



Sex, Violence, and Slavery: Blake and Wollstonecraft

Author(s): Anne K. Mellor

Source: *The Huntington Library Quarterly*, Vol. 58, No. 3/4, William Blake: Images and Texts, (1995), pp. 345-370

Published by: University of California Press

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3817572>

Accessed: 10/04/2008 12:49

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/action/showPublisher?publisherCode=ucal>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

JSTOR is a not-for-profit organization founded in 1995 to build trusted digital archives for scholarship. We enable the scholarly community to preserve their work and the materials they rely upon, and to build a common research platform that promotes the discovery and use of these resources. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Sex, Violence, and Slavery: Blake and Wollstonecraft

ANNE K. MELLOR

Enslav'd, the Daughters of Albion weep" (color plate IV): when Blake in 1793 began his illuminated poem *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* with this line, he directly alluded to the fierce political debates of the 1780s and early 1790s concerning the British slave trade, the institution of slavery in the British colonies, and the abolitionist movement. Equally trenchantly, he responded to the powerful arguments for the liberation of women put forth by Mary Wollstonecraft in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, published the previous year, in 1792. For it is the "daughters" and not the "sons" of England who weep in Blake's poem.

In this essay I will explore what Blake meant by "slavery" in *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* and what he considered to be the best way to "free" oneself from that condition. And I will compare Blake's "solution" to the problem of female slavery with that proposed by Wollstonecraft. Before turning to these two writers, I will briefly describe the political and social debates surrounding the British slave trade during the 1780s and 1790s.

The attempt to end the British involvement in the slave trade and to emancipate the slaves in the British crown colonies in the West Indies was perhaps second only to the French Revolution in its impact on the social consciousness of writers, in England—especially women writers—between 1780 and 1800. This attempt achieved legal standing on 14 May 1772, when William Murray, Lord Mansfield, presiding on the King's Bench, ruled in the case of James Somerset—a black slave who had been brought to England, versus his master, Mr. Stewart of Virginia—that slavery was not lawful in England. In his famous judgment, Lord Mansfield maintained that England was by nature "a soil whose air is deemed too pure for slaves to breathe in."¹ Somerset thereby gained his freedom, and England became a mecca in the eyes of slaves from the British West

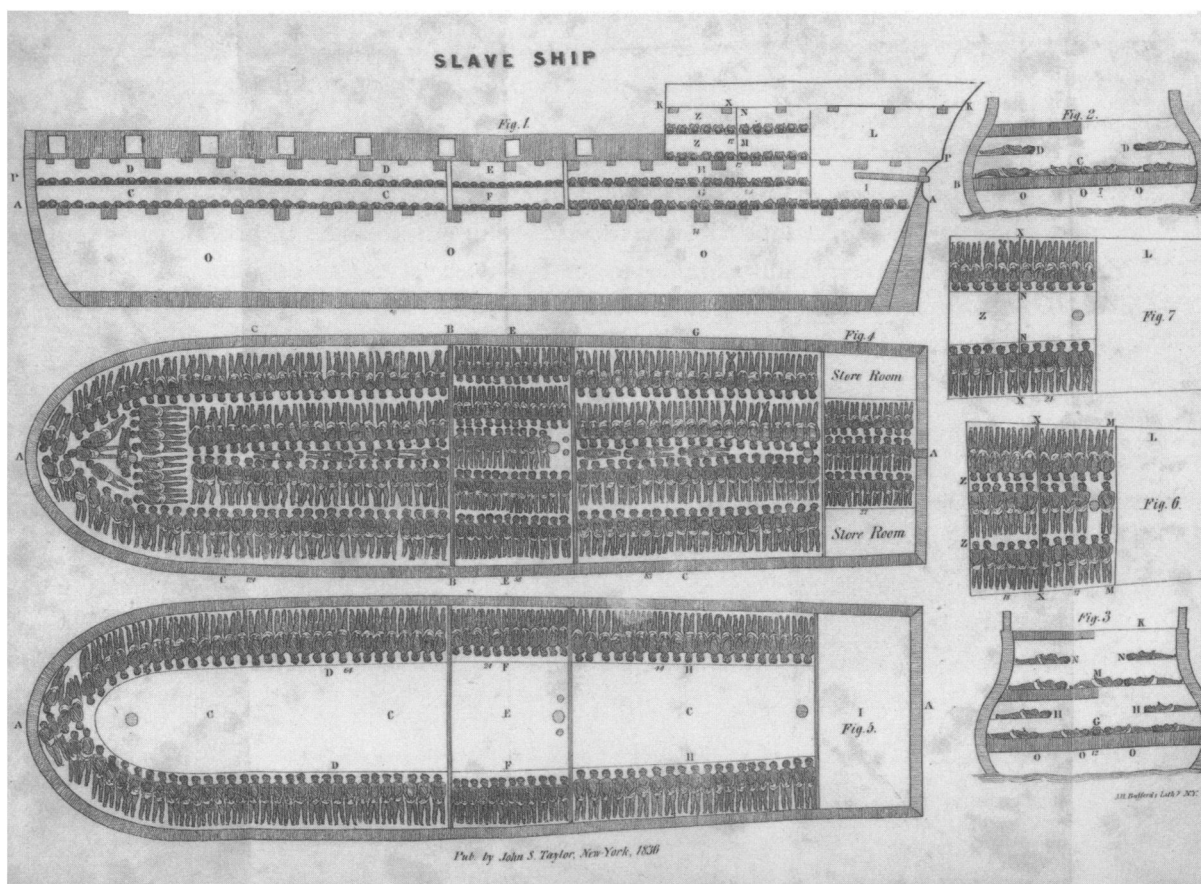
1. *The English Reports* 98 (King's Bench Division 27), Lofft 1 (London and Edinburgh, 1909): "Easter Term, 12 Geo. 3, 1772, K. B., Somerset *against* Stewart, May 14, 1772," 500.

Indies. Significantly, Mr. Dunning, the lawyer defending the slave owner Mr. Stewart, argued that slavery, *like marriage*, was a “municipal” rather than a “natural” relationship, and Lord Mansfield did not reject this equation. In this argument, both slavery and marriage were constructed by legal custom, like the feudal villeinage still recognized in British common law, and were not subject to “natural” law. The implied parallel between wives and slaves—and Lord Mansfield’s refusal to rule against the municipal servitude of women—did not escape the attention of the women writers of the period.

The legal abolition of slavery in England itself ended neither the slave trade nor the institution of slavery in the colonies. By 1775 the “triangular” slave trade had reached its peak: typically, British merchants sent “trappers” and ships to the Gold Coast of Africa where they kidnapped or bought between thirty-eight and forty-two thousand Africans annually at a maximum of fifteen pounds per head. These Africans were then shipped to the West Indies under appalling conditions on “the Middle Passage” (figure 11). During this sea passage 13 percent typically died; another 33 percent died later, during the “seasoning” or breaking-in period at the other end. They were sold at an average of thirty-five pounds each in the

Figure 11.

Loading of a slave ship. Reproduced from the 1836 edition of *Thomas Clarkson, History of the Rise, Progress, and Accomplishment of the Abolition of the African Slave-Trade* (facing p. 236).



West Indies, where they worked in the tobacco and sugarcane fields. The profits from this sale were used to buy sugar and tobacco, which were then sold again, at great profit, in England and elsewhere in Europe; total profits ranged from six hundred thousand to over a million pounds annually. Bristol and Liverpool were the centers of the British slave trade, and their merchants argued persuasively in both houses of Parliament that the British economy—consumption of refined sugar and its products by this time constituted a national addiction—depended on the continuance of the slave trade. In addition, the lobby of the extremely wealthy West Indian planters—the British owners of the slave plantations, who lived either in England (as does Sir Thomas Bertram in Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park*) or abroad on their plantations (as does Mr. Vincent in Maria Edgeworth's *Belinda*)—exerted an enormous influence on British politics.

