

The Rise and Fall of the Myth of Orc (2): mythogenesis in Blake's *America* and in *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*

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The title page of *America* shows that the work was produced in 1793. However, there is a strong possibility that the work took its present form later than that date. Geoffrey Keynes and D.V. Erdman speculated that *America* was completed in 1794 or 1795, but this idea was not researched further and was denied by G.E. Bentley. Keynes noticed that no copies of *America* had watermarks dated earlier than 1794,¹ but Bentley dismissed the indication that all copies were made later than 1794 by pointing out that copies C-L, without dated watermarks, could be earlier.² Erdman, on the other hand, perceived a difference in spirit and the quality of drawing between the cancelled plates and the plates integrated into the work.³ He also argued that *America* was completed around 1795, pointing out the closeness between the design of the second page of the Preludium of *America* and the text of *The Song of Los*.⁴ Bentley found little validity in Erdman's suggestion and concluded thus: 'there seems to be no sound reason not to accept the date of "1793" on the title page'.⁵ The existence of a gap between the date on the title page and the actual date of completion of a work is not unusual with Blake. Bentley believed the date on the title page because of the Prospectus of October 10, 1793, in which *America* was advertised: 'America, a Prophecy, in Illuminated Printing. Folio, with 18 designs, price 10s. 6d'.⁶ Since *America* has eighteen pages altogether, the present version may be regarded as the one completed in 1793. However, this is not necessarily the case: as Joseph Viscomi pointed out, 'In the Prospectus, Blake uses the word "design" to mean picture, not plate or page'.⁷ In what follows, the transformation of *America* before and after October 1793 is traced. It will also reveal that *America* is a work of complicated revisions and that its essence is infused by them. The focus must be on *America* because the process by which *America* was perfected reflects the gradual crystallization of the myth of Orc.

I

Blake's attempt to recover the lost vision of *The French Revolution* is accomplished in *America*. It was in September of 1792, when the French king was dethroned, that the French Revolution began to parallel the American War of Independence. While Burke battled for the

English monarchy against republicanism by turning people's sympathy towards the French monarch, Blake believed that the American War of Independence, which Burke supported, was a 'civil war',⁸ comparable with the French Revolution, designed to throw off the yoke of George III. *America*, as well as 'The Tyger' and 'A Song of Liberty', are certainly of this period.

The original form of *America*, in close relation to *The French Revolution*, 'The Tyger' and 'A Song of Liberty', is glimpsed when the cancelled proofs a, b and c⁹ are restored to the work in place of plates 5, 6 and 7.¹⁰ The following will make the point clear. First, as *The French Revolution* opens with the infernal council urged by the common's heavenly one, so in *America* Albion's Prince hastens to the equally gloomy council infuriated by the new awareness declared by Washington. All these works except 'A Song of Liberty' depict the transition from the depth of night to dawn, while the focus is on the villains rather than the heroes. Secondly, *The French Revolution* and *America* have a common figure who foreshadows Urizen. 'The aged apparition' (b. 15; E, 58) with snowy beard and garments wetted with tears in the latter is foreshadowed in the vision of the Archbishop of Paris in the former who gives 'the command of Heaven' to the oppressors (158; E, 293). He decides the course of the councils. Thirdly and most important, *America*, when it begins with plates a, b and c, is structured towards a climactic moment in the same way as *The French Revolution*, 'The Tyger' and 'The Song of Liberty'. With the original ordering of the plates the prophecy once reached its climax with Boston's Angel's speech on plate 13, while, in the present version, the prophecy culminates in Orc's apocalyptic vision on plate 8.¹¹ The importance of Boston's Angel's speech is marked by the place where he stood. It was on the Atlantean hills, from whose bright summits the golden world was attainable, that Boston's Angel announced the Declaration of Disobedience (10<12>. 5-11; E, 55). In 'A Song of Liberty' the 'infinite mountains of light' at which the new born fire confronted the starry king is the same place. Moreover, the passage concerning the Atlantean hills in *America* is embedded in the flame from which Orc emerges. Its pencil design can be recognized on the second draft of 'The Tyger'. This is part of Boston's Angel's speech:

