

William Blake's *The Book of Los* and the Female Prophetic Tradition

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Recent discoveries regarding William Blake's mother's ties to the Moravian church¹ and Blake's documented encounter with a contemporary female prophet,² have shifted the critical landscape surrounding Blake's attitude towards women and religion. In the decades since the ground-breaking studies by David Erdman and E.P. Thompson,³ Blake was firmly re-positioned within a world of radical Dissenters that was often assumed to be the domain of men. References to Blake's portrayal of prophecy as primarily the province of the masculine creative principle were therefore commonplace and unexamined. However, since we now know women assumed a more active role in the religious milieu Blake inhabited than previously thought, such assumptions require fresh scrutiny. In *Witness Against the Beast*, Thompson suggested that Blake's mother might have been a member of the Muggletonian sect, raising the prospect that Blake's ties to the Dissenting community came through the maternal line (104–5). While reality may not have matched the dramatic promise of this theory, Marsha Keith Schuchard and Keri Davies' work uncovering the true Moravian background of Blake's mother undoubtedly enriches our perspective on Blake's spiritual inheritance and the role of women in shaping

his unique worldview. What is more, Blake had ties to the world of female prophecy, including figures like Dorothy Gott and Joanna Southcott.⁴ As critics such as Barbara Taylor, Anna Clark and Susan Juster have shown,⁵ the assumption that women played only a minor role in the prophetic discourses of the eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries is at best partial, at worst mistaken. Taylor, Clark and Juster reveal that in this period there developed a distinct female prophetic tradition, which had its own symbolic language designed to validate women's voices as a source of divine revelation. This article will argue that Blake's mythopoeia reveals an intimate familiarity with this tradition and a willingness to incorporate it allusively into his prophetic poetry, particularly in the Lambeth books of the mid-1790s.

In this period of instability, radical religious sects that had clung on at the fringes of society since the seventeenth century re-emerged with a new sense of vigour and relevance.⁶ Within these sects, the nonconformist emphasis on justification by faith alone threatened the strict gender hierarchy of the established church and opened up the possibility of equality between the sexes, at least in terms of revelatory experience. The charismatic Richard Brothers may have been the most notorious prophet of the 1790s, but also fighting to be heard were Sarah Flaxmer, a critic and rival of Brothers, Dorothy Gott, an ex-Quaker, and by the end of

the decade Joanna Southcott, the self-described 'mother of the Messiah'. Even so, female prophets had to contend with continual pressure to balance accepted notions of a woman's proper place with their assertion of prophetic authority. If they were generally less overtly political than their male counterparts, for them to speak out at all was a radical act that drew the suspicion both of the establishment and of their fellow millenarians.

While it has been well recognised that Blake's writing is steeped in the visionary language both of the Old Testament and of the millenarianism of his day,⁷ less critical attention has been paid to the role played by gender in his construction of prophetic speech. Arguably the most important figure in his mythos, Los, dubbed 'the Eternal Prophet', is conventionally interpreted as a symbol of masculine creative genius. But while it remains the case that prophetic speech is commonly gendered male in Blake's work, it is not clear how essential Los's maleness is to his visionary capabilities. Given that prophets, in Blake's poetry, tend to act as vehicles to explore concerns regarding his own vocation as poet-prophet, this masculine imaging could be seen as simple self-projection. However, a recent article by Nancy Jiwon Cho and David Worrall revealed that at the Swedenborgian conference Blake and his wife attended at the New Jerusalem Church in Eastcheap in 1789, Gott, the former Quaker turned millenarian, was also present. Knowing that Blake personally encountered a female prophet, the critical association between maleness and prophecy ceases to be unremarkable and instead appears somewhat conspicuous. At the least, this discovery encourages a re-examination of possible examples of prophetic or visionary speech from Blake's female characters.

Cho and Worrall persuasively argue that Blake's presentation of Oothoon's visionary cry

in *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* (1793) reflects the influence of Gott's prophetic mode (66–7). Yet it remains true that Oothoon, as an example of positive, desiring and visionary womanhood, seems unusual if not unique within Blake's *oeuvre*. Aside from Oothoon's paean to liberty, in the Lambeth books the female voice tends to be associated with the forlorn yearning of the lament, as in the case of Ahanian in *The Book of Ahanian* (1794), or a malicious attempt to assert dominance, as in Enitharmon's song in *Europe: A Prophecy* (1795). The equivocal position of Vala, who plays a central role in Blake's great unfinished epic *Vala*, begun in 1797, seems only to confirm a deep distrust of what might be called 'feminine' expressions of power. Nonetheless, the close association between outspoken femininity and a destructive female wilfulness does not necessarily imply an automatic rejection of the potential for female prophecy. It was the combination of female wilfulness and personal ambition that Blake abhorred, and it is evident that he was not alone.