Between 1778, when Prime Minister William Pitt introduced the first legislation to regulate the slave trade, and 1807, when the slave trade was legally abolished, debate raged in England on the question. The powerful Standing Committee of Planters and Merchants urged not only that the slave trade and institution of slavery were essential to Britain's economic survival—especially because France and Holland had recently begun to make serious inroads into the slave trade—but also that the institution of slavery was morally justified. They asserted that many of the Africans had been slaves in their own countries and, further, were savages or heathens incapable of rational thought or moral feeling and hence unfit for freedom. African slaves, they insisted, should be regarded as “children” who required a benevolent master to teach them the civilizing benefits of Christian doctrine and the Protestant work ethic. Thomas Bellamy's influential play *The Benevolent Planters*, first performed at the Theatre Royal, Haymarket, in 1789, makes the pro–West Indian lobby argument in a particularly insistent form, even as Bellamy acknowledges that some slave masters abused their slaves and did not deserve their loyalty. In the final scene of Bellamy's play, the slave Oran, having been reunited with his beloved Selima by the generous slave owner Goodwin, who has purchased her for Oran, fervently concludes:

“Lost in admiration, gratitude, and love, Oran has no words, but can only in silence own the hand of Heaven. . . . O my masters! . . . let my restored partner and myself bend to such exalted worth; while for ourselves, and for our surrounding brethren, we declare, that you have proved yourselves *The Benevolent Planters*, and that under subjection like yours, SLAVERY IS BUT A NAME.”²

2. Thomas Bellamy, *The Benevolent Planters* (London, 1789), 13.

The abolitionists, who wished to end not only the slave trade but also the very institution of slavery in the colonies, argued in direct rebuttal that the institution of slavery itself was immoral—that it violated both the rights of man and Christian doctrine—and that the actual conditions imposed on Africans both during the middle passage and on the slave plantations were far more barbaric and uncivilized than anything they had experienced in Africa, and thus called into question the morality of England itself as a Christian nation. In 1781, the infamous legal case of the *Zong*—a slave ship whose captain, Luke Collingwood, threw 132 plague-infected Africans to the sharks in order to collect insurance on this jettisoned “cargo”—aroused widespread horror at the cruelty of the slave trade. Even fifty years later, this event was so shocking and well remembered that it inspired both J. M. W. Turner’s brilliant painting *The Slave Ship* and John Ruskin’s passionate moral denunciation of British imperialism in the essay “Of Water, as Painted by Turner.”

The leading voices in the attempt to end the slave trade were Granville Sharp, who initiated the Somerset case, and Thomas Clarkson, the son of an Anglican headmaster and an outstanding student at Cambridge University, who found his life’s work when in 1785 he wrote a prize-winning Latin essay on the assigned topic, “Is it right to make men slaves against their wills?” Although he argued the immorality of slavery in abstract terms, drawing his examples from the Quaker Anthony Benezet’s powerful descriptions of the inhumane conditions of slavery in the West Indies, Clarkson soon became obsessed with the concrete evils he had discovered. On his return from collecting his prize in London, he recalled,

all my pleasure was damped by the facts which were now continually before me. It was but one gloomy subject from morning to night. In the daytime, I was uneasy. In the night I had little rest. I sometimes never closed my eye-lids for grief. . . . I frequently tried to persuade myself in these intervals that the contents of my essay could not be true. . . . Coming in sight of Wades Mill in Hertfordshire, I sat down disconsolate on the turf. . . . Here a thought came into my mind, that if the contents of the Essay were true, it was time some person should see these calamities to their end.³

Pedantic, thorough, and absolutely convinced of the rectitude of his cause, Clarkson never wavered in his commitment to end slavery. In 1786 he published

3. Thomas Clarkson, *History of the Rise, Progress and Accomplishment of the Abolition of the African Slave-Trade, by the British Parliament* (London, 1808), 170–71.

his prize essay, *On the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species, particularly the African*, and in 1787 joined the Quaker committee founded by Granville Sharp to abolish the slave trade. He was sent to Bristol and Liverpool by the committee to determine the actual conditions aboard the slave ships. His daring and exhaustive research, based on numerous interviews with captains, sailors, ships' surgeons, and escaped slaves, formed the backbone of the abolitionists' attacks for years to come. Armed only with pencil and paper, Clarkson crawled through the holds of ships, haunted the waterfront pubs where drunken, rowdy sailors talked most freely, and risked his life to gain access to crewmen forbidden to speak with him. He uncovered not only the appalling treatment of the Africans aboard the slave ships—where they were loaded according to either “loose” or “tight” packing (in the latter there was insufficient room for chained men, women, and children even to turn over, as illustrated in figure 11)—but also the brutal floggings, starvings, and even murder of the sailors unlucky enough to sign up for these voyages.

Clarkson's authoritative work based on this research, *History of the Rise, Progress and Accomplishment of the Abolition of the African Slave-Trade, by the British Parliament*, was not published until 1808, but he had made the results of his research available to the Privy Council committee assigned to investigate the slave trade in 1789. This committee was chaired by William Wilberforce, Member of Parliament from Hull, who headed the efforts made between 1788 and 1807 to introduce legislation in Parliament abolishing the slave trade and slavery. The largest and most sustained outcry against both the slave trade and the institution of slavery was organized by the Quakers, who established the Anti-Slavery Societies throughout England between 1780 and 1830.

Women played a major role in these societies and became the leading figures in the social protests against the slave trade. It was through their efforts that a petition demanding immediate international emancipation of slaves was submitted in 1832, with 187,000 signatures. Earlier they had organized boycotts of sugar (advocating the use of honey instead) and wrote numerous poems, novels, and tracts condemning the slave trade. Hannah More's poem “Slavery,” first published in 1787 and widely circulated, is representative of works attacking the slave trade by Ann Yearsley, Helen Maria Williams, and Anna Barbauld. More insisted on the common humanity that Africans shared with Europeans—“Respect His sacred image which they bear. / . . . Let malice strip them of each other plea, / They still are men, and men should still be free.”⁴ At the same time

4. Hannah More, *Slavery, A Poem* (London, 1788), lines 135–36, 139–40, p. 10.

she denounced the “white savage” who, ruled by “lust of gold / Or lust of conquest,” forfeited any claim Europe might make to being either civilized or Christian. Such attacks were reinforced by the slave narratives published in the 1780s and 1790s, most notably those by Olaudah Equiano and Ottobah Cuguano, which provided searing witness to the atrocities of slavery.

It is important to recognize that however much they advocated an end to the slave trade and the institution of slavery, all the abolitionist writers, including Equiano and Cuguano, participated in a colonial discourse that has been called “Anglo-Africanism.” They shared the assumption, in Winthrop Jordan’s summary, that “to be Christian was to be civilized rather than barbarous, English rather than African, white rather than black.”⁵ In More’s revealing lines, which I quoted only in part above: “Barbarians, hold! th’opprobrious commerce spare, / Respect His sacred image which they bear, / *Though dark and savage, ignorant and blind,* / They claim the common privilege of kind; / Let malice strip them of each other plea, / They still are men, and men should still be free” (italics added).

Between the two poles of the abolitionist and pro-planter debate, many writers argued a third position, that the slave *trade* should be abolished—since Christian merchants should not deal in the buying and selling of human flesh—but that the *institution* of slavery in the West Indies should continue since it provided “better” living conditions for the Africans and greater access to Christian teaching than they could receive in their own countries. Abolishing the trade, they argued, would force planters to treat their slaves more humanely since they could no longer be easily replaced; if the slaves were simply freed, on the other hand, the planters in fairness would have to be financially compensated by the king, an enormous expense that no Chancellor of the Exchequer in this period wished to incur. This was the position endorsed in the 1780s by Bryan Edwards, the leading authority on the colonies, whose proslavery *History, Civil and Commercial, of the British Colonies in the West Indies* was published in 1793. And this was the view that prevailed in the British Parliament, which acted to abolish the slave trade legally in 1807 (although the trade continued illegally for several more years).