What God is he, writes laws of peace, & clothes him in a tempest
 What pitying Angel lusts for tears, and fans himself with sighs
 What crawling villain preaches abstinence & wraps himself
 In fat of lambs? no more I follow, no more obedience pay. (A, 11<13>. 12-15; E, 55)

The hypocrisy and deceit of the oppressors revealed in his speech drives Boston's Angel to rend off his robe and throw down his sceptre (12<14>. 1; E, 55). While in 'A Song of Liberty' the new born wonder is hurled down by the armed king, in *America* thirteen Angels indignantly descend as fires from the same heavenly height onto the land of America. As a result of these actions,

The British soldiers thro' the thirteen states sent up a howl

Of anguish: threw their swords & muskets to the earth & ran. (A, 13<15>. 6-7; E, 56)

This is not the bright apocalyptic moment decreed to throw down a sword and musket in *The French Revolution* (220-1; E, 296). Neither does this resemble the moment of the dawn when the stars throw down their spears in 'The Tyger' (17-18; E, 25). In *America* the apocalyptic vision of *The French Revolution* and 'The Tyger' is in decline: there throwing down swords and muskets merely signifies a military retreat (A, 13<15>. 7; E, 56). The original glory of the vision faded without recovery. Boston's Angel's heroic action of rending off his robe and descending as fire, however, is later renewed by the protagonist in *Milton*. While the thirteen Angels were inflamed by their wrath, Milton descended to redeem his emanations by self-annihilation: he became a human fire to give life, unlike the consuming fire of the thirteen Angels to give death.

Orc was not the distinct hero of *America* from the very beginning. While he remained a symbolic spirit emerging from the revolutionary fire, prominence was given to Albion's Prince whose monstrosity made the numerous rebels against him heroic. Blake's effort to produce his own mythology is seen in his naming a baby whose birth and whose mother's labour is recorded in 'A Song of Liberty'. As many critics have perceived, Orc derives from Orcus, meaning the brink of Hell. While Orcus is referred to as the dark vacuum in *Tiriel* (239; E, 281), the most similar use of this name is found in Book II of *Paradise Lost*: Satan, who escaped the gate of Hell in search of the dark region's boundary with Heaven, addressed Chaos, Night and Orcus standing side by side with Hades as 'Ye Powers/And Spirits of this nethermost Abyss'.¹² This Orcus serves Blake's purpose positively, for he anticipates the powerful force to counterbalance Heaven whose starry host symbolizes for him a mundane power. In Orc's emergence Blake's invocation of 'the Eternal Hell' in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (3. 2; E, 34) takes effect. However, in my view, it is not until Blake's suppressed thought was released in *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* that the myth of Orc began to crystallize in *America*.¹³

II

Visions of the Daughters of Albion owes its primary structure to the myth of Persephone or the descent of the soul as Kathleen Raine carefully elaborated.¹⁴ The significance of Blake's turning to the myth is precisely shown in Olympiodorus's comment on *The Phaedo* of Plato:¹⁵

The soul descends Corically, or after the manner of Proserpine, into generation, but is distributed into generation Dionysiacally; and she is bound in body Prometheiacally and Titanically: she frees herself therefore from its bonds by exercising the strength of Hercules; but she is collected into one through the assistance of Apollo and the saviour Minerva, by philosophizing in a manner truly cathartic.

Blake may have known this passage, since the passage is quoted in Thomas Taylor's 'A Dissertation on the Eleusinian and Bacchic Mysteries', whose presumed date of publication is 1790 or 1791.¹⁶ Blake's myth of Orc takes the course the passage presents, as what follows will show.