In Gott's pamphlet of 1788, *Midnight Cry*, she is anxious to dispel any suspicion of ambition or pride, repeatedly referring to herself as a 'poor worm' and disavowing what she calls, in the Quaker style, 'selfwill'. She relates how God exhorted her to set aside her 'selfwill' so that she might become a better conduit for His word by submitting fully to Jesus Christ in the form of the 'Bridegroom'.⁸ Gott casts her outspokenness, somewhat improbably, as evidence of a denial of 'selfwill', thereby providing the necessary justification for her choice to transgress her prescribed social role as a woman. Personal ambition is metaphorically softened into an appropriately submissive feminine posture by framing it within the familiar dynamic of a husband's sovereignty over his wife. Clearly, within the context of the contemporary prophetic tradition, the relation between female virtue, speech and agency was both culturally charged

and conceptually sophisticated. For this reason, it is worth looking beyond the openly rebellious Oothoon when considering examples of female prophetic speech in Blake's work. Taking a more nuanced approach to women's status as potential prophets, another possible candidate emerges in Blake's work during the Lambeth period in the form of Eno, who mourns the passing of paradise, or Eternity, in *The Book of Los* (1795). The remainder of this article will therefore trace the influence of both contemporary and typological representations of female prophecy in Blake's presentation of this unassuming visionary figure.

That Eno has long been disregarded is not surprising. The only work in which she plays a major role is *The Book of Los*. On first glance, the poem seems to offer little of original value, relying heavily on its intertextual relationships with *The Book of Urizen* (1794) and *The Song of Los* (1795) for significance, and has consequently received little critical attention. Yet it confronts one of the darker and more far-reaching themes in Blake's writing – that transcendent acts of the imagination can only be achieved within a corrupt material reality and inevitably involve a degree of compromise or capitulation to that reality. It may also have a claim to being the lowest point in Blake's depiction of imaginative redemption in the increasingly dark years of the mid-1790s. Perhaps for this reason, the prophet Los is silent throughout the work, in spite of the fact that it is named after him; Eno is the only character to speak. Her introduction is an elegy to a lost state of primeval innocence, which serves as a contrast to the hellish, fallen world presented in the rest of the poem.

By giving voice, even implicitly, to the shortcomings of the present while communicating a vision of a better world, Eno's speech is comparable to the kind of artistic defiance Blake celebrated elsewhere. This convergence of visionary authority and the female voice might indicate a meaningful

development in Blake's mythology. Yet aside from her role in *The Book of Los* Eno makes only one further appearance in Blake's writing, in *Night the First of Vala*. There is, nevertheless, a hint in the early drafts of *Vala* that Blake may at one point have intended Eno to have a broader mythopoeic significance. In the earliest version of the text, the opening line reads, 'This is the Dirge of Eno which shook the heavens with wrath'.⁹ That Blake's new work was initially framed on these terms conveys a sense of Eno's continuing relevance in the time immediately after the production of *The Book of Los*. Indeed, John Beer speculates that the poem that would develop into *Vala* and later *The Four Zoas* might have begun life as '*The Song of Eno*'.¹⁰ The use of the term 'Dirge' links Eno to other examples of passive, lamenting womanhood, like Ahania and Enion, while the reference to 'wrath' is more suggestive. Wrath, though not always positive in its connotations, is often associated with revolutionary defiance or with prophecy in Blake's work. Here it is linked to the power of Eno's voice, so loud it causes the 'heavens' to tremble, a description that echoes the opening lines of *The Book of Los*.

The association between a woman's voice and power is, of course, not always a positive one for Blake, as previously mentioned. In the introductory notes to *The Book of Los* as part of his excellent *Urizen Books* edition, Worrall compares Eno to the domineering figure of Enitharmon in Blake's 1794 work, *Europe*. He observes that in her role as woman-prophet or woman-Bard Eno resembles Enitharmon who 'shares in vestigial form the bardic rite of 'night song', which, prophetically, keeps Europe enslaved for eighteen hundred years'.¹¹ There are undeniably certain correspondences between the two characters, not least in the similarity of their names. Like Eno, Enitharmon is referred to as 'mother', though, in contrast to Eno the benign 'aged mother', Enitharmon is identified as the sinister 'accursed mother'.

