

“I WALK WEeping IN PANGS OF A MOTHERS TORMENT FOR HER CHILDREN”

Women’s Laments in the Poetry and Prophecies of William Blake

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ABSTRACT

Cross-cultural scholarship in ritual studies on women’s laments provides us with a fresh vantage point from which to consider the function of women and women’s complaining voices in the epic poems of William Blake. In this essay, I interpret Thel, Oothoon, and Enitharmon as strong voices of experience that unleash some of Blake’s most profound meditations on social, sexual, individual, and institutional forms of violence and injustice, offering what might aptly be called an ethics of witness. Tracing the performative function of Enion, Jerusalem, Vala, and Erin in Blake’s later epics, *The Four Zoas* and *Jerusalem*, I argue for the close connection between the female laments and the possibility of redemption, though in Blake such “redemption” comes at the cost of the very voices of witness themselves.

KEY WORDS: *William Blake, ethics of witness, lament, prophecy, redemption*

IN THE POETRY AND PROPHECIES of William Blake, the voice of female lament—the “voice of sorrow”—is the voice of a divided heart, one wounded by eros, by mixtures of pleasure and pain, by separation and the divisions of “otherness,” by jealousy, by secrets, but also by disease, madness, death. It witnesses to real ruin, and passionate protest. Consider Thel, the girl at the grave—one of Blake’s earliest female voices in his very first illuminated prophecy (*The Book of Thel* was composed in 1789, between *Songs of Innocence* and *Songs of Experience*). Thel seems to be on a journey in this delicate and strange poem. The youngest of the “daughters of Mne Seraphim,” she “in paleness” seeks “the secret air.”¹ She is a shimmering creature, one who seems to hover on the very threshold of form, of birth and human

¹ All quotations of Blake’s work are taken from Blake 1988. Citations will be given parenthetically in the text by section or plate number (where appropriate) and inclusive

embodiment, but she also possesses a certain patient but determined persistence, a polite but nonetheless pointed sense of urgency. Blake's first verses fairly whisper Thel's "gentle lamentation" that "falls like morning dew" after she has separated herself from her companions. She wistfully laments the transience of things, passively pines over the "gentle sleep of death," and feels vaguely a sense of the "voice / Of him that walketh in the garden at evening time."

Our seemingly fragile pilgrim then encounters various figures in this purely natural world, the "Lilly," the "Cloud," a "Worm," and a "Clod of Clay." Each attempts to answer her questions about existence, and to give her advice. She is a listener, and she scrutinizes these consolers, but still seems restive. The "matron Clay," in a Dantesque touch, allows Thel to enter her house with her "virgin feet" and "to return." She is told to "fear nothing" as she moves into and through the landscape of mortality, the Clod of Clay's common ground. She "wander[s] in the land of clouds thro' valleys dark." She listens "in silence . . . to the voices of the ground" and passes the "couches of the dead." At length she sinks down beside her own grave and hears "this voice of sorrow breathed from the hollow pit":

Why cannot the Ear be closed to its own destruction?
 Or the glistening Eye to the poison of a smile!
 Why are Eyelids stord with arrows ready drawn,
 Where a thousand fighting men in ambush lie?
 Or an Eye of gifts & graces, show'ring fruits & coined gold!
 Why a Tongue impress'd with honey from every wind?
 Why an Ear, a whirlpool fierce to draw creations in?
 Why a Nostril wide inhaling terror trembling & affright
 Why a tender curb upon the youthful burning boy!
 Why a little curtain of flesh on the bed of our desire?

The Virgin started from her seat, & with a shriek.
 Fled back unhindered til she came to the vales of Har [6:11–22].

The meaning of Thel's shriek at the end of the poem, and her fleeing "unhindered" back to "the vales of Har," has been seen by most scholars to be a kind of psychological failure, a rather pathetic refusal to mature. She has been interpreted to be imprisoned in her all-too-fragile, "namby-pamby" (according to Northrop Frye 1972, 233) world of innocence, too afraid to encounter, in her voyage to the grave at the end, the hard truths of Experience, which seem to include, along with the fact of death, a passage into sexual experience. Scholars have read

line numbers. Citations for *Vala* or *The Four Zoas* will give "Night" number and inclusive line numbers. Citations for *Jerusalem* will give chapter, plate, and inclusive line numbers.

the end as a withdrawal from such an encounter, a flight back to her limbo-land of blissful half-sleep, the "vales of Har." Harold Bloom observes that her name means "will," but he believes that Blake intends this to be ironic, for "Thel's pathetic fate is the consequence of her weakness in will, and her failure to carry her pastoral innocence into the world of experience is a failure of desire" (Bloom 1988, 808).² In this reading, Blake condemns his heroine, who is poised at the margins of painful, divisive experience of the body (with its ecstasies, growth, decay, death), for her retreat. According to this reading, the poem offers a picture of error, of stunted "virgin" consciousness unable to enter fully into a state Bloom calls "a higher imaginatively organized innocence" (1988, 809). The "voice of sorrow" that echoes out of the "hollow pit" of Thel's own grave (her own voice in "futuraity"?) is rather harrowing, with its powerful evocations of injustice, deceit, the shrinkage of consciousness into five senses, sexual division, passion and its "curbs" and "curtains of flesh." It could appear indeed obvious that Thel impulsively, even "hysterically," as one critic notes (Hilton 1983, 31), runs away in terror from the voice of Experience, fleeing instinctively back to safer ground, but to an "unorganized" innocence all too fragile to be believed or to possibly last.

These readings have, however, been challenged by the more nuanced analyses of W. J. T. Mitchell, Nancy Bogan, and Helen Bruder. Blake, they suggest, is far too much an artist of willed ambiguity to give us some simple answer here. There is more to this curious book than aborted awareness or failure of vision. There is more to this non-verbal, almost koan-like shriek. Thel contemplates; she listens; at the threshold of Experience, she is a curious interlocutor who has left the metaphysical "sunny flocks" of Mne Seraphim for the "secret air" of the vales and, eventually, the marginal airless underworld of the earth itself, descending into flesh and death, into the world of particulars, questioning her mortality, her reality and fate, and longing for something that does not change. Along the way she is subjected to a series of dialogues with creatures of the natural world who preach various forms of self-effacement, from the Lilly's self-abnegating humility, to the Cloud's vigorous though self-absorbed sexual self-giving, to the matronly and mothering self-sacrifice of the Clod of Clay, and on the way she meets the meek and weepy worm, a child-penis that lays in its dewy bed and says nothing. The advice she gets from all these "comforters" (oddly, the Book of Job is never far away) boils down to passivity and a destructive self-annihilation that bears little or no

² See also Bloom 1971, 53 for the view that the poem "ends in voluntary negation." For a good survey of male critics who have, from 1890 onward, judged Thel to be a failure, see Pearce 1978.

resemblance to the kind of self-annihilation that, in the later Blake, leads to the creation of a new selfhood, serving the imagination (Mitchell 1978, 91). As for that shriek, Mitchell argues, “Thel’s shriek and flight back to the Vales of Har may then be seen not as a failure to face life, but as the sign of a revelation” (1978, 91). In the hands of these interpreters, then, *The Book of Thel* yields up a moral critique of a superficial and dishonest social world that is bent on sacrificing all of Thel’s beauty and promise to stultifying conventions. The poem portrays failure, to be sure, but the failure is not Thel’s.

It has now become quite commonplace that any interpretation of Blake’s poems must attend to the visual drawings and designs within which his poems are embedded—and which often run counter to, and thus ironically undermine, the most obvious reading of the text. The plates for *The Book of Thel* seem to support the revisionist reading. When we look carefully at the visual designs, many of which allude to Erasmus Darwin’s book on the sexual lives of plants, for which Blake did illustrations, we can see that Blake composes here a subtle parody of books of “instruction” for women and also for children (Bruder 1997, 40–44; Blake 1971, 24),³ and that he hardly champions the option of passive renunciation, a “holy resignation” that obliterates the particular and individual. Most strikingly, at the bottom of the page on which the words from the grave are inscribed is an emblem-like design of a little girl gracefully and effortlessly riding a rather sinister-looking reined phallic serpent with two small children, the bigger one taking the hand of and steadying the smaller one, a figure that calls to mind images of both sexuality and fertility.⁴ The serpent’s tail is gracefully looped three times, suggesting energy, delight, the playful and auspicious. Beneath them is vegetal earth, and what looks like an oak leaf. Taking this into account, it would seem, then, that the girl is not afraid of embodiment, sexuality, and mortality. We would do better to read Thel as questing for personhood, for the meaning of her own individual existence, and to see her as revolted by the expectations and stultification with which the “comforters” beguile her.

To this rereading of the poem as a social critique, I would add a further layer of significance, developed out of my own cross-cultural

³ See also Williams 1998 for an insightful treatment of the “ideology of instruction” in Rousseau’s *Emile* and Blake’s *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*. Blake’s contesting “utopian” spirit of irony and parody is alive and well in the *Songs*, which are indebted to but also well over the head of Rousseau’s critique of social and educational indoctrination. See especially 61–70 for a close reading of “The Little Black Boy,” with its layers of ironies, both visual and textual.

⁴ David Erdman notes in *The Illuminated Blake* that in *America: A Prophecy, Plate 11*, “a rather more cheerful serpent is carrying a more securely mounted but similar family inland from the fires of war” (1974, 40).

study of the genre of women's laments.⁵ I propose that we understand the "voice of sorrow" that issues from the grave to be not some alien threatening voice, but her own voice (in the future) lifted up in lament and exhibiting the characteristics of that form of performative utterance. Reading the poem with that assumption, we then know that she will indeed enter the world of Experience, passionately, with a vigorous if eventually broken but nonetheless prophetic spirit. If we are to take the hint of the curious final design, the young girl and children who ride a bridled phallic serpent, we suspect that she will not be a mere passive servant of others or of events; she will not have the flaccid self-deluding abnegation of the Lilly, nor the blithe selfhood of the Cloud, but will give herself to the world, to sexual life, and even to death, in a way that breaks and wounds and fragments, but also that paves the way toward imaginative vision—vision that, in the terms of Blake's Motto, like plate 6, added later to the text, needs *both* the Mole and the Eagle.

The voice's repetition of "why" is an index of social protest; this is more than a private lamentation. The "voice of sorrow," as Mitchell argues, utilizes a language of suffering in love right out of Donne and Shakespeare, though Blake's verses take feeling to an extreme. "Renaissance protests against the pathological character of love," remarks Mitchell, "never take on the exaggerated anxiety we feel in Thel's voice of sorrow" (1978, 93). It is in this very exaggerated, even extravagant intensity and refusal to console or to offer, in its rhetorical interrogatory structure, any answers, that Thel's voice resembles most vividly what in ritual studies would be called a particularly female mode of lament. This voice from the grave, like more formalized laments discussed below, is a prophetic gift from a future Thel that demands of her "childhood" self an ethics of witness. The Thel of the future is a witness of deep irreconcilable antinomies and negation, both social and individual/psychological, and of irreducible particularities. The Thel of the present shrieks and flees, not because she is weak, but because she dimly recognizes this future witness, the scandal that she will weave into rhythmical, patterned poetic speech, the work-like art of the cry. In this she resembles also her creator, Blake himself, who primarily through his women is also a witness, one of the "dangerous voices" of social and sexual protest. Is there a way to truly live the

⁵ Sections of this paper were given as conference presentations at the panel "Blake and Religious Vision," Arts, Literature, and Religion Section, Annual Meeting of the American Academy of Religion, Washington, D.C., November 18–21, 2006, and at the conference "Blake at 250: Celebrating the 250th Anniversary of the Birth of William Blake: A Three-Day International Conference," hosted by the Centre for Eighteenth Century Studies, University of York, UK, July 30–August 1, 2007.

contraries—Innocence and Experience—in tension together, where one does not obscure the other and the two exist in “opposition” as “true friends?” Thel is on the threshold, and if she is our voice of Blake here, so is he.⁶

1. “Dangerous Voices”: Women’s Laments in Comparative Perspective

Women’s laments witness to a core set of themes that illuminate both the profound role women’s voices play in the poems and prophecies of Blake and also the poet’s broader social, political, and personal vision. These themes, some already alluded to in Thel’s “voice of sorrow,” include the finality of death, irreparable personal loss, and the threat these often pose to elaborately rationalized ritual systems. Also standard are the careful artistic, musical, and ritual structures of laments, their extravagant artful and work-like character, and their connection to the weaving of garments, memory, and memorialization. Laments express madness, vulnerability, erotic and parental love, and what might be termed, after the work of Catherine Lutz and most recently Martha Nussbaum, violent emotions that are rooted in ethical “judgments of value” (Lutz 1988; Nussbaum 2001, 19–88).⁷

I will argue that in Blake’s work (particularly his later works), this witness of lament not only embodies negation but is also linked to a redeeming turn, an apocalyptic pivot in time and space, a reversal and a breakthrough. The refusal to give up, this willed failure to successfully complete the “work of mourning” and to forget, this simple “being there” in grief, carries a profound ethical significance. Its secret, no less than a kind of “apocalyptic reversal of history” (Mitchell 1978, 191), is only intimated in plate 6 in Thel in the auspicious design of girl and children who happily ride a shady menacing serpent, but it hides in the lament like leaven for the bread.