And this was the position endorsed by Captain John Stedman in his *Narrative of a five years expedition against the Revolted Negroes of Surinam in Guiana . . . from the year 1772 to 1777*. In 1791 and 1792 Blake engraved at least seventeen of

5. Winthrop D. Jordan, *White over Black: American Attitudes toward the Negro, 1550–1812* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1968), 94. For further discussion of Anglo-Africanism in eighteenth-century British texts, see Moira Ferguson, *Subject to Others: British Women Writers and Colonial Slavery, 1670–1834* (New York and London, 1992), 5 and passim.

Stedman's watercolor drawings for the handsome folio edition with eighty engraved plates published by Joseph Johnson in 1796. Since Stedman's account had an immediate impact on Blake's attitudes toward slavery, I wish to look at it in some detail. I quote and discuss only Stedman's manuscript of the work, the version to which Blake might have had access before 1793; the published edition of 1796 was extensively rewritten and changed in significant ways by Stedman's editor, William Thomson.⁶ Blake met Stedman early in 1792 and they soon became friends. Contrary to the claims of Geoffrey Keynes and David Erdman,⁷ Stedman did not advocate the abolition of either the slave trade or slavery itself. His purpose was to *reform* the slave owners and thus to *improve* the institution of slavery in the West Indies.

Stedman's *Narrative* reiterates the familiar arguments of the proslavery lobby: the captured Africans were slaves in their own countries; the Africans "may live happier in the West Indies, than they ever did in the Forests of Africa" and are certainly treated no worse than the hordes of starving and abused sailors, soldiers, and prostitutes in Europe; under a fair master, slavery is but a name and the slave more accurately called a "Menial Servant"; and the slave trade, properly managed, contributes to the welfare of Europe and the colonies alike.⁸ Moreover, the Africans are, in Stedman's opinion, incapable of self-government. As he concludes,

the Grand Question that remains to be solved is—are these Negroes to be Slaves or a free People—to which I answer without hesitation—*dependent*, & under proper restrictions . . . for the Sake of . . . the African himself, with whose passions, debauchery and indolence, I am perfectly acquainted, and who like a Spirited Horse, when unbridled often Gallops to destruction himself,

6. For a thorough analysis of the deletions that Stedman made from his journal before submitting his *Narrative* to press and of the further changes made by William Thomson—who extensively revised Stedman's manuscript into a more proslavery and pro-Christian account—see the authoritative introduction by Richard Price and Sally Price to their edition of John Gabriel Stedman, *Narrative of a Five Years Expedition against the Revolted Negroes of Surinam, Transcribed for the First Time from the Original 1790 Manuscript* (Baltimore, 1988), xlviii–lv. See also Stanbury Thompson, *John Gabriel Stedman: A Study of His Life and Times* (Stapleford, England, 1966).
7. Geoffrey Keynes, *Times Literary Supplement*, 20 May 1965, 400; David V. Erdman, *Blake: Prophet against Empire* (1954; rev. ed., Garden City, N.Y., 1969), 230–35. Also see Erdman, "Blake's Vision of Slavery," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 15 (1952): 242–52.
8. J. Stedman, *Narrative*, ed. R. Price and S. Price, 171–73; hereafter, page references are given in the text. In this edition, slashes indicate the opening and closing of parenthetical remarks. The illustrations are reproduced from the Huntington Library's copy of the 1796 edition.

while he tramples under his feet all that he meets with—they would indeed in time provide for their *immediate* Subsistance but would no more think . . . of amassing Wealth by industry than their Countrymen the *Orangoutang*. (*Narrative*, 172)

As a mercenary soldier sent to Dutch Surinam under the command of the unscrupulous Colonel Louis Henry Fourgeoud, Stedman was welcomed by the planters, shown the height of colonial courtesy, and offered the sexual services of several young black girls—all of which he eagerly accepted. After she twice saved him from death, he entered into a “Suriname marriage” with Joanna, a mulatto house slave (figure 12). In other words, Stedman paid Joanna’s mother an agreed-upon sum in order to enjoy her undivided sexual and domestic services while he remained in Surinam. At the same time, he continued to have sexual relations with other black girls, most notably B---e, who on occasion joined Joanna and Stedman in their bedroom. Stedman lived with Joanna for four years and legally acknowledged their son as his own. He twice attempted to purchase her freedom but lacked the funds; finally the generous Mrs. Elizabeth Godefrooy bought Joanna and “gave” her to Stedman. But when Stedman was ordered back to Europe, Joanna refused to accompany him. As he told it, she claimed

that dreadful as appeared the fatal separation, which she forbode was for the Last time never to meet again, yet she Could not but Prefer the Remaining in Surinam, first from a Consciousness that with propriety she had not the disposal of herself—& Secondly from pride, wishing in her Present Condition Rather to be one of the first amongst her own Class in America, than as she was well Convinced to be the last in Europe at least till such time as fortune should enable me to establish her above dependence. (*Narrative*, 603)

Stedman ends his narrative with a melancholy account of Joanna’s death five years later, on 5 November 1782, and suggests that she either died of a broken heart at their long separation or was poisoned by blacks jealous of her social status. Although Stedman self-servingly conceals the fact of his marriage to a white woman ten months earlier, it is equally possible that this event led Joanna to commit suicide.

In his effort to reform the inhumane practices of slave owners, Stedman consistently equated the brutality of the planters with that of the rebel slaves who, under the command of Boni, had flogged all their white prisoners “to death for the recreation of their Wives and their Children” (*Narrative*, 189). But because



Figure 12. Vol. 1, facing p. 88.

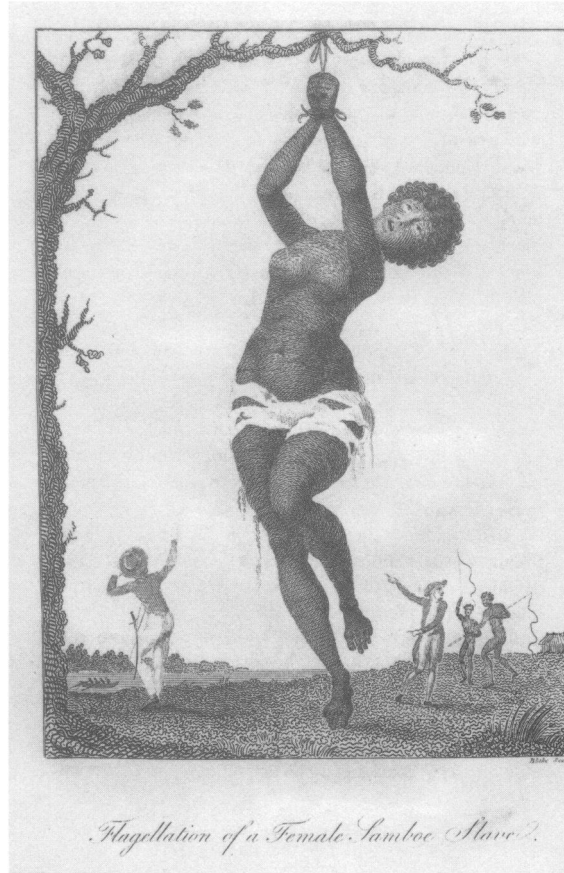


Figure 13. Vol. 1, facing p. 326.

Stedman encounters the slave owners far more often, it is their atrocities that dominate his narrative as well as his drawings. Here I cite but three of his three dozen or more descriptions of atrocities, and include the illustrations engraved by Blake after Stedman's drawings (figures 13, 14, and 15). In the 1796 edition, although the plates occupy a full page, each is carefully placed alongside the corresponding description.

