

“Theotormon hears me not”

Shaming Women in Eighteenth-Century Rape Trials

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Abstract: 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. This paper interprets Blake’s narrative poem Visions of the Daughters of Albion as a literary case study depicting the rhetoric of shaming. To show how language was used as a tool for shaming in a courtroom setting, I analyse the script of a trial from 1793. William Blake, by giving voice to her violated female character, Oothoon, used poetry and art to envision how women could refuse to be seen as objects defined by their chastity or the loss thereof.

Sexual violence was ubiquitous in the lives of women in the eighteenth century. Because of the attention rape cases received, a new moral consensus was forming in the public mind: virtuous women do not seek danger; they stay at home, where it is safe. For working-class women—especially single women—this was not an option, naturally. Those who were sexually assaulted found themselves trapped. An honest and reputable woman was not supposed to speak about sexual matters; therefore, seeking justice was often seen as a risk that might not be worth taking (Clark, *Women’s Silence* 2–3). Those who took the risk and spoke up found themselves in extremely difficult situations. Mary Block’s compelling study of rape law in early modern England has shown that it was “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” (25).

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 aggression. The questions the violated women were asked seemed more like an attack than an attempt to deliver justice. As I intend to show in this paper, courtroom language was used to shame women and to lecture them on how to avoid further violent encounters. This is also reflected in the literature of the period. 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 her liberty 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?” (41). Importantly, Mary is a single woman and an orphan, belonging to no male relative, and as Clark points 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 [women] themselves” (*Women’s Silence* 47). When Mary suffers sexual assault 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 even lets her know as much: “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 assaulter, she probably failed to get the justice she had sought.¹ The system did not help women who pressed charges because, as Clark points out, “the definition of rape was culturally constructed, ... it was publicly constructed by men and for men” (*Women’s Silence* 24). Meanwhile, rape was defined as a serious crime:

1 “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). For Mary Hays’s re-evaluation of rape, see Janczer Csikós (“Reflections” 80–81).

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 emphasising 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)

While in theory rape was initially considered to be almost as serious a crime as murder, in practice the legal procedure was far from fair, and justice was rarely attained. The difficulty of providing conclusive evidence as well as the fact that rape was seen as an instinct rather than a morally questionable, conscious act made juries less likely to believe women when they came forward with rape charges; therefore, a crime that had been considered among the most heinous of them all ended up having the lowest conviction rate.

In short, rape law in eighteenth-century England did not serve to protect women. It was to protect the property of men, and thus, protected men’s honour, because, as Clark states, “the loss of a woman’s chastity was believed to damage her father or husband’s honour and financial interest” (“Rape” 2). Eighteenth-century English rape law did not know what to do with a raped woman who had no husband or father. Such women were no one’s property, so according to the law, no one’s honour, or interest had been violated. The most problematic part of English rape law was that it “did not adequately define ‘rape’ or explain what was necessary to prove it” (Block 23). If the violated woman proceeded with the courtroom hearing, she most likely found herself facing a barrage of questions that were hardly necessary to aid her cause. Women were taught that speaking about sexuality was shameful and dirty; often they could not put into words 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 an enormous 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

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meant that she was already, in a sense, considered communal property” (Cogan 379). Since only chaste women could have been raped, a violated woman already started with a disadvantage in the courtroom (Clark, *Women’s Silence* 8).

Like many of his contemporaries, most eminently Mary Wollstonecraft in her novel *Maria; or, The Wrongs of Woman* (published posthumously in 1798), William Blake in his 1793 poem *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* (VDA) created a fictitious courtroom to highlight 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 specific court case, then proceed to analyse Blake’s poem as a literary case study in the rhetoric of shaming. I will use the Old Bailey transcript of a rape that occurred in 1793 to examine “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).

“BECAUSE I WAS ASHAMED”—THE RHETORIC OF SHAMING

In 1793, Sarah Tipple, an eighteen-year-old maid, accused John Curtis of raping her. The script of the trial can be found in the Old Bailey’s online archive (*Old Bailey Proceedings* [OBP]), which contains the trials conducted at London’s criminal court between 1674 and 1913. Tipple was at a disadvantage from the very start; she was the servant of John Curtis, a wealthy man 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. Because of what is now referred to as the “blackmail myth,” juries easily could have had the impression that Tipple’s accusation was baseless and that she only wanted to extort money from Curtis. 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?” The presumption supports the ill-perception of rape at the time: a single woman could only want money out of a wealthy male, thus turning the accusation over and making the accused man the victim. In this case, the prosecutor is already labelled as a liar or a malicious mastermind, positioning her in a disadvantageous situation from the start.