⁶ I am reminded here also of the young girls in Henry James’s novels, particularly Nanda Brookenham in *The Awkward Age* and little Maisie in *What Maisie Knew*. Such girls, like Thel, are, in Ronald Blythe’s words, “human thresholds” (Blythe 1987, ix, xix); they are morally vulnerable creatures whose knowledge and ordeal of consciousness is critical in the ethical universe of their male author/creators, though always coming with a cost. We might say for Blake what would be later said for James, namely that Thel (and perhaps also Oothoon) is Blake’s “portrait of the artist as a young girl” (Mitchell 1972).

⁷ See also the compelling comparative essays in Patton and Hawley 2005, especially the introduction. Hawley 2005 discusses poetry to the Hindu god Krishna and outlines patterns of religious weeping/tears that follow quite closely my discussion here of women’s laments. Hawley claims that “religious tears” are “enacted,” never spontaneous, that they open up communication rather than block it, that they are gendered, “usually gendered female,” and that tears are frequently “about death” (94–95).

There are also complications here. All is far from stable in Blake for women's witness and their dangerous voices. Blake's later vision of a sudden turn of time, the redemptive moment seemingly sparked into being by laments, witnesses to their transformative power, their role as agents in social/historical change, but also spells the end of sexual difference, and so of the separate female voice. Blake here seems to betray the very power of his female voices by erasing them in his final vision of *Jerusalem*. To focus on the powers of Blake's lamenting women is not only to uncover a liberating vision for female lament, but also to reveal real and unresolved tensions in Blake's visions of the sexes. However, to fully appreciate these female laments in Blake—to understand the work that they do, their force of meaning, and perhaps even their threats internal to Blake's work itself—it will be helpful first to review the findings of scholars who have been studying women's laments in a variety of literary and social manifestations.

1.1 Name, blame, fix in a landscape

In her study of women's laments (*moirologi*) in early Greek literatures and modern rural Greece, through the folk laments of Mani and Epirus, Gail Holst-Warhaft makes the claim that we can historically trace tensions between fundamentally male forms of ritual lament, such as the *epitaphios logos* (or *encomium*), and even the theatre of tragedy itself, with women's laments. The *epitaphios logoi*, funeral orations given by men at the tomb, along with forms of classical Greek tragedy, are, in Holst-Warhaft's words, "appropriations" of female mourning and its great uncompromising "antiphonal dialogue with death" (1992, 4–5). Men, of course, lament, and do so across cultures. However, their raw laments tend toward the inchoate, the merely inarticulate. They may howl, but they also seek to quickly transition to the ritual domestication of powerful, pure emotion. Male literary and ritual forms of funerary lament seek to give an answer to the question of death, to "counterbalance" the stark threatening powers of women's laments, their stubborn particularities, to tame, to domesticate, and to generalize them, to make death and its ruins serve the powers of the state.

Using examples from contemporary forms of lament to shed light on ancient "dangerous voices" such as Antigone, Holst-Warhaft calls attention to a variety of key patterns of the songs of female lamenters or *moirologhistres*, singers of "fate-speech." Women's laments, though they perform acts of weeping, sobbing, shrieking, sighing, and include mute gesture and pantomime, are also artful. They give structure and rhythm to rage and to madness, moving from "experience to art, from

tears to ideas” (Holst-Warhaft 1992, 22).⁸ Amassing proper names and the particular attributes of individuals, they memorialize—“inscribe, imprint, engrave, impress” (1992, 35) the dead onto the social body, weaving and spinning songs like the *moiri* who determine the fate of human persons by writing their marks on the faces of children (1992, 41), calling for action, for revenge, for social justice; they perform what is impossible to speak in any other way; even more radically, they sing what cannot be plainly spoken.

Women’s ritualized language is performative speech that confronts the unnamable and inarticulate. The words of two *moirologhistres* from Maniot are deadly direct, “cries that shake the world”:

I’ll climb up to High Poula
to see the stars in the sky
to shriek in a fierce voice
and shake up all the world.

And:

And Ligourou let out a shrill cry
That made the place shutter all around [Holst-Warhaft 1992, 69–70].

Mere words on the page, of course, can hardly do such performative speech justice. This is poetry and song, but a performed poetry whose borders are searingly porous to sound, pure breath, shout, shriek, and also silence: the mute, ritual speech at the margins of the articulate.

Holst-Warhaft also notes that Maniot laments commonly express anger against “authority in any form: the police, the state, even doctors considered responsible for a death” (1992, 67). There are other details that mark the lament: women’s connections with bird omens (things men ignore); images of melting and burning for forms of pain; death as a wedding; and finally the twin aspects of all death laments, the refusal to let go of suffering and loss, something that threatens social order, coupled with a solid disciplined structure, an “ordering of pain.” There is no resolution, but merely a very powerful externalization of pain from individual to community—“Naming, blaming, fixing in a landscape” (1992, 73).

⁸ Holst-Warhaft cites, in this context, Steven Feld’s work on weeping and ritual laments among the Kululi people of the Papuan rain forest in New Guinea: “As Feld points out, the Kululi use the two poles of ‘short out-of-control-hysterical-sad bird voice’ and ‘controlled-sorrowful-reflective bird voice’ to characterize respectively male and female weeping. It is women, not men, in Kululi culture who are the makers of structured lament and their patterned weeping is considered to be the most moving human sound expression in their society ‘because it is the closest sound to being a bird’” (1992, 21; see Feld 1982, 92).

As with Thel's "voice of sorrow" in Blake, we have here in rural Greek laments of women a simple, stark witness of pain and loss to power, an ethics of witness. Order and structure, but not at the service of forgetting, of simply getting on, of "success" at the work of mourning in Freud's sense, but a paradoxical "ordering" of the irrevocable and its dark memorialization. In a fundamental way, lament lays hold of, and does not let go of, melancholy (Freud 1963, 164–79). In the words of Shakespeare's Pandulph as he witnesses the powerful, reasoned lucid laments of Constance over her dead son Arthur in *King John*, lamenters threaten when they "hold too heinous a respect of grief."⁹ To use a formulation of Jacques Derrida: the deep ambiguities of mourning and melancholy are expressed in an "unfaithful fidelity" in which "success fails" and "failure succeeds" (Derrida 1986, 35).¹⁰

1.2 "Our Work to Cry: Your Work to Listen"

There are of course many other examples in the history of religions of such ritual lament traditions and forms. Closer to Blake himself perhaps is the rich "keening" traditions of rural Ireland, where women, semi-professionals or family members of the deceased, sing long improvised laments called *caoineadh*. As Holst-Warhaft notes, these *bean chointe* are "traditionally portrayed with disheveled hair, their clothes awry and their feet bare." They travel over the mountains, avoiding

⁹ See Shakespeare, *King John*, Act III, Scene 3 (1965, 80–84) for one of the most powerful female laments in English literature. Constance, "not mad," both cursing and calling on death and embracing grief as fondly as her dead child, her hair loose, unbound, so eloquently "names, blames," and, in the speeches beginning with "My name is Constance; I was Geoffrey's wife" and "Grief fills the room up of my absent child," "fixes in a landscape."

¹⁰ See also Zeiger 1997, especially 135–68. I am indebted to Amy Hollywood for the Derrida and Zeiger references. See Hollywood 2002, 335–56; 2006. Finally, see also Nussbaum's insightful and moving discussion of "helplessness" and endless grief inscribed into the musical textures of Gustav Mahler's *Kinderototlieder* in Nussbaum 2001, 248–94. Mahler's deeply ambivalent musical writing and instrumental scoring belies the seeming consolation of a final peaceful "sleep" in the last lines of the song cycle: "For the [dead] children it is a sleep not of comfort but of nothingness. For the parent, it is the knowledge of the impossibility of any loving, any reparative effort. The oboe, the voice of active love, has fallen silent. The voice, immobilized by helplessness and a now irreparable guilt, falls silent. The world of the heart is dead" (2001, 293). I think here too of Adorno's stunning phrase used to describe Mahler's "unconceptual language" in the Sixth Symphony, "unbounded weeping and unbounded love," and his summary remark about images of parting in "Der Abshied" from *Das Lied von der Erde*: "The subject cannot detach contemplative love from the irrecoverable" (Adorno 1992, 131–32, 166). Lament and an ethics of witness are at the heart of Mahler's music, and would richly contribute to any comparative study, though detailed treatment goes far beyond the scope of this paper.

normal roads and foot-paths, leap into air when they hear of the death, and drink the blood of the deceased when they find him. The Virgin herself, in Irish tradition, is seen as a mad wailing lamenter, with loose hair flying, leaping and drinking blood (Holst-Warhaft 1992, 28).

Lila Abu-Lughod, in her study of Awlad 'Ali Bedouin women, speaks of "crying," "the quintessential act of ritual mourning" performed by women. After an initial *'ayat*, "stylized high-pitched, wordless wailing," women begin "crying," performing a rhythmic, chanted lament "in which the bereaved women and those who have come to console them express their grief" (Abu-Lughod 1986, 198).

In the Bedouin world of lament, men do not "cry." They rather "counsel the bereaved relatives to 'pull yourself together' (*shidd helak*) and console them with pious references to God's will and goodness" (Abu-Lughod 1986, 198).¹¹ This sexual division of labor, though it takes different particular forms, is most striking in lament traditions. Men certainly do, literally, cry; they weep, often loudly, and most passionately. However, it is women who are, cross-culturally, custodians of an "artful" cry that serves as witness and refuses to "let go."

Veena Das has done some powerful fieldwork on mourning Sikh and Hindu women in north India, as well as studies of women's laments that transform ordinary language in their attempt to make "death narratable" (1986, 179–210). Her essay, "Our Work to Cry: Your Work to Listen," a phrase coined by survivors of the riots that followed the assassination of Indira Gandhi in 1984, powerfully witnesses to the uncompromising lamentation of women in various contexts. She cites vivid examples of women who are unable to "let go," to recall the past as one would, using Freud's analogy, a "passing landscape from a running train" (1992, 359).¹² They do not have, they refuse in fact to cultivate, a "vantage point of distance" (1992, 359). One woman, Shanti, who ended up committing suicide, lacking a sense of the worth of female connections, even to her surviving daughters, and traumatized by the loss of a male line, could not "move from that particular day" when her husbands and sons were killed; she would not "forget." She did not have, Das observes, "the means by which she could distance herself from her past so that the present could be made 'present' in her consciousness" (1992, 359). In Shanti's case, the

¹¹ See also Halevi 2007, 114–42 for a detailed treatment of the deep male ambivalence toward women's lamentation rituals, particularly wailing for the dead, but even toward women's very bodily presence among the dead and *as* the dead, in the development of early Islam from its Medinan origins to its spread throughout South Arabia, Mesopotamia, and the Mediterranean world.

