

Visions of the daughters of Albion: the influence of Mary Wollstonecraft's life and career on William Blake

Abbasi, Pyeaam; Keshavarzian, Ramin

Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Abbasi, P., & Keshavarzian, R. (2014). Visions of the daughters of Albion: the influence of Mary Wollstonecraft's life and career on William Blake. *International Letters of Social and Humanistic Sciences*, 40, 48-63. <https://doi.org/10.18052/www.scipress.com/ILSHS.40.48>

Nutzungsbedingungen:

Dieser Text wird unter einer CC BY Lizenz (Namensnennung) zur Verfügung gestellt. Nähere Auskünfte zu den CC-Lizenzen finden Sie hier:

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/deed.de>

Terms of use:

This document is made available under a CC BY Licence (Attribution). For more information see:

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0>

Visions of the Daughters of Albion: The Influence of Mary Wollstonecraft's Life and Career on William Blake

Ramin Keshavarzian*, Pyeaam Abbasi

Department of English Literature, Faculty of Foreign Languages,
University of Isfahan, Isfahan, Iran

*E-mail address: Raminell@yahoo.com , Ramin.Keshavarzian@fgn.ui.ac.ir

ABSTRACT

The present study discussed the influence of one of the eighteenth-century British women of color, the feminist Mary Wollstonecraft, on William Blake. By adopting a biographical and also a comparative approach, the authors tried to highlight the influences of Wollstonecraft's personal life, character, and career, chiefly her *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), on one of William Blake's less-referred-to poems *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* (1793). The study will help readers to both know Wollstonecraft's prominence and also to grasp more of William Blake and his poetry. The authors also attempted to show that William Blake was part of the early feminism of the late eighteenth century.

Keywords: Eighteenth century; Mary Wollstonecraft; William Blake; *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*; *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*; early feminism

1. INTRODUCTION

Since centuries ago, woman thinkers, intellectuals, and mostly those who were of above-average intelligence, at any rate, have striven throughout their lives to attain equal rights for all women. This led to different movements for different rights such as women's suffrage, reproductive rights, equal pay for women, gender neutrality in English, and so forth. All these movements culminated in the emergence of feminist theories and clear manifestations of feminism became noticeable in many areas of which literature was no exception.

There have been numerable works of literature on behalf of women in different eras. One of the classics of feminist philosophy and thought is *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) which is "still widely regarded as the founding text of Anglo-American feminism" (Caine and Sluga 2000, 19). It was written by the eighteenth-century British feminist Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-97) who is known as the first feminist, mother of women's rights as the title of Miriam Brody's book, *Mary Wollstonecraft: Mother of Women's Rights* (2000) suggests and the mother of feminism, as Janet M. Todd mentions in her bibliography of Wollstonecraft (2013, 120).

Rights of Woman inspired many contemporary and later literary texts, written by women and also rather unexpectedly by men, of which William Blake's poem *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* (1793) is an example published a year after the publication of *Rights of Woman*. By

adopting a biographical and a comparative approach in this study, it will be shown that William Blake's *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* was written under the immense influence exerted by Mary Wollstonecraft's life and character, her *Rights of Woman* and also the French Revolution, and thus William Blake was part of the early feminism of the late eighteenth century. A general overview of what feminism is seems necessary.

2. DISCUSSION

Simply put, feminism is the idea that a woman must have the same rights, power, and opportunities as a man has and she must be treated equally. It is a seemingly organized campaign on behalf of all women's rights and interests ("Feminism"). The fact remains that "feminism has often focused upon what is absent rather than what is present, reflecting concern with the silencing and marginalization of women in a *patriarchal culture*, a culture organized in the favor of men" (Guerin et al 2005, 222). The emergence of what that is called feminism is not new. One can trace it back in texts and manuscripts written hundreds of years ago. One noted example is, *Inanna*, a text written some 2000 years before the Bible.

This text presents the story of a goddess or, as T. S. Kensky suggests, of a "nondomesticated woman" (2006, 190) who challenges sexual discourse of the age (Rivkin and Ryan 2004, 765). In addition, the influence of *Inanna* and its related "stories have been central to feminist scholarship" (Noble 2003, 122). As mentioned earlier, Mary Wollstonecraft's *Rights of woman* is one of the classics of the feminist canon. She argues, in *Rights of Woman*, that the inferiority of women is because of their lack of proper education and men are not naturally superior to women though it appears so.

Although *Rights of Woman* received hostile reviews of which Richard Polwhele's poem "The Unsex'd Females" is the most vivid example (Shukla 2007, 5), Barbara Taylor believes that "she [Wollstonecraft] had allowed herself about three months to produce over three hundred pages, and whatever her own doubts about it, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* was an immediate success" (2003, 25). And although William Godwin asserted that the book was poorly organized and hurriedly-written in only six weeks, *Rights of Woman* became a cause célèbre throughout Europe (Franklin 2004, 101). Such criticisms as those of Godwin were previously predicted by Wollstonecraft as she declares in the introduction of *Rights of Woman* that:

Animated by this important subject, I shall disdain to cull my phrases or polish my style; I aim at being useful, and sincerity will render me unaffected; for, wishing rather to persuade by the force of my arguments, than dazzle by the elegance of my language, I shall not waste my time in rounding periods, or in fabricating the turgid bombast of artificial feelings, which, coming from the head, never reach the heart.—I shall be employed about things, not words! (1792: 7-8)¹

Another significant antecedent of feminism is a more recent book by Virginia Woolf (1882-1941), *A Room of One's Own* (1929). It is an extended essay based on a series of lectures delivered at two women's colleges at Cambridge University in 1928. It was an attempt to get

¹ Quotations from Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* are taken from the digital version of the volume published by J. Johnson in 1792. All subsequent references will be to this version and will be given with publication year and line numbers in parentheses in the text.

