have been enough to challenge her trustworthiness (Krueger 152). The question whether she was physically fighting back can also be interpreted in the following way: considering how her answers were mainly negative, it could easily have been stated that she simply did not do enough to protect herself from the advances of the assaulter, hence providing evidence that she did indeed favour the sexual act.

She was not only interrogated about self-defence; Tipple had to describe how she was allegedly raped, giving explicit details of the assault⁴:

He entered my body; he took and threw on the bed, and I called for assistance; I shrieked (*sic*) out once, and he put his hand and cramed (*sic*) the sheets into my mouth; as soon as he came into the room he bolted the door; he never spoke to me at all; he threw me on the bed without speaking to me; he put his private parts into mine.

(...)

⁴ “The ordeal began when the Judge asked the victim to describe in detail how the rape occurred. Male judges, counsels, juries and spectators were obsessed with the explicit sexual details of rape” (Clark, *Women’s*, 54).

What past after he put his private parts into your's? How long might he be in that situation? How did he force himself on you? Did you see him take down his breeches? – He did that after he put his hand to my mouth, and then he forced his private parts into mine, and something warm came from him. (OBP, oldbaileyonline.com)

18th-century rape trial scripts testify that there is a great interest in the minute details. This, Clark explains, was “derived from a patriarchal concern with chastity: what mattered was whether penile penetration and ejaculation had occurred, and the hymen broken, thus damaging the victim’s value as sexual property” (Clark, *Women’s* 55) Tipple was asked to talk about the venereal infection she had acquired as a result of her violation and how she had treated it:

Did you complain to her of your parts being sore? – No, not at all.

In short they were not sore? – Yes, very bad indeed.

Did you shew them to anybody? – No, not at all.

What did you do to alleviate the pain? – I did not do any thing at all. (OBP, oldbaileyonline.com)

The recalling of her traumatic experience, along with questions aimed to find out whether she was a virgin or not (“(...) you was quite a maid at this time? - I never knew a man before.”, OBP, oldbaileyonline.com) only added up to her already felt shame, which she clearly states that she had experienced: “Now my girl, how came you tell me a minute ago that you did not know how it [his hands] was employed, because I put it to you several times? – Because I was ashamed.” (OBP, oldbaileyonline.com). Her declaration of shame reflects the norm that chaste women could not speak about sexual matters – by retelling her sexual assault in such detail, she would be branded as unchaste. Her purity would also be questioned by the fact that she could describe the sexual act; an honest and reputable woman could not do such thing, because she lacked the knowledge of such matters. By talking about in such explicit details about her violent encounter, her name would taint, because “a rape victim’s honour, no matter how she struggled, was thought to be irrevocably tarnished according to bourgeois values. (...) the injured lady maybe chaste as unsunned snow, she will never more be considered as immaculate” (Clark, *Women’s* 29). She evidently felt impure because of what was done to her, and coarse for discussing such experiences. Tipple’s shame serves the purposes of her interrogator; admitting that she was ashamed, she passively took responsibility for what happened to her (at least partially). The barrister used her vulnerability against her, twisting her words in a way that would disprove her claim of being raped. The inquiry about how Tipple’s petticoats was held up is a particularly good example of how her claims were discredited:

What kept your coats up? - He took his knee up when he unbuttoned his breeches; he was on the bed and my coats kept up.

Did they keep up of their own accord or did you keep them up? – He kept them up to be sure. Now, how did he keep them up, he had not three hands, had he? – No.