¹² This essay has been revised in Das's recent volume, *Life and Words* (2007, 184–204). See also her chapter "Language and Body: Transactions in the Construction of Pain" in 2007, 38–58, especially 48–52.

stubborn particulars of death, along with a patriarchal family structure that stifled, for her, a sense of the meaningfulness of female connections, paralyzed her. She refused her female community of mourning, and did not allow her laments to join other lamenting women in their acts of public witness. Lament can kill. As Amy Hollywood has observed, with painful autobiographical witness, "acute melancholia" can be a cause of death, and perhaps a not so uncommon one (2006).

All around Shanti, other mourning women chose other means of articulating their refusal to get over the particularity of their grief. They refused to hide themselves and their grief. They refused to wash or to dress properly; they did not clean their houses or light cooking fires or change their clothes; in Das's phrase, they "defiantly hung on to their own filth and pollution," to the great chagrin of the local politicians and visiting functionaries. Relief agencies saw them as "dirty and slovenly." Das reproduces a composite of many voices:

They have asked us to clean up our houses and go in and settle down. How can we settle down here? Do you see the heaps of ashes? Do you see the blood? Here, put your hand inside this heap and you will see the melted skulls. They would not even let us have the dead bodies. We begged them; you have killed our men. Let us have their bodies at least—let us mourn them properly. The whole night we hear the voices of our dead. I hear my husband asking for water. The killers would not even let us give water to our dying. My son cried, mother—mother—as he used to when he was small but I could not go to him. This street is now a cremation ground for us. The living have become silent shades, while cries of the dead float up to the sky and fall on us like weights [1992, 359].

These women embraced the minute particulars of loss: "the heaps of ashes, the abandoned houses, the blood-splattered walls—these," says Das, "were not abstract; they were concrete and indexical symbols of what had happened to their men and to them." "It was part of their obligation to the dead to display these, but also," continues Das, "it was part of their obligation as women to bring to the collective consciousness the grievous wrongs that had been done to them" (1992, 363).

Such display is at the heart, as we have seen, of women's laments. It is both political and personal. Das notes that these actions, some done in utter and chilling silence, happened long before traditional laments for the dead were actually sung in houses, with extended family members present, when death was "normalized":

As I talked to the women, three or four very old women were wandering round the street in a kind of convoy, each holding the edge of the other's *dupatta*. Like spirits they stood in front of each house—mute—but seeing things that were invisible to us. The laments for the dead would not come

to their lips. There they stood, before broken doors and scorched walls—unseeing eyes calling softly the names of those who had died just two days ago [1992, 364].

Though they were not yet singing, the actions of these mourning women, particularly in their political and personal witness, their paradoxical ordered display of ruin and particular loss, are at the heart of performative lament.¹³ This mute witness is important to our understanding of the layers of lament in Blake's *Europe: A Prophecy*, where the written text focuses on male violence, war, sexual transgression, and rape, and the designs focus on female images and female victims, mute testimonies to ruin. One last example, before we return to Blake, is one of the most powerful of Jewish commentarial texts, Midrash Lamentations Rabbah, on the power of Rachel as lamenter.

1.3 *The woman among men: Rachel the Lamenter*

Blake scholarship has long noted influences from the Hebrew Bible on Blake's formal laments, most specifically from the cadences (in English) of Isaiah and Jeremiah, along with those of the Book of Job. Any treatment of "women's laments" in Blake must not, of course, ignore what are ostensibly *male* voices of lament in the Bible, voices that Blake so profoundly internalizes. However, we also need to take into account something (of which Blake was probably unaware) that is critical to the comparative study of laments, and solidifies their fundamentally female character, even among male voices of Jewish patriarchs and prophets. As one of the longest of *midrashim* argues, behind the voices of male lament in the Hebrew Bible is that of the paradigmatic lamenter, a woman, a mother, the "matriarch" Rachel. The midrash about Rachel the Lamenter is in Prologue 24 of the early collection of midrash called Lamentations Rabbah (c. fourth-century Palestine). The part that includes the Rachel midrash is framed as commentary on Isaiah 22:11, "And in that day did the Lord, the God of hosts, call to weeping and to lamentation." The rabbis want to know what it means that Yahweh, "The Holy One, blessed be He," called for weeping and lamentations.

It turns out that the Holy One Himself weeps. He weeps that He was forced to destroy the Temple, and he asks the prophet Jeremiah—the supposed master of "lamentations"—to see whether his children are weeping and to hear their lamentations over the exile of Israel and the loss of the Temple. The Holy One says to Jeremiah, "I am now like a

¹³ For two other eloquent studies of women's laments in the Indian context, see Wilce 1998 and Egnor [Trawick] 1986, both cited in Das 2007, 235–36.

man who had an only son, for whom he prepared a marriage-canopy, but he died under it. Do you feel no anguish for Me and My children? Go, summon Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and Moses from their sepulchers, for they know how to weep." Together then the Holy One and Jeremiah go to the "cave of Machpelah" to visit the graves of Moses, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, where each of the fathers of the faith is asked to lament the ruins of the people, their exile, and the destruction of the Temple. Each of the patriarchs performs his lament, but the Holy One is silent, seemingly unstirred by their ritual complaints. At the very moment that Moses, the final lamenter, finishes his testimony to ruins, protesting the Holy One's silence before the patriarchs' loud witness, the "matriarch Rachel broke forth into speech before the Holy One, blessed be He." It is Rachel's powerful witness to ruins, to irrevocable loss and to a kind of impossible mercy, her lament that "names, blames, fixes in a landscape" in full and poignant particularity and concreteness, that finally stirs the mercy of God.

Rachel's skillful lament emphasizes her own particular suffering and her own agency when she suppressed her own desire for her promised future husband Jacob so as to not shame her sister, who was substituted for her in marriage to Jacob by her father. Rachel's lament is not abstract, immediately universalizable but almost painfully concrete, appealing to the Holy One on the basis of her own humanity, her human sacrifice and compassion: *And if I, a creature of flesh and blood. . .* She speaks a general truth in full particularity. Through this midrash, her lamenting female voice is indelibly inscribed, encrypted, into the very texture of Jeremiah's text, *the voice heard in Ramah*, as definitive lament, the woman in the man, as female witness housed within the male prophet's text that succeeds, in ways never matched by the patriarchs, in drawing the Holy One's action of mercy.¹⁴

The growing body of literature on women's laments as a genre that is found in many cultures and in all historical periods is rich, powerful, and suggestive. I have not been able to do justice here to the way in

¹⁴ Adapted from Midrash Lamentations Rabbah, Proem 24 in Cohen 1983, 36–49. I am indebted to Nathaniel Deutsch and Helen Plotkin for drawing my attention to this powerful and relevant midrash. For a detailed treatment of God's tears, with passing reference to Rachel and the Lamentations Rabbah, see Basser 2005, 178–200. See also, for a careful and moving study of images of trauma, dreams, and riddles in Lamentations Rabbah, Hasan-Rokem 2000. This motif of the "women behind the men" in ritual laments and woman as paradigmatic lamenter is true even in a tradition that would seem to place male lamenters at its very heart, the Muharram mourning rituals (*matam majles*) of Shi'i Islam. See the essays in Aghaie 2005. A comparative study of the Rachel material in the *midrashim* and the figures of Zaynab or of Fatemeh Zohra in Shi'i women's mourning rituals would shed vivid light on the fundamental female character of lament across two traditions so seemingly marked by public male authority.

which this field of study is reconfiguring our understanding of the role and bearing of the female voice raised in protest against the ruins of history; nevertheless, I hope that the themes and motifs I have surveyed here will offer us a new and useful lens with which to appreciate some of Blake's strongest prophetic poetry, as well as to counter simplistically dismissive treatments of his female voices by showing the strength and thematic importance of their morally weighted protests and cosmic grief.

2. Lamenting Women, Sexual Strife, and the Ruins of History

For the remainder of this article, I will select from a number of female laments in Blake after *The Book of Thel*, beginning with Oothoon's painfully willed ambiguities in the sexual speech in *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* and Enitharmon's great speech in *Europe: A Prophecy* where, with savage irony, she speaks of "Woman's love as Sin," voices that witness to the sexual and social ruins of the fall of the "Man." These are strong voices of experience that reflect some of Blake's most profound meditations on social, sexual, individual, and institutional forms of violence and injustice. Such voices shape what one might call an ethics of witness (with a decidedly female cast) that is at the heart of Blake's entire prophetic project. Using patterns in these speeches, I then move forward in section three to a discussion of Enion in *The Four Zoas*, before turning to *Jerusalem* and the laments of "good" Jerusalem and "evil" Vala, though Vala's laments include agonizing admissions of her own deep guilt for the ruins of the natural world that reveal her to be much more complex than we might expect. Finally, I move on to Erin, a new creation in Blake's female lament tradition, witness to fallen suffering but also to hope, mercy, redemption, and to what Mitchell refers to as "apocalyptic reversal" "sparked" by the "female imagination" (1978, 191).

I hope, in this survey of critical lament-texts, to counter purely negative depictions of women and women's voices in Blake's loud, crowded, troubled prophecies. Blake's females are far more than "shadowy creatures who do practically nothing but wail," to cite Frye's assessment of female "emanations" in *The Four Zoas* (1972, 277). We will certainly meet with much ambiguity in Blake's treatment of females and female voices, from his deep distrust of and disquiet with sexual differentiation, his horror of the female as "separate," to his seeming homosocial concept of "Divine Humanity." We will also see, however, through our study of the most important of his powerful and particularized female "wailers," in their structured, deeply contextual verbal performances, his idealization of female-to-female love and his problematization of male sexuality, what might be conceived of as

Blake's "protofeminism." While a study of laments will not give us all the answers, I am confident that it will generate better questions about Blake's remarkable but often unsettling, at times internally contradictory, and uncanny poetry.

2.1 *Everything that lives is holy! Oothoon's lament and sexual bondage*

Blake's *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* (1793) is woven of laments, male and female: those of Bromion, Theotormon, and most vividly of course, Oothoon. Laments by males are dominated by self-pity, philosophical abstractions, inchoate shame, and flaccid complaints over a lost past and poignant memory ("memory," of course, is a negative in Blake).

Oothoon's speeches focus, as do women's laments cross-culturally, on the vivid life of minute particulars, and the role of minute particulars in knowledge, insight, and, above all, love.¹⁵ She does not dwell on the past, nor does she appeal to abstract truths beyond the immediate present injustices. In this way, we can see most clearly Oothoon as a particularly *female* lamenter in the traditions of women's laments that we have been exploring. Her rhetoric mirrors Thel's "voice of sorrow"; in fact, it could very well be argued that *Oothoon is Thel's future* (Eaves et al. 1993, 228–29).

She evokes the social and political critique of the present that marks women's laments in general, and alludes powerfully to the rhetoric of Thel's "voice of sorrow." In one passage, an argument about particulars also evokes social ills and injustice, speaking truth to power, here embodied in Urizen,¹⁶ the bearded cold creator god of Deism, the materialist Nobodaddy:

O Urizen! Creator of men! mistaken Demon of heaven:
Thy joys are tears! thy labor vain, to form men in thy image.
How can one joy absorb another? are not different joys
Holy, eternal, infinite! And each joy is a Love.