“both a literal and figural space for women writers within a literary tradition dominated by patriarchy” that paved the way for later feminists to cry for more awakenings (“A Room of One’s Own.”). Virginia Woolf attempted “to explain why the Western literature tradition had until that time been thoroughly dominated by male writers” (Booker 1996, 89).

Notwithstanding the differences, there are clear similarities between all forms of feminism in different ages, namely between early feminism and modern feminism. All of them have been struggling to reach one original target that is a thirst for equality between man and woman. Women managed to achieve the desired equality in some areas such as women’s suffrage; however, the satisfaction gained in some other areas, especially in literature, was not complete. They possibly began to believe in a famous quotation by F. A. Hayek that “even the striving for equality by means of a directed economy can result only in an officially enforced inequality” (Hayek and Caldwell 2007, 172).

The above-mentioned dissatisfaction gradually led towards the emergence of women in literary texts, both body and soul, which was called ‘female writing’. Despite having similar purposes, female writing is slightly different from those earlier feministic writings on behalf of women that have been writings about/for female or simply *pour femme* writings, as the authors would like to make it distinctive from ‘female writing.’

In the early 1970s, simultaneous with the rise of feminist literary criticism, female literary theorists and writers gave rise to a mode of writing literary texts, especially poetry, which was called female writing or (often termed) ‘white ink’. This movement, mostly done under the influence of modernism, was called *écriture féminine* by some foundational French feminist theorists such as Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray, and Julia Kristeva. *Écriture féminine* was first coined by Hélène Cixous in her groundbreaking essay, “The Laugh of the Medusa” (1975), where she states that “woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women [both their body and soul] to writing, from which they have been driven away. . . [for long enough]. Woman must put herself into the text as into the world and into history by her own movement” (qtd. in Ruth 2008, 64-65). It was a way for feminist activists and writers to linguistically express female identity and self. The feminist critic Elaine Showalter, defines *écriture féminine* as “the inscription of the feminine body and female difference in language and text” (1986, 249) which rises against the language and discourse of a phallogocentric (to borrow Derrida’s term) system.

Although Wollstonecraft’s *Rights of Woman* rises in revolt against the phallogocentric discourse of the age, it is not categorized amongst such texts written with white ink, nor is Blake’s *Visions*. They fall into the broad category of *pour femme* (authors’ term) writings, amongst those which are actually written with both literal and figural *black ink*. Prior to dealing with the impact of both Mary Wollstonecraft and her *Rights of Woman* upon later public attitude and literary texts such as William Blake’s *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*, which is the intended purpose of this study, it is quite helpful to regard the influence upon Wollstonecraft herself that led to the publication of *Rights of Woman*.

Mary Wollstonecraft has always been a radical thinker with experimental life and practice since her younger days. A backward glance proves that she has always been ready to demonstrate her zeal and commitment to challenge social norms. Esther H. Schor notes that even Mary’s early days and career “evinced a bold independence of mind and action” (2005, 937). This led to the publication of her first book, *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters* (1786), “which advocates a wide range of occupations for women and the necessity of quality education as preparation for motherhood” (2005, 937). It was written on returning home, after the sudden death of her friend Fanny Blood, who died in childbirth. Beside her own natural intelligence and potentiality, her life and career do not need to be subjects of close scrutiny for

one to know that throughout her life she was under the influence of a number of major events and well-known people. Of these influences the French Revolution is highly significant.

In 1790, Edmund Burke (1729-1797) published a book under the title *Reflections on the Revolution in France* that is considered as one of the best intellectual attacks on the French Revolution. It provoked many intense debates, inasmuch as many attempts have been made to refute Burke's ideas and reflections. Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* (1790), along with the more famous one, *Right's of Man* (1791), by Thomas Paine are of typical examples. Robert M. Ryan maintains that Edmund Burke's *Reflections* was not only an attack on the French Revolution but also one directed at Richard Price, Wollstonecraft's teacher (1997, 22). Hence defending the French Revolution by responding Burke, vividly demonstrated in the full title of her book, *A Vindication of the Rights of Men, in a Letter to the Right Honourable Edmund Burke; Occasioned by His Reflections on the Revolution in France*, Wollstonecraft writes in the opening address:

Mr. Burke's *Reflections* on the French Revolution first engaged my attention as the transient topic of the day; and reading it more for amusement than information, my *indignation* [Italics Added] was roused by the sophistical arguments, that every moment crossed me, in the questionable shape of natural feelings and common sense. (Wollstonecraft 2008, 11)

Therefore, Wollstonecraft "was on the revolutionary side in France" (Kirkham 1997, 164) and, accordingly under the Revolution's great influence. Later on in *A Vindication of the Rights of Men*, defending Richard Price, Wollstonecraft addresses her vitriolic remarks toward Burke:

Politeness is, indeed, the only substitute for humanity; or what distinguishes the civilised [*sic.*] man from the unlettered savage? and he who is not governed by reason should have a rule by which to square his behaviour [*sic.*]. But by what rule your attack on Dr. Price's was regulated we have yet to learn. (2008, 30)

Shortly thereafter came her *Rights of Woman* in 1792 which became "her most original and most influential book" (Schor 2005: 937) upon which her enduring worldwide fame rests. Perry et al. believe that *Rights of Woman* was also written "under the influence of the French Revolution" as a critique of the "submissiveness of women" (2009, 592). In addition, Wollstonecraft was also under the influence of important French literary figures and diplomats who had been political activists during the days of the French Revolution.