According to the official document, John Curtis “in and upon Sarah Tipple, spinner, violently did make an assault, . . . and violently and feloniously did Ravish and carnally know” her (*OBP*). In this case, the word “ravish” is used instead of “rape”; with this, Sarah Tipple’s accusation was deflated from the start. As Mary R. Block points 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).

The attitude with which the reported crime and the violated woman were treated clearly shows that it was rather Sarah Tipple who was on trial and not John Curtis. She was asked whether she had shown any signs of resistance, to which Tipple answered yes. Throughout the trial, most of the questions were aimed to find out how she resisted (or did not resist). The questions she was 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 was 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*)

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. To further investigate whether or not she resisted, the barrister directly asked her whether she fought back or used physical violence against her attacker:

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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*)

Paradoxically, these questions were all aimed at finding out what the *woman* did and how she hurt or attempted to hurt her rapist; whether the rapist used any other forms of physical violence was never asked of her. With this “rapid-fire rhetoric,” the barrister had a further intention as well: by asking very similar or even identical 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 of whether she was physically fighting back may also be interpreted in another 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, in fact, consent to the sexual act.

However, she was not only interrogated about self-defence. Tipple had to describe how she was allegedly raped, giving explicit details of the assault:

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.

...

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*)

Eighteenth-century rape trial scripts testify that there was a great interest in 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" (*Women's Silence* 55). Tipple was also asked about the venereal infection she had contracted as a result of her rape 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*)

The need to recall her traumatic experience, along with questions aimed to find out whether she was a virgin or not (“you was [sic] quite a maid at this time?—I never knew a man before” [*OBP*]) only added to her shame, as she clearly states in her answers: “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*). Her declaration 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. Paradoxically, her purity would also be questioned by the very fact that she could describe the sexual act; an honest and reputable woman could do no such a thing because she lacked the knowledge of such matters. By talking about her violent encounter in such explicit detail, she would be tainted, because “a rape victim's honour, no matter how she struggled, was thought to be irrevocably tarnished according to bourgeois values. ... the injured lady may be chaste as unsunned snow, she will never more be considered as immaculate” (Clark, *Women's Silence* 29). While this statement refers to women of a higher rank, it is important to see that the problem of sexual assault exceeds class; if a woman was raped, whether she was of the higher or lower classes did not matter. Rape is a gender matter of all things, and the shame that it brings with itself affects women regardless of social status.

Tipple evidently felt impure because of what had been done to her and coarse for discussing such experiences. Her shame, thus, serves the purposes of her interrogator; by admitting that she was ashamed, she passively takes responsibility for

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what happened to her (at least partially). Indeed, 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 were 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*)

Even though Sarah Tipple stated that it was John Curtis who held her petticoats up, all the while kneeling upon her and making it impossible for her to resist, the logic of the investigator was 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 was implying that Sarah Tipple held her petticoats up willingly, hinting that she might have consented to the advances of John Curtis. Another possibility is that judges (and often the public at large) simply enjoyed the game of shaming and liked hearing specifics of the assault:

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. (Clark, *Women’s Silence* 54)

By toying with the plaintiff, the trial became more exciting and entertaining also for lawyers and jurors in the courtroom. The attitude here is clear: she was never taken seriously. While Tipple had hoped that the law would protect her, the men

of law made a fool of her for their own amusement. Using the language of condescension and mockery, the barrister provoked and humiliated Tipple (“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?”). The style and tone of these questions suggest that the violated woman and her claims are not taken seriously—subtly predicting the verdict of the trial.

Even though the violated woman was not asked whether she consented or not, she still had to prove that she did not consent to the sexual act, and she had to give further justification why she put herself in a position where she could be attacked (Krueger 152). Her lack of self-defence could undermine her claim of not having consented, and it could also serve as an 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*)

Inquiring whether she kept her legs closed or whether she widened them insinuates again that Tipple, in fact, may have welcomed Curtis’s approach. The barrister not only questions her credibility, but he also lectures her on how she should have defended herself: “I should have thought keeping the legs close would be the best way to prevent him.” The demeanour of the investigator illustrates the popular belief that the prevention of rape lay mainly on women; if women did not try to avoid sexual violence with all their strength, men could not be held entirely responsible, as it was generally agreed upon that men had the right to appropriate the female body. 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 Silence* 7), an action to which they thought they had the right. According

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to eighteenth-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 enough the advances of John Curtis, and so she consented to the sexual act.

