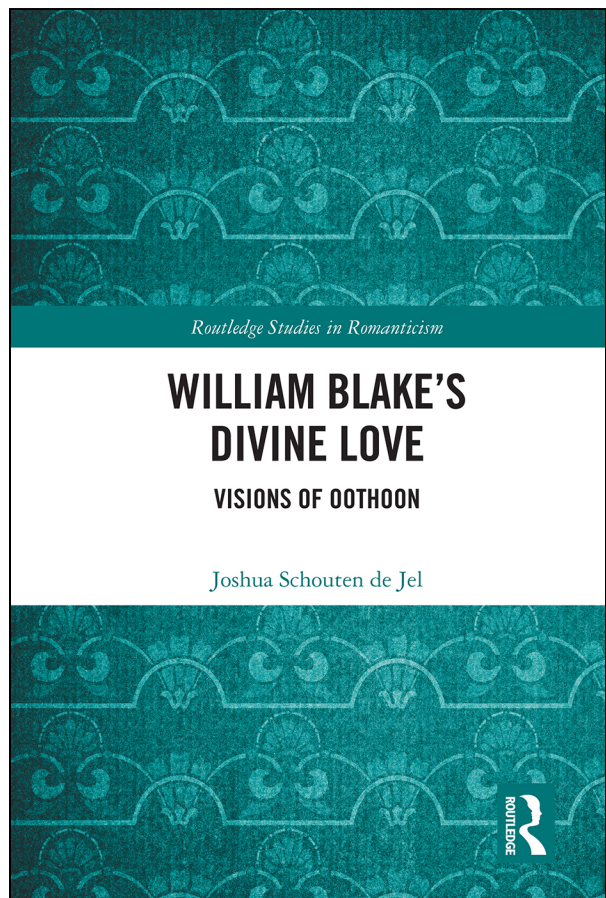


Joshua Schouten de Jel. *William Blake's Divine Love: Visions of Oothoon*. New York: Routledge, 2024. 290 pp. \$180.00/£135.00, hardcover; \$56.99/£42.99, e-book.

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- 1 WITH its stunning frontispiece, shocking themes—even for our time, let alone Blake's—of sexuality, rape, and possession, and its erotic imagery and provocative advocacy of free love through one of Blake's most interesting heroines, *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* is an outstanding and controversial poem. Critics such as Josephine McQuail, Irene Tayler, and Kathryn Freeman celebrate Oothoon's feminism as triumphant as she manages to refuse being branded a harlot by the patriarchal morality. Others—such as Lucy Cogan, V. A. De Luca, Brenda Webster, Michelle Leigh Gompf, and, most notably, Helen Bruder—claim that her short-lived sexual freedom is a failure; they contend that despite her revelation, her inability to make her triumph over Urizenic reasoning heard by the male characters of the poem makes her a tragic heroine whose initial achievement deteriorates into patriarchal standards. Joshua Schouten de Jel's book is an extensive study of *Visions* that celebrates and defends Oothoon's transcendent acceptance of free love as visionary and argues further that even when her words fall on deaf ears, the significance of her visionary attitude is not diminished.
- 2 In this very detailed and well-researched work, Schouten de Jel analyzes Oothoon's spiritual transformation as an expression of divine love through self-annihilation. Against claims that reduce her sexual liberation to “merely an expansion of senses” (4, quoting Gompf), he asserts that “by reclaiming her body, Oothoon attains a prophetic power that undermines the patriarchal injunctions of her former existence” (5). His well-articulated argument is supported by extensive research of the literature not only on *Visions*



and Blake, but also on the expression of divine love through different media.

- 3 The introductory first chapter provides an outline of the book and delineates the scope of the research. The main argument here is a compelling one: “Blakean salvation is an intellectual recovery of the whole man as a body of vision, which includes the restoration of man's sexual being as a prolific emanative force” (16). Accordingly, Schouten de Jel considers Oothoon's self-annihilation not as a defeat,<sup>1</sup> but as a triumphant spiritual exaltation that places her “within a female-centred ecstatic tradition in European painting, sculpture, and literature” (6). He carefully draws parallels between Blake's designs and representations of this tradition. The consideration of Oothoon's self-annihilation is not only based on the verbal component of the poem; the pictorial component is thoroughly analyzed too.
- 4 The second chapter, “The Nakedness of Women Is the Work of God,” focuses mainly on discussions concerning