The role of the French feminist Olympe de Gouges' *Declaration of the Rights of Woman and Citizen* written only a year before the publication of Wollstonecraft's *Rights of Woman* cannot be denied. De Gouges was one of the best known "of a number of radical women campaigning for equal rights" and "one of the first martyrs of French feminism" during the tumultuous age of the French Revolution (Rappaport 2001, 271-72). She is more famous for her contention that "no one is to be disquieted for his very basic opinions; woman has the right to mount the scaffold; she must equally have the right to mount the rostrum" (Spielvogel 2012, 584) that made her fall victim to the guillotine in 1793 (Rappaport 2001, 271). De Gouges penned her *Declaration*, both "in its structure and form," paralleled with the *Declaration of the Rights of Man* pamphlet of 1789 (Caine and Sluga 2000, 18-19) published by the French diplomat de Talleyrand-Périgord (1754-1838) to whom, "having read [his pamphlet] with great pleasure," Wollstonecraft dedicated her *Rights of woman* (1972, iii).

Accordingly, assuming that William Blake's *Visions* was written under the influence exerted by Wollstonecraft herself and her *Rights of Woman*, it can also be concluded that he was indirectly under the great influence of the French Revolution. However, such a literary figure as William Blake was not simply under the *indirect* influence of such a lively debate of the day, inasmuch as he had composed a poem under the title "The French Revolution" in 1791. Although Lisa P. Crafton implies that Blake was not an active member in any radical organizations in the time of the debate over the French Revolution, she maintains that during the tumultuous days of 1790s, "Blake participates most directly through his poetic rendering of events in [his poem] *The French Revolution, 1791*" (1997, 41).

Biographical information about William Blake and Wollstonecraft is widely available, in so far as one can draw conclusions that Blake *did* know of Wollstonecraft and had quite possibly known her personally. They had a causal mutual acquaintance, Joseph Johnson (1738-1809), whom they worked with. Caroline Franklin maintains that as a "full-time woman of letters, Wollstonecraft worked for Unitarian publisher Joseph Johnson" who was "a pioneer publisher of early German and British Romanticist writing" (2004, ix). It is believed that Mary Wollstonecraft "became his [Johnson's] protégé" (Brody 2000, 64) and they were "regularly in one another's company, and he published [most of] her works" (Barfoot 2010, 18). In a letter to Johnson, Wollstonecraft writes after a display of ill-humor that:

You are my only friend the only person I am intimate with. I never had a father, or a brother - you have been both to me, ever since I knew you yet I have sometimes been very petulant. I have been thinking of those instances of ill-humour [*sic.*] and quickness, and they appeared like crimes. (*Posthumous Works* 1798, 75)

Regarding William Blake, Harold Bloom notes that he "worked as an engraver for the radical bookseller and publisher Joseph Johnson" since 1779 (2008, 1) and thereunder Johnson, as David Weir implies, became Blake's "friend and sometime employer" (2003, 30). Weir also maintains that "Blake's employment with Johnson intensified in the 1790s" in as much as "Johnson published 14 books with prints engraved by Blake" including some "engravings for Mary Wollstonecraft's children's book, *Original Stories from Real Life* (1791) (147). Nevertheless, it is believed that "none of Blake's own works was published by Joseph Johnson" (Barfoot 2010, 17).

Accordingly, having considered some irrefutable evidence, it is now safe to say that William Blake had definitely known Mary Wollstonecraft. In addition, the publisher Joseph Johnson was in the habit of hosting "weekly dinners" where "Wollstonecraft entered the social and intellectual circle" in 1787 (Denlinger 2005, 27). It was a place where she could be in the presence of some key figures, namely the political thinker Thomas Paine and, among others, the poet William Blake. It was in this coterie that "Wollstonecraft first met her future husband, William Godwin" (27), and it was in this place, indeed, that she began to impress William Blake, an impression that caused Blake to become interested in her philosophy and to *read* her as well as her *Rights of Woman*, and to conceive her as the embodiment of his heroine, Oothoon.

There were other noted members in Johnson's circle of progressive writers and artists and the partisans of the French Revolution of whom the painter Henry Fuseli (1741-1825) was the most influential figure in the life of Wollstonecraft. According to William Godwin, her future husband, Wollstonecraft "fell in love with a series of men: Fuseli, Imaly, [and] Godwin [himself]" (Elfenbein 2002, 230). Diane Jacobs mentions that Mary Wollstonecraft "proudly declared her feeling for Fuseli . . . [but] the fact that Fuseli was married precluded their making

love” (2001, 89). The fact that Henry Fuseli had a strong impression on Mary Wollstonecraft is obvious in the passage that John Knowles writes in his *The Life and Writings of Henry Fuseli*:

‘For,’ said she, ‘I always catch something from the rich torrent of his [Fuseli’s] conversation, worth treasuring up in my memory, to exercise my understanding.’ She falsely reasoned with herself, and expressed to some of her intimate friends, and although Mrs. Fuseli had a right to the person of her husband, she, Mrs. Wollstonecraft, might claim, and, for congeniality of sentiments and talents, hold a place in his heart; for ‘she hoped,’ she said, ‘to unite herself to his mind.’ . . . From an admiration of his talents she became an admirer of his person, and then, wishing to create similar feelings in Fuseli, moulded herself upon what she thought would be most agreeable to him. (1831, n. pag.)

Another passage by Henry H. Wasser asserts quite the same story:

Their lively talk at Johnson’s dwelling blossomed into private conversation at Fuseli’s home or at Mary’s apartment. Mary, hitherto unaware of her dress or surroundings, began to beautify herself. Previously decked in a ‘habit of coarse cloth . . . black worsted stockings and a beaver hat, with her hair hanging lank about her shoulders,’ she now became a lady of fashion. Commensurately with her new outlook, she changed her lodgings to more fashionable quarters. Mary was in love for the first time. (1948, 293)

Despite all her efforts to have an affair with Fuseli, she failed because there was an obstacle; Henry Fuseli was married. It was due to the anxiety of being apart from Fuseli that Mary Wollstonecraft decided to go to Mrs. Fuseli to make a last effort to keep her intimacy with Fuseli because she thought she could not “live without the satisfaction of seeing and conversing with Fuseli daily” (294). Even her request to keep a platonic affection with Fuseli failed with “Sophia’s [Fuseli’s wife] intervention” insofar as “the Fuselis door was closed to her forever” (Liukkonen 2008, n. pag.). Therefore, the convention of marriage gained the upper hand and Wollstonecraft’s “desire to live with Fuseli as a spiritual rather than as a sexual partner has not been treated kindly” (Elfenbein 2002, 233).