Moreover, at some point, the reference to 'the Dirge of Eno' at the beginning of *Vala* was altered to read 'the Song of Enitharmon', recalling Enitharmon's 'Song of death' (E305). This substitution of one for the other could be interpreted either as strengthening or weakening the connection between them, depending on one's perspective. In the end, however, Blake settled on the formulation, 'the Song of the Aged mother' (E300), Eno's epithet in *The Book of Los*. This last adjustment served, finally, to distance the work from Enitharmon's menacing 'Song', indicating that Blake chose to return to a more neutral invocation of the female prophetic voice as the text reached its final stages, before he abandoned it. This may reflect the shifting emphasis that eventually resulted in a change to the title of the work; *Vala* in the earlier drafts becomes *The Four Zoas* in the later versions. If the poem was at one point conceived as an attempt to trace the path of female-instigated destruction, it developed into a more general meditation on the various dynamics between destructive and visionary forces both within the self and in the fallen world.

There is a further, more fundamental difference between Eno and Enitharmon in the opposing purposes to which they turn the power of the female voice. In *Europe* Enitharmon actively seeks to impose her will on the world, saying 'Now comes the night of Enitharmons joy! / Who shall I call? Who shall I send? / That Woman, lovely Woman! may have dominion?' (E62). Eno's speech, though it does exemplify a type of female linguistic power, is not an attempt to delimit or control the world around her through the imposition of her perspective. Unlike Enitharmon, she exhibits no personal ambition beyond her present status and remains, outwardly, a passive figure. Like Gott, her challenge to patriarchal hegemony occurs at the level of oral performance, which reconstructs the origin of Urizen's 'religion', described in *The Book of*

Urizen, from an unorthodox, unauthorised and, we might add, dissenting perspective.

The presentation of Eno as 'aged mother' also resonates with a number of other mythological and typological depictions of the wise woman or prophetess that were still current in contemporary portrayals of female prophets, among them the Sibyl of classical antiquity. This may seem surprising given Blake's general hostility to all things Greco-Roman, but perhaps it can be explained by the Sibyl's unique position as a figure associated with both the classical and biblical traditions. In the early days of the church, the Sibyl's prophecies were assimilated into the emerging Christian typological framework. The heathen prophetess was re-imagined as a herald of the new Christian age, but remained a potentially disruptive force—a remnant of a previous era in which female voices had held undisputed, divine authority.¹² From the seventeenth century onwards, new sceptical readings of the texts began to uncover the syncretic origins of the Sibylline Books.¹³ The controversy played a pivotal role in the development of Higher Criticism, which influenced Blake's understanding of the Bible as an artefact that was both historically and politically determined.¹⁴ The use of a Sibyl-like figure to tease out the contradictions and disjunctions in the formalisation of religious doctrine is therefore rather fitting in its symbolism. Like the Sibyl of popular imagination, on the frontispiece to *The Book of Los* Blake depicted Eno as an impossibly ancient old woman, and again like the Sibyl it is her access to a pre-history untainted by current institutional doctrine that provides her with an independent basis for her authority. Eno's speech in *The Book of Los* begins with a sibylline address, 'O Times remote! / When Love & Joy were adoration' (E90), a mournful apostrophe that evokes the sense of a world that is impossibly remote yet emotionally intimate. Her expression conveys the unbridgeable gulf

of time separating that distant past from the present and positions the narrative in the prophetic or mythic mode.

Eno's rhetorical evocation of an ancient pre-history is also embedded in her name, which is loaded with anagrammatic and allusive resonances. Among the more evocative derivations that have been suggested are 'one', with its connotations of unity and origination, and 'eon', meaning an immeasurably long period of time.¹⁵ In the convergence of these anagrammatic permutations there is the implication that Eno, the first 'one', was the source or origin of the doomed race of Eternals, the inhabitants of Blake's version of paradise. Taken alongside the epithet 'aged mother', this could be construed as an allusion to Eno, as the first woman and mother of the Eternals. As the Eternal Eve, Eno takes on an added significance that places her at the centre of age-old debates surrounding gender and moral authority. Conventionally, the idea that Eve's sin was transmitted to all women through the maternal line was invoked to justify female subservience as natural and to convey the innate unsuitability of women to positions of moral influence. Even within the nonconformist world of eighteenth-century Dissenters, Eve's centrality to the narrative of the fall and the emergence of sin posed a serious problem for any woman trying to assume religious authority. The Christianised Sibyl was herself periodically attacked for her sinful feminine nature due to her association with a frenzied and erotic prophetic state.¹⁶ How could a woman claim privileged access to God's word when her body marked her out as an impure vessel? In her 1795 work *Satan Revealed*, Flaxmer pointedly argues that 'Satan knowing that a Woman was to reveal him, has endeavoured to lessen the character of women'.¹⁷