Now, let us dispose of the two; how did he keep them up? – I cannot tell. (OBP, oldbaileyonline.com)

Even though Sarah Tipple stated that it was John Curtis who held her petticoats up, all the while he was kneeling upon her, making it impossible for her to resist him, the logic of the investigator is clear: if the alleged rapist was using one hand to hold her down and another one to hold up her petticoats, then how could he unbutton his trousers? Clearly, he is implying that Sarah Tipple held her petticoats up willingly, hinting at the idea that she might have consented to the advances of John Curtis. Another possibility is that judges (and often the public as well) simply enjoyed the game of shaming and liked hearing specifics of the assault, as stated by Anna Clark:

Judges and counsels would subject a victim to rigorous cross-examination, questioning her as to how her assailant could stop her mouth, hold her hands, pull up her petticoats and pull down his breeches all at the same time. In part, this curiosity stemmed from crude prurience; rape victims sometimes faced laughter from the galleries when they attempted to testify and transcripts of rape trials were sold as titillating literature.” (*Women’s* 54)

By toying with the plaintiff, the trial became more exciting and entertaining for the lawyers and jurors present in the courtroom. The attitude here is clear: she was never taken seriously; while Tipple expected the law to protect her, the men of law made a fool out of her for their amusement. Using language of condescension and mockery the barrister provoked Tipple and humiliated her (“Now, how did he keep them up, he had not three hands, had he?” “Now, let us dispose of the two; how did he keep them up?” OBP, oldbaileyonline.com). The style and tone of these questions suggest that the violated woman and her claims were not taken seriously – all of these implications subtly predict the verdict of the trial.

Even though the violated woman was not asked whether she consented or not, she still had to attest that she did not consent to the sexual contact, and she further had to give justification for why she put herself in a position where she would be attacked (Krueger 152). Her lack of self-defence could defy her claim of not consenting, and it could also serve as a excuse for attack and humiliation.

Will you tell us how he managed to bring his private parts to your’s, can you account how he did that? – No.

Did you cross your legs? – No.

It did not occur to you that that would be a good way to stop him; did you keep your legs a little wider than usual? – I don't know that I did.

Don't you know that you did not? – I don't know that I did not.

I should have thought keeping the legs close would be the best way to prevent him; (...) (OBP, oldbaileyonline.com)

Inquiring whether she kept her legs closed or whether she widened them implies again that Tipple in fact may have welcomed Curtis' approach. The barrister did not only question her credibility, but he also lectured her on how she should have defended herself: "I should have thought keeping the legs close would be the best way to prevent him; (...) (OBP, oldbaileyonline.com). The demeanour of the investigator illustrates the popular belief that the prevention of rape lies mainly on women – if women do not try to avoid sexual violence with all their powers, men cannot be entirely held responsible for their actions, because it was generally agreed upon that men had the right to female sexuality. Rape was not necessarily the result of urgent sexual desire, "rather, men who raped believed that sex involved the 'taking of women'" (Clark, *Women's* 7), an action to which they thought had the right to do. In the eyes of 18th-century English rape law, it should have been Sarah Tipple's obligation to avert the assault, which she failed to do; therefore, referring back to the "myth of the unrapeable woman", Sarah Tipple was not resisting hard enough or genuinely against John Curtis, so she consented to the sexual act.

The verdict of the trial was "not guilty" (OBP, oldbaileyonline.com), but not because there was evidence that rape did not occur; it is never explicitly stated whether the jury believed Tipple's accusation of rape or not (but it is safe to assume that they did not think that John Curtis committed rape on her). The decision came from an irrelevant factor of the trial; Sarah Tipple lied about not knowing anyone in London, whereas it turned out during the trial that she had a relative in the city. The original question, whether she was raped or not seemed to be irrelevant, and throughout the trial she seemed to be under interrogation. Tipple's cross-examination aimed to prove her lying – thus it could be stated that it was rather Sarah Tipple on trial than John Curtis. She was never asked if she consented or not, or the fact the preparator was violently using her, did not seem to interest the jury. The goal of the questions asked from her was not to prove that she was raped; it was to prove that she was not raped. Justice was not sought for her but for him. The person whose fate was in question was John Curtis. Tipple's trial shows "how lawyers manipulated a rhetoric of resistance to evince prosecutrices' sexual blameworthiness" (Krueger 153).