Undoubtedly, Wollstonecraft’s unrequited infatuation with Fuseli had a profound impact upon her life and career especially upon her highly polemical work, *Rights of Woman*. But, what had been more than a little disturbing for her probably was Henry Fuseli’s Theotormon-like inaction and coldness towards her. Todd, recounting Wollstonecraft’s life events, writes “when she had been at a low ebb after her suicide attempt in 1795, Wollstonecraft had asked Fuseli as well as Imlay to return her letters. Imlay complied but Fuseli did not” (2002, 12).

Perhaps what is more truthful and genuine than a biographer is an observer, namely the people present at Johnson’s circle like William Blake. Those who were present at the meetings were not only members of a group but “intimate friends” (Cayton 2013, 40). Therefore, Blake knew Wollstonecraft and Fuseli intimately and he had knowledge about their relationship and the feelings between them as a consequence. Yet, rather queer in the head, William Blake himself could feel affection for her. Wollstonecraft was a champion of women’s rights, especially after the publication of her *Rights of Woman*. She was so brave, unconventional, and talented a woman who could attract Blake’s attention like everyone else’s in the coterie.

The narrative of *Visions* is quite simple. There are three central characters in the poem. Oothoon, Theotormon, and Bromion. Oothoon loves Theotormon and to achieve his union she goes to Theotormon’s reign “in wing’d exulting swift delight.” However, she fails while taking

“her impetuous course” because “Bromion rent her with his thunders” and rapes her “on his stormy bed” (1: 14-16)². Surprisingly, the climax of Oothoon’s story is not the tragic rape. Had it been so, it would not have come so early in the poem in two thunder-like abrupt lines: “Bromion rent her with his thunders. On his stormy bed / Lay the faint maid, and soon her woes appalled his thunders hoarse” (1: 16-17). Consequently, it is safe to say that Blake wrote *Visions* based on the drama of Wollstonecraft’s love for Fuseli and he utilizes her story to write about such highly controversial issues as education, sexuality and marriage.

The important part of the poem’s narrative comes after the rape in Oothoon’s speech-like responses. Alicia Ostriker puts this more interestingly in other words saying “most of *Visions* is Oothoon’s opera” (1993, 106). Oothoon is accepted neither by Bromion nor by her lover. They believe she is a ‘harlot’ and therefore she is not pure. Oothoon is chained to the conventions of her day as she is literally chained in the illustration of the title page by William Blake.

The frontispiece of *Visions* shows Oothoon literally chained back to back to her rapist while her lover is sitting at the opening of the skull-like cave holding his head in his arms, probably reluctant to hear Oothoon (Blake 1795, n. pag.). The frontispiece is also reminiscent of Plato’s Allegory of the Cave in which Oothoon represents the freed prisoner-philosopher who sees glimpses of what reality might be like while the other two (Bromion and Theotormon), hindered by convention, do not want to/cannot see the reality. Oothoon cannot be representative of a typical woman in Blake’s day. She is the embodiment of a woman who, throughout her life and career, has kept a stiff upper lip striving to challenge the conventions of Blake’s day, a woman like Wollstonecraft.

Inaction and the lack of understanding of Wollstonecraft’s object of desire (Fuseli) is beautifully reflected in the behavior of Theotormon. Oothoon, Wollstonecraft-like, pleads with her lover to ‘arise’ and see that she is ‘pure’, but all to no avail. She asks “why does my Theotormon sit weeping upon the threshold, / And Oothoon hovers by his side, perswading [*sic.*] him in vain?” She cries “arise my Theotormon, I am pure;” but he does not hear Oothoon because “to him the night and morn / Are both alike” (2: 21-38). Later, provoking her ignorant lover, Oothoon says:

Silent I hover all the night, and all day could be silent,
If Theotormon once would turn his loved eyes upon me.
How can I be defild when I reflect thy image pure?
Sweetest the fruit that the worm feeds on, & the soul prey'd on by woe,
The new wash'd lamb ting'd with the village smoke, & the bright swan [*sic.*]
By the red earth of our immortal river: I bathe my wings,
And I am white and pure to hover round Theotormon’s breast. (3: 14-20)

Blake also attacks the institution of marriage and loveless lives of many women of his age and tries to tackle the corruption that is endemic in the system of the society. The following lines put by Oothoon are an attempt to change Theotormon’s (Fuseli’s) mind which is much reminiscent of Wollstonecraft’s opprobrium of men’s trivialization of women regarding the issue of marriage. It is a cry full of righteous anger about Theotormon’s/Fuseli’s indecision and submissive behavior towards the conventions of sexuality, love, and marriage. However, at last, Theotormon rejects the “heroine unequalled in English poetry before or since” (Ostriker 1993,

² Quotations from William Blake’s *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* are taken from *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, 8th Ed. Vol. 2. pp. 103-109. All subsequent references will be to this edition and will be given with plate number and line numbers in the text.

106) and “the first fully developed strong female character” (Ankarsjö 2006, 5), and so does Fuseli:

Till she who burns with youth, and knows no fixed lot, is bound
 In spells of law to one she loaths; and must she drag the chain
 Of life, in weary lust? must chilling murderous thoughts obscure
 The clear heaven of her eternal spring? to bear the wintry rage
 Of a harsh terror, driv'n to madness, bound to hold a rod
 Over her shrinking shoulders all the day, & all the night
 To turn the wheel of false desire, and longings that wake her womb
 To the abhorred birth of cherubs in the human form
 That live a pestilence & die a meteor & are no more;
 Till the child dwell with one he hates, and do the deed he loaths,
 And the impure scourge force his seed into its unripe birth
 E'er yet his eyelids can behold the arrows of the day? (5: 21-32, [sic.]

