

“Life exhal’d in milky fondness”—  
Becoming a Mother in William Blake’s  
*The Book of Thel*

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1 **B**LAKE critics most often see *The Book of Thel* as a thwarted attempt to pass from the state of Innocence to Experience.<sup>1</sup> Blake’s heroine is usually perceived as a somewhat naive, indecisive young female afraid to “be born” into the world of adulthood and maturity, or as a soul that refuses to enter the material world. Hence, there has been a tendency to pass judgment on Thel’s decision, to attribute it to weakness, immaturity, or fear, and to see it in pejorative terms.<sup>2</sup> My claim is that Thel’s refusal to enter the world of Generation has nothing to do with relapsing into childhood, or with weakness and indecisiveness. Instead, I see it as proof of her maturity and independent spirit. My article is concerned with two problems. Firstly, I want to demonstrate how text and design in *The Book of Thel* enter a mutual semantic relationship of contradiction and/or redundancy rather than complementarity.<sup>3</sup> Naturally, this claim is not new; W. J. T. Mitchell recognized this quality as early as 1978, writing that “the ‘unity’ of an illuminated book is a dynamic one, built upon the interaction of text and design as independent or contrary elements” (xviii). What I would like to examine, however, is how this dynamic interaction reinforces a feminist reading of Blake’s text.

Secondly, although there are critical texts that deal with Blake’s attitude to women, the majority of Blake scholarship on *The Book of Thel* does not seem sufficiently feminist. While he did not manifest an unwaveringly feminist stance throughout his poetry, in texts such as *Thel* or *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* he dealt with women’s issues in a way that may be deemed progressive. Consequently, I intend to focus on the problems of motherhood and childcare as rendered by Blake in his poem, since I perceive these notions to be essential for our understanding of Thel’s decision. Also, part of my argument is that, contrary to a number of critical readings, the message delivered by Thel’s three interlocutors (the Lilly, the Cloud, and the Clod of Clay) should not be seen as a positive statement that Blake wanted Thel to accept. Finally, if we comprehend Thel’s dilemma—whether to become a mother—this can shed light on some actions taken by other female characters in Blake’s later texts, Oothoon and Enitharmon in particular.

2 Generally it has been agreed that the issues of gender and sexuality provide a valid interpretative context for *The Book of Thel*, as “the consequence of the expression of sexual desire is the great theme of Blake’s prophetic poems” (Hayes 144). Thus, David Worrall suggests that *The Book of Thel* is Blake’s correction to Swedenborg’s ideas of sexuality: Thel’s escape “with a shriek” is “a specific refusal of Swedenborg’s doctrine of conjugal love, a subject topical to contemporary Swedenborgians who were proposing to establish an African colony based on its principles” (17).<sup>4</sup> However, as Susan Matthews notices, the vales of Har (the place that Worrall sees as the realm of Swedenborgian sexual union) are the world to which, and not from which, Thel flees (100). Matthews, in turn, sees the flight of Thel at the end of the poem as an escape from conflict rather than from sexuality, and interprets the vales of Har as a world where “benefit to the other is benefit to the self” and where, consequently, the self does not exist (99). Also, for her, the flight back is not the assertion of the self but a surrender of the self: “At the end of the poem, Thel flees to a female dream like that of *The Triumphs of Temper* which makes sexual desire safe but demands as the price the taking on of a female identity” (100). In a similar vein, Magnus Ankar-sjö, in *Blake and Gender*, notices that “although sometimes executing successful representations of the female, Blake in the early poems is at pains to find an appropriate expres-

1. See Bloom 49, Raine 52, Frye 232-33, Damon 52, 401, Gleckner 163-64, Ankar-sjö 62.

2. For example, Gleckner concludes that Thel is self-centered and sternly pronounces that she has to learn the life of self-sacrifice (163), while Behrendt asserts that, for Blake, Thel must have been an example of what he calls “the dead-end nature of narcissistic behavior” (27). For Matthews, Thel’s flight means conforming to stereotypes of femininity (100).

3. For the various types of image-text relations, see A. Kibédi Varga, “Criteria for Describing Word-Image Relations,” *Poetics Today* 10 (1989): 31-53.

4. Other important texts that discuss Blake’s connections to Swedenborg’s thought are Schuchard’s *Why Mrs. Blake Cried*, Viscomi’s 1997, 1998, and 1999 essays on *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, and Magnus Ankar-sjö, *William Blake and Religion* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2009). Also, in their introduction to *The Book of Thel* in *The Early Illuminated Books*, Eaves, Essick, and Viscomi note echoes of Swedenborgian thought (particularly with reference to his doctrine of use) in Blake’s poem (78).

sion of the positive interactivity of man and woman” (3). He locates Thel within the circle of “childlike innocent characters” (5) and concludes that she “utterly fails and relapses back to childhood” (62). In the course of this paper, I hope to demonstrate that it is possible to see Thel’s decision not as a failure or a surrender of the self, but as an act of self-assertion, a conscious decision to reject the perspective (however attractive at times) of both sexual relationship and childbearing. Such a decision is not a product of an immature, wavering, childlike mind but testifies to the opposite. Last but not least, it also denotes readiness to face the conflict that ensues from acting against the expectations of others.

- 3 Modern critical readings recognize the importance of dialogical structure in *The Book of Thel*.<sup>5</sup> Most of the poem is structured by question-answer exchanges, often summarized by Thel’s rephrasing of what she has heard. The common denominator of these conversations is Thel’s inquiry, which is followed by reassuring statements from other beings already familiar with the world that she contemplates entering. The chief question, then, is what it would mean for Thel to enter this world, Blake’s realm of Generation, or Experience. Entering it may be understood as a conscious decision to grow up and to assume the social roles prescribed for a woman in the adult world—primarily the role of mother.
- 4 Crucially, however, pregnancy and motherhood are preceded by courtship and marriage. This point has been noted and discussed from various perspectives by modern critics. Thus, Harriet Kramer Linkin identifies what frightens Thel off as the sexual nature of human relationships in the world of Generation. She suggests that Thel’s “horror at being food for worms actually displaces her deeper fear of the phallus” and that Thel wilfully chooses to ignore the sexual implications of the Cloud’s speech, instead focusing on the nurturing function voiced by the Clod of Clay (69). In the wake of feminist criticism, Helen Bruder, in an interpretation to which I am deeply indebted, sees *Thel* as a poem in which “the sceptical enquiries of a determined young woman thoroughly unmask patriarchal ideology, an ideology which promised women that heterosexual romantic and maternal roles equalled heavenly fulfilment, but which Thel discovers amount to nothing less than death” (44). Reading the key passage in which the Clod of Clay appears

as mother of the Worm, she concludes that “anyone who ‘her life exhal’d / In milky fondness’ (*Thel*, 4:8-9; E.5) has been severely gulled if she believes that this amounts to having ‘a crown that none can take away’ (*Thel*, 5:4; E.5)” (51).