Though their prophetic styles differed greatly, Gott, Flaxmer and Southcott all confronted this tainted legacy in their writing by re-inscribing Eve by way of the figure of

'the Woman clothed in the sun' who appears in chapter twelve of the *Book of Revelation* (Clark, 107–11). Often simply termed 'the Woman', in orthodox readings she is usually read as a sign foretelling the renewal of the church on earth (Jerusalem) and its redemption from the sin and depravity of the present age, symbolised by her giving birth to a 'manchild'. If woman, in the form of Eve, was responsible for the birth of sin, then it could be argued that woman, as the Woman of *Revelation*, is also responsible for its redemption – a proposition with wide-ranging repercussions. Any effort to rehabilitate Eve by conflating her with the Woman threatened to destabilise traditional interpretations of both characters and, by extension, of biblical womanhood in general. A decade after producing *The Book of Los*, Blake created two iconic watercolour images of the 'Woman clothed in the sun',¹⁸ in which Susanne Sklar sees typological links to Eve and Mary, among others.¹⁹ In *Jerusalem*, Blake again conflates Eve with Mary and the Woman when he casts Jesus as Eve's creator in anticipation of his own eventual birth as the redeeming 'manchild': 'the Saviour in mercy takes / Contractions Limit, and of the Limit he forms Woman: That / Himself may in process of time be born Man to redeem' (E189). In representing the Woman as a kind of Eve and repudiating the conventional Eve-myth, as he does most emphatically in *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* but also in *The Book of Los*, Blake's synergistic approach mirrors that of the female prophetic tradition. Furthermore, in Blake's universe the cause of the fall into materialism and error is not female sexuality, but despotic rationality embodied in the charismatic and loathsome Urizen.

Beyond her potential as a vehicle for upsetting the conventional equation of sin and femininity in Christian doctrine, the Woman, in her function as herald of a new world, was read by some as a kind of prophetess in her own right. Though the idea is most closely

associated with Joanna Southcott, critics including Taylor (161–72), Clark (107–11) and Juster (216–59) have noted the prevalence of this rhetorical manoeuvre in the writing of women prophets throughout the Romantic era. Indeed, this re-positioning of the Eve narrative in relation to the Woman of *Revelation* became a familiar theme deployed to bolster female prophetic legitimacy. In this neat repurposing of traditional biblical exegesis, the Woman represents a liberating symbol of female prophetic eschatology and a model for real women seeking to assert visionary authority. Viewed through this contemporary lens, Eno's prophetic narrative of the genesis of sin in the introductory section of *The Book of Los* assumes a more challenging and complex character. The version upheld in Christian orthodoxy hinges on the culpability of woman, Eve, in the fall of man. In Eno Blake creates his own sibylline 'Eve', a prophetic 'Woman' who is not implicated in the fall but instead has a voice so that she can give her own account of it, subverting the biblical narrative of the origin of sin.

Blake's description of Eno's earth-shaking voice may represent another subtle allusion to the re-interpretation of the Woman of *Revelation* in the female prophetic tradition. In the sole image of Eno, on the frontispiece of *The Book of Los*, she is pictured with her mouth open in the act of speech. This visual association is then echoed in a metaphorical suggestion that Eno's voice emerges from a 'mouth' or breach in the earth itself:

Eno aged Mother,
Who the chariot of Leutha guides,
Since the day of thunders in old time

Sitting beneath the eternal Oak
Trembled and shook the stedfast Earth
And thus her speech broke forth. (E90)

Here, Blake's ambiguous sentence structure confers a sense of rhetorical grandeur on Eno's

voice as it is unclear whether it is the last echoes of the 'day of thunders', or the sound of her speech 'breaking forth' that causes the earth to quake and fissure. The metaphoric implication is that the sound of her voice emanates from deep within the earth itself, a sign perhaps that Eno represents a form of chthonic earth goddess. Such an association would be overwhelmingly negative – druidic or nature-based religions typically tend towards tyrannical cruelty in Blake's mythos and would align Eno with the inauspicious figures of Vala and Enitharmon. Like Eno, however, the Woman of *Revelation* is depicted as allied to the ruptured earth. In *Revelation* 12:16, when she is attacked by a Dragon (Satan) who threatens to drown her in a flood, 'and the earth opened her mouth, and swallowed up the flood which the dragon cast out of his mouth'. The earth is suggestively personified in this passage as a benevolent Mother Earth figure, another primordial female force representing wisdom, power and authority that can be likened to Eno's characterisation as 'aged mother'.