The verdict of the trial was “not guilty” (*OBP*), but not because there was evidence that rape did not occur. In fact, it is never explicitly stated whether the jury believed Tipple’s accusation or not (although it is safe to assume they did not think John Curtis guilty). The decision arose from a seemingly irrelevant detail: Sarah Tipple said she did not know anyone in London, whereas it turned out during the trial that she had a relative in the city. With this, the original question of whether she was raped or not seemed to become irrelevant, revealing that throughout the trial, she was the one under interrogation. Since the cross-examination aimed to prove that she was lying, we may conclude that it was Sarah Tipple who was on trial rather than John Curtis. She was never asked if she consented or not, and the fact that the perpetrator was violently assaulting her did not seem to interest the jury. The goal of the questions asked of 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 is a clear example of “how lawyers manipulated a rhetoric of resistance to evince prosecutrices’ sexual blameworthiness” (Krueger 153).

The language and rhetoric used against Tipple support the idea that women and their sexuality had to be kept under close control. A wealthy pub owner in the eighteenth century was worth more than a working-class single woman. Sarah Tipple did not belong to any man legally; therefore, providing justice for her was in nobody’s interest. Not only did she have to endure the indiscreet questioning of the court, but she was mocked and ridiculed by the very system she had hoped 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.

“REND AWAY THIS DEFILED BOSOM”—BLAKE’S FICTITIOUS COURTROOM

It was common among writers and poets of the late eighteenth century to revolt against the constraining ideas of the time, and especially social injustices. In his narrative poem, *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*, William Blake radically challenges the beliefs of his own 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” (pl. 3.4), who, after plucking the “flower” of sexuality (pl. 3.13), embarks on a journey to experience sexual love with her beloved Theotormon. On her way to him, she is brutally raped by Bromion, after which neither Theotormon nor Bromion wants her; she is shamed by both of them, branded as impure and adulterous. 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). However, Blake recognised the oppression of women and challenged the way female sexuality and rape were perceived. Through Oothoon, he interrogates 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 figures in 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 perpetrators 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 in Blake’s poem is harsher and more immediate than in actual, real-life rape trials, yet the resemblance is indisputable. Oothoon is called derogatory names, is held responsible, and is treated as a property rather than 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” [pl. 2.4]), who is presumably loved by Theotormon. Yet she is also disruptive, as she is confident in her sexuality and free of shame: “I loved Theotormon / And I was not ashamed” (pl. 2.1–2). On her way to meet Theotormon, she is raped by Bromion.

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The word “rape” is never used by Blake; he refers to Oothoon’s brutal experience as “rent her with his thunders” (pl. 3.18). Krueger suggests that by staying away from the word “rape,” Blake might imply that Oothoon was either not forced into sexual intercourse or, which is also my contention, he draws attention to how language can be used to confuse societal beliefs about sexual violence. Given that “to rend” means to take or tear something violently, the question of whether rape actually happened should not be under dispute. Importantly, Oothoon does not belong to any man: she has no father figure, and she is not the wife of Theotormon; thus, it is almost certain that during an actual trial, Oothoon would have received the same treatment as Sarah Tipple. Janczer Csikós’s interpretation supports this idea:

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. (“Or wert thou” 45)

Since Oothoon is only a “daughter” in name and does not belong to any authoritative male figure, she is no-one’s property. Thus, technically, nobody’s rights have been violated, no man’s property was damaged. Moreover, her rape seems to fit the “myth of the unrapeable woman,” according to which an honest, respectable woman cannot be raped. Oothoon’s suggested pregnancy (“and protect the child / of Bromion’s rage, that Oothoon shall put forth in nine moon’s time” [pl. 4.2–3]) 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 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” (pl. 3.9–10) becomes Oothoon “the harlot” (pl. 3.20), a turning point that depicts how language and rhetoric could overturn women’s reputation within a short time: “Bromion speaks to Oothoon, saying to her 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 in the position of being attacked and raped, a situation to which today’s society would say that she was “asking for it” (Janczer Csikós, “Or wert thou” 45). Krueger also supports this reading:

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. (157)

Oothoon’s condemnation resonates with the ideas of the time: she rushed to her lover, naked and carefree, putting herself out in danger. In this sense, Bromion cannot be blamed for raping her; she did not guard herself; in fact, it could easily seem as if she purposefully “gave” herself for rape.