- 5 My discussion coincides with the above interpretations in that I also think the ideology of self-sacrifice, as promoted by the Clod of Clay and the Lilly, to be the key to understanding Blake’s poem. In addition, I propose that Thel is actually attracted both to the idea of sexual union and to the idea of becoming a mother, but she cannot reconcile her desires with what such fulfillment would mean in a world where the female is generally given one role, that of a humble servant with no voice of her own. What frightens Thel off is the philosophy of utilitarianism and self-denial embodied in the Clod of Clay and, to a lesser extent, in the Lilly and the Cloud. The Cloud’s conviction that becoming “the food of worms” (3.25, E 5)<sup>6</sup> might be enough to sing the song of self-fulfillment is another successful deterrent.
- 6 Thel is an adolescent. Generally, her name has been interpreted as signifying “wish” or “desire,” but another meaning has also been suggested—“woman.”<sup>7</sup> Thus, Thel contemplates what it means to be a woman, and whether it is what she really desires. Her interest in these questions, as well as her essential ambivalence, is mirrored in the title-page design (illus. 1), where she observes intently but with apprehension the passionate embrace of two tiny creatures emerging from a flowering plant, one male and one female.<sup>8</sup> Kathleen Raine claims that the designs for *Thel* “express, even more than those of *Songs of Innocence*, the easy grace, freedom and expressive sweetness characteristic of Blake’s vision of ‘Innocence’” (52).<sup>9</sup> Is that really so? Unquestionably, we see the characteristic weightlessness of Blake’s figures and delicate, almost fragile lines, but the apparent sweetness of the plates is deceptive. Careful observation reveals darker, more troubling echoes. Thel seems unsure how to understand the scene she is witnessing: the passionate embrace of the couple could be an externalization of their erotic love, but it could also be a scene of entrapment, against which the female seems to be striving.<sup>10</sup> Could the raised arms of the female figure perhaps express her fear of the union? She is clearly moving away from the naked, plunging body of her partner. David Erdman, in his *Illuminated Blake*, gives an account of Erasmus Darwin’s

5. See Levinson and Linkin.

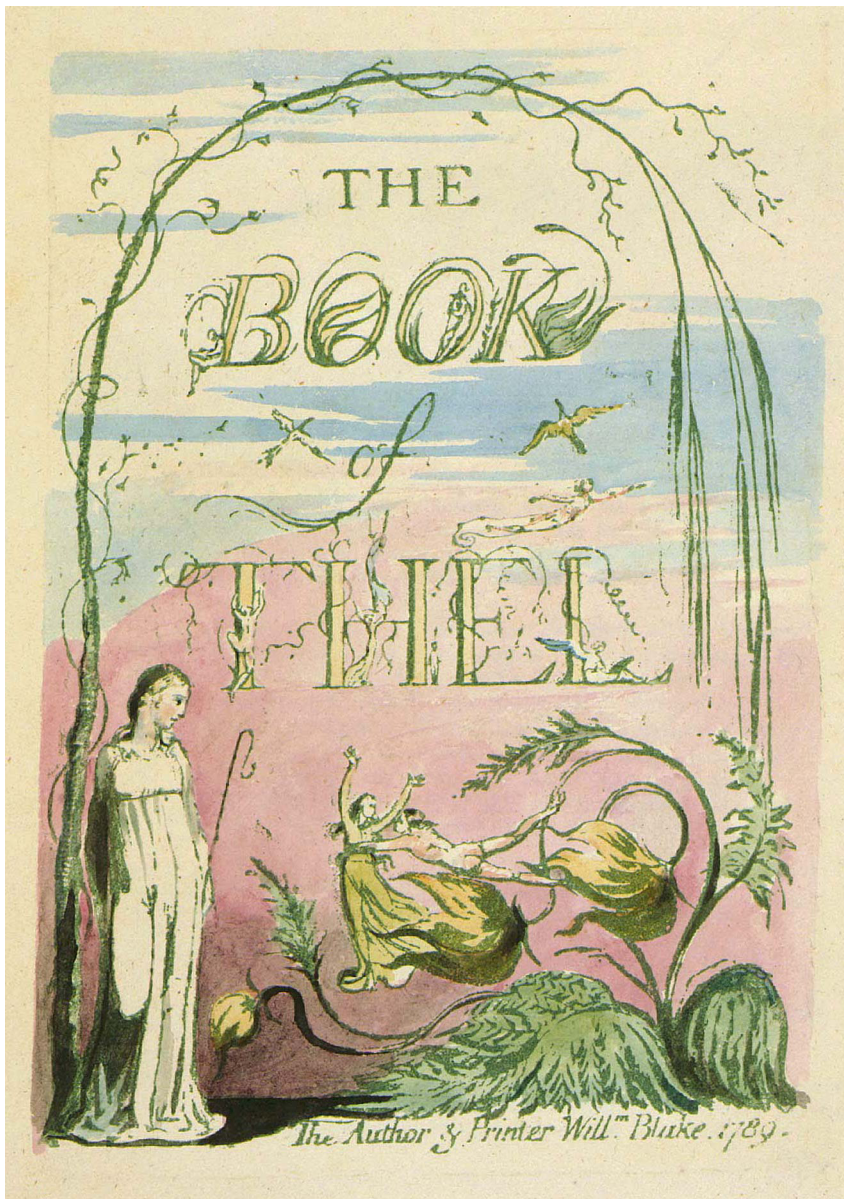
6. All quotations of Blake’s poems are from Erdman, *Complete Poetry and Prose*.

7. Linkin 67n7, relating the suggestion of E. B. Murray.

8. The plates that I discuss are from *The Book of Thel* copy H (Library of Congress), *William Blake Archive* <<http://www.blakearchive.org>>. Plates are numbered according to Erdman’s *Illuminated Blake*.

9. In a similar vein, Mitchell, in his *Blake’s Composite Art*, writes that “the title page depicts the courting dance of the Cloud and Dew as a whirling vortex of pleasure” (105).

10. Eaves, Essick, and Viscomi note the ambiguity of the scene in *The Early Illuminated Books* (82).



1. *The Book of Thel* copy H (c. 1789), pl. ii (title page). Library of Congress. Image courtesy of the William Blake Archive.