This section of Eno's introduction also has some curious echoes of the description of an event described in similar terms in the opening passage of the *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*. In this section, entitled 'The Argument', Oothoon recounts in strongly metaphoric terms the loss of her sexual innocence due to her rape by Bromion:

I trembled in my virgin fears
And I hid in Leutha's vale!

I plucked Leutha's flower,
And I rose up from the vale;
But the terrible thunders tore
My virgin mantle in twain. (E45)

Both passages refer to 'Leutha', an elusive character who publicly accepts the title of 'Sin' in *Milton* (1804), and is associated with the appearance or admission of guilt if not guilt itself. The references to Leutha in both texts

serve to link Oothoon and Eno to a larger discourse surrounding the labelling of woman as the embodiment of sin and sexual depravity (whether falsely accused or deserved) in Blake's fallen universe. The ambivalent relation between female sexuality and perceptions of sexual misconduct are later dramatised in *Visions* when Bromion, in the aftermath of his assault, refers to Oothoon as a 'harlot', attempting to cast her, the rape victim, as another sexually profligate Eve. The assault itself, euphemistically referred to as 'terrible thunders', implicitly occurred at a time in the recent past. This phrase is echoed in Eno's allusion to the 'day of thunders', however, that event is situated in the distant past, 'in old time', which Eno's great age allows her to recall. Yet the striking similarity in the language raises an intriguing possibility: might they refer to the same terrible event? Reading the two passages sequentially, the 'thunders' that reverberate through the earth result in or cause Eno's speech to 'break forth'. It is as if the violation of Oothoon resounded through the earth for 'eons' before erupting in the moment of Eno's address on the nature of sexual sin. Eno's speech thus reflects the typological pattern prevalent among Romantic era female prophets, in which a prophetic Woman frees femininity from a hypocritical masculine orthodoxy by rejecting the myth, traced back to Eve, that female desire is the source of sin and conflict.

The vision of Eternity Eno expounds in her speech is in line with the radical antinomian belief in the absolute sanctity of individual freedom that persisted into the late-eighteenth century. She describes the lost prelapsarian world as one devoid of moral judgements in which desire was a form of worship and experience of the divine was direct, personal and spontaneous: 'When Love & Joy were adoration: / And none impure were deem'd' (E90). Reminiscent of the doctrine of 'free grace', the simplicity and enthusiasm that

characterises this model of religious devotion represents an implicit contrast to the repressive obscurity of institutionalised religion. In contrast to the account of the loss of paradise and the emergence of sin in *Genesis*, desire both physical and psychological is shown to be an inherent part of Eno's paradise from the beginning. In a passage that bemoans the altered state of these natural appetites in the postlapsarian world, Eno enumerates a list of present-day 'sins' that were not judged to be sinful in Eternity, namely 'Covet', 'Envy', 'Wrath', and 'Wantonness'. The seemingly redundant doubling of 'covet' and 'envy' draws attention to Blake's subtle collapsing of the Mosaic Law of the Ten Commandments, which has a proscription against covetousness, into the Catholic doctrine of the Seven Deadly Sins, which includes envy, wrath and lust. The same conflation appears in Urizen's announcement of his creation of a Mosaic 'Book of brass' in *The Book of Urizen*:

Here alone I in books form'd of metals
Have written the secrets of wisdom
The secrets of dark contemplation
By fightings and conflicts dire,
With terrible monsters Sin-bred:
Which the bosoms of all inhabit;
Seven deadly Sins of the soul (E72)

The combination of these two autocratic moral doctrines casts the opposition to human desire as the founding principle of all forms of institutional Christianity or 'state religion'. Yet it is clear from Eno's speech that the energies known collectively as 'sin' in the fallen world were considered to be innocent and harmless before the fall. Therefore it not only carries the intimation that 'sin' was not recognised as such in paradise, but that the concept of 'sin' was an authoritarian invention designed, in the aftermath of the fall, to oppress and control something that is unjustly persecuted. The moral and political significance of both the above passage and Eno's description is that

impurity is not a self-induced state or condition but a judgement, conferred by those with the power to decide what constitutes sin.