Wollstonecraft also condemns the false institution of marriage as she defines it as “the only way women can rise in the world.” She acknowledges that women spend many of their younger days “in acquiring a smattering of accomplishments” which is establishing themselves by marriage. She believes that in so doing women’s “strength of body and mind are sacrificed to libertine notions of beauty” which makes “mere animals of them.” Wollstonecraft maintains that these married women act like children, and poses a rhetorical question: “can they be expected to govern a family with judgment, or take care of the poor babes whom they bring into the world?” (1792, 8-9).

Much noticeable among Wollstonecraft’s noted characteristics were perhaps her independence and her indomitable will. She believes that “independence is the grand blessing of life” (qtd. in Andrew 1996, 120). She was not a passive woman. There exist such bold characteristics in the character of Blake’s heroine, Oothoon. The recurrent use of the pronoun ‘I’ is noticeable in the following lines owing to the fact that the speaker of the lines is a female. Oothoon states in *Visions* that:

I loved Theotormon
 And I was not ashamed
 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. (iii: 1-6)

Flowers, first of all, symbolize girls, their beauty, and their virginity. The motif of ‘girl-plucked-while-plucking-flowers’ has been recurrent in literature. There exists such a motif in the story of Adam and Eve when Eve was supporting the drooping flowers, though she herself was “fairest unsupported Flow’r,” all of a sudden Satan comes to her as a serpent and seduces her. Adam, upon seeing the event, tells Eve that she has been “deflow’r’d [sic.]” (Ferber 2007, 75). Consequently, plucking flowers can also be symbols of loss of virginity and the initiation of sexual experience. In the case of Oothoon, she is an active agent in that she plucks rather than solely being plucked. This is strongly reminiscent of the true story of Wollstonecraft and

Fuseli, of how she chooses to pluck the flower and love Fuseli and of how her femininity started to grow upon meeting him.³

Another trace of Wollstonecraft can also be found in the very beginning lines of the poem when Oothoon “spoke to the bright Marygold of Leutha’s vale” expressing her Thel-like fears saying that she “dare not pluck” the flower from its “dewy bed” (1: 5-7). Blakean different spelling of Marigold (Marygold) humanizes the flower. Although some believe that ‘Mary’ refers to the Virgin Mary (Jackson-Houlston 2010, 154), it is difficult to accept if not impossible. The Marigold’s active invitation to “. . . pluck thou my flower Oothoon the mild. / Another flower shall spring, because the soul of sweet delight / can never pass away. . .” (1: 8-10) is an obvious celebration of sexuality, initiation of sexual experience, and loss of virginity. These are not to be associated with the Virgin Mary but they truly remind us of Mary Wollstonecraft.

It is also believed that the encounter between Marygold and Oothoon is “a consensual and co-sensual enjoyment of sexuality between two female figures” as it is blatant in Plate iii where the small figure’s (Marygold’s) hand is being guided to Oothoon’s breast by Oothoon herself while she is about to kiss her lips (Jackson-Houlston 2010, 154). Having taken issue with this conclusion, it can be accepted that the illustration shows a kind of interest/respect/concern towards a female’s own sex as Wollstonecraft had been feeling toward her own gender.

As mentioned earlier, the other major influence upon Blake when writing *Visions* was *Rights of Woman*. Mary Wollstonecraft notes in the Advertisement section of her book that the time she “began to write this work, [she] divided it into three parts, supposing that one volume would contain a full discussion of the arguments.” But she continues that “fresh illustrations occur[ed]” to her and therefore one single volume does not suffice the whole content, insofar as she should “present only the first part to the public.” She promised to publish the second and the third volumes to “complete many of the sketches begun in the first” (1792, XV). She died and there never was a second volume published.

Wollstonecraft writes *Rights of Woman* covering a wide range of topics about women. She mentions in the introduction to her book that the main topic of the present volume is related to the matter of national education, though she writes about a host of other important topics in the passing such as sexuality, degradation of women, modesty, parental affection, duty, and other related topics. According to Wollstonecraft, “education is the key to social improvement, allowing a woman to develop her rational and moral capacities” (Munt 1994, 33). She believes that women would equal men in achievement if they received equivalent educations and, in *Rights of Woman*, she considers them “in the grand light of human creatures, who, in common with men, are placed on this earth to unfold their faculties” (1792, 4-5).

Wollstonecraft, as mentioned earlier, admits that there exists a physical difference between man and woman but she believes that this natural inferiority of women should not be deemed as lack of virtue. She writes “if women are by nature inferior to men, their virtues must be the same in quality, if not in degree, or virtue is a relative idea; consequently their conduct should be founded on the same principles, and have the same aim” (1792, 48). She strongly disapproves of the false system of education in which there are only men who “are prepared for professions, and marriage is not considered as the grand feature in their lives, whilst women, on the contrary, have no other scheme to sharpen their faculties” (1792, 127). She maintains that there should be an equivalent education for all women, as well as men, to stop the trivialization and oppression of the female sex. She declares:

³ See the block quotation mentioned earlier by Henry H. Wasser: “Their lively talk at Johnson’s dwelling...”

one cause of this barren blooming ... [is] attribute[d] to a false system of education, gathered from the books written on this subject by men who, considering females rather as women than human creatures, have been more anxious to make them alluring mistresses than affectionate wives and rational mothers. . . (1792, 2)

She strongly believes that "till women are more rationally educated, the progress in human virtue and improvement in knowledge must receive continual checks" (1792, 80). She goes further to propose that:

The most perfect education, in my opinion, is such an exercise of the understanding as is best calculated to strengthen the body and form the heart. Or, in other words, to enable the individual to attain such habits of virtue as will render it independent. In fact, it is a farce to call any being virtuous whose virtues do not result from the exercise of its own reason. (1792, 37)

