“I WILL NOT CEASE FROM MENTAL FIGHT”:
WILLIAM BLAKE’S MILTON AND
THE PROCESS OF ADAPTATION

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A THESIS

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts
in the Department of English
in the Graduate School of
The University of Alabama

TUSCALOOSA, ALABAMA

2018
Critics have long pondered William Blake’s relationship to his literary predecessors. As both a visual and verbal artist, Blake had a bulk of precedence and tradition at his disposal. Many scholars focus on Blake’s relationship to Christian sources, most notably biblical and Miltonic narratives, especially with regards to his epic poem *Milton*. Those critics often read *Milton* as Blake’s attempt to correct the century-and-a-half’s worth of misreadings that had accumulated between the writings of *Paradise Lost* and Blake’s own epic. However, my thesis argues that Blake’s use of his sources is much more multi-faceted than the one-to-one relationship between Milton and Blake that this reading implies. By bringing the vocabulary of adaptation theory into Blake studies, I argue that Blake’s adaptive method becomes a means for him to assert his own cultural capital and purge his network of sources of their impurities. From *Paradise Lost*, Blake takes the fall plot and the character Sin-Leutha, correcting and updating Milton to better suit Blake’s personal mythology and vision for England. Blake turns an even more critical adaptive eye to Homer and Virgil, as he transforms the shields of Achilles and Aeneas to the garment of the Shadowy Female, criticizes the classical glorification of war, and offers a corrective through a purification of that garment. My third chapter revisits the motifs of the fall and weaving and views them through the lens of Norse mythology to show that Blake’s adaptive method is multiplicative in its design. This far-reaching and cleansing process of adaptation becomes Blake’s means of forging a national myth of England as a mythic paradise, joining Albion with his emanation Jerusalem.
LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS AND SYMBOLS

**BT**  *Milton a Poem and the Final Illuminated Works*, edited by Essick and Viscomi, sponsored in part by the Blake Trust and commonly called by that name in scholarship

**E**  *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, edited by David V. Erdman, commentary by Harold Bloom

**M**  *Milton*, from the Erdman edition

**DC**  *A Descriptive Catalogue of Pictures*, from the Erdman edition

**PL**  *Paradise Lost*, from *John Milton: Complete Poetry and Major Prose*, edited by Merritt Y. Hughes

“Sisters”  “The Fatal Sisters,” from *The Poems of Thomas Gray with a Selection of Letters & Essays*

“Descent”  “The Descent of Odin,” from *The Poems of Thomas Gray with a Selection of Letters & Essays*
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First and foremost, many thanks go to my advisory committee members who gave thought-provoking responses both in the defense and in various stages of production along the way. Special thanks go to my advisor and committee chairman, Dr. Stephen Tedeschi. He has been an invaluable resource for me throughout the research and writing of this thesis, and he has pushed my understanding of Blake and the Romantics to new heights, both in this work and in my graduate coursework in general. He has also been a source of support and guidance throughout the application process as I hope to continue my graduate studies at the doctoral level.

I also acknowledge the help of my fiancée, Kelsey Worsham. She read through portions of this thesis during draft stages, offering lucid and constructive feedback. Most importantly, she kept me on track and encouraged me in my many moments of frustration with Blake—a feeling most Blake scholars will know all too well.
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INTRODUCTION

The Romantics are often thought of in popular imaginings as champions of originality. In this line of thinking, Wordsworth, Coleridge, and their contemporaries were poets who wandered the Lake District composing their poetry on the fly, enraptured by the joys of nature and its singular moments of inspiration. The reality is hardly that simple. Although his study of originality and plagiarism in the nineteenth century focuses mostly on the Victorian period, Robert Macfarlane does include an initial chapter tracing the same ideas through the preceding Romantics. Drawing on the work of George Steiner, Macfarlane argues that attitudes toward literary originality oscillate between two poles: creatio and inventio. To be a creator is to “bring entirely new matter into being”—to create without aid of others or previous material. On the contrary, “[i]nventors…permute pre-existing material into novel combinations” (Macfarlane 1). Macfarlane proposes that the Romantics are not as entrenched in the creatio camp as one might at first think. In fact, they are quite undecided on issues of originality. By drawing mostly on evidence from Shelley, Wordsworth, and Coleridge, Macfarlane points out that Romantic writers both “coveted novelty and lack of influence as vital poetic criteria” and “addressed with varying degrees of cynicism and disbelief the concept of originality as creation out of nothing” (Macfarlane 29).

This study addresses the originality of another Romantic poet left out by Macfarlane: William Blake. Blake can, in some sense of the word, be fairly accurately described as “original.” There have been few poets who took such direct authorial control over their art at every stage of development. He was poet, printer, and publisher for his works, etching most of
his plates by hand as opposed to arranging type. He also illustrated most of his poems, and his processes of illustration are original in their specific engraving methods. Most illustrated works in his time “combined conventionally printed typeface with a pictorial border,” whereas Blake’s method “allowed him to combine words and images in a single design” (Damrosch 25) [Figure 1]. Furthermore, he is often credited with inventing a specific method of etching, now called “relief etching” in which, using tools “impervious to nitric acid, [Blake] executed the design directly on a copper plate, writing text backward and adorning it with images; he then etched the plate in acid to bite the unprotected metal down, thereby leaving the design in printable relief” (Viscomi, “Blake’s Invention”). In his methods, Blake does things that no one previously had done, and is therefore original. However, I used the word “inventing” earlier purposefully, because although no one before him etched in quite the same way he did, he still drew inspiration from a number of pre-existing techniques to devise his methods. His invention did not come ex nihilo, but was instead a rearrangement, an inventio original.