By invoking the tradition of Moses and his stone tablets, Blake stresses the critical role played by written language in the formalisation of the conception of sin, implying that 'sin' was first created not in the Garden of Eden but through its inscription into religious doctrine *via* the Mosaic Law, what he elsewhere calls the Moral Law. He also hints that the evils targeted by institutional religion emerge not from the desires themselves, but from their repression. In *America: A Prophecy* (1793), the link between the suppression of desire through Urizen's Mosaic law-making is made explicit, when the eruption of revolutionary spirit is described as 'The fiery joy, that Urizen perverted to ten commands' (E54). Orc, as the representative of revolutionary wrath, then proclaims an end to the tyranny of Urizen's 'stony law' by stamping it to dust, literally erasing it. Significantly, Orc acts out his repudiation of Urizen's Moral Law, he does not speak it. By equating desire, in its purest form, with an expression of natural but anarchic revolutionary energy, Blake asserts that desire, in its natural state, is antithetical not only to social and political control, but perhaps also to language itself, which operates by encoding and controlling the world around us. Energy escapes its fetters in a burst of entropic destruction that renders all linguistic codes obsolete.

Due to her use of the language of the Moral Law, Worrall interprets Eno's account of the pre-fallen nature of sin as evidence not that she is subverting Urizenic moralism but that she is colluding in its supremacy: 'If Sin is the means by which desire is regulated by religion, then the voice of Eno implies her own immersion within this ideology. This is why Eno's words are political and not just spiritual' (*Urizen Books*, 198). Certainly, there is a perceptible tension between the vocabulary and purported message of Eno's evocative description of this

'sinless' paradise. The desires are not yet 'deemed' to be sinful, but they are still named or branded by their fallen designations. Judged on this basis it appears that, like the Sibyl, her voice has been appropriated by the language of the 'state religion'. It could, however, be argued that direct confrontation of the kind Orc and Oothoon engage in is just one means of resisting the all-consuming power of the status quo. Like the real female prophets in the London of the 1790s, Eno's challenge to the establishment is less in her immediate effect on the prevailing moral system than in the alternate perspective she provides on the formation of that system. In her role as Sibyl-prophet Eno is capable of remembering and thus disseminating the memory of the process by which desire became institutionalised as sin. And while she cannot express those memories in a language other than that of Urizenic power and control, she can subvert it by exposing the hypocrisy and self-delusion at the heart of that linguistic system.

As Eno's speech continues, she expands upon the condition of the 'sins' in the prelapsarian world free from Urizen's influence:

But Covet was poured full:
Envy fed with fat of lambs:
Wrath with lions gore:
Wantonness lulld to sleep
With the virgins lute,
Or sated with her love. (E90)

In a world where Covet, Envy, Wrath, and Wantonness are fully integrated and part of a holistic model of experience, they pose no threat or danger; they are tame and sated, and need no discipline or repression. As Mee remarks, the seven deadly sins are revealed to be essentially 'positive energies' (202). Eno tells of a world in which there is no hypocritical denial of the nature of desire, instead it is shown to be a fundamental part of the human psyche. Like gluttons at a feast the 'sins' sate

themselves equally on the flesh of 'lambs' and 'lions', in an echo of the Messianic vision of *Isaiah* chapter 11. The reference to the lamb, an allusion to Christ, may signify that these 'desires' are not the product of human corruption, but are 'fed' on the same divine, spiritual sustenance as the rest of the Divine Humanity.

Like the presence of *Covet*, the inclusion of the sensual and evocative *Wantonness* in the place of the more obvious 'lust' is potentially significant. The connotations of the two words are subtly different – lust simply signifies an intense desire that is generally sexual in nature. *Wantonness*, though a synonym for lust, would commonly have been used as a pejorative term denoting a specifically female form of socially unacceptable behaviour. Moreover, in Eno's first use of the term it is described as 'Curled *Wantonness*', calling to mind iconic depictions of Eve, in the form of the carnal temptress: 'Her unadornèd golden tresses wore / Dishevelled, but in wanton ringlets waved / As the vine curls her tendrils'.²⁰ Blake's use of the term calls attention to popular preconceptions surrounding female sexual misbehaviour. In the next reference to 'wantonness' this previously feminised sin has been transformed into a savage beast to be soothed by the virgin's lute. In a parody of the chaste and accomplished young lady fetishised by eighteenth-century society, this image plays on the notion that a young woman's value rests entirely on her remaining a virgin – the archetypal foil to the wanton harlot with her loose dishevelled hair. Yet no sooner is this image of spotless female virtue established than it is subverted. The savage beast can be tamed either with music or 'sated with her love', implying that the two are morally equivalent. While *Enitharmon* declares that 'Womans love is Sin' (E62), Eno presents the loss of sexual innocence as the natural consummation of desire, to which she attaches no stigma. As in *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*, the consensual loss of virginity is not

something to be feared, but rather the healthy expression of a basic physical and spiritual drive.