Oothoon seeks for flowers to comfort her. In her eyes, flowers are equated with nymphs due to their watery nature. Plucking flowers symbolically signifies the dry soul's drinking enfeebling water whereby soul is generated into body. The implication of the union between soul and body is sexual. As Pluto ravishes Persephone who plucked Narcissus, so Bromion tears Oothoon's virgin mantle when she plucks the marygold. Thus, as Olympiodorus says, 'the soul descends Corically, or after the manner of Proserpine'.¹⁷ According to Platonic and Neoplatonic philosophy, the soul immersed within the body is defiled and loses all her splendour. Blake forms his own cogs to move the adverse wheels when he lets Oothoon say that 'the soul of sweet delight/Can never pass away' (*VDA*, 1. 9-10; E, 46) and that 'every thing that lives is holy!' (*VDA*, 8. 10; E, 51). Platonic and Neoplatonic philosophers' despising of matter and the body is responsible for the establishment of law and religion, which transformed the concept of love and undermined its fulfilment. Oothoon is the 'Eternal Female' anticipated in 'A Song of Liberty' who is brought into Blake's mythology with the vision of eternity untainted.

The poem is multidimensional, and assumes different phases depending on which point one focuses on. The emphasis seems to have shifted from the soul's descent into and union with the body to a love-triangle with a hidden cause of affliction when Blake initiated the third figure, Theotormon, as Oothoon's lover. Unlike Persephone who plucked the 'pride of all the plain', Narcissus, who was fatally deluded by his own shadow, Oothoon plucks the marygold: by this she is well-protected from false modesty or women's art¹⁸ and hastens to Theotormon. She is, however, raped and branded with the name of whore by Bromion. He says to Theotormon:

Now thou maist marry Bromions harlot, and protect the child
Of Bromions rage, that Oothoon shall put forth in nine moons time. (*VDA*, 2. 1-2; E, 46)

In Bromion's words the second point of Olympiodorus is fulfilled, however distorted it may be: that is, the soul 'is distributed into generation Dionysiacally'.¹⁹ The name of Bromius, which refers to Dionysus himself, is not irrelevant to Bromion. Theotormon is given a supreme test of love. Without faith and inner vision, his natural love for Oothoon is transformed into hate. In furious jealousy, Theotormon binds the 'adulterate' pair back to back for punishment as Vulcan contrived an invisible chain to bind fast his wife, Venus, and her lover, Mars.²⁰

The relationship between Bromion and Theotormon is notable. Although at first sight they appear to be dire enemies, beneath this level they are inseparable, as though they are opposing psychic forces which function in subtle collaboration—a mode of opposition which is fully scrutinized in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (5; E, 34). Bromion and Theotormon are, in fact, allied against Oothoon: Bromion's thunder as well as Theotormon's eagles are reminiscent

of the sky-God Jupiter, while Oothoon is a Blakean Prometheus punished for having brought down the heavenly fire and spread it on the earth. As Olympiodorus predicted, Oothoon is 'bound in body Prometheiacally and Titanically',²¹ although this role is distinctly taken over by Orc. The fact of collaboration between Bromion and Theotormon may be confirmed by the parallel vision in *Europe*. There they reappear as Rintrah (furious king) and Palamabron (horned priest) respectively, opposed to Orc:

Thus was the howl thro Europe !
 For Orc rejoic'd to hear the howling shadows
 But Palamabron shot his lightnings trenching down his wide back
 And Rintrah hung with all his legions in the nether deep. (*Europe*, 12<15> . 21-4; E, 64)

The precise use of conjunctions ('But... And') makes the relationship between the three clear. Moreover, Enitharmon gives an order to Rintrah and Palamabron, saying, 'Go! tell the human race that Womans love is Sin!' (5<8> . 5; E, 62), while chiding Oothoon, 'Why wilt thou give up womans secrecy my melancholy child?' (14<17> . 22; E, 66).