[Figure 13] The first Object that attracted my Compassion was . . . tied up with both Arms to a tree, a truly beautiful *Samboe* Girl of about 18, as naked as she came to the World, and lacerated in such a shocking Condition by the Whips of two Negro Drivers, that she was from her neck to her Ancles literally died over with blood—It was after receiving 200 lashes that I perceived her with her head hanging downwards, a most miserable Spectacle, Thus turning to the overseer I implored that she might be untied from that moment, which seem'd to give her some Relief, but my Answer was from the humane Gentleman,

that to prevent all Strangers from interfering with his Government, he had made it an unalterable rule, in that Case always to redouble the Punishment, and which he instantaneously began to put in execution—I tried to stop him in vain, he declaring the delay should not alter his determination but make him take vengeance with Interest upon Interest—Thus I had no other remedy left but to leap in my boat, and leave the detestable rascal like a beast of prey to enjoy his bloody-feast til he was Glutted. (*Narrative*, 264)

Note the ways in which Stedman's illustration *evades* the violence of his text: the girl is not entirely naked but rather modestly draped with a loincloth; no blood is visible; the overseer is not actively lashing her, nor is Stedman's attempt to stop the overseer represented. Instead we see a classically draped female body in an erotically charged position, a female in all respects European in appearance save for a shaded skin tone.

[Figure 14] Not long ago [a "decent looking Man" tells the newcomer Stedman], 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 /it being in the rainy season/ that were flowing down his bloated breast while the vultures were picking in the putred wound. (*Narrative*, 103)

Again, the violence of the text is visually evaded: the Negro is modestly draped, his chest unbloated, the suffering bystander is absent, and—a point to which I wish to return—there are no vultures feeding on his flesh.

[Figure 15] This man being Sentenced to be brook *Alive* upon the Rack [the decent-looking man continues], without the benefit of the *Coup de Grace*, or mercy Stroke, laid himself down Deliberately on his Back upon a Strong Cross, on which with Arms & Legs Expanded he was Fastned by Ropes—The Executioner /also a Black/ having now with a Hatchet Chop'd off his Left hand, next 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, or a Sigh—the Roaps being now Unlashed I imagined him dead & Felt happy till the Magistrates moving to

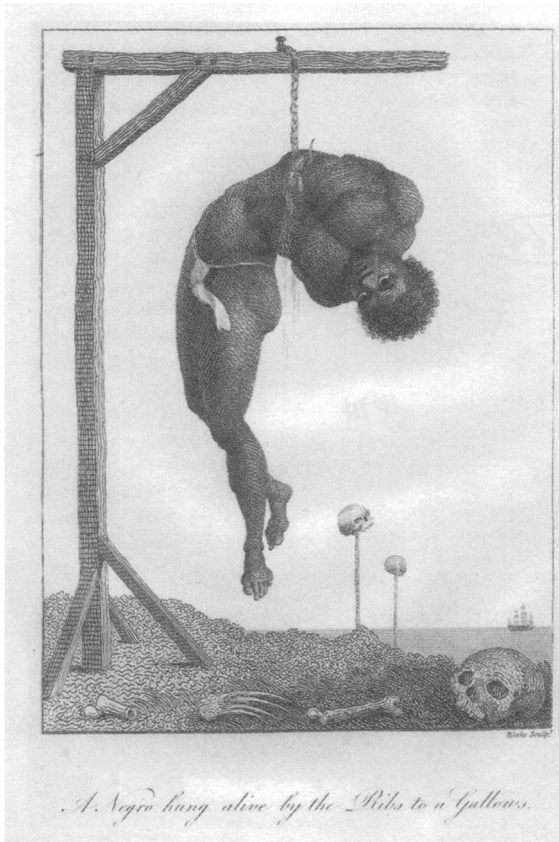


Figure 14. Vol. 1, facing p. 110.

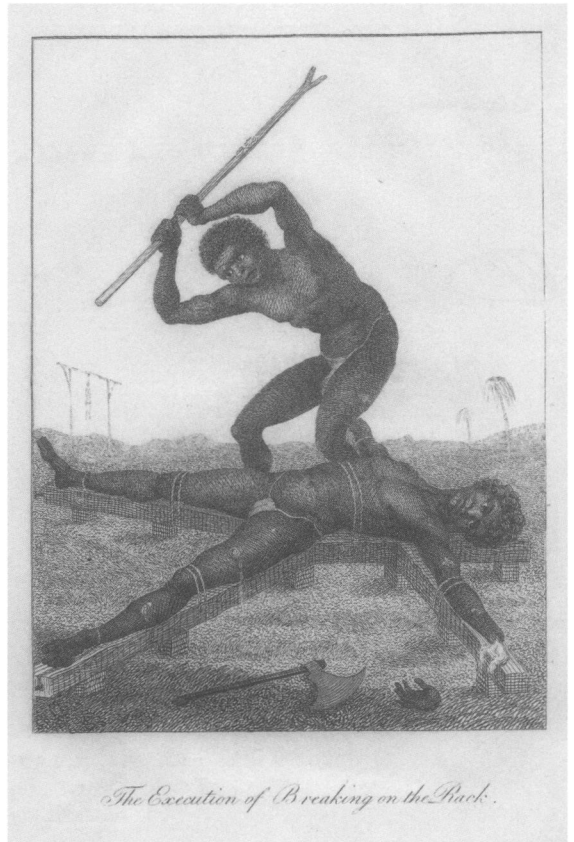


Figure 15. Vol. 2, facing p. 296.

Depart he Wreathed from the Cross till he Fell in the Grass, and Damn'd them all for a Pack of Barbarous Rascals, at the Same time Removing his Right hand by the help of his Teeth, he Rested his Head on Part of the timber and ask'd the by Standers for a Pipe of Tobacco Which was infamously Answered by kicking & Spitting on him, till I With some Americans thought Proper to Prevent it. (*Narrative*, 546–47)

Again the pattern of visual evasion recurs: the executed Negro is modestly clothed, his body remains on the cross, his bones unsplintered, his mouth closed, his hand at a distance. No bystanders—neither the magistrates nor the Americans—appear. Instead, the image is that of a black Christ-figure crucified by his own kind. Through this recurrent visual erasure of violence, Stedman subtly mitigates the horror of the numerous atrocities his text recounts in scrupulous detail.

Offsetting this record of European barbarism, and consistent with the pattern of visual mitigation, is Stedman's insistence on the benevolence of many of the planters—their willingness to educate and domesticate their slaves—and the consequent happiness of the slaves whom he came to know well. As a house slave, Joanna was permitted to establish her own home with Stedman, a cottage

he celebrates as a pastoral Eden inhabited by Milton's Eve. He devotes many pages to a detailed description of the slaves' well-being and their cheerful, healthy lives; I cite a brief excerpt, with Stedman's illustration engraved by Blake (figure 16):

I Will introduce a Negro Family in that State of Tranquil Happiness to Which they are all entitled When they are Well treated by their Owners: they are Supposed to be of the *Loango Nation* by the marks on the man's Body, while on his Breast may also be seen the letters J. G. S. being the enitials of my name, And Supposed to be the Cypher by which each master knows his Property—he Carrys a Basket with Small Fish on his Head & a net, While a large Fish is in his Hand, All Caught by Himself; & While his Wife /Who is pregnant/ is employ'd in Carrying Different kinds of Fruit, Spinning a Thread of Cotton and Comfortably Smoking her pipe of Tobacco. . . .

Under such a mild Government no Negroes work is more than a Healthy Exercise, which ends with the Setting sun, Viz at 6. O'Clock & When the Rest of the time is his Own, Which he employs in Hunting, And Fishing, Cultivating his Little Garden, or making Baskets, Fishnets &c for Sale; . . .

Thus Pleasantly Situated he is Exempt from every Anxiety, And looks up to his Master as the Common Protector of him and his Family, Whom he Adores not from Fear or Flattery but from a Conviction of his being the Object of his Care and Attention—He Breathes in a Luxorious Warm Climate like his Own . . . & enjoys much more Health and Pleasure by Going naked

. . . he never lives With a wife he does not Love Exchanging her for another the Moment he, or She is Tired. (*Narrative*, 534–36)

Stedman explicitly constructs the lives of these happy slaves as of his own making—the man is branded with Stedman's initials—and it is a construction that greatly appealed to his European readers.

Stedman argues throughout his *Narrative* that the institution of slavery as such is defensible, both as a necessary underpinning of the European economy and as an opportunity to improve the lives of these noble savages. He concludes that if slaves are "Properly fed, & Attended when Sick or indisposed," and if equal justice is administered to them "by a Judge & impartial Jury even partly Composed of their own Sable Countrymen," then "the *master* will with Pleasure look on his Sable Subjects as on his Children, & the Principle Source of his



Figure 16. Vol. 2, facing p. 280.