How language and rhetoric were used against Tipple supports the idea that women and their sexuality had to be kept under control. A wealthy pub owner in the 18th century was worth more than a single, working-class woman. Sarah Tipple did not belong to any man legally, therefore providing justice for her was in nobody's interest. Apart from enduring the exposing questions of the court, she was mocked and ridiculed by the system she believed would protect her. Her example shows how patriarchal society felt entitled to women's sexuality, and how they used women and their shame for their own validation. In the following, I will exhibit how William Blake responded to this ongoing fallacy of the system and how he envisioned the liberation of female sexuality from the shame attached to it.

3. “Rend away this defiled bosom” – Blake’s Fictitious Courtroom

As stated in the introduction, literature often engages in dialogue with the pressing issues of the time and exposes social injustices and false ideologies. It was common among writers and poets to revolt against the ideas of the time, especially if they contained social injustices. In his narrative poem, *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* [VDA] (1793), William Blake challenges the beliefs of his time and depicts male sexuality as “overwhelmingly violent and non-consensual rather than pleasurable” (Cogan 378). The poem tells the story of Oothoon, the “soft soul of America” (Plate 3, line 4) who, after plucking the “flower” of sexuality (plate 3, line 13) enrolls on a journey to experience sexual love with her lover, Theotormon. On her way to him, she is brutally raped by Bromion, after which neither Theotormon nor Bromion wants her; she is being shamed by both of them, branded as impure and adulterous. Although rape was still considered a serious crime in William Blake's time, the forceful and violent nature of male sexual contact was more normalised than it would be today (Jackson-Houlston 161). Blake recognized the oppression of women and challenges the way female sexuality and rape were perceived. Through Oothoon, he questions the way violated women were treated and denounces the ideas of “the patriarchal culture that condemns any form of female sexual liberation, even when it results from assault” (Krueger 149). Blake creates a courtroom setting, in which his characters resemble a rape trial:

Although Blake does not strictly structure VDA as a legal proceeding, the poem reflects some of its techniques. A trial's major figures are present in a fictive courtroom – the cave. We hear from a prosecutrix, Oothoon; a defendant, Bromion; and a representative of the family/patriarchy, Theotormon, who has had his

property-to-be/lover pilfered. We are introduced to a judge, Urizen (...), who functions doubly as a regulator of crime and punishment for preparators and victims. In the Daughters of Albion a group of peers/courtroom audience hears Oothoon's tale. We might interpret the Daughters as rape victims who echo Oothoon's sighs because they identify with her. (Krueger 155)

The language used by the male oppressors is harsher than in actual, real-life rape trials, yet the resemblance is indisputable; Oothoon is called derogatory names, is held responsible and treated as a property rather than as an individual.

At the beginning of the poem, Oothoon is depicted as an ideal woman – the text repeatedly mentions that she is a virgin (“I trembled in my virgin fears” plate 2, line 4) who is presumably loved by Theotormon. Yet, she is disruptive, as she is confident in her sexuality and is free of shame: “I loved Theotormon // And I was not ashamed;” (Plate 2, lines 1-2). On her way to meet Theotormon, she is raped by Bromion. The word “rape” is never used by Blake; he refers to Oothoon's brutal experience as “rent her with his thunders” (Plate 3, line 18). Krueger suggests that by staying away from the word “rape”, Blake might imply that Oothoon either was not in fact forced into having sexual intercourse with Bromion or draws attention to how language was used to confuse societal beliefs about sexual violence. Given that “to rend” means to take or tear something violently, as pointed out by Krueger, the question of whether rape happened or not should not be under debate. Importantly, Oothoon technically did not belong to any man; she had no father figure⁵, and she was not the wife of Theotormon, thus it is almost certain that during an actual trial, Oothoon would have met the same treatment as Sarah Tipple. Oothoon's suggested pregnancy (“(...) and protect the child // of Bromion's rage, that Oothoon shall put forth in nine moon's time.” Plate 4, lines 2-3) would have further discredited her in the courtroom as it was believed that rape cannot result in pregnancy. According to the medical jurisprudence of the day,” pregnancy was commonly taken as absolute proof of consensual sex since conception was thought to be literally inconceivable in cases of rape” (Cogan 378). In the eyes of society, the sexual assault she experienced turns the ideal woman into a fallen woman; Oothoon “the mild” (plate 3, lines 9-10) becomes Oothoon “the harlot” (plate 3, line 20), a turning point which depicts how language and rhetoric could overturn women's reputation within a short period: “Bromion speaks to Oothoon, saying to her