*The Loves of the Plants* as a possible source of Blake's illustrations of plants in *The Book of Thel*. *The Loves of the Plants* appeared in 1789 as part of *The Botanic Garden*, "a poetic guide, in the idiom of 'The Rape of the Lock,' to the sexual behavior of the male and female parts of garden flowers" (33). The plant that Blake makes the focal point of the title page to *Thel* is *anemone pulsatilla*, a flower that needs the wind to open its petals. As Erdman recounts, Darwin's imagery is straightforwardly erotic: the flower yearns for the wind's "cherub-lips," which are then to rend its "gauzy veil" (34). Ecstasy mixes with aggression and submission. Thel, standing aside, looks at the scene carefully but with uncertainty. On the one hand, she is fascinated by the promise of an adult, sexual relationship; on the other hand, she senses both violence and the power struggle inherent in such a re-

lationship in the world of Generation. Thus, her fascination mingles with fear, but the questioning stance very well reflects her inquisitive attitude toward reality, her inner compulsion to ask unsettling questions.

- 7 In *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* and in his annotations to Lavater, Blake expresses his conviction that human life should mean an active search for fulfillment. He claims that it is better to "murder an infant in its cradle than nurse unacted desires" (*Marriage* 10.67, E 38) and that "all Act [*from Individual propensity*] is Virtue" (annotations to Lavater p. 226, E 601). Staying passive, one becomes like poisonous standing water with "reptiles of the mind" (*Marriage* 19, E 42), since "he who desires but acts not, breeds pestilence" (*Marriage* 7.5, E 35). Although it is possible to

see Thel as a passive, indecisive figure, since her search is inconclusive,<sup>11</sup> this interpretation overlooks the fact that, unlike all the other characters in the poem, she exhibits a pondering, questioning attitude. The Lilly and the Clod exult in their productive, selfless lives. Thel's sisters have also become characterized by the duties that they fulfill: as shepherdesses, they obediently "led round their sunny flocks" (1.1, E 3), even if, as Bruder suggests, they run in circles (44-45). If they have desires, they do their best to suppress them. In contrast, Thel actively searches for fulfillment and ponders what this fulfillment implies and whether it would cost her dear. Her resistance is much more active than her compliance could ever be.

8 Thel, as the reader meets her for the first time, is deeply worried, and she feels alienated in her anxieties, brooding over them "in paleness" and in secrecy (1.2, E 3). In this way Blake stresses her position as an outsider, which she occupies at the beginning and retains to the end of the book. Although she inhabits the vales of Har, which have been traditionally interpreted as a paradise-like world (Blake's Beulah or preexistence), and thus is not subject to death, Thel in her first lamentation is concerned with mutability. She compares herself to all beautiful but transient phenomena in the material world, such as "a watry bow," "a parting cloud," "a reflection in a glass," "dreams of infants," "shadows in the water," "music in the air" (1.8-11, E 3). The Lilly of the Valley, the first of Thel's interlocutors, is puzzled by her worries, and asks "then why should Thel complain, / Why should the mistress of the vales of Har, utter a sigh" (1.25, 2.1, E 4)? Despite being a daughter of the Seraphim, Thel stubbornly refuses to see herself as immortal. While this point may be explained by noting that transience is the chief feature of the world that Thel contemplates entering—the cause of her fears—such an interpretation soon proves elusive: all the creatures that she talks to proclaim the existence of an afterlife, and the Clod of Clay, inviting Thel into her kingdom, assures her that "'tis given thee to enter, / And to return" (5.16-17, E 6). Though Thel need not fear disintegration in death, she is not comforted by any of the speeches and continues to cast herself as a transient, mutable being, different from those she meets on her way. As James Swearingen perceptively notes, "Her unity with the life of the fabulous setting is already disrupted. That unity does not belong to the time of the poem; it is a narrative memory, a hypothetical condition 'before' her differentiation from other things living alongside her in the vales of Har" (128). Gradually, however, she turns to contemplating a purpose rather than the transience of her existence. Very

quickly she concludes that there is no aim, no use in her life. She claims that she wants to leave a trace of her existence instead of disappearing without a mark. Thus, it may be suggested that death for Thel is nothing but insignificance. The main problem, however, around which the rest of the text is structured, is how to signify without having one's identity totally obliterated.

9 The Lilly of the Valley is Thel's opposite. She describes herself in terms of modesty, humility, hard work, and cheerfulness. She is "very small" and dwells in "lowly vales" (1.17, E 4); she is a weak and gentle maid who does not talk too much, only bows "her modest head" (2.17, E 4) and resides in "modest brooks" and "silent valleys" (1.22, E 4), where she goes to "mind her numerous charge among the verdant grass" (2.18, E 4). Her description adheres to the doctrine of self-sacrifice that underlies *Thel*. Morris Eaves, Robert Essick, and Joseph Viscomi attribute this ideology to "contemporary handbooks for young ladies that taught the docile acceptance of servitude to masculine desires and expectations" (*The Early Illuminated Books* 80), and this seems to be the case with the Lilly. She believes that her behavior is bound to be rewarded: she will be "clothed in light" and "fed with morning manna" (1.23, E 4). She feels gratefulness toward him "that smiles on all" (1.19, E 4) (critics still debate whether he is God from Eden or just a male cloud). Regardless of the ambiguity, this presence is unquestionably male and his behavior, as well as the Lilly's humble and grateful response from her position of dependency, defines her world as patriarchal. Since, in the Lilly's perception, her existence amounts to a happy and fulfilled life, she cannot understand Thel's doubts and worries. Why should Thel complain, if, upon entering the adult social world, she will be rewarded in exactly the same way for exactly the same behavior? She previews Dante Gabriel Rossetti's "an angel-watered lily" (the ideal female) from the sonnets written to accompany the painting *The Girlhood of Mary Virgin*,<sup>12</sup> a lily that "near God / Grows and is quiet" (lines 10-11). Rossetti characterizes Mary (the lily) by "simplicity of intellect, / And supreme patience" (lines 5-6), while her virtues correspond to the books that she studies: hope, faith, and charity. The Lilly, as her name suggests, signifies purity, virginity, and innocence, but it is interesting to remember that lilies have another primary symbolic association: death. This makes Blake's symbolism extraordinarily consistent, and links the Lilly to other elements in the text associated with death and mourning: the Clod of Clay, tombs, worms, withering of the body, and elegiac overtones. Would existence akin to that of the Lilly mean death

11. Some earlier critics seem to ignore Thel's inquisitiveness, or to attribute it to a whiny, self-centered attitude; see, for example, Damon 401, Bloom 53, and Frye 233.

12. Rossetti wrote two sonnets to accompany his painting; their collective title is "Mary's Girlhood (For a Picture)," and they are numbered I and II. The quotations come from the first sonnet (see the poem in the *Rossetti Archive* <<http://www.rossettiarchive.org>>).

for Thel? Strikingly, though, Thel sees the Lilly as the essence of motherhood and maternal care.