The issue of education, paralleled with *Rights of Woman*, is a crucial theme in Blake's *Visions*. Oothoon directs her attacks to authorities of the society whose system of thoughts and education, she believes, are the main reason of her inferiority and oppression. She propounds aloud that:

They told me that the night & day were all that I could see;
They told me that I had five senses to inclose me up,
And they inclos'd my infinite brain into a narrow circle,
And sunk my heart into the Abyss, a red round globe hot burning
Till all from life I was *obliterated* and *erased*' [sic.] (2: 30-34, Italics Added)

For Wollstonecraft, even the education of household women was crucial, both for the society and the house. She writes "to be a good mother a woman must have sense, and that independence of mind [which is the fruit of education and] which few women possess who are taught to depend entirely on their husbands. Meek wives are, in general, foolish mothers. . . ." (1792, 346). Likewise, Oothoon, emphasizing the role of mother-teacher, asks: ". . . wilt thou take the ape / For thy councillor [sic.]? or the dog for a schoolmaster to thy children?" (5: 8-9)

William Blake stays one step ahead of Wollstonecraft in some issues discussed by both of them. Regarding education, he extends the negative impact of the system of education also on men. Oothoon, quivering with indignation over Theoteron's false ideology, condemns the system of education which has brainwashed men of her society. Addressing the voice of authority, she queries "Father of Jealousy, be thou accursed from the earth! / Why hast thou taught my Theotormon this accursed thing?" (7: 12-13)

Wollstonecraft also believes that education encompasses many other notions in the society which are misguided. One example is the mistaken notion of modesty to which Wollstonecraft devotes a complete chapter under the title "Modesty – Comprehensively Considered, and Not as a Sexual Virtue." In this chapter, she defines true modesty and distinguishes it from all the mistaken notions. She has probably been provoked by Dr. John Gregory's advice to his daughters saying "one of the chief beauties in a female character is that modest reserve, that retiring delicacy, which avoids the public eye, and is disconcerted even at the gaze of admiration" (qtd. in Ty 2001, 72).

William Blake likewise condemns this misguided notion of modesty through Oothoon's words: "Who taught thee modesty, subtil modesty" (6: 7)? Oothoon also reasons that if modesty

is really that which is believed to be in the society now, she will be in agreement over Bromion's wrong belief that she is a 'harlot'. But, she refutes this view:

When thou awakest wilt thou dissemble all thy secret joys,
Or wert thou not awake when all this mystery was disclos'd?
Then com'st thou forth a modest virgin, knowing to dissemble,
With nets found under thy night pillow to catch virgin joy,
And brand it with the name of whore, & sell it in the night,
In silence, ev'n without a whisper, and in seeming sleep.

.....
And does my Theotormon seek this hypocrite modesty,
This knowing, artful, secret, fearful, cautious, trembling hypocrite?
Then is Oothoon a whore indeed! and all the virgin joys
Of life are harlots, and Theotormon is a sick man's dream,
And Oothoon is the crafty slave of selfish holiness.

But Oothoon is not so; a virgin fill'd with virgin fancies
Open to joy and to delight where ever beauty appears [*sic.*]. (6: 8-13, 16-22)

Among the topics that Wollstonecraft observes in her *Right of Woman* is the institution of marriage which was earlier dealt with in the passing. According to J. A. Carlson, *Rights of Woman* "characterizes a good marriage as friendship [and] devalues those [conventional] aspects of marriage [which] . . . surpass friendship. . . ." (2007, 69). Likewise, referring to marriage as "silken nets and traps," Blake celebrates free love. His heroine propounds the idea of free love saying "I cry, Love! Love! Love! happy happy Love! free as the mountain wind!" and poses an unanswerable question "Can that be Love, that drinks another as a sponge drinks water?" (7: 16-17).

3. CONCLUSIONS

Considering Mary Wollstonecraft, many believed and still believe that she was too radical a woman and they manipulate her private life and idiosyncrasies to prove their statements. On the contrary, as evidence comes from Blake's life and career, he is not in accord with such views. He has always been impressed by Wollstonecraft's bold character and manner. Based on many fresh ideas of Wollstonecraft, Blake shaped and expressed his own thoughts and desires which also made him a member of the so-called radicalism. The great contrast between Blake and Wollstonecraft is the fact that Blake never encountered hostile reviews and remarks for his revolutionary ideas as much as Wollstonecraft did for hers.

There are certain points that help us understand why Blake was not a target of vitriolic remarks and bitter criticism while Wollstonecraft was harshly labeled as one of the 'Unsex'd Females.' The clearest reason is that Wollstonecraft was a female in a patriarchal society and was more prone to rejection and marginalization. Another reason is the fact that Blake was more conservative in his career than Wollstonecraft was. The genre of their writings is totally different; Wollstonecraft wrote her major works as treatise, moral and political, while Blake was smarter to write the same ideas in a more literary genre, poetry where poets can have a character/speaker to express, rather imperceptibly, their own thoughts while they stand as an observer which is in stark opposition to Wollstonecraft's position in her genre. That made Wollstonecraft much more likely to be criticized.

Furthermore, the patriarchal legacy of Blake's age "made it difficult for him to give his ideas of gender equality a relevant representation in his poetry" (Ankarsjö 2006, 20). It is likely that this is the reason some feminist critics believe that Blake was not a supporter of the female sex. Anne Mellor is one of the noted feminist critics who "reads Blake's female symbols negatively and argues that Blake is a sexist in his portrayal of women" (21). On the other hand, it is also believed that this lack of "precise linguistic expression [in Blake's portrayal of women] places him in a position close to feminism" (23).