Does not the great mouth laugh at a gift? & the narrow eyelids mock
At the labor that is above payment, and wilt thou take the ape
For thy councillor? or the dog, for a schoolmaster to thy children?

¹⁵ See the series of rhetorical questions in *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* 3:1–9, which emphasize the differences among things and suggest that these distinctions and particularities are the key to knowledge.

¹⁶ As Bloom notes in his commentary, this is the first appearance of Urizen in Blake's poetry (1988, 901). The name is probably derived, Bloom observes, from the Greek for "to draw with a compass," and echoes the sound and meaning of "horizon." It also has the punning sense of "your Reason," being the very figure of a Deist "clock-maker" god.

Does he who condemns poverty, and he who turns with abhorrence
 From usury: feel the same passion or are they moved alike?
 How can the giver of gifts experience the delights of the merchant?
 How the industrious citizen the pains of the husbandman.
 How different far the fat fed hireling with hollow drum;
 Who buys whole cornfields into wastes, and sings upon the heath:
 How different their eye and ear! how different the world to them!
 With what sense does the parson claim the labor of the farmer?
 What are his nets & gins & traps. & how does he surround him
 With cold floods of abstraction, and with forests of solitude,
 To build him castles and high spires. where kings and priests may dwell.
 Till she who burns with youth. and knows no fixed lot; is bound
 In spells of law to one she loathes: and she must drag the chain
 Of life in weary lust! must chilling murderous thoughts. obscure
 The clear heaven of her eternal spring? to bear the wintry rage
 Of a harsh terror driv'n to madness, bound to hold a rod
 Over her shrinking shoulders all the day; & all the night
 To turn the wheel of false desire: and longings that wake her womb
 To the abhorred birth of cherubs in the human form
 That live a pestilence & die a meteor & are no more.
 Till the child dwell with one he hates. and do the deed he loaths
 And the impure scourge force his seed into its unripe birth
 E'er yet his eyelids can behold the arrows of the day.

Does the whale worship at thy footsteps as the hungry dog?
 Or does he scent the mountain prey, because his nostrils wide
 Draw in the ocean? does his eye discern the flying cloud
 As the ravens eye? or does he measure the expanse like the vulture?
 Does the still spider view the cliffs where eagles hide their young?
 Or does the fly rejoice. because the harvest is brought in?
 Does not the eagle scorn the earth & despise the treasures beneath?
 But the mole knoweth what is there, & the worm shall tell thee.
 Does not the worm erect a pillar in the mouldering church yard? [5:3–41].

And all the while that Oothoon chants this mourning lament over the ruins of Urizen's creation, "The Daughters of Albion hear her woes, & echo back her sighs."

Oothoon's above lament over Urizen, "Mistaken Demon of Men," like the "voice of sorrow," is a powerful example of Blake's prophetic style, where he weaves together the enumeration of "Minute Particulars"—no one Law for the "Lion & the Ox"—and social vision; such speeches are also the particular provenance of women.

Oothoon's speech on "Love! Love! Love! Happy happy Love!" is powerful and justly famous. It sets out a seeming ecstatic sexual liberation, the free experience of "gratified desire" in which Oothoon procures mistresses for Theotormon and lies beside him, watching him sport with "girls of mild silver, or of furious gold." It has often been

taken to be just what it seems to be, a "hymn to free love" and "organized desire" (Bloom 1988, 900), an unfettered celebration of eros without limits, of "perversions" (group sex, voyeurism) purified by *radical erotic self-giving* (Hobson 2000, 32–36). At one point, Oothoon gives voice to one of Blake's most famous lines, the ecstatic chant "for every thing that lives is holy!" which reinforces the reader's impression that this speech is meant in an unequivocally positive way.

However, a look at the visual designs, together with a closer look at the text's inner ironies, along with the historical situation of women and sexuality in the 1790s, tells another story.¹⁷ The speech is fraught with ambiguities. After the description of the imagined orgy, with Oothoon's supposed loving voyeurism, we get lines that have the familiar cadence of lament:

Does the sun walk in glorious raiment. on the secret floor
Where the cold miser spreads his gold? or does the bright cloud drop
On his stone threshold? does his eye behold the beam that brings
Expansion to the eye of pity? or will he bind himself
Beside the ox to thy hard furrow? does not the mild beam blot
The bat, the owl, the glowing tyger, and the king of night.
The sea fowl takes the wintry blast. for a cov'ring to her limbs:
And the wild snake, the pestilence to adorn him with gems & gold.
And trees. & birds. & beasts. & men. behold their eternal joy.
Arise your little glancing wings and sing your infant joy!
Arise and drink your bliss, for every thing that lives is holy!

Thus every morning wails Oothoon. but Theotormon sits
Upon the margind ocean conversing with shadows dire.

The Daughters of Albion hear her woes, & echo back her sighs [8:1–13].

This is hardly pure praise, if it is praise at all. How should one *say* this speech? Should one chant it as one would a hymn of praise? In many places it seems more like a dirge. Should one "cry" it? But what is this "cry," exactly? Do we mix and match different voices to go along with

¹⁷ Bethan Stevens (2007) has shown that the sources for Blake's *Visions* include not only the social debates around Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* and Blake's work on engraving images for Steadman's Narrative of Surinam focused on the brutalities of slavery, but also the rich Abolitionist literature of sensibility, particularly the work of abolition poetesses like Maria Falconer, women who became obsessed with fantasies of slavery and becoming slaves, sexual capture, and rape. Stevens also claims that part of Theotormon's "torment" and "shame" is having *himself*, along with Oothoon, been raped by Bromion, the male slave-owner, adding the theme of male-to-male sexual violence onto that of the violence of heterosexual love. A detailed discussion of these issues far exceeds the scope of this paper. I include a longer discussion of sexuality in *Visions* in my larger project-in-process.

varying registers of emotion, “ecchoing back the sighs”? Is the speech ironic, and if so, how do we capture the various levels of irony?

Ambiguities multiply if we also look at the designs on the plates. The first plate (from “I cry” to “secret floor”) has five of the Daughters of Albion “crouching in attitudes of despair,” all but one of them hiding their faces. One looks up and seems horrified. Their heavy garments seem to smother them in thick folds, and the air is suffused with black smoke and hints of green and vermilion. On the next, and last, plate, three Daughters are huddled, two look up in quiet awe rather than horror, at a woman floating on sulphurous cloud-pillows as on the crest of an approaching storm that emerges from a vortex over black waters, often referred to as the “the Sea of Time & Space.” Fires from her breast (burning brightest near her heart) flow around her shoulders and fan her open arms. Her face is sad. She is mourning. Erdman speaks of “an image that would suit Shelley’s of a fierce Maenad with streaming locks” (1974, 135–36). She is the visual twin of Urizen-rapist Bromion on the title-page who flies after a fleeing, terrified naked woman. The scene, painted in livid rainbow colors, combines vivid aliveness and urgency with sorrow.

We return here to the ambiguities of Thel’s “voice of sorrow” from the (vaginal?) grave, a voice that foreshadows Oothoon’s voice, her pleadings. Oothoon is Thel’s future, but this hardly solves any problem. On the contrary, it simply restates many “dilemmas of desire” inscribed in so many of Blake’s texts. We, too, hang on the clouds, suspended between fall and apocalypse, like the mourning woman.

Bruder argues that Oothoon fails, that she is “compromised and defeated,” in her capitulation to patriarchal voyeurism and the “excessive sexualization of women” (1997, 82–83, 89). Indeed, Blake in *Visions* not only argues positively for some visionary/sexual/spiritual liberation but also, particularly with regard to women, articulates a network of issues, laying out problems, dilemmas. Eros is problematized, even while praised, in this richly figured speech on free love.

Blake’s profeminism was perhaps, as Bruder observes, inspired by his acquaintance with the work of Mary Wollstonecraft. In Blake and in Wollstonecraft, claims Bruder, “patriarchal society forces women to gain power through the manipulation and exploitation of their sexuality,” but he differed from her in that he did not wish to make everyone’s passion “rational” but rather thought that “sexual energy and passion would be instrumental in the process of social change” (1997, 89). Ultimately, Blake’s profeminism is not about answers, but is still critical and unstable. He poses questions, sometimes veering back and forth perilously between, on the one hand, what seems to be misogyny and, on the other hand, a vivid advocacy of the powers of

women's voices for visionary/spiritual and sensual freedom.¹⁸ Women's voices in *Visions* are still very much in play, something that shifts in Blake's later prophecies, particularly, and mostly paradoxically, in the sudden "apocalyptic reversal" ushered in by women's laments themselves in *Jerusalem*, where such a "reversal" spells the end of the separate female voice, the very ethical agent of witness. We move from the particular—particular love and the particular concrete sense of ruin central to an ethics of witness—to the "general" solution and "universal" resolution of contraries. I will return to this point in the conclusion.

Whereas Bruder reads Oothoon quite negatively, I think we can, and should, see this remarkable speech more positively as a classic example of a woman's lament. As lament, it is stark ethical witness to present ruin. It is, in the phrase of Nicholas Williams, a "teasing of utopian significations out of ideological forms," and this is its purpose and its positive power (1998, 96).

Ultimately, as with *The Book of Thel*, the knotted ambiguities of Blake's text—its fearless and rigorous interrogations of his contemporary situation and its concrete use of the lament as a strategy—make this a text endless in its suggestive power. Like the most famous laments of Koundounara in village Greece or the ritual crying among the Awlad 'Ali, memorized and ritually recited by women in the course of their own personal sufferings, Oothoon's lament is given to us by Blake for continual meditation. It interrogates us in each rereading and relooking. It is our work to listen.

2.2 "Women's Love is Sin": Lament and Enitharmon's sleep

In *Europe: A Prophecy* (1794), Blake further pushes the ambiguities of women's voices and female lament. The *Preludium* speaks of a "nameless shadowy female" condemned to the nightmare of birth and death, of birthing, over and over again, throughout history, progeny who either suffer injustices or cause them, "devouring & devoured," "consumed and consuming."¹⁹ Blake begins to develop here what Frye in *Fearful Symmetry* calls "the Orc cycle" of revolutionary violence and the reassertion of oppressive order. The birth and the binding and the

¹⁸ Williams 1998, 95 speaks of Blake's "cunning hermeneutic" in *Visions*, revealing "the utopian content within the ideological form."

¹⁹ *Europe*, 60–61; for plates, see Dörrbecker 1998, 221–22. In the other "Continental Prophecy," *America*, Orc rapes what is perhaps his own sister ("the shadowy daughter of Urthona") and brings forth fierce revolution to every continent, a vision of "eternal death" and "torment long fortold," a rending of the fabric of reality that brings the "stern Bard"—an image of Blake himself?—to despair.

freeing and the capitulation of Orc constitute Blake's (and his shadowy female's) "nightmare of history" from which we all long to awake.

With its vividly colored designs that emphasize female figures in extravagant mourning, suffering in war, suffering over the deaths of children and the ravages of the plague, women as victims of male "revolutions" and assertions of cold, calculated Urizenic power, *Europe* is powerful to read and powerful to look at. There is even perhaps a striking reference to contemporary figures like Marie Antoinette in the winged female figure, "scroll-garmented," on the title page who, floating in air above clouds, with head bent down, her black hair hanging in shiny locks, grasps with both hands the back of her neck, as if anticipating the blow of the guillotine.²⁰ There is also the erotic (and ultimately incestuous) image of a young and naked Enitharmon lifting up the bed sheets of her grown first-born son, fiery Orc, the spirit of revolution, also naked, perhaps alluding to the rumored but false accusations of Marie Antoinette's incestuous relations with her son (Erdman 1974, 162–63).