- 10 We may recall here an interesting biographical speculation offered by S. Foster Damon, who suggests that *The Book of Thel* might have been an elegy written by Blake on the death of his daughter, lost through miscarriage (401), though no biographers support this conjecture. Certainly, the theme of motherhood is one of the chief concerns in Blake's poem. What is the vision of motherhood endorsed by the text, then, and how does it clash with what Thel would like it to be? The answer is partly revealed in the first dialogic exchange, with the Lilly of the Valley, and implicated in all subsequent interactions that Thel initiates.
- 11 When Thel rephrases the Lilly's answer, she arrives at her own interpretation of the Lilly's life. She describes her in terms of servitude and meekness, which become synonymous with nursing and mothering: the Lilly, Thel says, nourishes the innocent lamb, feeds him, cleans him, cherishes him. What is more, the Lilly is characterized by her "milky garments" (2.5, E 4), which straightforwardly figure breastfeeding and foreshadow the Clod's "milky fondness" (4.9, E 5). Finally, she calmly accepts the prospect of her sacrifice: while the lamb devours her flowers she sits "smiling in his face" (2.6, E 4). The Lilly also attends to other living creatures: her perfume "revives the milked cow" and "tames the fire-breathing steed" (2.10, E 4). The question implied in this passage, therefore, concerns the extent to which selfless giving may be reconciled with one's own needs. What is left of the Lilly when her flowers are cropped, her leaves become the bed for worms, and her perfume is scattered all over the grass?
- 12 At the end of this encounter, Thel reasserts her difference from the Lilly, but it seems that her emotional response to the Lilly's speech is not negative at all. As she contemplates the possibility of becoming a mother, she looks at the Lilly with interest and only slight apprehension. Thel's own vision of nursing and care appears to have diverted her attention from the real meaning of the Lilly's speech, which represents an essentially submissive position of humble dependence. Her positive attitude toward the Lilly (or her re-fashioning of the Lilly's function) can be detected when she contrasts her own futility with the Lilly's existence. Thel imagines herself now as a "faint cloud" (2.11, E 4) that experiences mutability and does not leave a trace when it vanishes from its "pearly throne" (2.12, E 4).
- 13 As if by the touch of a magic wand, the personified—distinctly male—Cloud appears. While the Cloud seems to answer Thel's worries connected with mutability, stressing the life cycles in nature, he primarily embodies the principle of sexual love. The fact that Thel sees him as

attractive is figured in her description of him as a "bright form" with a "golden head" (3.5, E 4), shiny and glittering. Erdman notes the tones of "sexual encounter and aggressive masculinity" in *The Book of Thel*, which he attributes to Darwin's *The Botanic Garden* (*The Illuminated Blake* 33). Similarly, Bruder concludes that the Cloud's speech is suggestive of violent appropriation: he, the only male in the text, violates the fair-eyed dew, who cries and trembles, afraid of their union (48). Such a reading, however, is not wholly convincing: after all, the Cloud is said to court the dew (courtship connotes gentle and tender behavior), which results in his being invited to the dew's shining tent. Thus, the sexual union that ensues is both feared and wanted by the "fair eyed dew" (3.13, E 5), and it happens with, rather than without, her consent. The dew, in her virginity, simultaneously desires and is afraid of sexual fulfillment. Hence, the Cloud is undeniably masculine and decisive, but not necessarily violent and aggressively appropriative.

- 14 Thel's attraction to the idea of partnership and sexual union is clearly spelled out in the illustration accompanying plate 4 (illus. 2). The design serves as a visual bridge between plates 3 and 4. While the text of plate 3 consists of the Cloud's speech, there is no visual equivalent of this scene on the plate. As I suggested earlier, I believe that some designs to *The Book of Thel* contradict, rather than complement, the text, and I see plates 3 and 4 as examples of this contradiction. There is nothing in the text of plate 3 to suggest that Thel has been convinced by the Cloud's speech, which explains how a female can find meaning in the world of Generation. The text depicts the moment that Thel finds hard to accept when the Cloud defines the proper place and significance for her in such terms:

Then if thou art the food of worms. O virgin of the skies,  
How great thy use. how great thy blessing; every thing  
that lives,  
Lives not alone, nor for itself. (3.25-27, E 5)

Laura Quinney notices the contradiction between Thel's expectations and the ultimate message communicated to her by the Cloud, and reads this statement as ironic:

It would be a mistake to think that Blake endorses this idea. The Cloud goes on to explain, "everything that lives, / Lives not alone, nor for itself" (Thel 3:26-27, E5), but this assertion is not to be confused with Blake's "Everything that lives is *Holy*" (MHH 25, E45; my italics). In the Cloud's absurd suggestion, Blake is mocking the attempt to redeem strictly natural existence. Consciousness cannot be content with its fate because the body nurtures worms. (32)

2. *The Book of Thel* copy H (c. 1789),  
 pl. 4. Library of Congress. Image courtesy  
 of the *William Blake Archive*.



The conflict between Thel's aspirations and the Cloud's ideology is straightforwardly indicated when she complains in the previous lines

And all shall say, without a use this shining woman liv'd,  
 Or did she only live, to be at death the food of worms.  
 (3.22-23, E 5)

This exchange testifies to the crucial misunderstanding: for Thel, feeding the worms is the ultimate sign of nothingness and insignificance, while her interlocutor understands it as the essence of both use and significance. Despite the obvious conflict of attitudes and expectations, Blake chooses to portray Thel with open, outstretched arms prior to the moment in the text where this openness is indicated. Her verbal acceptance is delayed until after her conversation

with the Clod of Clay in plate 5. Yet, in the design to plate 4, Thel is open and inviting; the apprehension signaled by her wary, cautious position as an outsider in the title plate has vanished. The explanation of this contradiction must be seen in her response to the appearance of the Cloud and the account of his sexual, impregnating function, rather than to his words about feeding the worms after death, which, as we have seen, clash acutely with Thel's expectations. As yet, Thel overlooks the connection between motherhood and such a sacrifice: after all, she herself described the Lilly of the Valley as being devoured by the lamb, but at that moment she seemed to praise the Lilly for her nurturing stance.



3. *The Book of Thel* copy H (c. 1789),  
 pl. 5. Library of Congress. Image  
 courtesy of the William Blake Archive.

