Some Things Need to be Seen to Exist: What's in a name?

Blake's *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* tells the story of an extraordinary woman. Oothoon, who has been raped and called a 'harlot' (pl. 1, l. 18, E46), picks herself up to announce that she — despite everything — is 'pure' (pl. 2, l. 28, E47). While her words and actions may impress and even influence the men around her (Bromion, her brutal rapist and Theotormon, her languishing lover), Oothoon's character is one of stability; it provides her with emotional resilience. She knows that she has been impregnated not only with a child, but also with the language of others. Oothoon has reflected, she is aware and she shares her intellectual insight into the psychological practices of what is now known as gaslighting:

> They told me that the night & day were all 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
> (*Visions*, pl. 2, ll. 30-31, E47)

That injustice has not gone unfelt; Oothoon is in a lot of pain. But who, I ask, is listening?

It is nothing new to suggest that patriarchal societies limit the rights of women. Women are denied the same opportunities as men, as long as social practices invalidate their lives and marginalize their experience. Women are excluded or treated as inferior. We need justice. While such discrimination can be detected easily in acts of aggression or outdated traditions that unthinkingly favour men, it can also be extremely subtle; it is often internalised, i.e. subconscious and invisible. By giving expression to a character's courage, her (or his) words reach us — Blake's modern readers.

In Blake's mythology, all figures are eventually subsumed into the Human Form Divine — the giant Albion. In Blake's Eternity, this character guarantees sexual equality. Although all Blake's characters disappear into Albion's chest, this (or rather his) state of being is brought about through female sacrifice. In Blake's version of the Fall, redemption becomes an experience of reintegration. Redemption causes female figures, quite literally, to dissolve. That leads to the reappearance of Albion, the man who represents universal humanity according to the creation of God's image in Genesis.

What further complicates gender in Blake is that he masculinizes female bodies or feminizes male bodies. The alternative to such reintegration might be a reunion of Blake's mythical personages, leading to marriage. This, however, is not what Blake envisioned.

Vala, the figure after whom this journal is named, can be understood as a symbol or metaphor that embodies attitudes towards women, nature and gender. As a concept, Vala contrasts sharply with Jerusalem, the bride of Albion. In Blake's mythology, Vala is a minor character, but a force to be reckoned with. She is destructive and divisive, but also capable of protection and healing. What makes her dangerous is the possession of will ('Female Will'). To possess will suggests choice, but it also empowers and enables selfishness. For Western sensibilities, to have a *will* (of one's own to evoke Virginia Woolf's argument in *A Room of One's Own*) is non-negotiable. Besides, as many Blake scholars have pointed out, it is important to differentiate between the poet and his characters, who may have conflicting opinions, which are not necessarily Blake's own.

In Blake's mythology, Vala exists in the webs of male and female family relationships. In his poetry, the connections are reinforced through allusion. Gender relations, as we all know, determine the process of associating people with certain qualities, characteristics or even roles. Vala is sister, mother, friend, daughter, lover, wife, shadow, Emanation, Goddess of Nature and shapeshifter. Vala is always on the move; she is beautiful, proud and bossy. She is also emotional and an active dreamer. This continual reimaging of her personhood as it unfolds across Blake's oeuvre extends, moreover, to how her name should be pronounced. Readers familiar with William Blake may speculate about a pun, evoking veiling or being veiled. The idea might be justified by his art, where Vala is a hidden figure, perhaps a master of disguise, who chooses self-preservation or self-restraint. But it suggests a specific way of saying the word 'Vala'. Further, the concept of a 'veil' might suggest a character that is all too quickly dismissed, relegated to the shadow version of herself. Vala is hidden and therefore not visible; it does not follow that she is physically absent.

Who can decide how Blake intended the word 'Vala' to be spoken? How should we pronounce it? Everything depends on how it plays out. Ideas, like people, can win. Here is another question: Are we prepared to accept those characteristics we are told define 'us'? The alternative is indifference or a façade of muteness: all is as if seen from far away or rather appears as if seen through a veil.

Contributors to VALA#2, which had the working title ‘Invisible (Female) Bodies’, were asked to think about ‘invisible women ’and gender in Blake. They approached their task academically and/or creatively, and in extraordinarily diverse ways. What they have created is in immediate proximity. Reach out, read more Blake; connect and enjoy!

Sibylle Erle
Editor of VALA: The Journal of the Blake Society, magazine style