⁵ “Oothoon, though a daughter in name, does not belong to either father or husband so the violence against her, in effect, would not be regarded as a punishable crime. Without the support of a trustworthy male, Oothoon's case would have been met with suspicion, especially because not only Oothoon's body, “her character” also is ruined by her rapist”. (Csikós 46).

in plate 4, 'thy soft American plains are mine and mine' and suggesting that her body is 'stamp'd with [his] signet'. This imprint lays hold of her first sexual experience and forever brands her with rape, a mark that society will associate with sexual ruin and dishonour" (Krueger 158). As a single woman, Oothoon should have stayed "inside", where she would have been safe – by "going out" to meet her beloved, she willingly put herself into the position of being attacked and raped⁶, a situation to which today's society would say that she was "asking for it" (Csikós 45). She is shamed by her rapist first; "Bromion spoke. behold this harlot here on Bromions bed,"⁷ (Plate 3, line 20) – the assaulter insults her, putting the responsibility on her, because, presumably, he is sure that Oothoon brought her rape upon herself (Ostriker 157).

Oothoon does not stay silent; she voices her pain and ill-use; however, her woes fall on deaf ears. Even her almost-lover, Theotormon turns out to be a passive listener, moreover, amidst his lamentations, it is Oothoon who comforts him: "Why does Theotormon sit weeping upon a threshold; // And Oothoon hovers by his side, perswading him in vain:" (Plate 4, lines 23-24). Theotormon does not cry for Oothoon and her pain; he cries for himself and the stain that has fallen upon his honour – in this sense, Oothoon is only a passive participant in the game of two powerful males; Bromion did not rape Oothoon out of desire, but rather to make Theotormon jealous, an aim that is achieved, as stated in plate 4: "(...) he [Theotormon] roll'd his waves around, // And folded his jealous black waters round the adulterate pair" (lines 5-6). The quoted section from the poem shows how Theotormon refused to hear Oothoon, but he had no problem listening to Bromion. This reinforces the idea that Bromion's assault was not the result of sexual desire, but it was the result of male rivalry ("Now thou maist marry Bromions harlot, and protect the child // Of Bromions rage, that Oothoon shall put forth in nine moons time", plate 4, lines 2-3); he took something that belonged (or rather, would have belonged to Theotormon), thus making Theotormon the violated party and not Oothoon. Even if "officially"

⁶ "Women were instructed constantly to guard their bodies and sexuality, and any slippage in conscientiousness of this self-protection was used against them in the court and by society at large. In building a vision of Oothoon as errant, first wandering, then flying hastily to see her lover, Blake's words echo the sentiment of society: Oothoon was not aware of her surroundings, and thus she is culpable for the attack" (Krueger 157).