15 Blake depicts the Cloud in the design to plate 4, later than his appearance in the text, on the plate that simultaneously shows Thel's encounter with the Worm. This device can be seen as an example of what Mitchell calls "the technique of syncope" and defines as placing designs "at a physical and metaphoric distance from their best textual reference" (193). A naked male figure flies with his arms outstretched in the upper part of the design, while in the lower part we see Thel standing above a little worm-like infant "wrapped in the Lillys leaf" (4.3, E 5). Blake's decision to depict both encounters within one design suggests that the intention

was to stress the inevitable relationship between sexuality and birth. If Thel decides to be a mother, first she has to accept her role as a sexual partner. Thel looks at the Worm with arms ready to embrace. Strikingly, plate 4 shows one of the few moments in the designs to *Thel* where she stands as if inviting, or actively wanting to embrace, the new experience. In Blake's designs, human postures are always suggestive of mental or spiritual conditions, and, as a number of critics have demonstrated, leaping, open, dancing figures with outstretched arms are often contrasted with bound, bent, constricted and confined, closed postures.<sup>13</sup>

13. For discussion of similar human figures and their postures, see Warner. Raine states straightforwardly: "There are, for Blake's human figures, essentially two conditions—the unconfined freedom of unimpeded energy; and the constricted, fettered, weighted and cramped state of the prisoners of Urizen's universe of mechanized nature" (111).

- 16 Thel's gesture is an exact parallel of the Cloud's outstretched arms. Wanting to hold the baby, she accepts her sexuality as well and, like "fair eyed dew," invites erotic union. Thus, my reading contradicts the view that Thel "is especially unresponsive to potentialities that she is unwilling to acknowledge in herself, most obviously her sexuality. Her interest assumes the form of a safe maternal superiority and attends to the Worm only as mediated by the Clod of Clay" (Swearingen 133). I believe that Thel consciously seeks the articulation of her feminine desire (as suggested by the possibilities of meaning inherent in her name), which embraces both sexual partnership and maternal love. However, she becomes discouraged and frightened by the implications accompanying this prospect mediated to her by other presences in the text (most crucially, the Clod of Clay) and seen during her thwarted attempt to enter Generation.
- 17 This discouragement is represented in the design to plate 5 (illus. 3), where Thel is sitting under a threatening plant, her posture the reverse of what it was in plate 4. Erdman identifies this plant as *Meadia* or dodecatheon, which "extends one blushing blossom above her [Thel's] head, still closed (compare the bud thrusting near in Plate ii) but beginning to put forth long stamens (a strongly phallic assertion in the Darwinian context)" (*The Illuminated Blake* 39). Thel's whole body communicates defensiveness. Embracing herself, she wants only to be left alone. This gesture is a frequent indicator of despair and dejection in Blake's designs.<sup>14</sup> At Thel's feet Blake depicts a mother playing with a child (a personified vision of the Clod and the Worm), but now Thel rejects even the experience that so far was attractive to her. Her bowed head obscures her face and suggests that she does not want to observe the joyful play. The flowers and plants in this plate are either predatory (on the right) or withered (on the left) and powerfully communicate Thel's inner state: threatened, she mourns her withered hopes. Behind her we see a gloomy, dark cloud. The price to pay for fulfillment as a lover and a mother, after all, turned out to be too high.
- 18 Plate 5 is another example of the contradiction between design and text. Blake devotes two plates of text to Thel's encounter with the Worm and the Clod of Clay, but while plate 4 describes Thel's essentially positive vision of the Worm as a child and the emergence of the mother figure, the Clod of Clay, plate 5 stresses aspects of feminine roles in the world of Generation that Thel rejects. The decision to separate, through the division between plates, these two verbal exchanges supports the claim that it is not the experience of motherhood that Thel rejects as such, but the way

in which this experience is mediated to her through the figure of the Clod, who is a sum of the attitudes of female servitude and submissiveness and who, even more importantly, harbors the opinion of her own unworthiness and insignificance *as a person* outside her role as a mother. Thus, in plate 4, the meeting with the Worm results in a spontaneous overflow of maternal feelings on Thel's part: she sees the Worm as helpless, naked, weak, and crying, and pities it for its loneliness. In a way testifying to her lack of practice, she tries to comfort it, urging it not to weep (4.4, E 5). At this moment the Clod of Clay materializes and appears to Thel as pitying, humble, and caring. Blake connects her to Thel's earlier perception of the Lilly's milky garments: the image of the Clod's nursing the Worm results in "her life exhal'd / In milky fondness" (4.8-9, E 5). This striking image communicates the essence of motherhood: on the one hand, selflessness on the verge of self-sacrifice when, breastfeeding a baby, the woman gives the best part of herself to her child; on the other hand, "milky fondness," which suggests love and willingness to do so. It is not a grudging, calculating, resentful giving, but a true gift of the heart as well as of the body. This is the vision to which Thel is drawn, as we see her in plate 4, where she is standing with open arms full of love and tenderness.

- 19 Toward the end of plate 4, however, complications emerge. The Clod of Clay proceeds to inform Thel of her own unworthiness:

Thou seest me the meanest thing, and so I am indeed;  
My bosom of itself is cold. and of itself is dark.  
(4.11-12, E 5)

In short, alone and by herself, she believes that she is nothing. She needs a man (God?) to give her significance and a function to uplift her status through marriage and childbirth, and this is how plate 5 starts:

But he that loves the lowly, pours his oil upon my head.  
And kisses me, and binds his nuptial bands around my  
breast.  
And says; Thou mother of my children, I have loved thee.  
And I have given thee a crown that none can take away.  
(5.1-4, E 5-6)

Although she finds erotic and maternal love alluring, Thel has no inclination to accept it as her only purpose of existence and her duty. She wants to see it as her active choice that would be appreciated and met with thankfulness, not as something that she needs to be thankful for. Her maternal instincts to cherish and hold are alive and well, which

14. Compare the design for *The First Book of Urizen* pl. 7, where Los "howld in a dismal stupor" (7.1, E 74), as well as the figure of Theotormon embracing himself in *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* pl. i.



is also true of her desire for partnership and marital union. Nevertheless, Thel's intellect rebels at the Clod's message asserting her meaninglessness, her internal conviction that she of herself is dark, mean, and cold and is given meaning only by being impregnated. She does not want to accept the attitude indicated in the Clod's humble "I ponder, and I cannot ponder; yet I live and love" (5.6, E 6). This is the probable reason for Thel's unresponsiveness, shown in the design.