William Blake, by and large, can be referred to as one of the early British feminists (anachronistically labeling) of the late eighteenth century. This means that it is not avoidable to call the style of some of his poems *pour femme* writing. Basically, it is important to know the category to which a work of literature belongs because it will be of great help for readers to grasp a portion of what the author meant to say. Moreover, it is quite worthwhile to be aware of the influences upon a writer which make him/her pen a work of literature, and it helps readers to have background information about that text prior to reading it. How can one start reading a literary text without any information about it? What has been considered in this study is an exploration of how Mary Wollstonecraft's life, career, and events of the day exerted influence on one of William Blake's less-referred-to poems, *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*. The basic narrative of *Visions* is based on the true love story of Mary Wollstonecraft and Henry Fuseli. Blake knew both of them, especially Mary, personally. After reading Wollstonecraft's highly polemical treatise *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, Blake writes *Visions* in a way that Wollstonecraft's "voice [, thoughts, and character] is widely recognized" in the poem (Stevens 2010, 145). Through the biographical and comparative analysis, the authors have also tried to dismantle the claims that describe Blake as patronizing towards the female sex. It is obvious, after due consideration, that William Blake accords with Mary Wollstonecraft's hopeful belief that the way to escape from the predicaments of the female sex ". . . is justice, not charity, that is wanting in the world!" (1792, 155-56).

Acknowledgement

I (Ramin Keshavarzian) would like to express my very great appreciation to Dr. Abbasi for his valuable and constructive suggestions during the planning and development of this research work. His willingness to give his time so generously has been very much appreciated. I also want to thank Professor Helen Ouliainia and Professor Hossein Pirnajmuddin from whom I have learned a lot. I would also like to express my deepest gratitude to Dr. Hadi Farjami, the one who taught me with inspiration, the one who taught me the way of looking at things, the one who taught me to be myself, the one who taught me critical thinking, and the one who still after eight years is the teacher of my life.

Biography

Ramin Keshavarzian is an ESL teacher. He has received his B. A. in English Language & Literature from Semnan University, Iran in 2010. He has received his M. A. in English Literature at the University of Isfahan, Iran in 2013.

Pycaam Abbasi has received his B. A. in English Literature from the University of Isfahan in 2000, his M. A. in English Literature from Shiraz University in 2002, and his Ph. D. in English Literature from University of Shiraz in 2011. He is currently assistant professor of English literature teaching at the University of Isfahan, Iran.

References

- [1] Andrew, Barbara. "The Psychology of Tyranny: Wollstonecraft and Woolf on the Gendered Dimension of War." In *Bringing Peace Home: Feminism, Violence, and Nature*, edited by Karen Warren and Duane L. Cady. Bloomington: Indiana UP, (1996) Print.
- [2] Ankarsjö, Magnus. *William Blake and Gender*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co, (2006) Print.
- [3] "A Room of One's Own." *Wikipedia, the Free Encyclopedia*. Wikimedia Foundation. (2013) Web. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A_Room_of_One%27s_Own>
- [4] Barfoot, C. C. "In the Churchyard and Under the Full Moon: The Radical Publisher and His Clients and Guests." In *The Literary Utopias of Cultural Communities, 1790-1910*, edited by Marguérite Corporaal and Evert J. V. Leeuwen, 9-22. Amsterdam: Rodopi, (2010) 9-22, Print.
- [5] Blake, William. "Visions of the Daughters of Albion, Copy G, 1795 (Houghton Library): Electronic Edition." *Visions of the Daughters of Albion, Copy G, 1795 (Houghton Library): Electronic Edition*. 10 Sept. (2013) JPEG file. <<http://www.blakearchive.org/exist/blake/archive/object.xq?objectid=vda.g.illbk.02&java=no>>
- [6] Bloom, Harold. *William Blake*. New York: Chelsea House, (2008) Print.
- [7] Booker, M. Keith. *A Practical Introduction to Literary Theory and Criticism*. White Plains, NY: Longman, (1996) Print.
- [8] Brody, Miriam. *Mary Wollstonecraft: Mother of Women's Rights*. New York: Oxford University Press, (2000) Print.
- [9] Caine, Barbara, and Glenda Sluga. *Gendering European History, 1780-1920*. London: Leicester UP, (2000) Print.
- [10] Carlson, Julie Ann. *England's First Family of Writers: Mary Wollstonecraft, William Godwin, Mary Shelley*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, (2007) Print.
- [11] Cayton, Andrew R. L. *Love in the Time of Revolution: Transatlantic Literary Radicalism and Historical Change, 1793-1818*. S.l.: Univ. of North Carolina Press, (2013) Print.
- [12] Crafton, Lisa Plummer. "The 'Ancient Voices' of Blake's *The French Revolution*." In *The French Revolution Debate in English Literature and Culture*, edited by Lisa Plummer Crafton. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, (1997) 41-58, Print.
- [13] Denlinger, Elizabeth Campbell. *Before Victoria: Extraordinary Women of the British Romantic Era*. New York: New York Public Library, (2005) Print.
- [14] Elfenbein, Andrew. "Mary Wollstonecraft and the Sexuality of Genius." In *The Cambridge Companion to Mary Wollstonecraft*, edited by Claudia L. Johnson, 228-45. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, (2002) 228-45, Print.
- [15] "Feminism - Definition and More from the Free Merriam-Webster Dictionary." *Dictionary and Thesaurus - Merriam-Webster Online*. N.p., 12 Sept. (2013) Web. <<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/feminism>>