Immediately after her physical violation, the rapist shames her verbally: “Bromion spoke. behold this harlot here on Bromions bed” (pl. 3.20). The assailant insults her, putting the responsibility on her as, presumably, he is sure that Oothoon brought her rape upon herself (Ostriker 157). In theory, rape laws did not exclude harlots from prosecuting rape, as pointed out by Janczer Csikós: “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” (“Or wert thou” 45). Janczer Csikós states that because Oothoon willingly set out on a journey to find Theotormon and make love to him, she was assumed to have made herself available to rape voluntarily. This could add to the idea that men generally believed they had the right to female sexuality; in the eyes of Bromion, Oothoon was already “free prey,” and thus, his action could not be seen as rape. From this point of view, only a very small number of rape cases could be recognised as “genuine”; if a woman left her assigned “space,” she was already inviting sexual assault.

Oothoon does not stay silent but voices her pain and ill-use. However, her woes fall upon deaf ears. Even her almost-lover, Theotormon, turns out to be a passive

listener; in fact, it is Oothoon who comforts him amidst his lamentations: “Why does Theotormon sit weeping upon a threshold; / And Oothoon hovers by his side, perswading him in vain” (pl. 4.23–24). It turns out that 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. We may suspect that 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] rolld his waves around, / And folded his jealous black waters round the adulterate pair” (5–6). This section of the poem shows how Theotormon refuses to hear Oothoon but has no problem listening to Bromion, substantiating the idea that Bromion’s assault was not the result of sexual desire but that 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” [pl. 4.2–3]). Bromion took something that belonged to (or rather, would have belonged to) Theotormon, making Theotormon the violated party and not Oothoon. Even if “officially” 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 an “adulterate pair” (pl. 4.6)—it is clear that he finds Oothoon just as guilty as Bromion, if not more so. He does not listen or even look at her (“If Theotormon once would turn his loved eyes upon me” [pl. 5.16]), and the corresponding image (pl. 6)² clearly shows he is only concerned about himself. Ultimately, it is Oothoon’s immodesty that makes Theotormon turn away from her—she was raped and turned into “damaged goods” because she was ready to fully live up to her sexuality. As Ostriker argues, “[Theotormon] 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 the sexual initiative instead of being ‘modest’” (157). Theotormon, who represents traditional values and male pride, cannot handle Oothoon’s free sexuality. He 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 trapped by force in a vulnerable position. Theotormon is fully clothed, and Oothoon is fully naked, revealing the power dynamics between them. Oothoon’s nakedness shows how exposed to the violence

2 See in *The William Blake Archive* [here](#).

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 by the man she loves. In the eyes of her beloved, she became 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 visualise male oppression, Blake depicts Oothoon on plate 5 lying on a phallic-shaped cloud, limbs spread out, while an eagle is devouring her.³ The eagle belongs to Theotormon (“And calling Theotormons Eagles to prey upon her flesh” [pl. 4.15]), so she is now victimised for the second time, not only by individual men, but by male oppression and the patriarchal system in general, which objectifies the female body. This claim may be substantiated by the fact that Theotormon never accuses or even criticises Bromion for his sexual violence, as pointed out by Kruger: “he [Theotormon] 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” (160). It is not the act of rape that sends him into ordeal; in his perception, it was his sense of masculinity that had been raped, not Oothoon herself. This makes Oothoon, and thus, all women, an object through which male pride is validated. However, Oothoon defiantly “wishes to have sexual experience without guilt” (Connolly 53). She rejects the idea that her sexuality is defined by her previous violent encounter, and demands it back. By depicting her lying on a phallic symbol, *VDA* may suggest that despite her rape, she is ready to experience sexual love again and to “engage in joy” (Janczer Csikós, “Or wert thou” 51).