- 20 Interestingly, this is a moment where the design and the text evidently clash again. In the text, Thel's response to the words of the Clod suggests welcoming and willing reception: she wipes her tears and proclaims her readiness to enter Generation after all. The explanation of the shift in her stance, nevertheless, is peculiar: Thel rephrases the Clod's speech but, as happened earlier in the conversation with the Lilly, it seems that she has heard a message different from the one understood by the reader. Has she even been listening to what the Clod said? Thel states:

Alas! I knew not this, and therefore did I weep:  
That God would love a Worm I knew, and punish the evil  
foot  
That wilful, bruis'd its helpless form: but that he cherish'd  
it  
With milk and oil, I never knew; and therefore did I  
weep. (5.8-11, E 6)

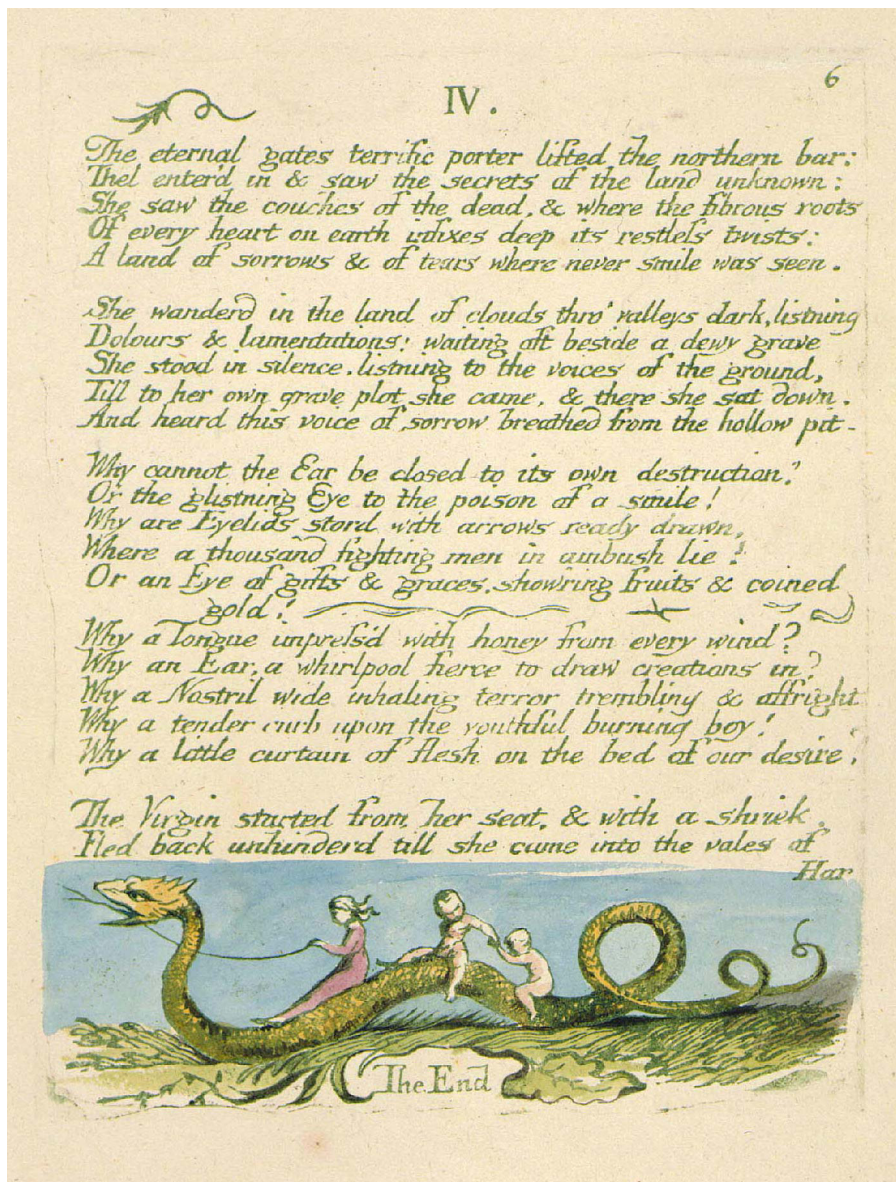
When Thel was listening to the Lilly, she screened out the meaning of her words: instead of the Lilly's proclamation of her smallness, humbleness, modesty, humility, and insignificance, Thel noticed only her nurturing, giving, open attitude. Now, summarizing what the Clod said, she concentrates on the notion that God cherishes every living creature (the Clod never said that!) and, consequently, she convinces herself to seek fulfillment in the world of adulthood and maturity. She does not, at that point, consciously notice the ideology endorsed by the Clod because the Clod talks about what Thel desires: love, marital union, and childbearing. The vision of partnership and maternity is so tempting that Thel overlooks graver implications in her words. It is as if the Thel of the text is more naive and more easily deluded than the Thel of the designs. No wonder that when she finally enters Generation and sees with her own eyes the world whose patriarchal rules the Lilly, the Cloud,

and the Clod of Clay described, she turns from it in revulsion, and, shrieking, flies back into the vales of Har.

- 21 The design accompanying the last plate of *The Book of Thel* (illus. 4) is an example of a verbal-visual relationship known as redundancy. While so far we have encountered one-to-one correspondence, by which every design has its equivalent in a passage of the text, the last design stands apart.<sup>15</sup> Eaves, Essick, and Viscomi call this plate "less an illustration to the text than a visual commentary on it or a final vision providing an alternative ending to *Thel*" (*The Early Illuminated Books* 85). Blake presents a striking image of two young children and an adolescent girl riding a snake in a way suggestive of both joy inherent in the activity and control exerted over the creature. The children play on the loops of the serpent; the girl, in a red dress in this copy, firmly holds the reins in her hand. Some critics do not identify the girl with Thel.<sup>16</sup> Others, like Anne Mellor, see the design as a triumphant symbol of Thel's overcoming her fears, suggesting that it is "an emblem of the ability of Innocence to bridle or control the evils of the land of death, ... and to reaffirm the wisdom of Innocence" (36), which will enable Thel later to "joyfully lead round her 'sunny flocks,' secure and lovingly productive in the mutable but holy world of Innocence" (37). The second part of Mellor's statement is problematic. In my view, Thel is present in the design and she is triumphant, but her rite of passage has been precisely to recognize the fact that she does not want to be "lovingly productive" and to "joyfully lead ... her 'sunny flocks,'" at least not round and round, as her sisters do in plate 1. I think, rather, that this design is indicative of Thel's inner transformation: instead of female malleability and perfect compliance with the roles that have been written for her, she takes the reins of control into her own hands and writes her role herself. I see this design as the most optimistic, as it implies maturity and decisiveness on Thel's part, but does not exclude joy and fulfillment (as suggested by the presence of the playing children). It appears that Thel has finally found a way out of her dilemma and a life in which her worth does not entirely depend on how good she is at serving and self-denial, a life of which we see only a glimpse and which is not narrated in her book. The change of color of her dress in this copy, from white to dark pink, signifies that the rite of passage has been completed.

15. The tendency to accompany text with designs that seem not to illustrate it is prominent in other prophetic books, and the designs for *The First Book of Urizen* may serve as an example (see pls. 15 and 27). Within *The Book of Thel* pl. 1 is similar to a certain extent, but in comparison with the last plate it is still easier to find parallels with the text; Erdman suggests that "both the eagle man and the armed man adumbrate the 'fighting men in ambush' that haunt Thel in Plate 6" (*The Illuminated Blake* 35).