We must also ask the same question of Blake’s art in substance, not just in methods. Are his poetry, images, characters, and plots born from some creative influence-free womb that only Blake can access? Or are they also the product of an inventio form of originality? To examine these questions, this study turns to the field of adaptation studies. Although he does not make the connection explicitly, Macfarlane’s category of inventio and its associations with permutation, allusion, imitation, and arrangement all reflect the critical vocabulary of adaptation theory. For a poet such as Blake, who so openly interacts with his literary predecessors in his works, adaptation is a fruitful means of approaching Blake’s poems, especially his longer, more mythologically dense epics. By examining Blake’s use of Miltonic, Greco-Roman and Norse

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1 For further, more detailed discussions of Blake’s printing process, see also Viscomi’s book Blake and the Idea of the Book, or his easily accessible page on the William Blake Archive, “Illuminated Printing.” Full citations for both are listed in my Bibliography.
sources in his epic poem *Milton*, I argue that his adaptive method becomes a means for Blake to assert his own cultural capital, raise himself to the level of his literary predecessors, and begin to forge a national myth of England as a mythic paradise, joining Albion with his emanation Jerusalem.

The adaptation studies theoretical framework works well for Blake because, as I argue, Blake is a highly adaptive artist. Linda Hutcheon’s book *A Theory of Adaptation* in particular gives a rich critical vocabulary that easily transfers to Blake. She conceptualizes adaptation as a “palimpsestic intertextuality,” a phrase which encapsulates Blake’s work well (Hutcheon 22). His works are intertextual on one level because they allude to and adapt many previously-existing sources. His epic poems are palimpsestic in the sense that the original sources are scraped away to allow for Blake’s additions, but not removed entirely, so that the allusions are still graspable. Blake’s poems also interact with each other, often repeating, rewording, or revisiting the same themes, ideas, or images from work to work. Finally, each poem, or each plate more accurately, is an intertextual unit of its own since most contain both text and image on the same page. Here again, adaptation studies provides a useful framework for interpreting the differences between Blake’s two “modes of engagement”: the “telling” of the words and the “showing” of the images (Hutcheon 22-24). Of most use for this study is the definition of adaptation as an intertextual conversation between source and adaptor, which I see manifested in Blake’s work.

As the title of the poem indicates, the most obvious source materials for *Milton* are the works of John Milton, especially *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained*. Blake’s obsession with Milton came to fruition in many forms throughout his career. He illustrated a few of Milton’s poems, such as *Paradise Lost, Il Penseroso*, and *L’Allegro*. One of the frescoes in Blake’s only
public exhibition also depicted the Miltonic scene of “Satan calling up his Legions” (Descriptive Catalogue, E 547). In Milton, Blake hopes “To Justify the Ways of God to Men,” taking a line straight out of Paradise Lost (M i [1], E 95) [Figure 2]. The poem also adapts many plot elements such as the council in heaven, a fall from heaven, and a hellish trinity. My first chapter is devoted to a study of Blake’s debt to Milton, as manifested primarily in Milton but also with reference to some of his illustrations to Milton’s works. By analyzing the falls of Milton and Blake’s Leutha, one can see the corrective work of adapting and updating Milton to better suit Blake’s personal mythology and vision for England.

My second chapter turns to Blake’s classical Greek and Roman sources, notably the Iliad and the Odyssey. Homer and Virgil give Blake the epic form, but beyond that, there is not much that he sees of value in their works by the time he writes Milton. For Blake, the Greeks and Romans perverted art through war and ignored divine inspiration. Why, then, does Blake draw so heavily on classical myth—such as his Athena-like birth of Leutha—if “all Men ought to contemn [sic]” Homer, Ovid, Plato, and Cicero (M 1 [i], E 95)? The second chapter traces the development of Blake’s thoughts concerning his classical predecessors and examine a connection between those sources and Milton. By adapting the shields of Achilles and Aeneas to the garment of the Shadowy Female in Milton, Blake criticizes the warmongering Greeks and Romans and offers a corrective through a purification of that garment.

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2 In citations, I will use the shorthand M for Milton and E for Erdman’s The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake. Most criticism follows the format of simply giving the Erdman page number when citing Blake. However, in order to accommodate and encourage readers using the online William Blake Archive, I include plate and line numbers using the format (M plate number.line number, E page number). In instances where no line numbers are given in the Erdman—as is the case with the title page here and in the prose portion of the Preface—I use only the plate and page number. For some plates, there are two plate numbers, as is the case here as well. See my explanation for the plate numbering system at the end of this Introduction. When citing either Erdman’s Textual Notes or Bloom’s Commentary, I will simply use the format (E page number) to avoid confusion with any other sources from Erdman or Bloom.
My third chapter focuses on Blake’s use of Old Norse literature. Thanks to the growth of academic and nationalistic projects in Iceland and greater Scandinavia, works of Norse literature began to appear in Latin translations in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and their popularity in England continued into Blake’s lifetime. English writers linked their countrymen to the Icelanders through Anglo-Saxon ancestors, and then further back to a common Gothic lineage (O’Donoghue 12). The influence of these sources is not as noticeable as that of Miltonic and classical Greco-Roman works, and they are relatively underrepresented in Blake criticism. However, Blake had considerable familiarity with Norse literature through Thomas Gray, a poet who translated two Icelandic poems into English which Blake later illustrated. My third chapter revisit the motifs of the fall and weaving from previous chapters and views them through the lens of Norse mythology to show that Blake’s adaptive method is multiplicative in its design, so that adapted symbols, themes, or plots are woven from threads from multiple sources.

My final chapter ties all of the previous chapters together to argue that by drawing from and adapting this extensive network of previous source material, Blake creates a myth of Albion, his universal man and vision for a perfect England. In the Preface to Milton, Blake includes a short poem that has been adapted into the famous Anglican hymn “Jerusalem.” The final stanza of this poem reads:

I will not cease from Mental Fight,
Nor shall my Sword sleep in my hand:
Till we have built Jerusalem,
In Englands green & pleasant Land. (M 1 [i].13-16, E 95-96)

Jerusalem, for Blake, is the city of perfection. Jerusalem is also the emanation, or consort, of Albion. As previously stated, one goal of Milton is to continue the theodicy of Paradise Lost, but this stanza reveals another purpose of building perfection in England, to bond Albion with

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3 This poem is sometimes anthologized separately from Milton and listed by the alternate title of its first line “And did those feet in ancient time.” It is not to be confused with Blake’s longer epic Jerusalem.
Jerusalem. The poem *Milton*, by adapting what Blake sees as the admirable elements of so many mythic or literary cultures connected to England, is Blake’s first attempt at answering his own call.