By giving voice to Oothoon as if pleading before a court, William Blake takes issue with the patriarchal ideology of his time. She demands her right to her own 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 calls with a “holy voice” to the “kings of the sounding air” (pl. 4.16) in order to “rend away this defiled bosom that I may reflect / The image of Theotormon on my pure transparent breast” (pl. 4.17–18). The word “rend” is used here again, the same word that was used earlier to describe her rape. Just as her honour was forcefully taken away, Oothoon now wants to forcefully take it back, even if it means that she must break with the views of society (Krueger 159). She refers to herself as “holy,” thus elevating her purity to a sacred level that cannot

3 See in *The William Blake Archive* [here](#).

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be questioned by any man-made law. According to Kruger, Oothoon “describes the symbolic process of salvation that she wishes to receive from the court and society” (159). I would argue that “salvation” is not the right word here, as it would imply that Oothoon is guilty. But she calls herself “holy”; she refuses to be viewed as a sinner (even if in the eyes of society, she had “sinned” and deserves to be punished). Therefore, it is not “salvation” she is asking for, but rather acknowledgement from the other party (i.e. the patriarchal system) that she was never the one to be blamed. She refers to herself as “pure” numerous times, even explicitly directing her words to Theotormon: “Arise my Theotormon I am pure” (pl. 4.30). Theotormon himself is a victim of an ideology, which “glorifies male aggressiveness, as much as ... feminine purity” (Ostriker 157). Oothoon’s statement is rhetorically immensely important. She calls out the patriarchal system and interrogates the ideology according to which 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 the figure of 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 the humiliation violated women had to face, Oothoon dares to ask back: “How can I be defiled when I reflect thy image pure?” (pl. 6.17). By being the one asking the questions, she overturns the trial. She becomes the interrogator, while Bromion and Theotormon (representatives of the patriarchal system that had violated and shamed her) are now the ones to answer. Her lamentation makes the audience question why women must answer and take responsibility for a crime that was committed against them. It raises the question of why it is not the violent man who 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 invested in the upholding of male hegemony. This is a system that allows language to be used to shame and humiliate others, even in a legal setting, by using derogatory terms, asking double-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 as well as her entrapment in a system that does not acknowledge her are depicted in the frontispiece of *VDA*.⁴ The three main characters of the poem—Oothoon, Bromion, and Theotormon—are seen in a cave, physically all so very close to each other that it is suffocating, yet they are very far away from each other. The isolated cave only strengthens Oothoon's status in a world ruled by men. She is positioned between the two male figures, chained to her rapist, showing 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 a necessity, and Theotormon wound up in self torment" (17). The cave they are in could also symbolise a mental space: since the shape of the cave resembles a skull, the three figures inside it may represent the ideas and perceptions of womanhood that dominated society. Connolly's claim that Oothoon's body language suggests that she should not be punished further underlines that Oothoon does not think of herself as a sinner; her anguish does not stem from a sense of impurity but from unjust treatment. Bromion does not look at her, but into the distance. 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 her arms painfully twisted and locked behind her back. The image reflects how she is forcefully subjugated by patriarchy, which shames her and handles her as an object.

CONCLUSION

Eighteenth-century rape trials did not provide justice for women, but as we could see from their rhetorical manoeuvres, their main aim was to ensure that men and their properties would be safely protected. Both the trial of Sarah Tipple and William Blake's *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* demonstrate 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 a grim reality: the system they believed in put them in vulnerable positions, while the judges and juries used their power to publicly

4 See in *The William Blake Archive* [here](#).

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humiliate those seeking legal redress. Like the heroine of Mary Hays’ novel, single women who decided to prosecute found themselves up against a system built upon male authority.

Hays’ character did not legally prosecute her assailant but merely voiced the idea, only to be crushed by her rapist and the patriarchal society she lived in. Eighteenth-century courtrooms often turned into a crime scene for women: after being physically assaulted, the violated woman had to endure psychological assault by a courtroom of men. Unlike the heroine of Mary Hays, Oothoon does raise her voice in “court,” and thus, William Blake’s *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* may be seen as a poetic response to trials like Sarah Tipple’s. By examining both cases—one legal and the other literary-fictional—one might raise the question of 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 forever be tainted. In his narrative poem, William Blake not only exposes the fallacy of the system, but he also 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—and thus, all women—can relate: “The Daughters of Albion hear her woes, and echo back her sighs.” Blake uses literature as a mirror through which he reflects on the atrocious realities of his age while lending a powerful voice to those who cannot express their pain so that their complaints might be heard.

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