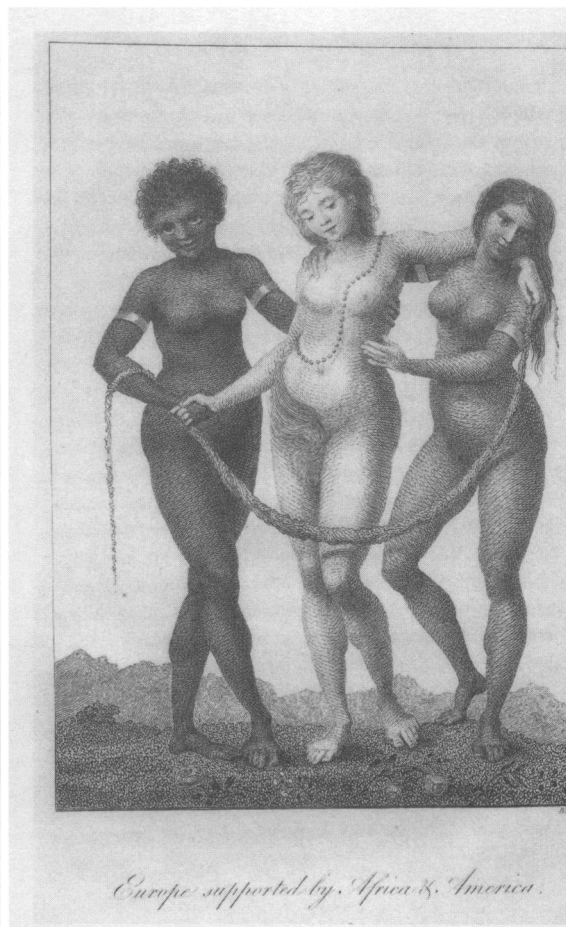


Figure 17. Vol. 2, facing p. 394.

Happiness; while the *negroes* will bless the day that their Ancestors first Set foot on American Ground” (*Narrative*, 594). Stedman visualizes this conclusion, in an image engraved by Blake (figure 17), as

an Emblematical Picture of *Europe* Supported by *Africa & America* Accompanied by an Ardent Wish that in the friendly manner as they are Represented they may henceforth & to all Eternity be the Prop of each other . . . we All only differ in the Colour but we are Certainly Created by the same hand & After the same Mould thus if it has not pleas'd fortune to make us equal in Authority, let us at Least use that Superiority With Moderation & not only Profer that Happiness which we have to bestow on our Superiors & Equals, but with Cheerfulness to the very Lowest of our dependants. (*Narrative*, 618)

From our contemporary perspective, the racism and the sexism of this widely reproduced image are apparent: the women of color *support* the white woman, not vice versa. Their labor is used to shore up the central and superior European female,

who wears a jeweled necklace, the overt sign of the wealth they produce, while the women of color wear arm bands reminiscent of the fetters of the slave.

More important, all three women are represented in a European body type, with the same facial features and physiognomy: all three conform to eighteenth-century neoclassical prototypes of female beauty derived from the Venus of Medici and the Three Graces. One might argue that this visual assimilation of the black female body to the classical Western white body is an attempt to “humanize” the African by insisting on her identity with the European female. Such an argument would also apply to the earlier images of Negro slaves painted by Stedman and engraved by Blake: what I have been calling an evasion of violence might instead be seen as an effort to render the African more noble and heroic. Or this “Europeanization” of the African body might simply result from Stedman’s (and Blake’s) neoclassical artistic training; perhaps this was the only way they were able to draw the human figure. But such arguments subtly reinforce the very point I am trying to make: that both Blake and Stedman participated in a cultural erasure of difference between races and individuals that gave priority to Western, white models. An alternative “scientific” visual style, which we would see as more documentary, was available to them: in illustrated travel books, in medical treatises, and in the studies of racial physiognomy compiled by John Caspar Lavater and Pieter Camper (these last studies noted by David Bindman in his essay in this volume). Employing such a scientific style would have enabled Stedman and Blake to portray the physiological differences between different racial and ethnic types as well as to render the cruelties of slavery in a more literal way.

Finally, Stedman’s construction of entire continents—Europe, Africa, and America—as female, as the classical Three Graces, reproduces the familiar patriarchal trope of Nature as a female body designed for the aesthetic, sexual, and economic gratification of her male masters or owners. Here “Africa” is identical with the naked Joanna, still a slave with arm and ankle bands serving her white mistress (figure 12), and further defined in Stedman’s text as the voluntary sexual possession of the white male military colonizer.



It is within the context of such proslavery colonialist discourse that Blake’s representations of slavery must be placed. I turn first to Blake’s “Little Black Boy” from *Songs of Innocence* and *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* (color plates XII–XV). Alan Richardson has recently noted the significance of the poem’s construction of the black mother as a teacher of her child, thus undercutting the dominant cultural construction of the African as essentially and exclusively a “child-who-

must-be-taught” and implicitly endorsing instead a program of gradual emancipation.⁹ Richardson’s point is well taken, but does not to my mind outweigh the counterargument, namely, that Blake here affirms the ideological construction of the African as one who finally benefits from Christianity. It is a child who speaks, after all, and what he has learned from his mother is a desire both to serve the white child (“I’ll shade him from the heat”) and to be “like” the white child and his God. Blake represents this likeness as complete assimilation: in those versions of the second plate where the black boy does not take a subservient position—and is depicted further away from that Christ who resides within as well as without in Blake’s antinomian *Songs of Innocence*—he becomes entirely white, indistinguishable from the white boy, as in some early versions (see color plates XII–XV). Had Blake given us a black Christ, for which there is historical visual precedent, he might have registered the degree to which the spectator’s eye rather than his own collaborates in a Western ideological production of the white body as the superior, more “divine” body.

Blake’s participation in a colonialist visual discourse is even clearer in *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*. Before turning to this poem, however, I want briefly to outline the other social discourse to which this poem directly responds, a discourse of human or “natural” rights and specifically of the rights of woman. In the eyes both of her contemporaries in general and of Blake in particular, the leading exponent for the rights of woman in the early 1790s was Mary Wollstonecraft. Blake had illustrated and engraved the plates for Wollstonecraft’s *Original Stories from Real Life* (1791), illustrations that offer a pervasive criticism of Wollstonecraft’s feminist doctrines. In these didactic stories, which consist of conversations between the prudent, rational, and compassionate Mrs. Mason and her two young students Mary and Caroline, Wollstonecraft specifically sought to develop a radically new image of the ideal woman. Eschewing her culture’s construction of the feminine gender as innately or essentially emotional and irrational, dominated by impulse, desire, imaginative fancy, or acute sensibility, Wollstonecraft’s Mrs. Mason offers instead a prototype of the ideal woman as one who avoids anger, exercises compassion, loves truth, acts with prudence and modesty, and conquers the “wild pursuits of fancy.”¹⁰ She insists above all on the capacity of females to

9. Alan Richardson, “Colonialism, Race, and Lyric Irony in Blake’s ‘The Little Black Boy,’” *Papers in Language and Literature* 26 (1990): 233–48.

10. Mary Wollstonecraft, *Original Stories from Real Life: with Conversations calculated to Regulate the Affections, and Form the Mind to Truth and Goodness* (1791; reprint, London, 1906), 154. Illustrations are reproduced from the Huntington Library’s copy of the 1791 edition.

develop virtuous habits, which she defines as the intelligent performance of acts of charity, compassion, and disinterested love. As the subtitle of her book insists, Mrs. Mason's conversations are "calculated to regulate the affections, and form the mind to truth and goodness."