Because of Blake’s eccentric printing and publishing method, there exist multiple copies of most of his poems, many with variations between number and ordering of plates. In the case of *Milton*, four copies exist, with a total of fifty-one plates, but with no single copy consisting of all fifty-one plates. For instance, only Copies A and B contain the Preface quoted above. Copies C and D, while lacking the Preface, do have several additional plates of text not found in the first two copies. This study follows the practice of David V. Erdman’s monumental volume *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake* by using Copy D as the base text, with the additional Preface plate included as well. As such, quotations from *Milton* are cited using his plate numbering system.⁴ All images of *Milton* taken from The William Blake Archive also come from Copy D, unless otherwise noted in the captions. Copy information for any quotations or images taken from any other of Blake’s works are noted in footnotes or in captions.

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⁴ For a full explanation of Erdman’s numbering system, see his Textual Note to *Milton on E 806*. The system is fairly straightforward, following the earlier system developed by Geoffrey Keynes, but adding in the full-plate images that Keynes excluded.
CHAPTER 1. MILTON AND MILTON

The title-page of Milton announces that the poem has been written “To Justify the Ways of God to Men,” and if there is one English poet who precedes Blake in this goal, it is the titular character John Milton (M i [1], E 95). The line, taken from Paradise Lost, implies that Milton did not push his theodicy far enough and that Blake will finish what Milton started. In Milton, Blake adapts some of the characters and plot of Paradise Lost as the basis for his own epic theodicy, most notably Satan, Sin, and the fall. Blake replicates the Miltonic plot of falls into sin, but also redeems them with Milton’s fall of inspiration and self-annihilation. Blake’s Milton realizes that he is Satan, and the sins he has released on the world are the Urizenic laws of false morality. The sins as defined by churches are not actually sins in Blake’s eye, and he further complicates typical definitions of sin through his adaptation of Milton’s character Sin. Pride, lust, and even envy are often not sins at all for Blake, they are only sins as prescribed by so-called moral laws of churches. For Blake, the greatest sin of all is to corrupt the divine voice of God by imposing these false moral laws and attempting to usurp divine judgment. By altering Sin into Leutha, Blake also altered Milton’s theology of sin, turning it from a doctrine of punishment into one of forgiveness. However, by letting Milton have a hand in the inspiration of Milton, Blake makes these moments of adaptation both opportunities to correct Milton and to create with him and accrue cultural capital for Blake himself, in order to place himself at the same cultural level as Milton.
The Falls of Milton

The plot of *Paradise Lost* is punctuated by two falls: the fall of Satan, and the fall of humanity. The fall of Satan is extra-biblical, and although the fall actually occurs before the events of the poem, it is referenced in speeches and flashbacks throughout. Both Satan’s and humanity’s falls are descents into sin. The first literally creates Sin through Satan’s rebellion, and the second brings that sin upon humanity. *Milton*, like *Paradise Lost*, also concerns itself with two falls: the fall of Satan and the fall of Milton. However, unlike *Paradise Lost*, only one of Blake’s falls is into sin. The fall of Satan in *Milton*—sparked by the jealousy of his brother and his attempts to take inspiration into his own hands—is a fall into sin, in the Miltonic sense. The fall of Satan results in the creation of “Seven deadly sins” and therefore links him to the ultimate evil for Blake: Urizen, the creator of repressive, so-called moralizing law (*M* 9.21, *E* 103). In response to Satan’s fall and creation of Urizenic law, Milton volunteers to chase Satan to Earth to remodel Urizen and confront Satan. Milton’s fall is a fall into inspiration, and ultimately, into salvation through Blake and the writing of *Milton*.

After an invocation of a muse, the plot of *Paradise Lost* opens with Satan and his fellow rebel angels already fallen into the lake of fire that will be their eternal punishment. After the unsuccessful war in heaven, God “Hurl’d [Satan] headlong flaming from th’ Ethereal Sky / With hideous ruin and combustion down / To bottomless perdition” (*PL* I.45-47). Later, in Book VI, we are given details of the war in heaven and the subsequent fall of Satan through Raphael’s narration to Adam. After days of intense back and forth fighting, God finally sends his Son into the fray, who quickly brings an end to the war. The Son pushes the rebel angels back to the walls of heaven, where “headlong themselves they threw / Down from the verge of Heav’n, Eternal

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5 For citations from *Paradise Lost*, I use the typical book and line number citation format. When citing Hughes’ notes, I use his name instead and the page number of the note.
wrath / Burn’d after them to the bottomless pit” (*PL* VI.864-866). The devils fall for nine days, passing through the realm of Chaos on their journey until “Hell at last / Yawning receiv’d them whole” (*PL* VI. 874-875).

In Blake’s *Milton*, the fall of Satan is caused by the same emotion that doomed Satan in *Paradise Lost*: envy over his place in the divine hierarchy. In Book V of *Paradise Lost*, Milton gives the reason for Satan’s rebellion as his jealousy over the Son being announced chief among angels. In Blake’s version, Satan actually attempts to usurp another character’s divine duty, and this scene and the trial that follows are the primary focus of the Bard’s Song that takes up much of the first book of *Milton*. Blake’s Satan is the son of Los and Enitharmon, the parents of many of Blake’s cosmic beings. Of their children, “First Orc was Born then the Shadowy Female: then all Los’s Family / At last Enitharmon brought forth Satan Refusing Form” (*M* 3.40-41, *E* 97). Satan’s cosmic role was to be “The Miller of Eternity subservient to the Great Harvest” (*M* 3.41, *E* 97). His older brother Palamabron works the “harrow of the Almighty” in this Great Harvest (*M* 4.1, *E* 97). Blake’s Satan, not satisfied with his role, attempts to overtake his brother’s work:

> He soft intreated Los to give him Palamabron’s station;  
> For Palamabron returned with labour weariest every evening  
> Palamabron oft refus’s; and as often Satan offer’d  
> His service till by repeated offers and repeated intreaties  
> Los gave to him the Harrow of the Almighty; (*M* 7.6-10, *E* 100)