⁷ "And although, theoretically, even a harlot had the lawful right to prosecute for rape, in fact if a woman did not behave in a pure and sexless manner, she had only herself to blame for inciting the "artless sincerity of natural passion" in men, in other words she invited rape" (Csikós 45). Csikós points out that because Oothoon willingly set out on a journey to find Theotormon and make love to him, she made herself available to rape voluntarily. This could add to the idea that men believed that they had the right to female sexuality, therefore, in the eyes of Bromion, Oothoon was a "free prey", and his action cannot be seen as rape.

or legally she does not belong to anyone, Oothoon is still defined by the men around her, rather than existing as an individual in her own right. When the question of honour comes up, it is posed at the male character; however, when it comes to culpability, Theotormon points to Oothoon by calling them “adulterate pair”, (Plate 4, line 6) – it is clear that he finds Oothoon just as guilty as Bromion, if not more so. He does not listen or look at her⁸, (“If Theotormon once would turn his loved eyes upon me;” Plate 5, line 16) and on the corresponding image (Plate 6; Figure 1) also clearly shows he is concerned about himself. Theotormon is shown weeping, head bent down, while Oothoon is observing him from above naked, with chains around her ankle – a tiny, yet very important detail, depicting how Oothoon is forcefully trapped in a vulnerable position. Theotormon is fully clothed, Oothoon is fully naked; the power dynamics are depicted here. Oothoon’s nakedness shows how exposed to the (toxicity of the) patriarchal system she has become. She is abandoned both by the rapist (who did not want her in the first place but used her as a tool in male rivalry), and in the eyes of her beloved man, she is damaged goods, which an honourable man could not have possibly welcomed (Krueger 160). Oothoon is a victim of a conflict between males, both physically and mentally; after her brutal rape, she must endure objectification and shaming. To visualize male oppression, Oothoon is laid on a phallic-shaped cloud, limbs spread out while an eagle devours her (Figure 2) on plate 5, presenting her in a vulnerable position. The eagle belongs to Theotormon (“And calling Theotormons Eagles to prey upon her flesh” plate 4, line 15), so she is now victimized the second time to male oppression and the patriarchal system⁹, which objectifies the female body. She also “wishes to have sexual experience without guilt, perhaps seeking that kind of perceptual penetration of the human body without pain, injustice or death” (Connolly 53), thus she rejects the idea that her sexuality is defined by her previous violent encounter, and she demands it back. By lying on a phallic symbol, she also displays that despite her rape, she is ready to experience sexual love again and to “engage in joy” (Csikós 54). Oothoon, and thus most women were prey to this system, and this is clearly reflected in the law and the courtroom as well (Krueger 155-156).

⁸ “(...) he cannot look Oothoon in her intellectual and erotic eye as she maintains her spiritual virginity and offers him her love, not only because she is damaged goods but because she is taking sexual initiative instead of being “modest”” (Ostriker 157).

⁹ “Theotormon fails to criticize Bromion’s ‘taking’ of Oothoon; rather, he laments the destruction of his vision of treasured chastity and the depreciation of his prospective property. Theotormon’s testimony only bears witness to his selfish patriarchal sense of honour” (Krueger 160).

By giving voice to Oothoon as she “pleads before court”, William Blake reacts to the patriarchal ideology of his time. She demands her right to her sexuality and wishes “to cleanse her body and clear her name of the crime committed against her” (Krueger 159). She does not see herself as the men around her do – dirty and shameful, but she calls with “holy voice” (Plate 4, line 16) to the “kings of the sounding air” (Plate 4, line 16) in order to “rend away this defiled bosom that I may reflect // The image of Theotormon on my pure transparent breast” (Plate 4, lines 17-18). The word “rend” is used here, the same word that was used earlier in the poem to describe her rape – the same way that her honour was forcefully taken away from Oothoon, she wants to forcefully take it back, even if it means that she must go against the views of the society (Krueger 159). She also refers to herself as “holy”, thus elevating her purity to a sacred level, which cannot be questioned by any man-made law. Krueger states that Oothoon “describes the symbolic process of salvation that she wishes to receive from the court and society” (159). In my opinion, ‘salvation’ is not the right word, as it seems to imply that Oothoon is guilty. But Oothoon calls herself “holy”; she refuses to be viewed as a sinner (even if in the eyes of society, she ‘sinned’ and deserves to be punished), therefore it is not ‘salvation’ she is asking for, but acknowledgment from the other party (that is, the patriarchal system) that she was never the one to be blamed. She refers to herself as “pure” numerous times, once even directing her statement to Theotormon explicitly on plate 4 (“Arise my Theotormon I am pure”, line 30). Theotormon is himself a victim of toxic masculinity which “glorifies male aggressiveness, as much as by that ideology’s requirement of feminine purity” (Ostriker 157). Oothoon’s statement is immensely important rhetorically. She calls out the patriarchal system and interrogates the ideology that women and their worth are defined by their sexual purity. By referring to herself as pure and demanding the removal of the stigma falsely placed upon her, she refuses to be defined by her traumatic experience, and by extension, she also challenges the system that put her on trial and shamed her for something that was beyond her control.