At the center of the prophecy is an evocation of the eighteenth-century "sleep of Enitharmon," a nightmare history of plagues, wars, the chains of sacrificial religion, the progressive shrinkage of the human person from full vision to the meager five senses, to death and the dominion of Urizen and "his brazen book." We have a vision of the fallen contemporary London, and a final great irony, Newton blowing the trump of the "last Judgment," turning the angelic hosts into dead autumn leaves, who fall "thro' the wintry skies seeking their graves / Rattling their hollow bones in howling and lamentation" (13:4–8).

Who is Enitharmon here? A strategist who shores up as much power as she can in a world to be defined by male power? The "Female Will" is negative; it "spreads nets in every secret path." It tells the Human race that "Woman's love is Sin." But is it also all that a woman can do? How are we to read the following passage, given our previous discussions of the lament?

Now comes the night of Enitharmon's joy!
 Who shall I call? Who shall I send?
 That Woman, lovely Woman! may have dominion?
 Arise O Rintrah thee I call! & Palamabron thee!
 Go! tell the Human race that Woman's love is Sin!
 That an Eternal life awaits the worms of sixty winters

²⁰ Erdman 1974, 162 does not allude to Marie Antoinette here but describes this figure as "the scroll-garmented huge-winged Cassandra . . . who should be soaring fast yet rains her black locks straight down toward the flaming orb of the new born." For extensive references to the life and death of Marie Antoinette and her connection to Blake's *Europe*, see Bruder 1997, 158–71.

In an allegorical abode where existence hath never come:
Forbid all joy, & from her childhood shall the little female
Spread nets in every secret path.

My weary eyelids draw towards the evening, my bliss is yet but new
[5:1–10].

This is not a happy declaration. In the design, we see a scaly, black, and gawking Rintrah, hardly the true face of chivalry or the chivalric code. As we have read in the formal laments, there is irony here. "Woman's love is Sin"; how might we really read this? With a devious voice, a tender one, or a tone dripping with irony? To whom is this addressed? What kind of "bliss" is this? The sleep of history is inevitable, and Enitharmon is its queen:

Enitharmon slept, Eighteen hundred years: Man was a Dream!
The night of Nature and their harps unstrung:
She slept in the middle of her nightly song,
Eighteen hundred years, a female dream! [9:1–5].

The context, the larger tragic narrative of history, of these texts betrays a savage irony, and places us at the heart of a lament. "Lovely" woman, lovely "sin." She dreams a nightmare of violence and constriction dominated by males and male power: "bright ruins" and "the Fiery King," the pillars and "massy" uncut stones of altars of sacrifice, a history, in its violent shrinkage, that mirrors the shrinkage of the human being:

. . . when the five senses whelm'd
In deluge o'er the earth-born man; then turned the fluxile eyes
Into stationary orbs, concentrating all things.
The every-varying spiral ascents to the heaven of heavens
Were bended downward; and the nostrils golden gates shut
Turn'd outward, barr'd and petrify'd against the infinite.
Thought chang'd the infinite to a serpent; that which pitieth:
To a devouring flame; and man fled from its face and hid
In forests of night; then all the eternal forests were divided
Into earths rolling in circles of space, that like an ocean rush'd
And overwhelmed all except this finite wall of flesh.
Then was the serpent temple form'd, image of infinite
Shut up in finite revolutions, and man became an Angel;
Heaven a mighty circle turning; god a tyrant crown'd [10:10–23].

The design for this page is an awesome dark spangled serpent the color of mineral earth: moss, lichen, pitted rock; its seven coils are the seven days of the "encompassing creation," its body a material transformation of the infinite (Erdman 1974, 168). The letters send off shoots of

spirals, banner-forms, and vine-shapes, the vegetal world of cycles. However, before this terrible beauty is born, we look in silence at two stunning full-page images, both of which focus on helpless, grieving, and hungry women.

In one, an emblem of "Famine," a rich woman and a poor woman sit near a dead child, his cold white body lying on a white shroud. A huge hearth gives off flames like those on the head of Orc, heating up a pot that presumably will be used to cook the child for food. The poor woman, in a simple cloak, barefoot and without jewelry, is bent in grief; the other, a woman with a pearl necklace, hugs herself, perhaps gestures with one hand to finger her pearls, and stares blankly at the pot. The other full-page image is an emblem of "The Plague": a gloomy gray-haired bellman with a drooping wide-brimmed hat, dressed severely in black, who looks down, averting his gaze from two women, whose faces and feet have turned green with advancing plague. One, a blonde, collapses in despair in the arms of a young man; the other, seemingly mad with grief, kneels and raises up her arms in frantic supplication, her black hair falling back like that of the floating Antoinette angel. Behind them all is a closed oak door in a brick wall marked "Lord Have Mercy on Us," with a cross, crudely drawn (Erdman 1974, 164–65).

These are the true images of grief and hopelessness, an unredeemed present, and they are marked by mourning women, and by a ruthless vision of social injustice (Erdman 1974, 164–65). Like the Sikh women, described in Das's study, who wander their neighborhoods, silently witnessing to the violence that has ruined the streets and houses around them, haunted by the ghosts of the dead, these figures—these two pages—witness to mute lament, impossible choices, things unspeakable. Blake's designs emphasize *women* as victims in this historical period of Enitharmon's dream. The primary actors in the violent nightmare of history are men: specters, Albion's Angel, Orc. Is Enitharmon the creator of all this, its form-giver and mother, or the witness? Or both? Reluctant creator *and* witness? This would be one of the many painful paradoxes of this text and of Blake's social vision. What are we to do with her *laughter*, the aside about "woman's triumph," given these silent designs so marked by women's lament?

Enitharmon laugh'd in her sleep to see (O woman's triumph)
 Every house a den, every man bound; the shadows are filld
 With specters, and the windows wove over with curses of iron:
 Over the doors Thou shalt not; & over the chimneys Fear is written:
 With bands of iron round their necks fasten'd into the walls
 The citizens: in leaden gives the inhabitant of suburbs
 Walk heavy: soft and bent are the bones of the villagers [12:25–31].

I think Bruder is right here to see Blake informed by Wollstonecraft in the composition of this bleak and powerful prophecy (1997, 168–73). Blake points in these images, in the savage ironies of Enitharmon's dream, and what I believe to be her *ironic* laughter ("O woman's triumph," most deep of ironies), to the fate of women trapped within the confines of male social order, the patriarchal order defined by both Urizen's and Orc's visions of the world. The design on the page with the above verses has what looks like a female figure,²¹ seemingly naked, bound in a great spider's web that dominates the page and edges around the verses. This human form is contorted, with impossibly twisted hips, hands in prayer and head stretched painfully upward, a feverish expression on the face. If female, we can say with certainty that Blake has, in yet another context, stressed women as victims; if truly indeterminate, then perhaps Blake's nascent "Human Form Divine" is what is trapped and praying for freedom in this nightmare history.

As Bruder notes, "Enitharmon's speech isn't issued from a position of power but is a response to the position in which patriarchy places women." Blake's designs and text here display, as Bruder suggests,

an awareness of the pertinence of Mary Wollstonecraft's observation that [women's] "exertion of cunning is only an instinct of nature to enable them to obtain indirectly a little of the power of which they are unjustly denied a share; for, if women are not permitted to enjoy legitimate rights, they will render both men and themselves vicious to obtain illicit privileges" [1997, 169–70].²²

When Enitharmon wakes from her dream, she calls various male–female pairs that serve to enslave and bind, but also to *order*, to foster revelry under the moon. The natural imagery in the page design teems with a profusion of creatures, snakes, spiders, birds in flight, snails, butterflies, leafy, looping foliage, a Meadia flower, "an immense world of delight," a counter-image of the ruin we have witnessed. There is buried here something of a turn, though of course, great ambivalence and anxiety remain. Enitharmon tries to dissuade Oothoon from giving up her "womans secrecy," perhaps a warning that her seeking of sexual and bodily liberation is only a self-destructive illusion, in that it will inevitably be appropriated and used against her by men.

²¹ The gender is somewhat ambiguous; there seems to be a visible breast, but it is perhaps transsexual. Bruder 1997, 172, not surprisingly, sees it as female; Erdman 1974, 170 calls it "human," then "he," a figure of the "soft-boned villager."

²² See also Nicholas Williams's nuanced discussion of Wollstonecraft's "ideology-critique" as a background to Enitharmon's speeches and their evocation of "cunning female power" in *Europe* (Williams 1998, 74–82). To read the images along with the words, and to treat these texts with the structures of the lament in mind, shapes a more "positive" and complexly dialectical interpretation of Enitharmon here.

In *Europe*, we are faced with a net of ambiguities on the social/political level that rivals the end of *Visions* and its dilemmas of desire. There seems to be a moment of joy and sport after Enitharmon's last speech, but very soon, and suddenly, "terrible Orc," the male hero, shoots from "the heights of Enitharmon" and initiates a strife of blood that is hardly redemptive. The final design depicts a male heroic rescue of females: Los, in naked grandeur, carries a fainted female on his back—her thick black hair hangs down, touching his thigh—and holds the hand of a little girl who gestures to an ascending eagle, rescuing them both from encroaching fires of war and "strife of blood."

Again, we note that Blake's great genius is not, at least at this point, about solving problems, but diagnosing them. This challenging text sets before us dilemmas—dilemmas of desire, freedom, sexual politics, the body, gender, and spiritual power. In the spirit of women's laments imbedded within it, both in words and mute pictures, it speaks an awful truth to power.

3. Laments, Redemption, and Apocalyptic Reversal

3.1 "Enion blind & age-bent wept upon the desolate wind . . .": Crying witness in *The Four Zoas*

Perhaps the most impressive and sustained laments, by males or by females, in Blake appear in *Vala* or *The Four Zoas: The torments of Love & Jealousy in the Death and Judgment of Albion the Ancient Man* (1796–1807). This was Blake's first attempt at long epic form, using his characteristic long-lined verse, the "fourteener."²³ Frye calls it the "greatest abortive masterpiece in English literature" (1972, 269).

The Four Zoas is a vast epic narrative that traces the progressive fall from a primordial fourfold unity of the powers of harmony, love, intellect, and imagination, or in Blake's mythological world, Tharmas, Luvah, Urizen, and Urthona. We also see Blake begin to develop systematically his idea of the Emanations, the female aspects of (male?) persons, which brings to the fore important gender issues. Each of these four forces/powers/characteristics, primordial "natures" of the human person, the primal "Man," has female "consorts": for Tharmas, Enion; for Luvah, Vala; for Urizen, Ahania; for Urthona/Los, Enitharmon. Part of the primordial fall is into sexual division, when

²³ Blake's very first use of the septenarius or "fourteener," the seven-beat line that was inspired by a variety of poetic models, from Elizabethan poetry to the cadences of the King James Bible, was in the unengraved prophetic work *Tiriël*. Interestingly, Blake composed, in the last chapter of *Tiriël*, a powerful speech in the lament mode for the old blind king Tiriël, though it takes, in Tiriël's voice, the form of a barren curse, and understanding that has come, in Bloom's words, "too late." See *Tiriël* 8:3–29.

the emanations separate in jealous (erotic) distance from their "husbands"—harmony, love, intellect, and imagination. This leads all too rapidly to disaster in Blake's world, as we have seen in our reading of *Visions* and *Europe*.

The female powers are of particular interest here because, following the initial example of Enion, they witness Cassandra-like to the disasters. They systematically and formally lament, as the voices of Experience, the tragic present, and they long, in passionate lines of great power, for redemption. Enion's speeches stand out in the first six nights as outstanding examples of Blake's prophetic female voice of lament, of social critique, ethical witness, and outrage over injustice, like that Voice from the Grave that Thel hears before she shrieks and runs back into the vales of Har. Ahania, Urizen's Emanation, also adds to this prophetic voice as Enion ultimately lapses into "non-entity," a babbling incoherent wave in the waters of non-existence. They both return at the end of Night the Eighth, ushering in the Last Judgment, their witness to ruin a pivot-point in the narrative.