Oothoon is awake. She notices the jealous eye which is keeping their den as she describes:

Instead of morn arises a bright shadow, like an eye
 In the eastern cloud. (VDA, 2. 35-6; E, 47)

This orb is linked to Urizen, as made clear in the frontispiece to *Europe*, in which Urizen with a compass circumscribes the infinite. It is neither to Bromion nor to Theotormon but to Urizen that Oothoon directs her protest. She identifies him as the Father of jealousy who suppresses desire and deprives Man of joy and bliss, while Bromion and Theotormon are regarded as his agents under his malicious influence.

When the values of Bromion are internalized in Theotormon's psyche and the relationship between Oothoon and Theotormon is intensified, the myth assumes another important phase. On plate 4 of *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*, Oothoon is chained by the foot and lamenting in the wave over woe-stricken Theotormon. Bromion is no longer present. The implication of this bizarre design is partly deciphered by Raine in terms of Ossianic vision.²² Oothoon is wrapped in a wave because she is 'the virgin of the wave', deriving her name from Macpherson's Oithona. Like Oothoon, Oithona was ravished, by a lord of Orkney, though her lover carried out revenge directly against the offender. Oithona chose death rather than life in 'disgrace'. Blake saw the myth of Persephone as underlying the Ossianic narrative and also as a net in which Ossianic characters are trapped. Thus, in *The Visions of the Daughters of Albion* Blake reveals the hidden collaboration of Bromion and Theotormon in their confrontation. Although Oothoon perceives the religious net which Urizen spreads, she cannot free herself from the snare either unless it vanishes as a result of being perceived by the others. As for the design of plate 4, however, the Ossianic background of the vision does not disclose its

full significance. What is entirely missing is the design's hidden connection with a scene in *The Iliad*:

Not so his Loss the fierce Achilles bore;
 But sad retiring to the sounding Shore,
 O'er the wild Margin of the Deep he hung,
 That kindred Deep, from whence his Mother sprung.

.....

Far in the deep Recesses of the Main,
 Where aged Ocean holds his wat'ry Reign,
 The Goddess-Mother heard. The Waves divide;
 And like a Mist she rose above the Tide;
 Beheld him mourning on the naked Shores.

(*The Iliad*, I. 454-7, 468-72)

Theotormon sitting and lamenting on the shore is reminiscent of Achilles who was deprived of his war-prize, Briseis, by Agamemnon. The image of Achilles underlies that of Theotormon to express unprecedented anger and revenge, an emotion central to *The Iliad*. Achilles's mother, the salt-water goddess, Thetis, appeared to her son in anger and sorrow, as in the design, although without a chain around her ankle, to help him carry out his revenge. Similarly behind Theotormon's unrelenting anger lies his strong will for revenge, which Oothoon attempts to appease in vain.

Oothoon is called 'the soft soul of America', probably because she infuses life into the Prophecy of that name. Orc thereby ceases to have a purely imaginary status and emerges as an inspired figure. The very vision of a man breathed into life by a woman appears on the title page of *America*. The inscription on the earliest draft of the title page emphasizes the importance of this subject even in comparison with the trumpeting Angels heralding the Apocalypse.²³ That Oothoon is the source of Blake's inspiration for Orc is indicated in *Milton*, in which Orc, although he has lost his original splendour, suddenly bursts into an inspired protest against the shadowy female who tries to entice Milton out of his mission. There he is clearly associated with Oothoon and Leutha (*Milton*, 18 [20].39; E, 112).

Unmistakably, Orc is the successor of Oothoon. *America* could have started from Orc's release from his chains without the elaborate myth behind it, for it is, in a sense, Oothoon who is released from the infernal chain simultaneously. Here, as Olympiodorus says, the soul 'frees herself therefore from its bonds by exercising the strength of Hercules'.²⁴ The kinship between Oothoon and Orc would be untraceable in the sharp contrast between Oothoon's exalted soul and Orc's fierceness without speech echoes and visual images which mutually communicate beyond the boundaries of their separate works.