1. He gives a detailed exegesis of the scholarly debate in his notes (27-28).

nakedness in art. Unlike those with more orthodox tendencies, Blake believed nakedness to be a celebration of the Human Form Divine. As Schouten de Jel asserts, “Blake’s artwork was an expression of spiritual truth and the naked body could be manoeuvred as a semiotic vehicle for telling this truth” (42). He deftly engages with discussions of the erotic nature of the depictions of Oothoon, and argues strongly against claims that “Blake uses rhetoric to mask ‘aggressive or selfish ... sexual fantasies’” (53, quoting Webster). He maintains that by focusing not on the pornographic but on the transformative nature of the sexual act, Blake highlights the significance of sensual gratification of desire for spiritual enlightenment. With a well-rounded argument and a very clear outline, the chapter concludes that “these scenes imbue the biological body with the potential for spiritual transformation and thus map the socio-somatic revolutionary flames of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1790–3) onto Oothoon’s narrative of sexual liberation” (53).

- 5 Chapter 3, “The Tityus Tradition after Michaelangelo,” contains the strongest and most original argument of the book. Since Blake believed Michelangelo to be one of the masters of true art, along with Raphael and Albrecht Dürer, Michelangelo’s influence on Blake’s art cannot be ignored. Schouten de Jel draws parallels between Michelangelo’s Tityus drawing and Blake’s depiction of Oothoon, especially on plate 6, claiming that “such a model transposed a ‘core artistic vocabulary’ which imbues Oothoon’s self-annihilation in *Visions* with eschatological signification” (95, quoting Edina Adam and Julian Brooks). He believes that the Tityus drawing is a representation of “not the weakness but the fortitude of the spirit facing adversity” (104), since Michelangelo drew not the gory moment of punishment but right before it, thus focusing on the wholeness of the body as Tityus unwaveringly accepts his punishment. After delineating the significance of Blake’s drawing, comparing it to other renditions of the myth both pictorially and in literature, he claims that “Blake, by feminising Tityus ... as the rape victim Oothoon, meaningfully reinvigorates the iconography of Tityus (and Christ) so that somatic suffering becomes not the punishment for sensuality but a spiritual redemption from those urges” (95). The discussion turns the perspective toward the moral and sociosomatic dimensions of rape by highlighting the social and political structures that tolerate it.
- 6 Chapter 4, “Divine Love: The Transverberation,” places Oothoon within the European female mystic tradition. Concentrating especially on Teresa of Ávila’s idea of transverberation, Schouten de Jel claims that Oothoon’s self-annihilation “draws upon the violence of divine love (such as the pleasurable pain of the transverberation), the social abandonment of those female mystics who give themselves

to divine love, and the eroticised language of divine love as it was communicated through the *Song of Songs*” (174). The fourth section of the chapter focuses on the theatricality of Oothoon’s experience, and is the most striking part. Highlighting the performativity of the images and lines to direct the reader’s gaze to form a controlled narrative, Schouten de Jel contends that “theatricality becomes a mode of revelation ... [employed to] explain to us ... spiritual meaning by offering us ways of seeing, visioning, the poetic action” (189–90).

- 7 The final chapter, “*L’Estasi di Santa Teresa*,” introduces unique and really interesting ideas of spectatorship, voyeurism, and *jouissance*; however, most of these intriguing ideas are quickly glossed over, with the result that they fail to deliver the expected effect. Schouten de Jel here recapitulates most of the arguments of the other chapters and loses the promise of the questions posed. This also leads the book to end abruptly, without a conclusion that wraps up the argument as a whole. Despite this shortcoming, the chapter still offers exceptional questions relevant to discussions of Oothoon’s transformative revelation.
- 8 Overall, *William Blake’s Divine Love* offers a potentially significant argument; however, it fails to fully realize that potential, perhaps because of too many questions that surpass the scope of the book. Schouten de Jel shows that he excels at his field, but his ambitious agenda sometimes hinders his otherwise excellent research. Nevertheless, with its unique perspective on *Visions* and clear arguments, the book is a significant addition to scholarship on sexual freedom and emancipation in terms of Blake’s ideas of free love and sexuality and on Blake’s attitude toward women.