-
- [16] "Feminism - Definition in the British English Dictionary & Thesaurus - Cambridge Dictionaries Online." *Cambridge Free English Dictionary and Thesaurus (US)*. N.p., 12 Sept. (2013) Web. <<http://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/british/feminism?q=feminism>>
- [17] Ferber, Michael. "Flower." *A Dictionary of Literary Symbols*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, (2007) Print.
- [18] Franklin, Caroline. *Mary Wollstonecraft: A Literary Life*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, (2004) Print.
- [19] Greenblatt, Stephen, and M. H. Abrams. *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*. 8th ed. Vol. 2. New York: W.W. Norton, (2006) 103-09, Print.
- [20] Guerin, Wilfred L., Earle Labor, Lee Morgan, Jeanne C. Reesman, and John R. Willingham. *A Handbook of Critical Approaches to Literature*. 5th ed. New York: Oxford UP, (2005) Print.
- [21] Hayek, Friedrich August, and Bruce Caldwell. *The Road to Serfdom: Text and Documents; the Definitive Edition*. Chicago, IL: Univ. of Chicago P, (2007) Print.
- [22] Jackson-Houlston, Caroline. "'The Lineaments of . . . Desire': Blake's *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* and Romantic Literary Treatments of Rape." In *Queer Blake*, edited by Helen P. Bruder and Tristanne J. Connolly, 153-62. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, (2010) 153-62, Print.
- [23] Jacobs, Diane. *Her Own Woman: The Life of Mary Wollstonecraft*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, (2001) Print.
- [24] Kensky, Tikva Simone. *Studies in Bible and Feminist Criticism*. Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society, (2006) Print.
- [25] Kirkham, Margaret. *Jane Austen, Feminism and Fiction*. London: Athlone, (1997) Print.
- [26] Knowles, John. *The Life and Writings of Henry Fuseli*. London, (1831) PDF e-book.
- [27] Liukkonen, Petri. "Henry Fuseli." *Henry Fuseli*. Books & Writers, 2008. Web. Last modified September 12, (2013) Web. <<http://www.kirjasto.sci.fi/fuseli.htm>>
- [28] Munt, Sally R. *Murder by the Book?: Feminism and the Crime Novel*. London: Routledge, (1994) Print.
- [29] Noble, Vicki. *The Double Goddess: Women Sharing Power*. Rochester, Vt.: Bear & Co., (2003) Print.
- [30] Ostriker, Alicia. "Desire gratified and Ungratified: William Blake and Sexuality." In *Romantic Poetry: Recent Revisionary Criticism*, edited by Karl Kroeber and Gene W Ruoff. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, (1993) Print.
- [31] Perry, Marvin, Margaret Jacob, James Jacob, Myrna Chase, and Theodore H. Von Laue. *Western Civilization: Ideas, Politics and Society*. 9th ed. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, (2009) Print.
- [32] Rappaport, Helen. *Encyclopedia of Women Social Reformers*. Vol. 1. Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, (2001) 271-72, Print.

-
- [33] Rivkin, Julie, and Michael Ryan. "Introduction: Feminist Paradigms." In *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, edited by Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan. 2nd ed. Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub., (2004) Print.
- [34] Ruth, Renae. "Trinity of Consciousness: Body, Mind, Soul, and Female Identity in the Novels of Gail Godwin." Diss. Indiana Univ. of Pennsylvania, Pennsylvania, (2008). *Dissertations & Theses*. 64-65, Web.
<<https://dspace.iup.edu/bitstream/handle/2069/91/Renae%20Applegate%20House%20Updated.pdf?sequence=1>>
- [35] Ryan, Robert M. *The Romantic Reformation: Religious Politics in English Literature, 1789-1824*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, (1997) Print.
- [36] Schor, Esther H. "Mary Wollstonecraft." In *The Johns Hopkins Guide to Literary Theory & Criticism*, edited by Michael Groden, Martin Kreiswirth, and Imre Szeman. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins UP, (2005) Print.
- [37] Showalter, Elaine. "Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness." In *The New Feminist Criticism: Essays on Women, Literature, and Theory*, edited by Elaine Showalter. London: Virago, (1986).
- [38] Shukla, Bhaskar A. *Feminism: from Mary Wollstonecraft to Betty Friedan*. New Delhi: Sarup & Sons, (2007) Print.
- [39] Spielvogel, Jackson J. *Western Civilization*. 8th ed. Vol. C: Since 1789. Boston: Wadsworth, Cengage Learning, (2012) Print.
- [40] Stevens, Bethan. "'Woes & . . . sighs': Fantasies of Slavery in *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*." In *Queer Blake*, edited by Helen P. Bruder and Tristanne J. Connolly, 140-152. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, (2010) 140-52, Print.
- [41] Taylor, Barbara. *Mary Wollstonecraft and the Feminist Imagination*. Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge UP, (2003) Print.
- [42] Todd, Janet M. *Mary Wollstonecraft: An Annotated Bibliography*. 1976. Reprint. Abingdon: Routledge, (2013) Print.
- [43] Todd, Janet M. "Mary Wollstonecraft's letters." In *The Cambridge Companion to Mary Wollstonecraft*, edited by Claudia L. Johnson, 7-23. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, (2002) 7-23, Print.
- [44] Ty, Eleanor. "'The History of My Own Heart': Inscribing Self. . ." In *Mary Wollstonecraft and Mary Shelley: Writing Lives*, edited by Helen M. Buss, David Lorne Macdonald, and Anne McWhir, 69-84. Waterloo, Ont., Canada: Wilfrid Laurier UP, (2001) 69-84, Print.
- [45] Wasser, Henry H. "Notes on the Visions of the Daughters of Albion by William Blake." *Ebscohost*, 293-94. *Modern Language Quarterly*, 1948, n.d. Web. 08 Aug. (2013) 293-94.
- [46] Weir, David. *Brahma in the West: William Blake and the Oriental Renaissance*. Albany, NY: State University of New York, (2003) Print.
- [47] Wollstonecraft, Mary. "Letters to Mr. Johnson." In *Posthumous Works of the Author of A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, edited by William Godwin. London: Joseph Johnson, (1798) PDF e-book.

- [48] Wollstonecraft, Mary. *A Vindication of the Rights of Men*. NY: Cosimo, (2008) Print.
- [49] Wollstonecraft, Mary. *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman with Strictures on Political and Moral Subjects*. London: J. Johnson, (1792). PDF e-book.

(Received 08 September 2014; accepted 17 September 2014)