This reading of Eno's paradise as a soft, sensual world free of judgment and artificial restraint accords with her appearance in *Night the First of Vala*. There she creates a space in which *Los* and *Enitharmon* are kept safe from harm after the first cycle of division and conflict has begun between the *Zoas*. Eno constructs this Edenic world by stretching out a gap or a moment in time: 'Then Eno a daughter of *Beulah* took a Moment of Time / And drew it out to Seven thousand years with much care & affliction / And many tears & in Every year made windows into Eden' (E304). Her ability to see into Eternity, also the basis of her speech in *The Book of Los*, allows her to remember and therefore reproduce a paradisaical sanctuary for *Los* and *Enitharmon*. Far from being a passive figure doomed to observe and record the fall from Eternity, Eno preserves it in order to reconstruct it and give it new life in the present. A similar episode occurs in *Jerusalem* (E197–8) in which an 'Aged pensive Woman' creates a world within a 'Moment of Time' to protect *Jerusalem*, who is typologically linked to both *Eve* and the *Woman*, from the repercussions of *Albion's* fall into division and dissolution. There the character is identified as 'Erin' rather than Eno, adding an overt political dimension to her actions. Like Eno, Erin rejects repressive moralistic systems, which she blames for 'Withering the Human Form by Laws of Sacrifice for Sin / By Laws of Chastity & Abhorrence' (E198).

The final stanza of Eno's introduction in *The Book of Los* anticipates the imminent destruction of the peaceful paradise of Eternity as the description of the 'sins' ominously foreshadows their altered states in the postlapsarian world. *Covet* breaks 'his locks & bars' (E91) marking a departure from the images of unbounded freedom and fulfilment that defined Eno's description of Eternity up

until this point. The symbolism of chains and fetters is elsewhere associated with constrained or perverted desire in Blake's writing, for example in Los's chain of jealousy in *The Book of Urizen* or Oothoon's Promethean punishment in *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*. Meanwhile, the images of Envy and Wrath hint at the temptations to come: 'Envy sung at the rich mans feast: / Wrath was follow'd up and down / By a little ewe lamb' (E91). But only in the final lines does Eno start rhetorically to bridge the gap between the fallen and unfallen worlds: 'And Wantonness on his own true love / Begot a giant race'. The use of 'begot' recalls the 'sons & daughters' of Urizen's 'selfbegotten armies' (E73), whose fate, as revealed in *The Book of Urizen*, is to be corrupted and degraded by life in the material universe. It is 'wantonness', the presumption or judgment of sexual sin, that provides the catalyst. Even in this realm of paradisaical fulfilment there is a sense that the cycle of suppression and release is inevitable, with paradise always in danger of giving way to a new period of repression. Abruptly, Eno's speech ends and the narrative moves from the past to the present in which the desires in their current perverted state run rampant through the heavens, while the prophet Los looks on helplessly, 'bound in a chain / Compell'd to watch Urizens shadow' (E91). In the remainder of the work, *The Book of Los* reveals itself to be a meditation on the failure of prophecy, as defined in a narrow popular sense where it is understood to be a means of intervening in the present to prevent future catastrophes. However, the role of the prophet clearly meant much more than this to Blake who ascribes to it a public and political dimension, which includes bearing witness, remembering, demystification and speaking out.