These lines perhaps characterize Satan as a caring brother trying to spare Palamabron some work. However, the line that precedes these betrays this interpretation. The Bard tells us that this is one of Satan’s “primitive tyrannical attempts on Los” implying that his pleas, while seemingly made “with most enduring love,” are but a false front (*M* 7.5, *E* 100). It is not love that drives Satan in *Milton*, but an envious desire for power, the same force that sparks Satan’s rebellion in *Paradise Lost*. 
However, Palamabron yields to Satan, and when he resumes his duty as driver of the harrow the next day, he finds disaster. As he goes to hook the harrow to his team of horses, he finds that “the horses of the Harrow / Were maddened with tormenting fury, & the servants of the Harrow, / The Gnomes, accu’d Satan, with indignation fury and fire” (M 7.17-19, E 100). Palamabron immediately blames Satan, saying that he “Seeming a brother, being a tyrant, even thinking himself a brother / While he is murdering the just” (M 7.22-23, E 100). Palamabron calls forth Satan and Los, and Los makes the decision that from then on, each son will work only their assigned task. Palamabron returns to his harrows, and Satan to his mills. Once back in his rightful place, Satan “found all confusion” because “The servants of the Mills [were] drunken with wine and dancing wild / With shouts and Palamabron’s songs” (M 8.5 and 8-9, E 101). Satan then returns blame back on Palamabron, and a great divine council is called to determine the guilty party.

During the trial, Satan is linked to Urizen, reason, and law, which lead to his fall from Blake’s heaven, Eden. When Satan is granted his chance to defend himself, he falls into a furious rage, calling himself “God alone / There is no other” (M 9.25-26, E 103). As he continues, “his bosom grew / Opake against the Divine Vision” and “In Satans bosom a vast unfathomable Abyss” begins to grow (M 9.30-31 and 35, E 103). Satan’s envy of Palamabron and even his wrath are not the true sin, they are simply outbursts of emotion. For Blake, the sin occurs when he calls himself God and attempts to command the divine voice. In doing so, he seems to fall into this abyss of his own creation—of his own self—for the Bard tells us that “He sunk down a dreadful death” (M 9.48, E 103). After this usurpation of God, “Los & Enitharmon knew that Satan is Urizen” (M 10 [11].1, E 104). Urizen is typically tied to reason and law, both perennial evils in the eyes of Blake. This connection is made clearer when one considers that during his
rage, Satan “create[s] Seven deadly sins drawing out his infernal scroll, / Of Moral laws and cruel punishments upon the clouds of Jehovah / To pervert the Divine voice” (M 9.21-23, E 103).

In the eyes of Blake, religious laws are not the work of God; they are humanity’s twisting of the divine—the perversion of the voice. By pulling out the Urizenic scroll, Satan becomes the ultimate evil in Blake’s canon: repressive, so-called moralizing law. In *Milton*, Satan’s fall is therefore less a literal fall and more of a symbolic descent into treacherous false divine laws. However, he does make a literal fall from Eden to Earth to escape punishment. After the intervention of Leutha, who will be analyzed in more detail in my next section, Enitharmon “Created a New Space to protect Satan from punishment,” and it is there that he goes and where Milton will eventually follow (M 13 [14].13, E107).

Scholars typically read the Satan-Palamabron conflict as an adaptation of a biographical conflict between Blake and his friend-patron-rival William Hayley. For a time, Blake lived under Hayley’s patronage in a cottage in Felpham. Things started out amicably enough, but after some time “Hayley had turned from Providence into a grinning spectre of polite but persistent discouragement” (Frye 328). Hayley was hoping to promote Blake, but he was “also officious and given to controlling his protégés” (Damrosch 132). Hayley convinced Blake to “postpone his epic” and make a living through the commissions that Hayley secured on his behalf (Frye 328). It did not help the relationship that Hayley “showed not the slightest interest in Blake’s illuminated books” as well (Damrosch 133). The stage was set then for a clash between Blake and a patron who attempted to control him, to reign him in with Urizenic false laws, and the

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6 For a study of Blake’s relation to antinomian and other unorthodox Christian groups in the early years of his career (1788-1794) and the ways in which those teachings informed or paralleled his radical politics, see E. P. Thompson’s *Witness Against the Beast*.

7 This reading has its origins in E. J. Ellis and Yeats (BT 15). However, as with most dominant trends in Blake studies, the interpretation has its most influential iteration in Frye’s *Fearful Symmetry*. The reading gained further clout through Bloom’s commentary in Erdman’s edition of Blake’s works, and still persists—albeit with some pushback acknowledged—in the Blake Trust edition of *Milton*. 

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tipping point came in 1803 when Blake got in an argument with a drunk soldier who was trespassing on the Felpham property. The soldier brought charges of treason against Blake, and a trial ensued. Blake, ever the conspiracy theorist, suspected in a notebook poem that Hayley “Hired a Villain to bereave my Life” (“On H-----ys Friendship,” E 506). In the end, Blake came out unscathed, thanks in part to a positive testimony from Hayley, but the episode surely did not sit well with Blake, and he soon moved back to London in the fall of that year.8

Despite the animosity that may have arisen between Blake and Hayley through this one episode, the two remained on friendly terms, and Hayley’s thoughts on Milton and the epic form have parallels in Milton. Hayley was a biographer of Milton, and in his work The Life of Milton, he “forges an attitude towards the poet compatible with Blake’s own” (Wittreich 231). Hayley’s perception of Milton was that of “a revolutionary artist—one who embodies in the epic form a radical version of Christianity” (Wittreich 233). However, in Blake’s view, Milton was not radical enough. For Blake, Milton was still slave to organized religion and the Urizenic laws that such churches espouse. The character Milton makes this point clear, stating “I in my Selfhood am that Satan: I am that Evil One!” (M 14 [15].30, E 108). Blake sees Milton as too entangled by false moral laws, and this failure has doomed both the poet and his epic. Therefore, Blake sets out to save Milton, to right Milton’s wrongs, and to purge false revelation from his poetry. But first, he has to make Milton recognize his own shortcomings, and he does so by adapting Satan’s fall in Paradise Lost and making Milton relive that fall and then inspire Blake in the process.