Through Oothoon, William Blake exposes the fallacy of the rhetoric of rape trials, and the way rape victims are handled. Instead of enduring the flood of questions and humiliation that a violated woman usually faced on a trial, Oothoon dares to ask back: “How can I be defiled when I reflect thy image pure?” (Plate 6, line 17). By being the one asking the questions, she overturns the trial – she becomes the investigator and Bromion and Theotormon (thus the patriarchal system that shamed her for what happened to her) are the ones to answer. Why is it women that must answer and take responsibility for a crime that was committed against them? Why is it not the oppressing man that is being held accountable for a crime he committed? Oothoon’s questions are left unanswered, just as she remains a fallen woman in the eyes of a

society that is indulged in the comfort of male hegemony; a system that allows language to be used to shame and humiliate others, even in a legal setting, by using derogatory terms, asking doubled-edged questions and forcing the victim into vulnerable positions, where everything they say will be twisted in a way that their statements can be used against them.

Oothoon's futile demand to be heard and her entrapment in a system that does not acknowledge her is depicted in the frontispiece to *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*. The three main characters of the poem – Oothoon, Bromion and Theotormon – are seen in a cave, physically all very close to each other, suffocatingly so, yet they are very far away from each other. Oothoon is positioned between the two male figures; she is chained to her rapist, a way to signal that she physically belongs to him (Connolly 17), yet her head is posed towards her almost-lover, Theotormon. Their positions represent the mental state they are in, as Tristanne J. Connolly pointed out: “Bromion bound and raging, Oothoon bound yet graceful, suffering, not seeing her binding as necessity, and Theotormon wound up in self torment” (17). Connolly's claim that Oothoon's body language displays that she should not be punished further proves that Oothoon did not think of herself as a sinner; her anguish does not stem from impurity, but from an unjust treatment. Bromion does not look at her, but he looks somewhere far; Theotormon too, ignores her, as he is seen bending his head into his folded arms, presumably crying over his honour, which had been stained when Oothoon was raped. Oothoon is the one positioned the lowest with her head bent down and arms painfully twisted and locked behind her back. The image clearly reflects how she is forcefully submitted to patriarchy which shamed her and handles her as an object.

4. Conclusion

18th-century rape trials did not provide justice for women but as can be seen in the rhetorical manoeuvres, their main aim was to ensure that men and their properties would be protected. Both the trial of Sarah Tipple and William Blake's *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* demonstrates how language was used to shame women whether by asking humiliating and exposing questions (“(..) did you keep your legs a little wider than usual?”) or using insulting terms (‘harlot’). Single women, who decided to seek justice and prosecute those who did them wrong found themselves faced with the ugly reality of a system they believed in; they put themselves into vulnerable positions and the judges and juries used their power to publicly humiliate women who were seeking legal redress. The courtroom turns into a crime scene: after

being physically assaulted, the violated woman had to endure psychological assault by a courtroom of men. William Blake's *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* may be seen as a poetic response to trials like Sarah Tipple's. By reading both cases – one legal, and the other literary – one might raise the question whether it was worth trying to pursue justice; what awaited the prosecutrix was most likely more shame, but this time, in front of an audience, which contained the possibility that one's name and dignity will be paraded around and will forever be tainted. In his narrative poem, William Blake not only exposes the fallacy of the system; he envisions a future where women will have the courage to publicly denounce it. He depicts Oothoon's ordeal as a communal experience to which the daughters of Albion – thus, all women – can relate ("The Daughters of Albion hear her woes, and echo back her sighs."). He uses literature as a spectacle through which he reflects on the atrocious realities of his age and provides a voice to those who cannot express their shame and hurt, so that their complains might be heard.