16. Neither Erdman nor Damon identifies the girl with Thel. Damon sees "a girl, with a light bridle" guiding "the Serpent of Nature" (52), while Erdman decisively states that the girl is not Thel and contrasts her "easy riding of the phallic serpent" with Thel's shriek (*The Illuminated Blake* 40).



4. *The Book of Thel* copy H (c. 1789), pl. 6. Library of Congress. Image courtesy of the William Blake Archive.

- 22 Two poems from *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* that also deal with maternal love and childbearing throw additional light on Thel's dilemma concerning fulfillment. The connections occur both on the visual and on the textual level in ways too striking to ignore. "Infant Joy" and "Infant Sorrow" delineate contrasting visions of childhood and of parenthood. Since the parents' attitude to their parenthood—happiness or dejection—defines and determines the joy or sorrow of their children, the poems speak as much about the emotions of the children as of the adults.
- 23 "Infant Joy" (illus. 5) is visually linked to *The Book of Thel* through the plant image that forms the center of the design. The same flower (anemone pulsatilla), although with different leaves, is used in the title page of *The Book of Thel* (illus. 1). Erdman discerns this similarity and goes on to ask:

"And we might wonder how Thel would regard the bud (which gets in her way in *Thel* ii) if she could see the present scene in the open blossom?" (*The Illuminated Blake* 66). The anemone in the design has leaves and a stem strongly reminiscent of flames, and its blossom is also flame-like. Inside the flower Blake depicts three human figures: a mother with a child on her knees and a winged female angel. The poem enacts happiness and unity both verbally and visually: the stems and the leaves enclose the text and culminate in the cup- or womb-like blossom in the upper part of the design, which delicately and safely shelters the nativity scene inside. The position of the mother, tenderly bent over her child, as well as the presence of an angel, recalls representations of the Madonna and Christ, in accordance with one of the main motifs of *Songs of Innocence*, where Jesus is said to be identical with every living being,



5. "Infant Joy," *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* copy C (1789, 1794). Library of Congress. Image courtesy of the William Blake Archive.

a child in particular.<sup>17</sup> The dialogue that governs the poem testifies to the harmonious interaction between the mother and the child. The mother's question "What shall I call thee?" (line 3, E 16) signals receptivity and respect toward her newborn child. As a result, sweet joy befalls both of them, becoming the child's name and the mother's inner state.

- 24 The womb-like shape of the flower and the flame and color symbolism (the flower in copy C is dark pink, almost purple) suggest the possibility that the scene inside the flower imaginatively renders the situation prior to the birth, and that the two-day-old child has only just been conceived. In this reading, more than ever before, the notion of a passionate erotic relationship stands in the background. The child is the mother's joy because it is the fruit of her erotic union with a man she loves. She may shelter her baby inside her womb and sing joyful lullabies because she herself



6. "Infant Sorrow," *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* copy C (1789, 1794). Library of Congress. Image courtesy of the William Blake Archive.

feels happy and protected inside her relationship. Although no masculine element is literally present in the poem or in the picture, the presence of the father/partner figure is indicated both through the conception of the child and through the unity and happiness enacted in the design.

- 25 In contrast, "Infant Sorrow" projects a diametrically different scene. The loving dialogue between the mother and the child of "Infant Joy" is replaced by the woeful monologue of the newborn, who "leap[s]" (E 28) into the dangerous world, where nobody is happy about its birth: the parents, crying and groaning, give in to dejection and depression. The child becomes a devil (a "fiend"), not a joy; it enters a world defined by struggle, aggression, and limitation; it struggles in the father's hands and against the swaddling bands, which constrain it and make any free movement impossible. Exhausted by the conflict, the child gives up and agrees to suck its mother's milk, but there is no "milky

17. This motif recurs in *Songs of Innocence*: it can be found in "The Lamb," "The Divine Image," "On Anothers Sorrow," and "A Cradle Song."

fondness,” no happy giving and taking; instead, the breast-fed child is said to “sulk” upon the mother’s breast. Clearly, there is no joy in their mutual relationship, only the baby’s needy hunger and the mother’s sense of duty and resignation. As John Bender and Anne Mellor suggest,

Here, the child of innocent energy at first struggles against the chains of society and authority. But finally it capitulates, persuaded by developing reason that survival lies in accommodating oneself to the powers that be—even though such capitulation can only produce a life of frustration. The child is fed, but at the price of being swaddled and of “sulking.” (301)

Their reading of “Infant Sorrow” is primarily aimed at showing that there is a visual/verbal discrepancy between the design and the text, undermining the governing concept of the “Sister Arts” (298). The main disjunction, as this interpretation suggests, is between the newborn baby in the poem, swaddled and oppressed, and the one-and-a-half-year-old child in the design (304-05). Another divergence can be detected in the mother figure, who “leans forward in a pliant arc” with a “soft, tenderly beckoning . . . gesture” toward her child (304). While the absence of the swaddling bands and the different age of the child are unmistakable, the gesture code that Blake uses in this design seems to echo the title page of *The Book of Thel*, where the couple emerging from the flower are presented in a similar way—one of the lovers with hands uplifted in a gesture of alarm, the other struggling to grasp and embrace her. It may be concluded, then, that the design for “Infant Sorrow” retains ambiguity similar to that in the title page for *Thel*. The child reaches away from the mother, communicating an ambivalent attitude toward her embrace, which may be perceived as tender or as restricting. Feeling helpless and naked, “piping loud” as in the poem, the child finally has no choice, however, but to succumb to the mother’s grasp.

- 26 It is worth remembering that Thel, upon meeting the infant-Worm, describes the baby in almost identical terms: “helpless,” “naked,” and “weeping.” Her dilemma can be summarized in the clashing visions of motherhood depicted in “Infant Joy” and “Infant Sorrow.” Thel yearns for fulfillment as a mother and as a partner similar to that indicated in “Infant Joy,” but does not think that such a vision is plausible in the world described by her interlocutors. Convinced that in the world of Generation motherhood would realize itself as metaphorically presented in “Infant Sorrow,” she visualizes herself as an oppressed and unhappy mother, who would impose the same pattern of oppression on her baby. Since she does not want to become the groaning, grasping figure of “Infant Sorrow,” Thel rejects the prospect of erotic love and motherhood outright, at least for the time being. Her choice is deeply em-

bedded in the question of gender difference in a patriarchal world, presided over by a male God who legitimizes the purpose of one’s existence by giving meaning to that which “of itself is cold. and of itself is dark” (*Thel* 4.12, E 5), where a female has no right to assert her worth if she does not fulfill her biological function of childbearing. Instead, Thel desires existence in a world where being a mother does not mean solely becoming food for worms, where she is allowed to think and ask questions, making her own free choices, and where she may expect gratitude for all that she has to offer.