Milton makes his first appearance as a character in Milton shortly after the trial of Palamabron and Satan. The Bard ceases his song relating the trial, and the Edenic council is stirred by his story. Milton, among the council in heaven, is particularly moved, and he “rose up

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8 For some of Blake’s letters that shed some context on the episode, as well as Blake’s relationship with Hayley in general, see E 731-767.
from the heavens of Albion arduous!...He took off the robe of the promise, & ungirded himself from the oath of God” (M 14 [15]. 10 and 13, E 108). This scene is depicted in one of the poem’s full plate images, shown below in Figure 3. By derobing, he sheds his divinity, and then he exclaims, “I go to Eternal Death!,” meaning life on Earth (M 14 [15].14, E 108). His mission is to “go down to self annihilation and eternal death, / Lest the Judgment come & find me unannihilated / And I be siez’d & giv’n into the hands of my own Selfhood” (M 14 [15].22-24). That Selfhood is Satan, Urizen, and moral laws. He must go down to Earth, to remold Urizen and annihilate himself and Satan.

As he travels to Earth, Milton re-enacts Satan’s fall and passage to Eden in Paradise Lost. As previously stated, when thrown from heaven, the devils fall through Chaos into hell. So then, when Satan leaves Hell to tempt Adam and Eve on Earth, he must pass through Chaos again. The Chaos of Paradise Lost is described as a “wild Abyss” made up not “Of neither Sea, nor Shore, nor Air, nor Fire, / But all these in thir pregnant causes mixt / Confus’dly” (PL II.910 and 912-914). Here, Milton represents the elements water and earth synecdochally as sea and shore. Although Chaos is elementally a mixture of the four, Milton describes it using comparisons to the oceans and seafaring specifically: the realm is “a dark / Illimitable Ocean without bound” which Satan must cross on his “Voyage,” and the Pavilion of Chaos is “spread / Wide on the wasteful Deep” (PL 2.891-2, 919, and 960-961). Satan leaps “Into the wild expanse, and through the shock / Of fighting elements, on all sides round / Environ’d wins his way” (PL II.1014-1016). Blake’s Chaos is similarly disorienting; he must pass through a vortex to get to Earth. As Blake describes it, “once a traveler thro Eternity / Has passed that Vortex, he perceives it roll backward behind / His path, into a globe itself infolding” (M 15 [17].22-24, E 109). He continues to fall “Precipitant loud thundering into the Sea of Time & Space,” taking the
comparison of Chaos to the sea from *Paradise Lost* (M 15 [17]. 46, E 110). Once Milton makes it through the vortex and comes in sight of Earth, the speaker (Blake) “saw him in the Zenith as a falling star” (M 15 [17].47, E 110). Milton then descends as this falling star into Blake’s “left foot falling on the tarsus, enterd there,” a scene depicted in Figure 4 below (M 15 [17].49, E 110).\(^9\) This scene is pivotal because it represents the moment when Milton enters Blake as poetic inspiration so that he can compose *Milton*.

Milton entering Blake’s foot causes another event to happen as well: the spreading of what Blake saw as Milton’s Urizenic law. Immediately after Milton enters Blake’s foot, “a black cloud redounding spread over Europe” from that same foot (M 15 [17].50, E 110). In the commentary for this line, Bloom states that “Milton is still burdened by the Spectre, and the black cloud may well be Puritan doctrine” (E 915). It is this cloud of repressive Puritan doctrine from which many scholars think Blake set out to redeem Milton. One common interpretation is that Blake wrote *Milton* to save Milton from the 130 years of misreadings that accumulated between the publishing of *Paradise Lost* and when Blake began his own epic. Milton “had become, through his critical legacy, an instrument of oppression,” and Blake set out to free him from this legacy (Johnson and Grant 145). However, Wittreich argues that this reading slights Blake, and that “one cannot maintain that only Milton’s commentators and not Milton are the objects of Blake’s criticism” (Wittreich 231, emphasis in original). In *Milton*, Blake’s mission is to adapt Milton’s myth and correct his doctrine in the process. To examine a specific case of this process, I will return to the trial in Eden scene and more closely examine Blake’s adaptation of Milton’s character Sin.

\(^9\) Wittreich links this scene to a biblical source “in the Book of Revelation, where Christ appears as the morning star” (Wittreich 223).
Sin, Leutha, and Forgiveness

In Book II of Paradise Lost, Milton introduces his hellish trinity in contrast to the typical Christian trinity. As Satan flies from the depths of hell towards Earth, he is confronted by two figures on either side of the gates. The first is a monstrous female form, whom the reader eventually finds out is Satan’s own daughter-turned-lover, Sin. The second, Satan’s son via Sin, is Death, a challenger for the throne of hell. In the scene, Satan and Death almost come to blows when Sin intervenes to stop the Oedipal battle. This trinity of Satan-Sin-Death stood out to Blake, who not only represented this scene in both complete sets of his Paradise Lost illustrations, but also included his own version of the hellish trinity in his epic Milton. Therefore, I will look to both adaptations of Milton’s terrible triumvirate to examine the ways in which Blake makes this alternative trinity his own, altering Milton’s theology of sin in the process.

Before moving to Blake’s depictions of Satan, Sin, and Death, one must first look more closely at how Milton himself portrays the trinity of hell scene. Of the two gatekeepers, Milton allots more lines and a more detailed description to Sin. She is described as:

Woman to the waist, and fair,  
But ended foul in many a scaly fold  
Voluminous and vast, a Serpent arm’d  
With mortal sting: about her middle round  
A cry of Hell Hounds never ceasing bar’d  
With wide Cerberean mouths full loud  
(PL II.650-655, emphasis in original)

Monstrous indeed, especially when, in subsequent lines, the reader learns that the hounds around her waist constantly eat into her womb. The comparison to the Greek mythological monster Scylla is explicit, both by Milton himself in line 660, and in a footnote in Merritt Hughes’ edition of Paradise Lost which links Sin to Ovid’s Scylla specifically (Hughes 247). Death, in Milton’s version, is less a concrete form and more of a black cloud, a “shape, / If shape it might be call’d
that shape had none / Distinguishable in member, joint, or limb” (*PL* II.666-668). Milton calls him a shadow, and notes that he wears on his head “[t]he likeness of a Kingly Crown” (*PL* II.672). In the standoff that ensues between Death and Satan, the reader also learns that both can alter their size at will, so that Death resembles his father and other angels—in *Paradise Lost* at least—in their ability to take whatever form they choose.