That Blake is hostile to Wollstonecraft's attempt to achieve a "revolution in female manners" is apparent in the illustrations he created for her text. He initially portrays Mrs. Mason with her arms held over her charges, looking sternly down, and places them directly in front of a prison-like door (figure 18)—a setting he invoked in his design for "Nurses Song" in *Songs of Experience* to represent the oppressiveness of the female teacher (figure 19). Throughout his illustrations for *Original Stories*, Blake consistently chooses *not* to represent images of the positive rational compassion exercised by Mrs. Mason and her students. Wollstonecraft's ideal woman, Mrs. Trueman, never appears. Nor does Blake illustrate the practice of reading that Mrs. Mason constantly recommends to her students, a positive alternative to idleness that enables, in her words, "the ripenings of reason [to] regulate the imagination."¹¹

As did Stedman in his drawings, Blake engages in a visual evasion of textual violence. Where Mrs. Mason consistently emphasizes the extreme hardships caused by social injustice and poverty in late-eighteenth-century England—terrible human suffering to which her charges learn to respond with intelligent charity—Blake equally consistently transforms these textual descriptions of social violence into visual images of sentimental sensibility. By so doing, he reinforces his culture's hegemonic construction of the female gender as not actively engaged in social or political reform—as instead reducing social injustice to occasions for the expression of delicate sensibility and individual compassion. A few examples will illustrate this point.

Mrs. Mason tells the story of Jack the sailor, designed to teach Mary and Caroline the pleasure of actively helping the poor. Captured by the French and thrown into prison, Jack is later released with his legs crippled and one eye blind and now scrapes out a meager existence with his family by begging; yet Blake illustrates the scene with the domestic idyll of a prosperous bourgeois family (figure 20). When Mrs. Mason tells the story of Charles Townley, whose procrastination in repaying a debt ruined his best friend and drove that friend's daughter into madness, Blake illustrates only Townley's ruined house (figure 21); neither the mad Fanny nor her dead father appears. When Mrs. Mason visits a poor Welsh family she has saved from starvation, a family

11. Wollstonecraft, *Original Stories*, 96.



Blake n. 6. 36

*Look what a fine morning it is. — Insects,
Birds, & Animals, are all enjoying existence.*

Published by J. Johnson, Sept. 1798.



Figure 18, left. Frontispiece.

Figure 19, above. *Songs of Experience*, copy N, plate 53.

Figure 20, below left. P. 74.

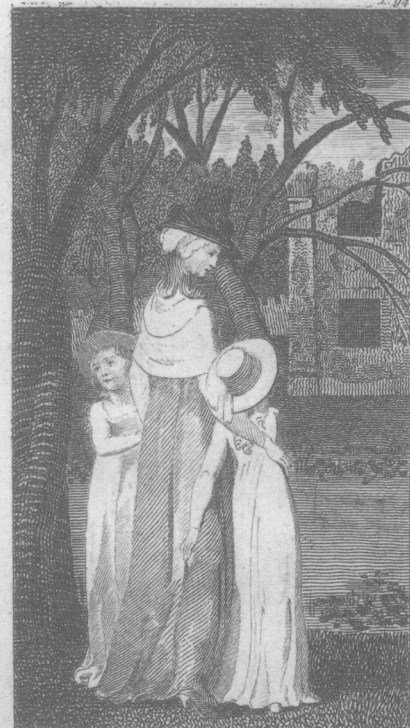
Figure 21, below right. P. 94.



P. 74.

Indeed we are very happy! —

Published by J. Johnson, Sept. 1798.



P. 94.

*Be calm, my child, remember that you
must do all the good you can the present day.*

Published by J. Johnson, Sept. 1798.

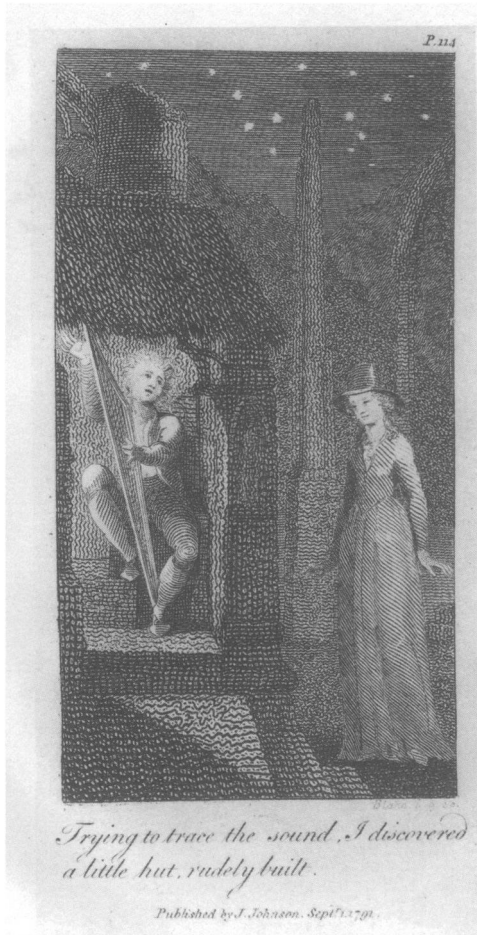


Figure 22. P. 114.

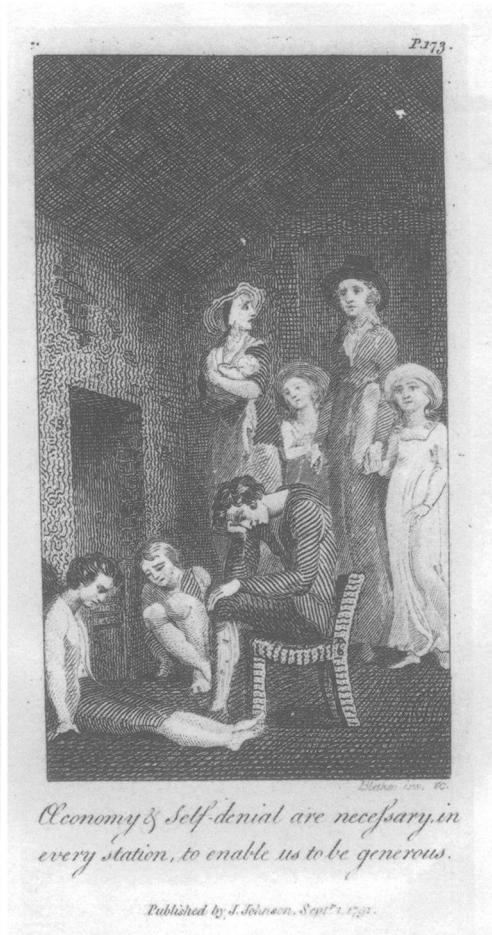


Figure 23. P. 173.

headed by an old, enfeebled Welsh harper, Blake illustrates neither her active charity nor the harper's penury. Instead he represents the harper as young, healthy, inspired by heavenly vision, and entirely happy (figure 22). Even when, in his final engraving for the volume, Blake does illustrate the sufferings of an impoverished worker and his family (figure 23), he does not show the active gift-giving practiced in the text not only by Mrs. Mason but also by both of her students, who have now learned to save their own resources to better help others. Instead Blake represents Mrs. Mason and her girls as idle bystanders, apparently indulging their feminine sensibility but without the capacity to *act*.

What I wish to emphasize here is not merely Blake's active misreading of Wollstonecraft's text, his deliberate suppression of the life of rational charity and social justice practiced by Mrs. Mason. I am most interested in Blake's refusal to see Wollstonecraft's new construction of gender in *Original Stories* as a positive female image. Instead, Blake chooses to define Mrs. Mason as a mere spectator

of suffering, and one who is gratified entirely by such passive ways of expressing pity or exercising feminine sensibility.

Blake's *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* expresses a more direct criticism of Wollstonecraft, whose *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* had been published the previous year. Wollstonecraft had pointed out that British wives were no different from slaves: "When, therefore, I call women slaves, I mean in a political and civil sense."¹² Her argument rested on both legal and psychological grounds. As we have seen, Lord Mansfield's 1772 antislavery judgment left intact the legal definition of marriage as a "municipal" relationship of the kind derived from feudal villeinage, in which the wife exists under the "coverture" of the husband. In other words, a wife is absorbed into the legal body of her husband: man and wife are "one flesh." She is not a "person" in law: she cannot own property, have custody of children, bring legal suits—although she can be held solely responsible for any crimes she commits. Wollstonecraft argued that such legal coverture produced not only an economic but also a psychological dependence of women upon their husbands or male relatives. She further insisted that this condition corrupted both partners, for women "may be convenient slaves, but slavery will have its constant effect, degrading the master and the abject dependent" (*Vindication*, 5).