- 27 Considering the fate of female figures in Blake’s later texts, one may feel that Thel’s decision is quite appropriate. Blake presents no vision of happy motherhood, and any prospect of a successful relationship comes at a high price. If we look at *The Book of Thel* from a feminist viewpoint, this can put other female characters in Blake’s poetry into a new perspective. Thus, we have brave, adventurous Oothoon in *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*, who is first cruelly mistreated and then severely punished for both her openness and her loving nature. Not only is she branded a whore, but she is also made to abort her own child as a result of social pressure. Why does she decide to perform the abortion? Her urge to “purify” herself in order to “deserve” Theotormon is one of her motives, but it is equally likely that she cannot face the possibility of becoming an outcast, unwed, single mother, nor does she want to be “stamp’d with my [Bromion’s] signet” (*Visions* 1.21, E 46). In other prophetic books we have Enitharmon, who in *The First Book of Urizen* flees from Los’s embrace but is probably forced into sexual union with him, which results in her (unwanted?) pregnancy. The outcome is a lifelong struggle for domination, since Enitharmon is not a docile character either, but consequently her life is far from happy. She is another unfortunate mother in Blake’s poems—together with her child she becomes a victim of Los’s (the father’s) jealousy. Orc is just as unhappy as the child from “Infant Sorrow”: he is born howling and his birth is accompanied by shrieks from all Eternity. Finally, he is bound to the rock at the top of the mountain and left there without any protection (*Urizen* 19-20, E 79-80).
- 28 Both Oothoon and Enitharmon enact Thel’s dilemma regarding the acceptance of the position of a woman in a patriarchal world. They plausibly present what might have happened to Thel had she decided to enter Generation after all. Oothoon rebels, but succeeds only in verbally asserting her position, as the poem ends in stagnation. Enitharmon, in turn, is a very ambivalent figure. Married to Los in “discontent & scorn” (*The Four Zoas* 13.19, E 308), she lives out her stormy relationship with her partner and generally fights for independence but ends up with what we may call militant feminism: she establishes the “Womans World” till

her creative capacities become perverted and she weaves the “triple Female Tabernacle for Moral Law,” “That he who loves Jesus may loathe terrified Female love / Till God himself become a Male subservient to the Female” (*Jerusalem* 88.16-21, E 247). Instead of harmonious, mutually supportive relationships and love we mostly have power struggles. Sadly, it seems that there are no positive patterns in Blake’s later poetry to follow regarding female fulfillment either as an independent woman or in relation to others. The best that can happen to females such as Ololon and Jerusalem is their total absorption into their male counterpart, even if the outcome of this process is deemed glorious and ultimately positive. No wonder that this has provoked various statements about Blake’s anti-feminist stance; Diane Hoeveler claims that “Blake clearly depicts androgyny as a male-centered ideal that exists only through the predatory usurpation of the female. Unless the female willingly sacrifices her existence to the male, he remains a spectre, a shadow of his unfallen potential” and that there is in Blake’s poetry “a persistent womb-envy of women as creators, life-givers, mothers” (42-43).<sup>18</sup> Yet it would be a mistake to reduce Blake’s thought to everyday categories of gender only. Ultimately, “male” and “female” are for him cosmic categories, the forces constituting the essence of humanity and the divine Poetic Genius, and this goes way beyond any domestic relevance of masculinity and femininity. Since Blake believes that the division into sexes is in fact one of the stages of the fall from the ideal order prior to the creation of the natural world, he also points out that “The Sexual is Threefold: the Human is Fourfold” (*Milton* 4.5, E 97). When, at the end of *Milton*, he speaks of those

Who pretend to Poetry that they may destroy Imagination;  
By imitation of Natures Images drawn from Remembrance  
These are the Sexual Garments, the Abomination of Desolation  
Hiding the Human Lineaments as with an Ark & Curtains  
Which Jesus rent: & now shall wholly purge away with Fire  
Till Generation is swallowd up in Regeneration  
(*Milton* 41[48].23-28, E 142-43)

he figures the sexual garments (it’s irrelevant whether they are male or female) as hiding the true essence that lies with-

in. Ultimately, “Humanity is far above / Sexual organization” (*Jerusalem* 79.73-74, E 236).

- 29 Bearing in mind the clearly positive and sympathetic attitudes to what we can term female dissent in both *The Book of Thel* and *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*, we can conclude that some of Blake’s texts openly voice feminist concerns and yield well to feminist readings. Blake displays acute sensitivity to and awareness of women’s issues, unprecedented among other so-called canonical romantic poets. First and foremost, he gives his female characters the right of choice—whether to enter a sexual relationship and to give birth to a child (*Thel*), whether openly to display her readiness for erotic union and to deny ideology that condemns her to ostracism (*Oothoon*)—even if he does not present constructive alternatives to the most socially expected choices. This is undoubtedly progressive when we realistically consider the situation of women at the end of the eighteenth century. Secondly, and crucially, Blake always finds a way to speak from the inside rather than from the outside of a dramatic situation that he constructs, which results in a non-judgmental stance and multiplies possible interpretations. This strategy makes him more akin to Keats’s “chameleon poet” or even Rossetti’s “inner standing point” than to Wordsworth’s egotistical sublime or Byron’s very personal manner of narration. In *The Book of Thel* and *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*, the “inner standing point” that Blake assumes is the perspective of the oppressed, internally conflicted, and pained woman. His sympathetic attitude is a result of his extraordinary psychological insights into the human psyche and human relationships, which pervade his poetry from the very early texts. His interest in the individual mind and its internal conflicts and contradictions finds its crowning manifestation in his major conception of the four Zoas, which is as psychological as it is mythopoeic, but already in such texts as *The Book of Thel*, *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*, and *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* Blake shows how perceptive and progressive his awareness of “mind-forg’d manacles” is.<sup>19</sup>

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18. However, this comment relates to what Hoeveler terms an “early notion of the female as an unequal principle”; according to Hoeveler, later Blake turned to viewing women “as equals in recapturing the androgynous ideal” (43).

19. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that there are a number of studies tracing parallels between Blake’s thought and ground-breaking psychological theories. See Jerry Caris Godard, *Mental Forms Creating: William Blake Anticipates Freud, Jung, and Rank* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1985), Diana Hume George, *Blake and Freud* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980), and Dóra Janzer Csikós, “Four Mighty Ones are in Every Man”: *The Development of the Fourfold in Blake* (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 2003).

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