In his illustrations to *Paradise Lost*, Blake recreates this scene almost exactly. In both versions, Satan sits on the left side of the page, Death on the right, and Sin in the middle, attempting to come between the two belligerents both literally and figuratively. Sin clearly has her female human upper body, accompanied with the serpentine lower body and the circle of hounds around her waist. As Bette Charlene Werner makes clear, there are small details that differ between the two versions of Sin, such as the serpentine legs ending in heads in the 1808 version shown in Figure 6, forming “an amphisbaena, the two-headed reptile that was an emblem of sexual infidelity” (Werner 63). In both illustrations, Sin inserts herself into the conflict between Satan and Sin, but not as forcefully as in the poem. In the parallel scene in *Paradise Lost*, she gets the majority of the attention and dialogue, breaking up the fight, relating to Satan the familial relationship between the three characters, and granting him the keys to the gates of hell. In Blake’s illustrations, although she occupies the center of the image, she is dwarfed by Satan and Death and almost fades into the background, barely able to hold back either father or son, and instead Satan comes across as the dominant figure in both illustrations.

Satan’s appearance in both versions of the illustration fits his typical representation in Blake’s canon: a youthful, physically fit, classical nude. Despite being a fallen angel whom Milton describes as flying “with swift wings” pursuing a “solitary flight” from hell to Earth, Satan almost always appears in Blake’s illustrations as wingless (*PL* II.630-631). Blake did
create one well-known image of a prelapsarian Satan, complete with multiple feathered wings [Figure 7]. However, after the fall, Satan is either wingless, or portrayed with batlike wings—on the rare occasion he is given wings at all—both representing his corruption through sin [Figure 8]. Blake does change Satan’s posture between the two versions, with the second stance coming across as slightly less forceful, but in both he still fits the description in the source poem.

Death is the most inconsistently represented of the three between the illustrations and the source text. Instead of the formless shadow Death from *Paradise Lost*, Blake gives us a clearly human form, albeit transparent and therefore a shadow in one respect. Death does wear the “likeness” of a crown given to him by Milton in both versions, but he does not appear nearly as frightening a challenger to Satan as *Paradise Lost* suggests. In the 1807 version, Death takes the appearance of an old man, and although his spear and expression are certainly formidable, his age makes him appear weaker than Satan. As Werner points out, Blake gives Death a younger appearance in the second version, “highlight[ing] the aspect of sexual jealousy between father and son” and possibly making him a more fit opponent for Satan (Werner 62). However, even the younger Death appears weak, with both an expression of complete shock and fear, and a posture leaning away from his opponent, shrinking back from the challenge. His crown, then, is rightfully a mere likeness since his father Satan is the true dominant force in hell.

The allegory of Milton’s hellish trinity should come across easily to most readers. Satan begets Sin, and Sin begets Death. Werner identifies Milton’s source from the New Testament Book of James: “Then when lust has conceived, it bringeth forth sin: and sin, when it is finished, bringeth forth death” (Werner 64, quoting Jas. 1:15 King James Version). Milton inserts Satan into both steps of the process, having his lust for power birth Sin, and then making him procreate

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10 In a footnote, Werner guides readers to a note in Hughes’ edition of *Paradise Lost* that also lists some possible other sources for Milton, all derived from this biblical verse. See Hughes 250.
with Sin to create Death. In Blake’s illustrations of the scene, we do not get either of these births, instead we only get the conflict between them, perhaps indicating the endgame of Milton’s allegory “of the self-destructiveness of evil” (Werner 64). All three are manifestations of evil—even if Sin comes across as a concerned mother in the poem itself—and yet, despite their initial conflict, the forces of evil successfully tempt humanity. In *Paradise Lost*, Sin succeeds in subduing Satan and Death, and Satan goes on to carry out his mission, but that is not the scene Blake gives us. Knowing that the forces of good will eventually triumph over Satan through the Son, Blake illustrated the scene in a way that emphasizes the self-imploding nature of evil. Although the illustrations differ from the text by pushing Sin to the background and reducing her agency, they do not present much of a challenge to Milton, theologically. Blake gives us only their argument, because the powers of evil are ultimately failures with the redemption of the Son, and Sin is still sinful, hellish, and evil.

In *Milton*, Blake’s adaptation of the hellish trinity is less an exercise in illustration and more an exercise in correction. In his own epic, Blake makes it his mission to adapt Milton’s myth and correct his doctrine in the process. In both *Paradise Lost* and *Milton*, Satan is the antagonist to be overcome, or if not Satan himself, “a condition brought on by Satan’s activity” (*Blake’s Apocalypse* 401). Satan as a character eventually becomes less important in the middle portion of the poem after the Bard’s Song, but he still plays a part in the work as Milton must overcome his Satanic Selfhood. However, Satan takes center stage during his conflict with Palamabron in the Bard’s Song, and it is at this point in the epic that Blake’s version of Milton’s trinity of hell appears. In this scene, Blake first introduces Leutha, a character who is clearly an

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11 In *A Blake Dictionary*, S. Foster Damon defines Satan in the individual as “the principle of selfishness (the Selfhood) and the function of rationalizing (the Spectre)” (Damon 356). Likewise, in their introduction to Milton, Mary Lynn Johnson and John E. Grant state, “In *Milton*, the true Satan is Milton’s own ‘Selfhood’” (Johnson and Grant 144-145).
adaptation of Milton’s Sin. However, Blake quite literally adapts Sin, making crucial changes necessary for her figurative survival. By analyzing Blake’s transformation of Sin into Leutha, one can see that he adapts what he sees as Milton’s repressive theology of punishment of sin into a theology of forgiveness of sin.