Works Cited

The William Blake Archive. www.blakearchive.org

Blake, William. *Visions of The Daughters of Albion. Copy A: electronic version.* www.blakearchive.org

Block, Mary R. "For the Repressing of the Most Wicked and Felonious Rapes or Ravishments of Women': Rape Law in England, 1660-1800." *Interpreting Sexual Violence, 1660-1800*, edited by Anne Leah Greenfield, Routledge, 2013, pp. 23-35. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315654362>

Clark, Anna. *Women's Silence, Men's Violence: Sexual Assault in England 1770-1845*. Pandora Press, 1987.

Clark K., Anna. "Rape or seduction? A controversy over sexual violence in the nineteenth century". *The Sexual Dynamics of History. Men's power, women's resistance*, edited by The London Feminist History Group, Pluto Press, 1983, pp. 13-27.

Cogan, Lucy. "Rending the "Soft Plains" of America: Rape and Liberation in the Poetry of William Blake." *European Romantic Review*, vol. 32, no. 4, 2021, pp. 377-397. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10509585.2021.1944130>

Connolly, Tristanne J. *William Blake and the Body*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2002.

Csikós, Dóra. "Or wert thou not awake when all this mystery was disclos'd." *Ritka művészet: írások Péter Ágnes tiszteletére [Rare device: writings in honour of Ágnes Péter]*, edited by Gárdos, Ruttkay and Timár, pp. 41-52.

Hays, Mary. *The Victim of Prejudice*. London, Printed for J. Johnson, 1799.

Jackson-Houlston, Caroline. "'The lineaments of ... desire': Blake's *Vision of the Daughters of Albion* and Romantic Literary Treatments of Rape." *Queer Blake*, edited by Bruder P., and Connolly, Palgrave Macmillan, 2010, pp. 153-163.

Krueger, Misty. "The Rhetoric of Rape: William Blake's Visions of the Daughters of Albion As Eighteenth-Century Rape Trial". *Interpreting Sexual Violence, 1660-1800*, edited by Anne Leah Greenfield, Routledge, 2013, pp. 149-163. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315654362>

Olsson, Lena. "Violence that's Wicked for a man to Use': Sex, Gender and Violence in the Eighteenth Century." *Interpreting Sexual Violence, 1660-1800*, edited by Anne Leah Greenfield, Routledge, 2013, pp. 141-149. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315654362>

Old Bailey Proceedings Online (www.oldbaileyonline.org, version 8.0, 06 January 2023), February 1793, trial of JOHN CURTIS (t17930220-48).

Ostriker, Alicia. "Desire Gratified and Ungratified: William Blake and Sexuality." *Blake/An Illustrated Quarterly*, vol. 16, no. 3, Winter 1982/1983, pp. 156-165.

Simpson E., Anthony. "Blackmail Myth and the Prosecution of Rape and Its Attempt in 18th Century London: The Creation of a Legal Tradition, The." *Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology*, vol. 77, no. 1, 1986, pp. 101-150.