We also have Los and Enitharmon here, beginning to transform more and more into the truly prophetic, imaginary powers they become in the later epics: time and space, the mercy of eternity, laboring with forms/outlines and colors (like William and Catherine Blake) to give a shape to things, drawing a line "upon the walls of shining heaven" and tinturing it "with beams of blushing love" (98:35–36), to build the city of Golgonooza (the city of art) that will usher in the triumph of Jerusalem, the city of Eden, emanation of Albion, at the end of the poem.

In *The Four Zoas*, Enion, Ahania, and Enitharmon are strong female forces, and lament displays their power. As we have briefly glimpsed in *Europe*, Blake's prophetic histories of cosmic fall portray a profound ambivalence toward women. The "female" plays a deeply ambiguous role in the economy of his "creation," functioning as the weaver of captive forms, material deceiver ("Nature" as "Female Will"), and also the most vigorous and sober witness to the ruin.²⁴ Such ambivalence is deeply connected to Blake's ambivalence toward erotic love and "otherness." However, as lamenters, they have their own undeniable authority and autonomous power, despite other threads of misogyny in the text. They speak some of Blake's most powerful and articulate poetry of protest.

The males—most particularly Tharmas and Los—also voice laments in Blake's great epic, but their laments and their weeping tend to be inarticulate, merely inchoate, a matter of self-pity, memory, impotent

²⁴ Along with sources discussed above, see also the fine discussion of female secondariness and Blake's complex sense of "nature" in Ferber 1985, 89–115, especially 111–15.

rage. We return here to Holst-Warhaft's comparative analysis, where she observes that while "men and women both weep," men's weeping "tends to be inarticulate." It is women, from New Guinea to Greece, North India, and rural Ireland, who "seem to be able to turn weeping into a controlled, often contemplative lament" (1992, 20–21). Women move "from tears to ideas" without thereby giving up the tears, and this is what we also see here in the passionate worlds of Blake's narrative prophecies.²⁵

From the very beginning of *The Four Zoas*, Blake's sexual division of labor in laments is clear. Tharmas, the "parent power," is the first to fall, and his witness is appropriately inchoate:

Why wilt thou Examine every little fibre of my soul
 Spreading them out before the Sun like Stalks of flax to dry
 The infant joy is beautiful but its anatomy
 Horrible Ghast & Deadly nought shalt thou find in it
 But Death Despair & Everlasting brooding Melancholy

Thou wilt go mad with horror if thou dost Examine thus
 Every moment of my secret hours Yea I know
 That I have sinnd & that my Emanations have become harlots
 I am already distracted at their deeds & if I look
 Upon them more Despair will bring self murder on my soul
 O Enion thou art thyself a root growing in hell
 Tho thus heavenly beautiful to draw me to destruction

Sometimes I think thou art a flower expanding
 Sometimes I think thou art fruit breaking from its bud
 In dreadful dolor & pain & I am like an atom
 A Nothing left in darkness yet I am an identity
 I wish & feel & weep & groan Ah terrible terrible [I. 4:29–45].

While her husband eventually sinks down "into the sea a pale white corse," Enion begins a slow deliberate process of weaving, while loving and weeping over "her shining loom of Vegetation," the material world of forms to stave off the chaos, including Los and Enitharmon. This is women's work, where lament is a weaving, a creative and performative act of mercy.

As the fallen world unfolds in its dreadful and lovely, transient, material forms, Enion, one of its merciful weavers and weepers, is an eloquent witness to its ruin and ultimately to its apocalyptic reversal. She becomes in Blake's epic the very figure of an Irish female lamenter (*bean chointe*), the mad woman wandering in the wilderness. Her laments are some of the most powerful in the poem, and come at

²⁵ It is in this sense that laments might be distinguished from "tears" alone as a cross-cultural religious category. See Patton and Hawley 2005.

pivotal moments in the text. The difference between her performative speech and the inchoate babble of her lamenting husband Tharmas is unmistakable. We have come across this lamenting voice before, in Thel's "voice of sorrow" and in Oothoon. There it sounded its minute particulars of grief, individual sense of loss, but not with such potent power. The "marriage feast" of Los and Enitharmon is the celebration of what will become a cycle of violence, jealousy, possessive love, and craving, sexual division that will divide the heart as it divides creation, and in the midst of it, Enion witnesses, weeping:

Enion blind & age-bent wept upon the desolate wind

Why does the Raven cry aloud and no eye pities her?
Why fall the Sparrow & the Robin in the foodless winter?
Faint! shivering they sit on a leafless bush, or frozen stone
Wearied with seeking food across the snowy waste; the little
Heart, cold; and the little tongue consum'd, that once in thoughtless joy
Gave songs of gratitude to waving corn fields around their nest.

Why howl the Lion & the Wolf? why do they roam abroad?
Deluded by summers heat they sport in enormous love
And cast their young out to the hungry wilds & sandy deserts

Why is the Sheep given to the knife? the Lamb plays in the Sun
He starts! he hears the foot of Man! he says, Take thou my wool
But spare my life, but he knows not that winter cometh fast.

The Spider sits in his labored Web, eager watching for the Fly
Presently comes a famished Bird & takes away the Spider
His Web is left all desolate, that his little anxious heart
So careful wove; & spread it out with sighs and weariness.

This was the Lamentation of Enion round the golden Feast
Eternity ground and was troubled at the image of Eternal Death
Without the body of Man an Exudation from his sickning limbs
[I. 17:1–10, 18:1–10].

As we have seen in other women's laments, Blake's Enion is immediate and concrete; she enumerates particular antinomies in her lament, and is pointed in her social commentary. Like the Greek women *moirologhistres*, like Rachel or Shakespeare's Constance in *King John*, she names, blames, fixes in a landscape.

While Enion's early lament is certainly powerful, perhaps Blake's greatest poetic achievement is Enion's later lament after Enitharmon's elaborate parody of love language from the Hebrew *Song of Songs*, "the joy of woman is the Death of her most best beloved / Who dies for Love of her" (II. 34:63–67). This speech, deeply ironic, like that of Oothoon's, also contains the phrase—again set within a savage ironic context—"For every thing that lives is holy!" Enitharmon's speech exudes

division and jealousy, and perhaps hides within its studied ambivalence, its own lamenting spirit. It is also the apotheosis of the "Female Will," sung in "Rapturous and delusive trance" (II. 34:78–96).

On the heels of this sexual delusion and erotic division, "Enion wails from the dark deep, the golden heavens tremble":

I am made to sow the thistle for wheat; the nettle for a nourishing dainty
 I have planted a false oath in the earth, it has brought forth a poison tree
 I have chosen the serpent for a counselor & the dog
 For a schoolmaster to my children
 I have blotted out from light & living the dove & nightingale
 And I have caused the earth worm to beg from door to door
 I have taught the thief a secret path into the house of the just
 I have taught pale artifice to spread his nets upon the morning
 My heavens are brass my earth is iron my moon is a clod of clay
 My sun a pestilence burning at noon & a vapour of death in night

What is the price of Experience do men buy it for a song
 Or wisdom for a dance in the street? No it is bought with the price
 Of all that a man hath his house his wife his children
 Wisdom is sold in the desolate market where none come to buy
 And in the witherd field where the farmer plows for bread in vain

It is an easy thing to triumph in the summers sun
 And in the vintage & to sing on the wagon loaded with corn
 It is an easy thing to talk of patience to the houseless wanderer

To listen to the hungry ravens cry in wintry season
 When the red blood is filld with wine & with the marrow of lambs
 It is an easy thing to laugh at wrathful elements
 To hear the dog howl at the wintry door, the ox in the slaughter house moan
 To see a god on every wind & a blessing on every blast
 To hear sounds of love in the thunder storm that destroys our enemies
 house
 To rejoice in the blight that covers his field, & the sickness that cuts off
 his children
 While our olive & vine sing & laugh round our door & our children bring
 fruits & flowers

The groan & the dolor are quite forgotten & the slave grinding at the mill
 And the captive in chains & the poor in the prison, & the soldier in the
 field
 When the shattered bone hath laid him groaning among the happier dead

It is an easy thing to rejoice in the tents of prosperity
 Thus could I sing & thus rejoice, but it is not so with me! [III. 35:1–19,
 36:1–13].

"Wailing," yes, but hardly in Frye's general and dismissive sense (1972, 277). There is obvious biblical resonance, from Jeremiah, Zechariah,

and in particular, from Job.²⁶ This is wailing with a difference. And in the context of Blake's "Visionary Forms Dramatic"—as in Lamentations Rabbah, with its evocation of the weeping ghost of our "Mother" Rachel encrypted into the language of biblical lament—it is female "wailing," and it communicates.

There are other examples of women's laments in *The Four Zoas*, including Enitharmon's Songs of Lamentation in Night the Eighth that weave on the "Looms Cathedral" the "saving forms" of the City of Art, Golgonooza (VIII. 100[1–2]-103), but I close here with one last point and one last reference to Enion.

Such speeches often, in their bleak but powerful witness, presage in Blake a turning, a sudden reversal and spiritual apocalypse, as Rachel's lament stirs the heart of the Holy One. In *The Four Zoas*, it is the speeches of Ahania, and the astounding one of Enion, our wandering old lady lamenter, that close Night the Eighth, anticipating the "return" of the "Lamb of God," the "Eternal Man," in Blake the visionary Human Form Divine, redeemed Humanity, who is felt, who is seen and heard, in the sorrows of all things. These women's voices presage redemption.²⁷

Enion's voice, like Thel's voice of sorrow in futurity, is a witness of "bitter hope" from the "caverns of the grave." There is nothing more to say, really, after her great speech of Night the Eighth (114:1–33). We listen; she works to cry.

3.2 Lament, female voices, and apocalyptic renewal in Jerusalem

Unlike the laments in *The Four Zoas*, women's laments in *Jerusalem* (1804–21) do not "stick out"; they are more deeply woven into the text, less differentiated. What we begin to see more and more in this last vision of the "judgment" is lament as a vehicle of compassion; as in the midrashic narrative of Rachel the Lamenter, lament clears a space for redemption to occur. This mode of lament as compassionate insight goes even for a figure as seemingly negative as Vala, the seductive goddess of the natural world who holds all vision in her dark vale/veil, the folds of her garment.

One of Vala's most poignant laments occurs in a strangely compelling episode in the first chapter of *Jerusalem* when Albion, the figure of fallen divine humanity, becomes more and more closed in on himself,

²⁶ Bloom, in his notes for Night the Second (1988, 954), cites specifically Zechariah 8:17 and Job 28:12–13 as "biblical lyric echoes" of Enion's speech.

²⁷ It is interesting to note Blake's very early lament in this "female" style, put into the mouth of the old blind and bitter king Tiriell, where it speaks to defeat only, and a knowledge come too late. See *Tiriell*, sec. 8.

congealed into the rock of England, solid and opaque, surrounded by the “Sea of Time & Space.” As he hardens outside, inside he flees “inward among the currents of his rivers.” It is here that we come to what Christopher Hobson has called the “riverbank idyll,” the scene of mutual lesbian love-making between Jerusalem and Vala (Hobson 2000, 150–62):

He [Albion] found Jerusalem upon the River of his City soft repos'd
 In the arms of Vala, assimilating in one with Vala
 The Lilly of Havilah: and they sang soft thro' Lambeth's vales,
 In a sweet moony night & silence that they had created
 With a blue sky spread over with wings and a mild moon,
 Dividing & uniting into many female forms: Jerusalem
 Trembling! then in one commingling in eternal tears,
 Sighing to melt his Giant beauty, on the moony river [I. 19:40–47].