Blake links Leutha to Milton’s Sin by making her Satan’s offspring and lover, just as in Paradise Lost. During Satan’s trial, Leutha comes forward to take the blame for Satan: “But when Leutha (a Daughter of Beulah) beheld Satans condemnation / She down descended into the midst of the Great Solemn Assembly / Offering herself a Ransom for Satan, taking on her, his Sin” (M 11 [12].28-30, E 105). In this last line, Blake clearly ties Leutha to Sin, and the parallels only grow stronger as Leutha’s speech continues. She calls herself “the Author of this Sin! by my suggestion / My Parent power Satan has committed this transgression” (M 11 [12].35-36, E 105). Blake continues the tradition from Milton of making Sin the offspring of Satan, although Leutha states that she “sprang out of the breast of Satan” and not the head (M 12 [13].10, E 105). In Paradise Lost, Sin is born from Satan’s thoughts, whereas in Milton, there is a more procreative process, at least for Leutha’s physical form. A few lines earlier, Leutha explains that she “enter[ed] the doors of Satans brain night after night” (M 12 [13].4, E 105). We aren’t given the circumstances of Leutha’s creation within Satan’s body, but it is clear that she exists within him and has agency to move through him before being born from him. In fact, entering Satan’s brain night after night conveys a sexual connotation, as if Leutha mixing with Satan’s thoughts is the procreation needed to lead to her physical birth from his breast, which happens six lines later.12

12 Johnson and Grant link Leutha entering Satan’s dreams to the scene in Paradise Lost in which Satan whispers into the sleeping Eve’s ears, another sexual—or intimate at the very least—scene (Johnson and Grant 159).
Leutha later has a second physical birth, and this moment is the strongest link between her and Milton’s Sin. After Satan uses Palamabron’s horses, Leutha is born again “from the head of Satan!” (M 12 [13].38, E 106). The scene is a clear borrowing from Milton, not only in the specifics of the body part from which Leutha springs, but in the speech she uses to describe the incident. Leutha says, “back the Gnomes recoil’d. / And call’d me Sin, and for a sign portentous held me” (M 12 [13].38-39, E 106). These lines echo almost exactly Sin’s own words in *Paradise Lost*:

*Paradise Lost:*

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Out of thy head I sprung: amazement seiz’d
All th’ Host of Heav’n; back they recoil’d afraid
At first, and call’d me Sin and for a Sign
Portentous held me; (PL II.768-771, emphasis in original)
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Blake provides two birth scenes for Leutha, both of which have her springing from within Satan’s body, and both of which have ties to Milton’s birth of Sin.

Blake links Leutha to Milton’s Sin not just through her relationship to Satan but through her function in the plot at this point of the poem as well. In *Paradise Lost*, Sin serves as a peacekeeper between Satan and Death. In *Milton*, Leutha inserts herself into the Satan-Palamabron conflict, moving the council to tears, and Enitharmon uses this chance to create a haven for Satan. It is as if Leutha’s plea in *Milton* is the answer to the unresolved intervention of Sin in Blake’s illustrations to *Paradise Lost*. Once Satan and Leutha flee to “Enitharmon’s Tent”—which Bloom links to “our world”—the familial cycle adapted from *Paradise Lost* comes full circle (M 13 [14].14, E 107; E 914). It is here that Leutha “in dreams…bore the shadowy Spectre of Sleep, & nam’d him Death,” fulfilling the Sin-Death relationship, without the subsequent rape that occurs in *Paradise Lost* (M 13 [14].40, E 107). However, in Blake’s version, it is unclear who actually is the father of Death. Satan fled with Leutha to Enitharmon’s refuge, but Elynittria also met Leutha there, and “brought her [Leutha] to Palamabrons bed” (M
The possibility of Palamabron as Death’s father is not far-fetched, since Leutha earlier states that she “loved Palamabron” (M 12 [13].37, E 107). It is also entirely possible that Leutha is the sole parent of Death, springing from her head in dreams, just as she did from Satan. This possibility parallels the sexual connotation of nightly visions as when Leutha entered Satan’s dreams to then lead to her own second birth.

So far, Blake’s Leutha reflects Milton’s Sin fairly closely, but there is at least one way that she does not follow her predecessor, and that is in her appearance. In Paradise Lost, Sin is born beautiful and angelic, mirroring her as yet unfallen father: “Likest to thee [Satan] in shape and count’nance bright, / then shining heav’ly fair” (PL II.756-757). However, during labor, Death “Tore through [her] entrails, that with fear and pain / Distorted, all [her] nether shape thus grew / Transform’d” (PL II.783-785). The rape that follows only further distorts her appearance with the addition of the hounds that gnaw through her body. Unlike Milton’s Sin, Blake’s Leutha is nowhere near monstrous. When she first stands before the trial, she “stood glowing with varying colours immortal, heart-piercing / And lovely: & her moth-like elegance shone over the Assembly” (M 11 [12]. 32-33, E 105). She does tell us on the following plate that a “Dragon-form forth issue from [her] limbs,” recalling the serpentine legs of Sin (M 12 [13].2, E 105). However, it seems as if Leutha speaks of this dragon-child hypothetically, and even if he does exist, she stands before the assembly after the birth without scars to her appearance. The description of Leutha as colorful is repeated, too, as she explains that her appearance “as a bow / Of varying colours on the hill” (M 12 [13].14-15, E 105). This link to a rainbow is particularly interesting since in Copy C the plate in which Leutha is introduced is painted with a large rainbow wash in the background [Figure 9]. So, unlike Milton’s Sin, Blake’s Leutha is beautiful in appearance.
The key to unraveling Blake’s adaption of Milton’s Sin lies specifically in Blake’s understanding of sin. Blake thought that the rules and laws of organized religion were oppressive, as he allegorized through his character Urizen, who is often a Jehovah-like God the Father and God of laws, and therefore a negative force, as in the earlier trial scene. One of the full-plate images in *Milton* depicts Milton molding Urizen’s face like clay as he stands in the River Arnon, tablets of law slipping from his grasp [Figure 10]. Milton must overcome Urizenic law “To Annihilate the Self-hood of Deceit & False Forgiveness,” as the caption at the bottom of the plate attests (*M* 16 [18]).13 One of the few good things that Blake had to say about the Catholic Church had to do with sin, specifically the forgiveness of sin. According to Damrosch, Blake’s first biographer Alexander Gilchrist “understood that for Blake ‘forgiveness of sins was the cornerstone of Christianity,’” and the “‘Romish Church was the only one which taught the forgiveness of sins’” through confession (Damrosch 225, quoting Gilchrist 348). However, the Catholic Church still sets moral laws, just as Calvinist churches do. Religious laws serve to define our sins, but, in Blake’s view, those sins are often not sinful at all in the eyes of God.