In the vision communicated in *The Book of Los*, Eno speaks out to demystify the loaded association between sinfulness, desire and womanhood. Though she speaks in Urizenic

terminology, she also destabilises Urizen's totalising discourse through intertextual allusion and internal contradiction, not least in her description of the sins themselves. In the subversive subtext of Eno's speech lies the suggestion that she is not simply the conduit for the Urizenic Moral Law, but the vehicle for a critique from within, a deconstruction of that repressive code. Like her real-life counterparts, it is in the very act of speaking as a woman that she asserts the value of dissension through which discrete individual subjectivities can challenge prevailing socio-political narratives that serve both deny and suppress difference. While her rejection of the traditional Eve-myth in favour of a redemptive, female-driven prophetic eschatology links her to a complex conceptual system concerned with the reclamation of femininity as a moral force. Blake's knowledge of the culture of female prophecy is evident in his exploitation of rhetorical strategies such as the conflation of Eve and the Woman of *Revelation*, part of his intricate typological approach to the thorny issue of gender and moral authority. Eno may not reach the stature of Los or Orc but, nonetheless, she acts as a prism through which Blake can explore these contemporary debates surrounding women who claimed the power of prophecy. Moreover, in Eno Blake demonstrates a willingness to consider the implications of women's entry into the community of prophets, both real and imagined.

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1. Keri Davies, 'William Blake's Mother: A New Identification', *Blake/An Illustrated Quarterly*, 33. 2 (1999), 36–50. Marsha Keith Schuchard and Keri Davies, 'Recovering the Lost Moravian History of William Blake's Family', *Blake/An Illustrated Quarterly*, 38.1 (2004), 36–43. Keri Davies, 'Jonathan Spilsbury and the Lost Moravian History of William Blake's Family', *Blake/An Illustrated Quarterly*, 40.3 (2006–07), 100–9.

2. Nancy Jiwon Cho and David Worrall, 'William Blake's Meeting with Dorothy Gott: The Female Origins of Blake's Prophetic Mode', *Romanticism*, 16.1 (April 2010), 60–71.
3. David Erdman, *Prophet Against Empire*, rev. edn. (Princeton, NJ, 1970) and E.P. Thompson, *Witness Against the Beast: William Blake and the Moral Law* (Cambridge, 1993).
4. Robert Rix documents Blake's Swedenborgian associations through his friends Joseph Flaxman and William Sharp in *William Blake and the Cultures of Radical Christianity* (Aldershot, 2007). Rix identifies Sharp as a follower of Richard Brothers and later Joanna Southcott, who tried unsuccessfully to convert Blake to both sects (75–7).
5. Anna Clark, *The Struggle for the Breeches* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1995), Barbara Taylor, *Eve and the New Jerusalem* (London, 1983) and Susan Juster, *Doomsayers* (Philadelphia, 2006).
6. For a thorough discussion of the Dissenting sects and prophets in the London of the 1790s see, E.P. Thompson's seminal work, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London, 1963), and J.F.C. Harrison's *The Second Coming* (London, 1979).
7. See Jon Mee's *Dangerous Enthusiasm* (Oxford, 1992) and Thompson's *Witness Against the Beast*.
8. *Midnight Cry* (London, 1788), 8–9.
9. *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, ed. David V. Erdman and Harold Bloom (New York, 1988), 819. All references to Blake's poetry are to this edition, hereafter referred to in parentheses by an 'E'.
10. *Blake's Visionary Universe* (Manchester, 1969), 345.
11. *The Urizen Books* (London, 1995), 196.
12. See, Marina Warner, *From the Beast to the Blonde* (London, 1994), 67–79.
13. See, David S. Katz, 'Isaac Vossius and the English Biblical Critics: 1650–1689', in *Scepticism and Irreligion in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (Leiden, 1993), 142–84.
14. See, for example, Blake's 'Annotations to an Apology for the Bible', in which he takes the Deist Paine's side against the Bishop's defence of the Bible as the received Word of God (E611–20).
15. S. Foster Damon, *A Blake Dictionary* (Hanover, NH, 1988), 125.
16. Susan Matthews identifies Blake's invocation of female prophecy in the Preludium to *America* as an indirect allusion to this eroticised conception of the Sibyl, in *Blake, Sexuality and Bourgeois Politeness* (Cambridge, 2011), 162–6.
17. *Satan Revealed; or, The Dragon Overcome* (London, 1795), 23.
18. *The Great Red Dragon and the Woman Clothed with the Sun* and *The Great Red Dragon and the Woman Clothed in Sun: 'The Devil Is Come Down'* in Martin Butlin, ed. *The Paintings and Drawings of William Blake* (2 vols, New Haven and London, 1981), nos 519–20.
19. *Blake's 'Jerusalem' As Visionary Theatre: Entering the Divine Body* (Oxford, 2011), 71–2. Sklar traces this depiction of Jerusalem back to the early influence of Jacob Boehme's writings on Blake's visionary universe.
20. *Paradise Lost*, ed. Alastair Fowler, 2nd edn (Edinburgh, 1998), 239.

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