‘Slip-Sliding Away’:
Some Problems with
‘Crying Love’ in the 1790s

Although the critical character of my first chapters may suggest otherwise, it is the case that venerable Blake scholars do sometimes make the most insightful comments. Such comments, however, are those which seem to be most quickly obscured by the quick-falling dust of time. This is certainly the case with the startlingly neglected contextual remarks S. Foster Damon made as a preliminary to his discussion of *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*. In surprisingly insistent historicist terms he reminds his readers that the ‘questionable’ nature of eighteenth-century sexual morals and mores must be borne in mind by any critic wanting to understand Blake’s treatment of sexuality in that poem, a poem which he insists is ‘primarily a protest against the sexual customs of the times’. Adjustments are certainly needed to correct Damon’s class prejudices but the path which he pointed out is one that urgently needs following, for neglect of the historical specificities of Oothoon’s protest, based largely on the assumption that sex is timeless and stands safely beyond the taints of history, has rendered the greater part of *Visions* criticism repetitive, self-referential or even – as one irritated writer put it – onanistic.

In brief, the orthodox case suggests that *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* is a continuation of *The Book of Thel*, in which the poem’s heroine triumphs over the weakness and cowardice that, as we’ve seen, most critics believe mark Thel’s biography. Oothoon in pure ‘Blakean’ terms becomes that most accomplished of poetic characters: a ‘higher innocent’. The criterion used to make this distinction, and assessment, could aptly be called penetrative, as Oothoon’s ‘success’ seems largely to consist in being prepared to undergo the heterosexual assault that Thel feared.

the future would bring.\(^7\) And the critics who judge Oothoon to be successful usually go on to describe the poem as 'a hymn to free love': the core of Blake’s sexual gospel (an interpretative trend started by Blackstone and Bloom, and carried up to the present by Duerkson, Dickstein, Murray, George, Brogan, Crehan, Hagstrum and more problematically Swearingen) – critics in this tradition, like Stephen Cox, still continue to peddle the idea that 'Oothoon's degrading experience of sex asserts the holiness of her love'.\(^8\)

Some more thoughtful understandings of the poem have however begun to emerge, due to the willingness of a number of writers to address the paradox – glossed over by the 'free lovers' – of Oothoon's situation: raped and enslaved yet delivering wildly exuberant sexual rhetoric. Identifying and investigating this paradox is crucial to any convincing reading of the poem and so it is sad that explorations to date have for the most part not been very enlightening. The extant cluster of explanations for this problem are very limited and centre around suggestions that Blake was just ambivalent about sex (Damrosch),\(^9\) or that Oothoon's less than perfect character is responsible (Peterson, Anderson, Haigwood, Ellis, Wilkie)\(^10\) or Blake’s equally flawed personality (Ellis, Fox, Mellor, Ostriker, Webster, Haffar).\(^11\) Some writers have even been forced to conclude that the poem's essential contradiction is simply 'mysterious' or 'inexplicable' (Linkin, Stepto, Ferber).\(^12\) And these interpretations are so unsatisfactory largely because attempts to understand the paradox of Visions have unfortunately not prompted critics to look in any detail at the historically specific sexual practices and abuses which Damon recommended as a guide, nor – more importantly – at the various discourses that presented and represented them to the eighteenth-century reading and viewing publics. With the single exception of Steven Vine's superb discussion of Oothoon's enslavement (which I shall return to later) commentators have been driven deeper into the corpus of critical literature – with a clutch of very detailed, and undeniably impressive, surveys intent on finding answers, if not truth, by reviewing and revising past criticism (Moss, Haigwood, Goslee, Vogler, Linkin, Hefferman).\(^13\) Thomas Vogler has produced perhaps the most insightful review although he, having been overtaken by post-structuralist suspicions of language's ability to effectively signify, gave up trying to understand any of Blake's messages (which he believes are