There is a strong possibility that Blake imagined a mother and child relationship between Oothoon and Orc. *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* may have been projected to mythologize how Orc was conceived. Albion's Angel's speech on plate 11 of *America* retains this original

vision of Orc's mother:

Ah vision from afar ! Ah rebel form that rent the ancient
Heavens, Eternal Viper self-renew'd, rolling in clouds
I see thee in thick clouds and darkness on America's shore.
Writhing in pangs of abhorred birth; red flames the crest rebellious
And eyes of death; the harlot womb oft opened in vain

.....

Thy mother lays her length outstretch'd upon the shore beneath. (9<11> . 14-25; E, 54-5)

A woman who was called harlot and gave birth to Orc on America's shore suits Oothoon well. Moreover, the description of a woman 'outstretch'd upon the shore beneath' has a striking resemblance to the bottom design of plate 1 of *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*. Far from being under an illusion, Albion's Angel shows here his initial recognition of Orc, however distorted it may be—although in the final version he appears to be insane because of Blake's shift of vision concerning Orc's parentage. Blake's new perception results in Albion's Angel's renewed identification of Orc on page 9, which records the reaction of Albion's Angel after the mighty voice declares the arrival of the dawn:

... Art thou not Orc, who serpent form'd
Stands at the gate of Enitharmon to devour her children;
Blasphemous Demon, Antichrist hater of Dignities;
Lover of wild rebellion, and transgressor of Gods Law;
Why dost thou come to Angels eyes in this terrific form ? (A, 7<9> . 3-7; E, 53-4)

The abrupt appearance of the name of Enitharmon, the first appearance of her name in Blake's works, indicates that Orc's parentage was transferred from Theotormon and Oothoon to Los and Enitharmon by the time this passage was added.

There are more graphic designs in *America*, the lost meanings of which become apparent in the light of Blake's original vision of Orc's parentage. The cancelled plate d of *America*, whose relationship to the work has been obscure, depicts two women in contrary states: one is sorrowful and naked to the waist with a tree bending over her; the other, who is much smaller in size, is joyfully kissing a baby as if he were descending from the sky. The baby appears in exactly the same posture, although in flames and without his mother receiving him, on page 20 of *The Book of Urizen*, where he is named Orc. This design may show Oothoon's descent to Leutha's vale to become pregnant by Bromion and her release by giving birth to Orc. Probably when Orc became the child of Enitharmon, however, the context of the design changed and the plate was cancelled.

The frontispiece to *America*, which is thought to have been added before the work was advertised in October 1793,²⁵ is also illuminated by the line of thought traced so far. The

meaning of the frontispiece to *America* is best understood when it is contrasted with plate 4 of *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*. The winged figure in the former seems to have developed from Theotormon in the latter. He is given wings as well as a fringe sticking out like horns because he is a 'horned priest' like Palamabron in *Europe*. Moreover, while in *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* Oothoon is chained by the foot beside Theotormon, in *America* a woman often understood as Oothoon is released from a chain while a winged figure is tormented by his own 'mind-forged manacles'. 'Oothoon' with two children, one of whom we may regard as Orc, sits beside 'Theotormon', indicating that they are the hidden cause of his sorrow. Theotormon's anger, which is comparable to that of Achilles, was not appeased until he nailed down his son, Orc, although this role is taken over by Los who becomes Orc's father. The frontispiece is not irrelevant to the upper design of the Preludium in which revenge is finally carried out.

Notes

All quotations from Blake are taken from *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, edited by David V. Erdman, commentary by Harold Bloom, New York, Anchor Press, 1965, revised edition, 1982.

Quotations are identified by the abbreviated title of the poem, followed by page (or plate) and line number, and page number in Erdman, thus: *A*, 11. 12-15; *E*, 55.

G.E. Bentley's plate numberings are used for *America* and *Europe*, and are supplied in brackets in reference to those works, thus: *A*, 2<4>. 7-9; *E*, 52.