This is undoubtedly one of the most erotic verses in all of Blake. It is an uncharacteristic celebration, for Blake, of *mutual* love, a blissful and fertile melting and mingling without anxiety, asymmetry, or negation, and it is the love-making between two women.²⁸ Mitchell refers to this moment as “an image of a prelapsarian harmony and freedom which looks evil from a fallen perspective, and which is evil insofar as it absorbs or disguises the visionary form of Jerusalem in the image of Vala or Nature” (1978, 207). As Hobson notes, this interlude-like scene announces certain themes that become critical in assessing Blake's final synthesis in *Jerusalem*. In this intimate, mutually affirming, lesbian sexual encounter we glimpse something of the harmony, fluid freedom, and sexual equality that remains one of the most longed-for goals of his visionary texts. The fact that this whole scene occurs in “Lambeth's vales,” one of Blake's very own neighborhoods in a vigorous period of his creative life, places this scene close to the poet's life and desires.

However, this river-drenched happiness does not last long. The two women see Albion fallen on “mild Lambeth's Vale.” “Astonish'd! Terrified,” they hover “over his Giant limbs.” Here we are made aware of a deep ambiguity. Albion's “fall” is seen by the two women to be a result of his witnessing their love-making on the river (this is made most clear in a later speech of Jerusalem). Blake's Albion witnesses the power of a love he can neither inspire nor control in his beloved, and the jealousy and shame overwhelm him.²⁹ What follows this discovery

²⁸ Prophetic love between males, such as the Los/Blake, Urizen/Orc, and Milton/Urizen couplings, are more agonistic in Blake. My larger study includes a detailed reading of such agonistic homosocial texts and images in Blake's *Milton*.

²⁹ It is impossible not to think of Proust here, and the narrator of *A la recherche du temps perdu* when he spies the forbidden love between Mme. Vinteuil and her female

are two moving "laments," weeping speech that gives us insight into and compassion for both women, especially for Vala, as she will represent what is most negative in the Female Will throughout the narrative. We see her here vulnerable, caught between two precious loves, Albion and Jerusalem, weaving "the veil of tears." Her own shame and guilt here are personal and particular, but they also, like Albion's, have cosmic ramifications.

The first lament is Jerusalem's, as she reacts to Vala's sudden shame:

Then thus Jerusalem spoke, while Vala wove the veil of tears:
Weeping in pleadings of Love, in the web of despair.

Wherefore hast thou shut me into the winter of human life
And clos'd up the sweet regions of youth and virgin innocence:
Where we live, forgetting error, not pondering on evil:
Among my lambs & brooks of water, among my warbling birds:
Where we delight in innocence before the face of the Lamb:
Going in and out before him in his love and sweet affection [I. 20:3–10].

The second is Vala's reply, a lament in the female mode, about personal loss, particular loss, mirroring social disorder:

Vala replied weeping & trembling, hiding in her veil.
When winter rends the hungry family and the snow falls:
Upon the ways of men hiding the paths of man and beast,
Then mourns the wanderer: then he repents his wanderings & eyes
The distant forest; then the slave groans in the dungeon of stone.
The captive in the mill of the stranger, sold for scanty hire.
They view their former life: they number moments over and over;
Stringing them on their remembrance as on a thread of sorrow.
Thou are my sister and my daughter! thy shame is mine also!
Ask me not of my griefs! thou knowest all of my griefs [I. 20:11–20].

We will never read Vala the same again after what this lament reveals about her sensibilities, her guilt, and her dark emotions. Lament has humanized her here, made her more complex, and has also made Blake's great narrative of fall and redemption more personal, particular.

Jerusalem's reply, "in soft tears over the valleys," contains a brutally simple question: "O Vala what is Sin that thou shudderest and weapest / At the sight of thy once lov'd Jerusalem?" "What is Sin," she says, "but a little / Error & fault that is soon forgiven?" (I. 20:22–24). To feel shame over this love is to do violence to others. Blake's insights here

friend (Proust 1954, 156–65; 1992, 219–33). Homosexual and lesbian love in Proust represents, for his heterosexual narrator, a love and happiness that he will never be able to inspire in his beloved, a larger world of love from which he will always be shut out, to which he will always remain a voyeur, and so reveals a persistent truth about love and jealousy.

are far ranging. Finally, Jerusalem speaks of a past when, out of jealousy, witnessing their love, Albion raped Vala:

When Albion rent thy beautiful net of gold and silver twine;
 Thou hadst woven it with art, thou hadst caught me in the bands
 Of love; thou refusedst to let me go: Albion beheld thy beauty
 Beautiful thro' our Love's comeliness, beautiful thro' pity.
 The Veil shone with thy brightness in the eyes of Albion,
 Because it enclosed pity & love; because we love'd one-another!
 Albion lov'd thee! he rent thy Veil! he embrac'd thee! he lov'd thee!
 Astonish'd at his beauty & perfection, thou forgavest his furious love:
 I redounded from Albion's bosom in my virgin loveliness.
 The Lamb of God receive'd me in his arms he smil'd upon us:
 He made me his Bride & Wife: he gave thee to Albion.
 Then that was a time of love: O why is it passed away! [I. 20:30–41].

It is after this stunning moment in the narrative, where lament articulates particular love, jealousy, and separation, that Albion turns away from both women in shame, his heart helplessly divided against himself. His sense of sin and female dissembling secrets overwhelm him. He curses both Vala and Jerusalem, enumerates what he sees as Jerusalem's faults, recapitulating the originary fall of Tharmas at the beginning of *The Four Zoas*. Jerusalem speaks Tharmas's lines about numbering every "little fibre" of the Soul, "spreading them out before the Sun like stalks of flax to dry" (I. 22:19–24), and we will get the same "dull round" all over again: ruinous history, individual and collective disaster. As Hobson notes, "Albion's rending the original veil, a female curtain, emblematic of the maidenhead, which was the sign of Vala's and Jerusalem's love, *creates* the veil of moral virtue" (2000, 158).

I will not reproduce here Hobson's detailed and nuanced exegesis of this scene and its implications. To most of Blake's readers, as he observes, this scene's "positive treatment of Vala is its most striking aspect." Many critics have too habitually interpreted it as negative, including Bloom, who remarks that the scene has a certain "sinister beauty," and that Jerusalem's love for Vala, temptress of fallen material nature, dragging her heavy veil over all things, is "a disaster, a mistaken mingling of man's freedom [symbolically Jerusalem] with his bondage" (Bloom 1965, 429–30, quoted in Hobson 2000, 154).³⁰ Hobson, on the other hand, argues that Vala becomes the negative figure she is, the dreaded Nature goddess who enslaves her "little ones," in reaction to the jealous rage of Albion over her love for

³⁰ See also Bloom 1988, 934: "Vala thus has paradisaical beauty as 'the Lilly of Havilah,' but she is a sister to Nimrod [Havilah is also a name of his brother], and her assimilating 'in one' with Jerusalem is a destruction of Albion's liberty."

Jerusalem. Vala's love, shame, guilt, and awareness of transgression is a complex topic, a theme that weaves its way through the poem and has as yet hardly received the complex treatment due to it, though Hobson comes close. He summarizes:

Blake's treatment of Vala—complex, far-reaching, and deeply radical—suggests a potentially and initially benign role for nature and the flesh, and thus sexuality and lesbianism in particular. Further, far from treating Jerusalem and Vala's love as a source of bondage, Blake inverts the republican tradition's link between homosexuality and social corruption by making guilt over homosexuality a wellspring of war and oppression [2000, 154].³¹

Blake's ideas about the role or place of homosexuality, or perhaps more accurately, his implicit vision of a polymorphous sexual identity within the world of redeemed humanity "in Eden," remain a major question in his work, one that is crucial in the interpretation of his final vision of the Human (Fourfold) Form Divine at the end of *Jerusalem*. Though Blake's great vision of Fourfold Humanity Divine is at the expense of the female "other," and even perhaps at the expense of eros itself, women and women's love (the idea here of sexual reciprocity and mutuality) may play a greater role in his final synthesis than would initially seem to be the case. As I have mentioned elsewhere, it is here precisely that we find deep ambivalence in Blake.

As *Jerusalem* progresses, women's laments become more critical as countering the extensive damage of men in history. The second of the four chapters of *Jerusalem* focuses on a critique of the patriarchal, the "Masculine Portion" of human nature, the Spectre or Selfhood, dwelling on the horrors of the sons of Albion within the fallen world, consolidated in the figures of Reuben and Hand. The chapter is addressed to the "Jews," who witness to the vision of the universe as a cosmic person, as does Blake in his myth, but also are responsible for the errors of "patriarchal religion" and the false rule of Urizen, god conceived as the Law-Giver. Much of the chapter is about ruin and Los's lamenting witness as he searches with his Globe of Fire the "interiors of Albion's bosom." Albion at one point worships his own shadow as God and ends the chapter with the cry "Hope is banish'd from Me" (II. 47:18). The chapter contains references to "The Divine Family," the "Divine Voice," tropes for "Jesus," who hovers over "darkened Albion," but also to Vala becoming Nature, presiding over the pains of childbirth and sexual love, irredeemable otherness, and to a vaguely conceived "Brotherhood" as ideal.

³¹ See also Hobson 2000, 157: "This social world *is* the world of Vala's internalized but displaced sexual guilt."

At the end of chapter II, with the appearance of Erin, we have a foreshadowing of a motif that becomes significant to later chapters and to the final “synthesis.” Erin, “an Aged pensive Woman,” provides one of the strong singular female voices of witness, weeping, mourning, and lament. Having no male “consort,” Erin is actually not an “Emanation” at all in the secondary sense of the term, but a female who remains independent, possessing her own identity apart from that of a male. As “Ireland,” Erin represents for Blake a new opening, a new visionary and perhaps even political “center” for revolution, a force that helps Los, the creative spirit of prophecy, to free himself from the “Cliffs of Albion.”³²

Erin’s actions and her lament on plate 48 are a passionate, articulate, *compassionate* witness to ruin and, like many of the female lamenters in Blake, she ushers in a certain “turn” in the text, marking a nadir that will be the pivot for a reversal. With “awful hands,” she takes “A Moment of Time, drawing it out with many tears & afflictions / And many sorrows.” Erin’s Space is a redeemed space, an Act of Mercy, and her lamenting witness, which continues through plate 49, is a moving “history of the present” (II. 48:31–64, 49:1–77).

Plate 48 is “quiet” (Erdman’s gloss) but alive with potential life: rising birds, looping vines, flying insects, eagles, tendrils suggesting flying flame-like serpents, butterflies, clouds, vegetation, even a palm tree on the word “dead” (Erdman 1974, 327). Like the design of the girl who is riding the serpent on the page of Thel’s “voice of sorrow,” this lament hides its own reversal. It reveals, like the “prophetic falsehood,” a “contrary truth,” the time of a turning. Erin also announces the existence of Shiloh, the “Masculine Emanation among the Flowers of Beulah,” who dwells over (male) France “as Jerusalem dwells over Albion,” alluding, as Hobson argues, to a male-to-male pairing (Hobson 2000, 166–67). Such a possibility will become significant when we come to Blake’s final Fourfold Vision, a male–male, female–female, and male–female integral humanity. We have here, hidden in the text, implied within its minute particulars, the poly-sexual, poly-gendered vision of “fourfold” humanity.

There are of course many other examples in *Jerusalem* of female laments that work steadily toward the pivot moment when Erin is witness, at the very end, to Blake’s apocalyptic moment of reversal when “Time” is finished, and so then, is lament (IV. 94:18). There are the Daughters of Albion who weave garments and the world cradle for the “infantine Terror” (“Infant sorrow”) on the Loom of Love (III. plates

³² That “Erin came forth from the Furnaces / . . . by Los’s mighty power for Jerusalem’s / Sake” is revealed earlier, in the first chapter of *Jerusalem* (I. 11:8–15; see also Hobson 2000, 184).