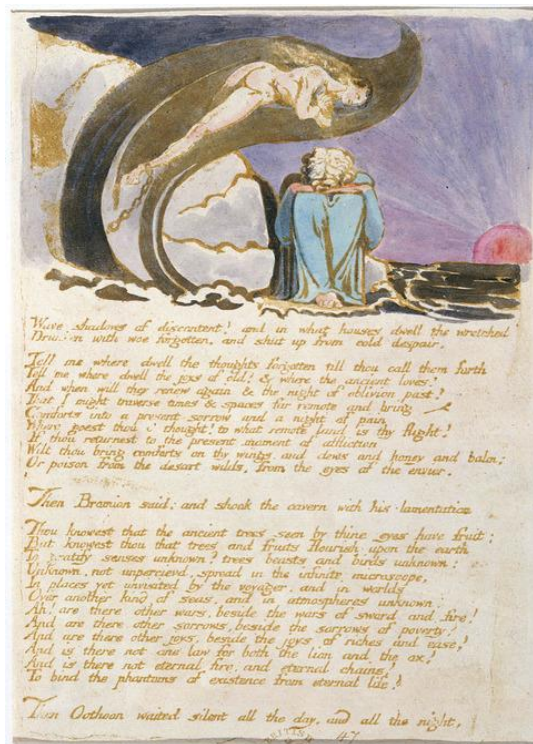


Figure 1. Theotormon weeping into his arms after the rape of Oothoon

(<https://blakearchive.org/images/vda.a.p6-7.100.jpg>)

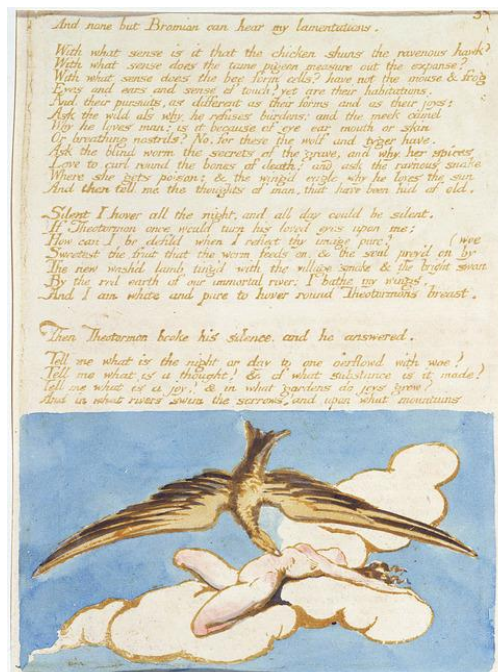


Figure 2. Oothoon is devoured by an eagle of Theotormon. (<https://blakearchive.org/images/vda.a.p5-6.100.jpg>)

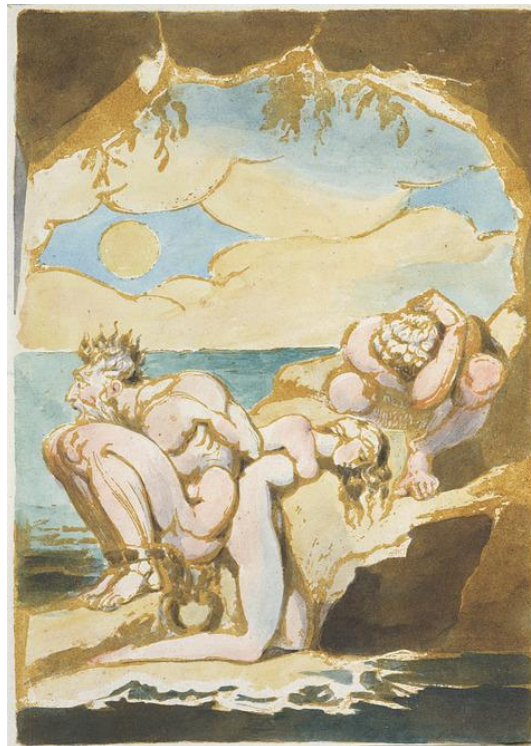


Figure 3. Bromion, Oothoon and Theotormon in a cave. (<https://blakearchive.org/images/vda.a.p11-1.100.jpg>)

