

Toby Lucas

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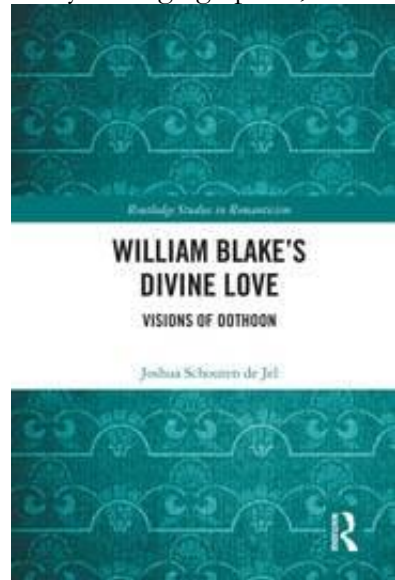
William Blake's Divine Love: Visions of Oothoon

by Joshua Schouten de Jel¹

JOSHUA SCHOUTEN DE JEL'S CONTRIBUTION to the *Routledge Studies in Romanticism* series is an ambitious survey of some of the influences orbiting Oothoon, from William Blake's *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* (1793). As the heroine of *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*, the verbal and visual Oothoon is a difficult character to approach; through the horrific ordeals she suffers, Blake questions issues of love, lust, and sexual ethics. Rather than shy away from these complexities, Schouten de Jel approaches the text through various artistic and literary traditions, suggesting that Oothoon is best understood as the inheritor of these different influences. The introduction indicates the sheer breadth of his sources—Renaissance art, Baroque sculpture, female mystic hagiographies, even medieval ornithology—and the scale of the book's project becomes evident. Its chief claim is that 'the formative framework of *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* is scaffolded simultaneously by more particular and more universal terms than what has hitherto dominated discussions of the poem' (98). Schouten de Jel outlines some of this scaffolding across four chapters, focusing less on the *Visions* itself than on making some specific influences more accessible.

Condensing so much material to under 300 pages is no small endeavour, and whilst the array of these sources is sometimes dizzying, *William Blake's Divine Love* revels in their diversity. Given the variety of these concepts, it is perhaps inevitable that some intriguing lines of inquiry do not have as much space to develop. The introduction begins to compare John Donne's devotional poetry to Oothoon's (and Blake's) bodily religious experiences, a poetic connexion that merits a much longer consideration than this project can accommodate. Similarly, in situating Blake within these different traditions, Schouten de Jel signposts how some of these traditions continue after Blake. Chapter five, for example, suggests that Lacan's concept of *jouissance* could colour Oothoon's self-torment as 'a magnification of her enlightenment' (254). Such lines of inquiry impress upon the reader how rich and diffuse Blake's work is, and how valuable a further examination of some of Blake's cultural diffusions may be.

Chapter two delineates the first aesthetic thread: 'The Nakedness of Women is the Work of God'. Here, Schouten de Jel considers Oothoon's nakedness as



¹ Joshua Schouten de Jel, *William Blake's Divine Love: Visions of Oothoon* (New York: Routledge, 2024).

an integral aspect of her character and sense of self, tying this to Blake's philosophy of the human body. As the chapter begins, Coleridge's criticism of 'the ambiguity of the Drapery' of the frontispiece for *Songs of Innocence and Experience* (1794) is cited, as he asks 'Is it a garment or the body incised and scored out?' (35). From this starting point, Schouten de Jel begins a discussion of bodies and their 'drapery' across Blake's aesthetics, considering classical and erotic nudes, nakedness in Milton, and iconographic depictions of the Crucifixion. Through all this, Oothoon 'shares Blake's conviction that nakedness is truth' (43) and thus, Schouten de Jel argues, Blake makes identification with Oothoon, likening himself as an impoverished artist to the victimized Oothoon, describing both as enlightened sojourners after truth.