56–58). And of course, there is Jerusalem herself, who "disorganized; an evanescent shade, scarce seen or heard among / Her childrens Druid Temples dropping with blood, wander's weeping!" (IV. 78:28–29). She cries:

Encompassd by the frozen Net and by the rooted Tree
I walk weeping in pangs of a Mothers torment for her Children . . .
[IV. 80:1–2].³³

The design that accompanies this line shows a naked female wrestling with a giant worm-serpent that seems to be slowly morphing into a man that has wrapped itself round her waist, its tail, in three curves, dangling between her legs. Erdman identifies her as Gwendolyn (a few pages on), at work humanizing the "dewy worm" (Hyle, her lover, "matter") "into a form of love by tears and pain" (Erdman 1974, 359).

Chapter IV is filled with women and is dominated by the lamenting and binding and birthing work of females, just as chapter III is dominated by males and their terrible wars. But women's labor finally ends with their acts of self-giving, self-*annihilation*—in Blake an active, self-aware, particular, energetic, compassionate gifting of oneself—and not passive *abnegation*. This act ushers in the end-time, the end of sexual difference, of "male" and "female" differentiation, and clears a space in "deathlike silence" (IV. 94:17–18) for the sudden birth of the fourfold, poly-sexual Human Form Divine where the "Hand of Man grasps firm between the Male & Female Loves" (IV. 97:12–15).

Mitchell cites a key moment, when Gwendolyn, whom we have noted already above, "has apparently persisted in her folly long enough":

. . . she howl'd
Over the forests with bitter tears, and over the winding Worm
Repentant: and she also in the eddy wind of Los's Bellows
Began her dolorous task of love in the winepress of Luvah
To form the Worm into a form of love by tears & pain.
The Sisters saw! Trembling ran thro' their Looms! softening mild
Towards London: then they saw the Furnaces open, & in tears
Began to give their souls away in the Furnaces of Affliction.
Los saw & was comforted . . . [IV. 82:72–80].

Only after "The Poets Song draws to its period & Enitharmon is no more" in plate 92 does Albion eventually give himself to death, making a gift of his own death, death of his selfhood:

³³ The entire lament sequence of Jerusalem and Vala in chapter IV, plates 79–80 is a powerful example of female witness to and awareness of ruin that presages redemption.

So Albion spoke & threw himself into the Furnaces of affliction
 All was a Vision, all a Dream: the Furnaces became
 Fountains of Living Waters flowing from the Humanity Divine . . . [IV. 96:
 35–37].

In Blake, as Mitchell has observed, “the apocalyptic reversal of history is sparked by women, or by the feminine aspect of consciousness,” and “the female imagination is the agency of inspiration that gives direction and meaning to the work of the male imagination” (Mitchell 1978, 191).³⁴ As we have seen, the lament, in all its complex emotional registers, its willed ambiguities and stubborn particularities, its refusals and affirmations, is a most potent vehicle of this female imaginative vision.

Finally, for a vivid image of female redemptive lamentation in *Jerusalem*, one need only look carefully at the stunning design of plate 25, which has been interpreted by many (who posit as Blake’s source Poussin’s *The Martyrdom of St. Erasmus*) as the torture and sacrifice of Albion by the three Parcae, or “Fates.” There are three naked women here who surround a fallen Albion. He kneels on his haunches, chest, arms, and head thrown back on what looks like a square stone altar, Blake’s “Druid” altar of sacrifice. Not yet “fled from his mighty limbs” (I. 27:16), the Starry Heavens shine on his fallen cosmic body; an angry sun, a pensive crescent moon, two bright stars (Jupiter or Mars or Venus), Orion and the Pleiades. On his left, our right, Tirzah, the “mother of our mortal parts,” draws from what looks like his navel area an umbilical cord or perhaps his intestines or his spinal cord, his “living fibres”; this is hardly a disemboweling but is, strangely, the careful action of the midwife drawing and tying the cord. Mitchell adds: “Tirzah can be seen as a midwife ‘milking’ the umbilical cord downward to the navel to preserve the life fluids before cutting and tying off” (1978, 201–2).³⁵ Tirzah, seated on the stone altar, is weeping, inconsolably it seems; her eyes are swollen and red, her mouth open, with huge tears running down her red cheeks. *She is at once midwife, the careful compassionate nurse, and lamenter, and will be witness and midwife of a new birth.* This connection of lament with childbirth is critical to any sustained discussion of the positive transformative powers of women’s lament.³⁶

³⁴ As is suggested in the narrative of Rachel’s lament in Jewish sources, such utterances, far more potent than those of men, have the power to stir God’s heart to compassion.

³⁵ Erdman interprets this scene as one of torture (1974, 304).

³⁶ See also plate 3E of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (Erdman 1974, 100) where Blake cites Isaiah 43:35 on the apocalyptic restoration of “Zion” and the redemptive erotic energies of the contraries, including a design of a woman giving birth, both child

At his right, our left, is Rahab, the mesmerist who has ostensibly put Albion into his trance-swoon. However, she seems almost pensive and bears something of the sorrow of a mourner. As Mitchell has noted, she seems more like the "mother of sorrows" who receives her dead son's head in her lap like a "melancholy Pieta" (1978, 201). Her bodily gesture, right hand behind the back, legs crossed, is not only a gesture of "deceit" but also of "prophetic falsehood," and presages "error that reveals a contrary truth" (1978, 201). Vala hovers over the two women and Albion, spreading out her tent of creation, a fiery fibrous womb and placenta where the child will be nourished until he is (re-)born. We are witness here to one of Blake's most compelling reversals, counter-readings. As Mitchell summarizes,

The irony in the picture cuts in two directions: we can behold a scene of a man in the fallen world of birth, life in nature, and death, surrounded by solicitous mothers who are really torturers (Rahab a hypnotist who really enslaves her victim, Tirzah the physical torturer, Vala the one who keeps the whole atrocity secret and mysterious); or we can see the apparent torturers are giving life to their victim, commiserating and mourning over him like the melancholy watchers on the title page [1978, 201].³⁷

What Mitchell sees in this profoundly vivid design *is present also in women's laments in Blake's multilayered narratives*. Women's laments also "cut in two directions": they bear witness to ruin and loss, enslavement and seemingly irreconcilable antinomies, and in doing so, in asserting a fundamental particularity at the heart of humanity, and in their refusal to forget and move on, they also affirm life, and in affirming the powers of living they spark renewal, in Blake always a sudden shift, a turn of redemption.

4. Conclusion: Dangerous Voices and Their Silence

A close look at Blake's female lamenters gives us a most compelling lens through which to view what might be termed, with some nuance,

and mother looking up with open arms. The connection between lamentation and birth-pangs are central to Jewish readings of Zion's destruction and redemption. See Lamm 1999, 141 for the paradigmatic cry of Rabbi Levi Yitzhak Berdichev: "weep for Zion and her cities as a woman in birth-pangs. . . . Even though she is now in pain because of her destruction, it is like a woman suffering birth-pangs." I am grateful to Joel Blecher for calling my attention to Blake's design and to these references.

³⁷ Mitchell here refers to the title page of *Jerusalem*, which shows two female mourners, perhaps Vala, with her nascent bat-wings, and Erin, with her fourfold feather-like Cherub wings marked with moon and stars, watching over the naked sleeping body of Jerusalem, as Erdman remarks, "her human form woven in three-fold wings of potential butterfly flight into human form divine" (1978, 281).

Blake's profeminism. In his female lamenters, from blind Enion, Enitharmon, Erin, and Jerusalem to Oothoon, Thel's Voice from the Grave, and even Vala (the seemingly most irredeemable female power), Blake, in Bruder's words, "constructs a notion of femininity centered upon the concept of dissent." He "allows disputatious female voices into his texts in a truly revolutionary way" (1997, 36).

Blake's lamenting women loudly question injustice of a fallen world; they are at once fierce, loving, tender, hateful, vengeful, and sad, despairing voices of dissent that confront the truth of loss, even if this means weeping songs of their own degradation. They are, to use Holst-Warhaft's phrase, "dangerous voices." They witness, over and over again, in their own bodies and actions, for the sake of others—their husbands, their male and female lovers—to the nadir of things, the ruins of experience, but also, like Rachel the Lamenter in midrash, they witness to the "apocalyptic reversal" (Mitchell 1978, 191).³⁸ In both *The Four Zoas* and *Jerusalem*, it is just after epic laments that a reversal takes place, "time" finishes, and the lamenters fall silent, evaporating into thin air.

Laments last as long as the world. They mark, in their work-like, structured awareness of suffering, its span. The silence of lament is the end of the world. And in the silence of the lamenting comes another, final theme, one alluded to many times here, but one beyond the scope of this paper. It is perhaps a theme more imponderable and disturbing than the laments themselves.

With the end of conflict in Blake comes the end of the *separate* particular and *particularizing* female voice, and it is here finally that we can with some nuance address the true complexities of Blake's construction of women and of female voices in his prophetic art. When the laments are finished and the weeping women suddenly evaporate, we are confronted with Blake's deep ambivalence toward women and sexual difference, his sense of gender division as somehow mirroring a "fallen" world, the "horror" of female separate, linked fundamentally, at its heart, at the "origin," with jealousy.³⁹ Homosocial and homosexual, and particularly lesbian, relationships, on the other hand, take on in

³⁸ Mitchell, of course, does not mention the comparative example of Rachel.

³⁹ Blake's designs contain their own visual arguments and transformations. See, for instance, the movement from the sexually differentiated image of Aged Albion and Britannia embracing as old prophet and lovely naked female (her legs are crossed, a sign of prophetic reversal) on plate 96 to the embrace of the old man and lovely "youth" (sexually ambiguous, though in copy E the painting makes them both seem more male, strengthening the "Prodigal Son" image that Blake himself favored) on plate 99. In the final plate 100, the body of Enitharmon-Vala, seen only from the back, is generalized, not particularly "female." Female as sexually differentiated "other" has evaporated. See plates in Paley 1998 and Erdman 1974, 375, 378–79.

Blake the aura of loving mutuality, and even a kind of transcendent "Humanity," anticipating the fourfold polysexual cyborgs that converse together synesthetically in "Visionary forms dramatic" at the very end of *Jerusalem* (Hobson 2000, 172–73).

But true to the depth and power of this poetry, Blake's great complaints, and their female truths, are never entirely wiped from our awareness. Women's laments, cross-culturally, are acts of ethical witness to unbearable and unacceptable, immediate and present injustices that rigorously link the particular and personal to the more broadly general social/political realms, and we cannot lose sight here of this fact, even in texts that also demonstrate such ambivalence toward the female "other" and seek forms of transformation that neutralize sexual difference. One might even say—and this would need to be much more fully developed—that Blake's lamenting women work against any easy "sudden" resolution to the dilemmas outlined in the prophecies themselves; laments "speak back," they witness their particular antinomies, even to the poet himself. Does "apocalyptic reversal" need to be a betrayal? This remains an open question in Blake's final synthesis.

Ultimately, as Bruder has observed, "all is flux and conflict, all is debate and argument, all is open to challenge and change in Blake's sexual universe," and in the end, "this is one of the best reasons for our continued reading of his poetry" (Bruder 1997, 37). The laments are one of the best places to start.⁴⁰

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⁴⁰ I am deeply indebted to Joel Blecher for drawing my scholarly attention back to the poetry of William Blake, and inspiring work in Blake studies that has led to my ongoing project on women's laments in Blake's prophecies and poetry. I am also grateful to Nathaniel Deutsch and Helen Plotkin for sharing with me the extraordinary Rachel narratives of Lamentations Rabbah, to the anonymous reviewers of this journal, to Matthew Hagele, copyeditor extraordinaire, and to Diane Yeager for her incisive comments on various drafts of this paper, and to her truly remarkable skills as an editor.

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