Wollstonecraft assumed that females have the same souls as males and therefore the same rational capacity as men, a point implicitly acknowledged not only by the established Anglican church but even by law. For if women can be held responsible for their sins or crimes, they must have the mental ability to distinguish good from evil, right from wrong. On this foundation in logic Wollstonecraft mounted her impassioned appeal for the equal education of women and for their right to enjoy the same legal, economic, and political rights as men.¹³

In her attempt to change the construction of gender in her society—to transform women from Jean-Jacques Rousseau's submissive, coquettish child-brides, who live only to please their husbands, into rational agents—Wollstonecraft insisted on the necessity of curbing female sexual desire. In part, she wanted to break her society's identification of the female with sexuality; in the eighteenth century, "the sex" referred only to females. More immediately, she wanted to warn women against being seduced by their own sexual desire into an unhappy

12. Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (London, 1792), ed. Carol Poston (1975; reprint, New York, 1988), 167; hereafter, page references are given in the text.

13. For further discussion of Wollstonecraft's political and social theory, see Anne K. Mellor, *Romanticism and Gender* (New York and London, 1993), 31–39; and Virginia Sapiro, *A Vindication of Political Virtue: The Political Theory of Mary Wollstonecraft* (Chicago, 1992).

marriage. But Wollstonecraft's warning was fueled by an even more pressing social and moral issue. Too often, the females of her day were seduced by heartless libertines who then abandoned them, dishonored and pregnant, to a life of social ostracism and prostitution. The consequences of free love, for women, were apparent in the streets of London, where over ten thousand prostitutes plied their trade by the end of the eighteenth century.

Therefore Wollstonecraft insisted that the ideal rational woman is also a modest woman, one who preserves her chastity and channels her sexual desire into a marriage based on mutual respect and enduring affection. Arguing that modesty is a virtue that should be acquired by men as well as by women, she asserts that modesty "never resides in any but cultivated minds. It is something nobler than innocence, it is . . . the reserve of reason, and . . . so far from being incompatible with knowledge, it is its fairest fruit" (*Vindication*, 123). Pragmatically, however, in Wollstonecraft's view, rational modesty is essential to female social survival.

Throughout the *Vindication*, Wollstonecraft uses the term *slavery* in both a literal and a metaphorical sense. She believes that the institution of marriage in England in 1792 is legal slavery, no different in kind from that imposed on Africans in the American colonies. Commenting on the arguments of male conduct-book writers (such as John Gregory and James Fordyce) that women must be subjected to the "severe restraint" of propriety, she asks,

Why subject her to propriety—blind propriety, if she be capable of acting from a nobler spring, if she be an heir of immortality? Is sugar always to be produced by vital blood? Is one half of the human species, like the poor African slaves, to be subject to prejudices that brutalize them, when principles would be a surer guard, only to sweeten the cup of man? (*Vindication*, 144–45)

At the same time, she frequently uses *slave* or *slavery* figuratively to underline her attack on female psychological dependence. A few pages later she attacks "a slavish bondage to parents," for those daughters "taught slavishly to submit to their parents . . . are prepared for the slavery of marriage." But she is careful to qualify such rhetorical usages: "I do not dream of insinuating that boys or girls are always slaves, I only insist that when they are obliged to submit to authority blindly, their faculties are weakened, and their tempers rendered imperious or abject" (*Vindication*, 155).

While Wollstonecraft distinguishes between the literal and figurative construction of slavery in her text, she nonetheless insists that if British women are kept in a

state of ignorance or “perpetual childhood”—not educated but rather trained to be pleasing to their masters and “cunning, mean and selfish” to everyone else—they are no different in character or nature from a dependent slave. Her program for the emancipation of women is clear: the state must provide, at public expense, a comprehensive education for females that teaches them the value and practice of honesty, compassion, modesty, and useful work, an education that leads to what she would call “rational love” and an egalitarian marriage.

Blake’s program for the emancipation of the “enslav’d daughters of Albion” is very different. In “The Little Black Boy,” Blake had suggested that the solution to racism was the assimilation of the black body into the white, for—as the Little Black Boy insists—“my soul is white.” Had Blake followed the same line of argument in *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* when addressing the issue of the enslavement of women, he might have made the same move that Wollstonecraft made, the argument that females have the same “souls” as males and hence are entitled to the same political and social rights. But instead, he translated the civil and legal slavery of British women referred to by Wollstonecraft into a specifically *sexual* slavery. Oothoon, “the soft soul of America,” represents both the slave woman of the American colonies and the oppressed English woman at home. Raped by the slave owner Bromion to increase her value and then rejected by her jealous lover Theotormon, Oothoon is legally enslaved by the economic institution of slavery that entitles European men to claim, as does Bromion: “Thy soft American plains are mine, and mine thy north & south; / Stamp’t with my signet are the swarthy children of the sun.”¹⁴ Blake illustrates the consequences of legal slavery with an image of a black man lying on the ground (color plate V). This image seems to me to engage in an erasure of visual violence similar to that of Stedman’s illustrations: no overt physical abuse appears; his pick axe lies, unused, nearby. More important, this is the only black body that appears in the designs for this poem: neither Oothoon herself nor her lover Theotormon is depicted as black, not even copper-toned.

I make this point because I wish to emphasize a pattern of displacement that governs this entire poem. Blake’s primary concern in *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* is not to end the slave trade or the institution of slavery in the colonies, although he may have gone well beyond his friend Stedman in his support of abolition. His primary concern is to liberate the “daughters of Albion,” *British* women, from the greater slavery they experience at home. But *that* slavery is not the civil

14. *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, ed. David V. Erdman, rev. ed. (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1982), 46; hereafter cited in the text as “E.”

and legal slavery described by Wollstonecraft. It is rather, as Oothoon makes clear, the psychological slavery of “subtil modesty” (E 49)—that very rational modesty advocated by Wollstonecraft—from which Blake hoped to free both British women *and* British men.

When Oothoon plucks the bright marigold (color plate III), as Paula Bennett and Jack Goody have recently reminded us,¹⁵ she engages in a familiar eighteenth-century language of flowers: she explicitly offers her blossomlike clitoris and her fertile womb to her lover. After she is raped and impregnated by Bromion, she insists that her body—because it is now sexually experienced—is actually more delicious: “sweetest the fruit that the worm feeds on” (E 47). Blake is here attacking the *repression* of sexual desire; the slaves whose voices Theotormon hears are “children bought with money. / That shiver in *religious* caves beneath the burning fires / Of lust, that belch incessant from the summits of the earth” (E 46; italics added). Blake condemns any theology that defines the desires of the flesh as evil, that insists that only the chaste body is lovable or marriageable, that thus produces both the public injustice of prostitution (of female children “bought with money”) and the private abuse of masturbation. As Oothoon proclaims (color plate IX):

Who taught thee modesty, subtil modesty! child of night & sleep . . .
Then com'st thou forth a modest virgin knowing to dissemble
With nets found under thy night pillow, to catch virgin joy,
And brand it with the name of whore; & sell it in the night, . . .
(E 49)

As Blake's image of Theotormon apparently flagellating himself suggests, the enslavement Blake attacks is largely self-imposed, a voluntary submission to a Christian belief in the necessity of chastity that makes it impossible for Theotormon to embrace the woman he desires once she has had sexual relations with another man.

Blake's solution to both Theotormon's sexual jealousy and Bromion's materialist economics—as well as Wollstonecraft's demand for women's rights—is simple. It is, as Oothoon proclaims to her oppressed sisters of Albion (color plate X), “free love”—“I cry, Love! Love! Love! happy happy Love! free as the mountain wind!”