Frequently cited Blake's works are abbreviated thus:

A *America a Prophecy*

VDA *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*

1. Arnold Fawens, ed. *America; a prophecy*, 'Description and Bibliographical Statement' written by Geoffrey Keynes, Clairvaux, Jura, Trianon Press, 1963.
2. G.E. Bentley, *Blake Books*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1977, p. 86.
3. *E*, 802.
4. *Ibid.* p. 802.
5. Bentley, *op. cit.*, p. 86.
6. *E*, 692-3.
7. 'Facsimile or Forgery? An Examination of *America*, Plates 4 & 9, Copy B', *Blake/An Illustrated Quarterly*, 16 (1983), pp. 219-23 (p. 220).
8. Erdman put Blake's perception of the American War in this succinct form in *Blake: Prophet Against Empire*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1954, third edn., 1977, p. 66.
9. These proofs are reproduced in Erdman's *The Illuminated Blake*, London, Oxford University Press, 1975, pp. 392-4.
10. Bentley's pagination of *America* is adopted here and the work is counted from the frontispiece, although Blake numbered some copies from the Preludium (a practice followed by Erdman).
11. The absence of plates 5, 6 and 7 would have given less prominence to plate 8. Orc is looming up without

- being identified on plates 5, 6 and 7 until his articulate voice and vision manifests him on plate 8.
12. *Paradise Lost*, II. 968-9.
 13. In my view *America* was projected earlier and finished later than *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*. Copy F of *America* in the British Library is bound (since July 1859) before copy B of *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*, while the reverse order of the two works is common in the standard editions of Blake's complete works. The two works used to have far stronger link than now, which Blake's shift of vision made obscure. The closer location of *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* to *Europe* would reveal how some images of the latter originated from the former.
 14. Kathleen Raine, *Blake and Tradition*, 2 vols., Princeton University Press, 1968, vol. 1, pp. 168-170.
 15. Thomas Taylor *the Platonist*. *Selected Writings*, ed. Kathleen Raine and George Mills Harper, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1969, p. 373.
 16. *Ibid.*, p. 344.
 17. Taylor, op. cit., p. 373.
 18. As many critics perceived, Oothoon is associated with Mary Wollstonecraft. Mary's spirit was infused into Oothoon when she plucked the 'marygold'. Mary's view is articulated in the following:
 Would ye, O my sisters, really possess modesty, ye must remember that the possession of virtue, of any denomination, is incompatible with ignorance and vanity! ye must acquire that soberness of mind, which the exercise of duties, and the pursuit of knowledge, alone inspire, or ye will still remain in a doubtful dependent situation, and only be loved whilst ye are fair! The downcast eye, the rosy blush, the retiring grace, are all proper in their season; but modesty, being the child of reason, cannot long exist with the sensibility that is not tempered by reflection.
 (*A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, 1792, ed. Miriam Brody, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1975, p. 239)
 19. Taylor, op. cit., p. 373.
 20. The details of the myth are in *The Odyssey*, Book VIII, 307-402.
 21. Taylor, op. cit., p. 373.
 22. Raine, op. cit., vol. 1, pp. 174-6.
 23. The inscription runs as follows:
 Angels to be very small as small as the letters that they may not interfere with the subject at bottom—which is to be in a stormy sky & rain separated from the angels by Clouds.
 (Martin Butlin, *The Paintings and Drawings of William Blake*, 2 vols., New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1982, [Text], p. 116)
 24. Taylor, op. cit., p. 373.
 25. Keynes & Wolf consider 'the frontispiece and the title-page normally... the last completed section of any book' (Geoffrey Keynes and Edwin Wolf, *William Blake's Illuminated Books. A Census*, Cambridge University Press, 1953, p. 27). In my view, Blake invented the frontispiece around 1793 to integrate graphic designs which would otherwise have remained in fragments. For instance, only copy B of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* has the frontispiece ('Our End is come', dated June 5, 1793). This design grew out of a design in which Tiriel denounces his three sons, as Butlin showed by bringing together two similar designs.