Building on this connexion of truth and the naked body, the third chapter—'The Tityus Tradition After Michelangelo'—traces the lineage and impact of Michelangelo's *The Punishment of Tityus* (1532) and *The Risen Christ* (c. 1532), drawings which Blake's illustrations of Oothoon consciously evoke. Schouten de Jel undertakes some vital, detailed contextual work, summarising two-and-a-half centuries of artistic responses and reinterpretations of Michelangelo's *Tityus*. Relying on Blake's notebooks, sketches, and marginalia, Blake is thus placed alongside Titian, Beatrizet, Bertolozzi, and other artists. Whilst Blake's familiarity with some of these artists is sometimes supposed rather than proven—'one can imagine Blake nodding in agreement' (110)—this chapter does well to suggest the significance of Michelangelo to Blakean aesthetics. By depicting Oothoon in this way, it is argued, Blake establishes her as a 'Redeemed Tityus' (130), a Christlike figure in the poem. *Visions* can then be approached, Schouten de Jel writes, as 'a verbal and pictorial narrative which deals with the sexual conditioning of the body as well as the spiritual enlightenment of the self' (116), informed by both classical and Christian traditions.

Over the remaining two chapters, Schouten de Jel combines these premises of the sexual body and spiritual enlightenment, by discussing St. Teresa of Ávila, whose accounts of religious ecstasy provide the prototype, it is argued, for Oothoon's redemptive function in the text. Most of chapter four, 'Divine Love: The Transverberation', details the conventions of female mystic experiences, acting as a sourcebook for medieval saints and thinkers including St. Teresa, Christina of Markyate, St. Christina the Astonishing, Gregory of Nyssa and St. Francis of Assisi. The central claim here is that 'Oothoon partakes in this female-centred mystical tradition' (155) and that Blake thus revises 'the mystical death of female ecstasies during the throes of their spiritual rapture' (155). Most of the argumentation here details this 'female-centred mystical tradition', and whilst Blake's regard for St. Teresa is well-established—she features in *Jerusalem: The Emanation of the Giant Albion* (1804)—some of the other figures discussed in these chapters could be more robustly connected to *Visions*. For instance, it is taken as self-evident that the poem alludes to St Francis of Assisi's reported levitations and 'ornithological spirituality' (182): 'clearly, Blake's depiction of Oothoon draws on such iconographic figurations' (164). Chapter four does well to

explicate some obscurities of medieval mysticism and hagiographies, but a closer discussion of their critical significance for Blake's work would be welcome.

Chapter five, 'L'Estasi di Santa Teresa', applies this framework to Bernini's sculpture of St. Teresa, which is foundational to Blake's depiction of Oothoon. From the premise that 'Blake would have read about Bernini' (213) through Joshua Reynolds, Schouten de Jel suggests that 'Blake had Bernini's *Ecstasy of Saint Teresa* in mind when designing Plate 6' (212) of *Visions*, replacing St. Teresa with Oothoon. Schouten de Jel notes the visceral, even erotic, aspects of St. Teresa's visions, Bernini's sculpture, and Oothoon's experiences, facilitating a discussion on spiritual transcendence, voyeurism, and female agency. Situating Oothoon and the poem in this larger conversation, the chapter concludes that 'Oothoon is unashamedly, defiantly sensual, but she possesses the spiritualised sensuality of ecstatic mystagogy' (251). In arguing for Oothoon's sensuality to be understood as 'ecstatic mystagogy', the chapter could examine the significance of this for understanding the work as a whole, and how far this reading should inform Blake's other mythopoetic works. Schouten de Jel's consideration of Bernini facilitates a wider discussion on 'the epistemological context of ecstatic looking' (24) and the eroticization of (feminine) religious experience, which is applied elegantly to the frontispiece with its 'opening in a cave mouth, a sun-shaped eye [. . .] blazes from between eyebrow-like clouds' (223). The analysis here demonstrates a keen appreciation of how Blake's visual language complements his poetics, and how, like sculpture, illustrations 'implicate us in the scene and force us to recognise the role of the spectator' (232). Schouten de Jel's ability to trace narrative progression between Blake's illustrations and their interactions with the reader is again superb, and it would be rewarding to see how he might extend this to Blake's other works.

Having assessed that 'the scene suggests that Blake was aware of his religio-artistic inheritance' (250), *William Blake's Divine Love* demonstrates the potential for further, more comprehensive work to reconstruct Blake's creative milieu. *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* is one of Blake's more challenging artistic visions, and the triumph of *William Blake's Divine Love* is in explicating some of its guiding artistic, theological, and poetic contexts. In accomplishing this vast survey, it is evident how deep the well is from which Blake draws, and how much work remains to be done to recover these contexts for other characters both in *Visions* and across his oeuvre.