15. Paula Bennett argues that all flowers carry a symbolic association with female genitalia in Western art and literature, in “Critical Clitoridectomy: Female Sexual Imagery and Feminist Psychoanalytic Theory,” *Signs* 18 (1993): 235–59; while Jack Goody reminds us that the marigold was specifically associated with fertility and marriage in eighteenth-century English texts; see *The Culture of Flowers* (Cambridge, 1993).

(E 50). This is a love that defies the slave traders' economics of commodification, exchange, and consumption, a love that enables the unrestrained expression of sexual desire and its gratification. And as E. P. Thompson has recently reminded us, this is also the love promoted by the antinomian Christian sects, the Swedenborgians and Muggletonians, to which Blake adhered.¹⁶

But whose interest, I would ask, does such a doctrine of free love serve? To persuade her lover to accept her sexually ripened body and forswear the "frozen" marriage bed, Oothoon promises Theotormon the following:

. . . silken nets and traps of adamant will Oothoon spread,
 And catch for thee girls of mild silver, or of furious gold;
 I'll lie beside thee on a bank & view their wanton play
 In lovely copulation bliss on bliss with Theotormon:
 Red as the rosy morning, lustful as the first born beam,
 Oothoon shall view his dear delight, nor e'er with jealous cloud
 Come in the heaven of generous love; nor selfish blightings bring.
 (E 50)

Wollstonecraft had argued that free love of the kind here envisioned by Oothoon is a male fantasy that serves the interests only of the male libertine. As David Erdman enthused, "The soul of America who sings passionately of 'lovely copulation' is a woman and also a continent longing for fruit in her fertile valleys. To say that she wants to be loved, not raped, is to say, economically, that she wants to be cultivated by free men, not slaves or slave-drivers; for joy, not profit."¹⁷ Erdman's assumption that the loving and lovable woman wants to "be cultivated" —rather than to cultivate—is an assumption he shared with Blake. Perhaps Blake was thinking of Stedman's happy slave family of Loango, in which husband and wife are free to find new sexual partners when either tires of the other. Or of Stedman's own bedroom frolics with Joanna and B---e. But where Stedman recognized that the black woman as well as the man could have other partners, Swedenborg and the Muggletonians explicitly forbade this for women,¹⁸ and Blake's Oothoon never presents this possibility to Theotormon. Nor does Blake deal with the consequences of such sexual promiscuity: who will care for the numerous children

16. E. P. Thompson, *Witness against the Beast: William Blake and the Moral Law* (Cambridge, 1993), 138–39.

17. Erdman, *Blake: Prophet against Empire*, 227.

18. Thompson, *Witness against the Beast*, 138.

that will be born? Note that Blake visually erases the biological fact of Oothoon's pregnancy, even though the text insists upon it—unless the back view represented (E 49; color plate VIII) is meant to suggest a pregnant female body; if so, it is a pregnancy that Blake conceals with uncharacteristic modesty.

Some readers have suggested that Blake wanted us to see Oothoon's doctrine of free love, her "silken nets and traps of adamant," as well as the nets spread by Bromion and Theotormon, as Urizenic forms of psychological enslavement.¹⁹ Although Bromion rather than Oothoon wears the ankle fetters of the slave in the frontispiece (color plate I), this image implies that *all three* characters remain trapped within Bromion's caves. The eye of the sun looking in from behind Blake's design onto this "religious" or Platonic cave may open up the possibility of an alternative sexual economy, for, as the Motto on the title page (color plate II) asserts, "the eye sees more than the heart knows." But if the Motto urges the reader to imagine an alternative to the slavery of modesty other than free love, the poem does not suggest what that alternative could be. As the creator of this poem and its designs, Blake must take responsibility for what the work does not say as well as for what it does say.

Finally, neither the verbal nor the visual representations of sex, violence, and slavery in *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* contests the racist or sexist dimensions of the Enlightenment discourse of Anglo-Africanism Blake inherited. Blake too equates ultimate freedom with the gratification of the desires of the white European male. Insofar as the black body can be assimilated into the white body, the black man can enjoy the same "rights" as the white man. Insofar as the female body gratifies the sexual and psychological desires of the male body, she achieves her freedom. Specifically, the "freedom" visually offered to Oothoon on the left side of the title page is that of the three female Graces, now swirling in ecstatic frenzy, but still seductively displayed to the gaze of male spectatorial desire.

More troubling, Blake's designs erase the spectacle of male violence against the female body. We do not see Bromion raping Oothoon. Instead we see only their postcoital exhaustion (color plate IV). When we do see the female body ag-

19. For such readings of slavery in *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*, see Ronald Paulson, *Representations of the Revolution (1780–1820)* (New Haven, Conn., 1983), 88–95; Mark Anderson, "Oothoon, Failed Prophet," *Romanticism Past and Present* 8 (1984): 1–21; Mark Bracher, "The Metaphysical Grounds of Oppression in Blake's *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*," *Colby Library Quarterly* 20 (1984): 164–73; and Nancy Moore Goslee, "Slavery and Sexual Character: Questioning the Master Trope in Blake's *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*," *ELH* 57 (1990): 101–28.

gressively penetrated, it is not by a man but by a bird (color plate VI). Oothoon here becomes Prometheus, willingly mutilated by Jupiter's or her lover Theotormon's eagle for the benefit of mankind. Blake thus transforms the literal atrocities of slavery in the West Indies (recall Stedman's description of the male slave hanging from a hook, his putrifying breast eaten by vultures) into a visual *metaphor*, into a rhetorical figure of heroic Promethean suffering. Blake thereby distances us from the physical tortures of slavery and at the same time subtly suggests that the female slave welcomes her painful sexual servicing of male desire.

At the level of sexual politics, this poem—like Stedman's *Narrative* before it—must finally be seen as condoning the continuation of female slavery under a benevolent master. Does not this idealized image of a female eagerly offering her flesh to her lover's beak support Bromion's claim that the daughters of the sun "resist not, they . . . worship terrors and obey the violent" (E 45)? From this feminist perspective, one visual source for Blake's design for the Argument (color plate III), Joseph-Marie Vien's *The Selling of Cupids* (identified by Erdman),²⁰ reverberates with brutal irony, for *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* finally endorses Vien's representation of the female as a *procurer* of love and sexual gratification, no longer for upper-class ladies, as in Vien's image, but for men only.

I would like to close on a less tendentious and more theoretical note. From our perspective it is easy to see the problems inherent in the Enlightenment attempt to assimilate the black body into the white body; the same problems confront Wollstonecraft's attempt to assimilate the female body into the male body. Her doctrine of sexual equality, now institutionalized in the American legal system,²¹ takes the male body as the norm and insists on women's sameness with that body. Clearly, Wollstonecraft's liberal feminism fails to give an adequate account of female difference, specifically of the difference in sexual reproduction. Blake's alternative solution to the problem of sexual difference, free love, is equally problematic. But our society has not yet developed a viable theoretical alternative to these accounts. We still need a political and legal system that can resist the Blakean or Hegelian temptation of a dialectic in which one contrary finally

20. Erdman, *Blake: Prophet against Empire*, 240–41.

21. The failure to acknowledge such difference was vividly demonstrated a few years ago by a legal case involving California Federal Savings, in which pregnancy was legally defined as a "disability" to guarantee the sexes equal health benefits—an extremely odd way to define the fundamental process of creating human life.

takes precedence over or is drawn into synthesis with the other. For Blake, it is “maleness” that, at the most fundamental level, takes priority over “femaleness,” as Marc Kaplan has documented in his recent analysis of Blake and gender.²² We still need a political and legal system that can construct racial, cultural, and sexual difference rather than assimilation as the highest social value.

University of California, Los Angeles

22. Marc Kaplan, “Weeping Woman/Weaving Woman: Gender Roles in Blake’s Mythology” (Ph.D. diss., UCLA, 1993). Chapter 5 of this dissertation appeared as “Blake’s *Milton*: The Metaphysics of Gender,” in *Nineteenth-Century Contexts* 19 (1995): 151–78.