In his earlier work *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, Blake satirizes traditional Christian moral laws and instead presents his own set of virtues. In the section of the poem collecting the Proverbs of Hell, Blake states his beliefs of what God thinks of typical sins:

- The pride of the peacock is the glory of God.
- The lust of the goat is the bounty of God.
- The wrath of the lion is the wisdom of God.
- The nakedness of woman is the work of God. (*Marriage* 8.22-25, *E* 36)14

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13 Full-plate images are not included in Erdman’s text-only edition. See Figure 10 below.

14 Erdman’s line numbering system differs in *Marriage* from the system used in *Milton*. The work is a mixture of prose and two poetry sections, and only the poetry lines are numbered. Instead of starting the numbers over with each plate, the poetry sections are numbered as one set, regardless of plate divisions. I give the plate, line, and page number.
The repeated line endings with the form “is the….of God” recall the beatitudes from the Sermon on the Mount, and three of these virtues are typically included in the seven deadly sins. Blake is quite clearly referring to biblical forms and redeeming them from the corruption that churches have wrought. The narrator here is “a Blake-like character…[who] confidently offers the public the wisdom he has gained,” and that wisdom is that the so-called Christian law and doctrine that churches hand down to us are perversions of the truth (Johnson and Grant 66). In another work, Blake states that “Man has no notion of moral fitness but from Education. Naturally he is only a natural organ subject to Sense” (There is No Natural Religion, E 2). Natural man has no knowledge of morals, just of senses, feelings, and emotions. Morals come into play only from education, mostly the education given by churches. In the eyes of Blake, the laws that churches teach corrupt humanity’s natural virtues because they make emotions, sexuality, and imagination sins. It is the churches, then, who punish these sins, not God.

As much as Urizen is a representation of law, he is often also a representation of reason, the ultimate sin for Blake. Reason, for Milton, was the faculty that allowed believers to recognize sinful behavior and attempt (but fail) to avoid it. This recognition of sins through reason also leads to admission of guilt and repentance for Milton. For Blake, reason is the foundation of law; it is “a mechanism of restraint and restraint is fundamentally evil” (Nuttall 236). As he says in Milton, “the purpose of thy Priests & of thy Churches / Is to impress on men the fear of death; to teach / Trembling & fear, terror, constriction” (M 38 [43].37-39, E 139). Reason and laws repress and constrict believers, teaching a religion of fear, when instead, priests should teach a religion of forgiveness and beauty. For Blake, any church or any person who teaches doctrines of

15 Curiously, for a book titled The Alternative Trinity, Nuttall devotes very little attention to either Milton’s or Blake’s trinity of hell. Instead, his title refers to a Gnostic trinity “in which the Father is a tyrant, not complemented but opposed by the Son” and a trinity of writers that he sees as influenced by Gnosticism: Marlowe, Milton, and Blake (Nuttall 3). The Gnostic Oedipal framework is useful for interpreting Milton though since Blake’s Milton opposes the tyrannical Father Urizen that previously controlled him, just as Blake opposes his “father” Milton.
repression and obedience to a divine law instead of forgiveness corrupts the true virtues of God, and Milton is no exception. Milton’s theology taught damnation, election, and repentance, not forgiveness, so Blake must recast those constraining laws into a law of forgiveness, and he does so through Leutha.

This emphasis on forgiveness of sins is especially important when we return to consider Blake’s portrayal of Leutha as a rainbow in his adaptation of Sin. Blake thought that Milton’s Sin “was a monstrous misconception” and that “[h]er deformity exemplifies the withering of humanity that occurs when liberty is replaced by stern requirements of right and duty,” i.e. religious law (Werner 65). Milton’s Sin is a monster because Milton’s Urizenic view of sin and total depravity has deformed her. The sins that Sin and Leutha represent—freedom of sexuality in particular—are delights for Blake, and that is why he chooses to depict Leutha as beautiful.16 By linking Leutha to a rainbow in his text, Blake also links her to the biblical rainbow. The rainbow in Genesis is a sign of God’s covenant to his people, and the basis of that covenant is the promise of future forgiveness and salvation as opposed to the destruction he brought through the flood. Blake sees Milton as corrupting that covenant, and Milton the character must redeem and renew it. Sin, no longer the traditional half-beautiful, half-monstrous figure as in Paradise Lost, is now an all-beautiful figure. Leutha’s beauty does not lure people in just to feed them to the monster below. Instead, now the beauty leads to the forgiveness of sins. By making Leutha far from monstrous in appearance and linking her to the rainbow, Blake adapts Milton’s Sin to his own uses, correcting Milton’s false imagining of sin in the process.

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16 Damon defines Leutha as “sex under law” and guilt. However, she is also the “rainbow of expectation,” and I suggest the expectation of forgiveness. Sex under religious law is sinful, but by nature of the rainbow of forgiveness, this sin and guilt are washed away (Damon 238).
Milton Molding, Molding Milton

It is somewhat misleading to say that Blake is adapting Milton’s law, because within the poem, it is Milton himself that does the adapting. Milton the character does not create Leutha and set her up as a representation of forgiveness. However, in his fall into inspiration, Milton does chase Satan, his Spectre and Self-hood, down to Earth in an attempt to annihilate false-forgiveness, as the caption to the full-plate image of Milton struggling with Urizen states [Figure 10]. As Blake describes the scene, Milton takes up clay from the river, “moulding it with care,” and “building him [Urizen], / As with new clay a Human form” (M 19 [21].10 and 13-14, E 112). It is a pseudo-biblical scene, reminiscent of the formation of Adam from clay and Jacob wrestling with the angel, or God himself in some interpretations. Essick and Viscomi also compare Milton to Samson, bringing down the pillars of the temple Urizen (BT 24). As Samson, Milton destroys the laws, and as the sculptor, he reshapes them into a new form. He is therefore undergoing an adaptive process of remolding the old into the new, represented visually by his literal molding of Urizen’s face as the tablets of law slip from his grasp.

In a similar way, the image can also be read as a visual encapsulation of Blake’s adaptive process. In the plot of the poem, Milton is battling his Self-hood, reshaping it into something new. In my reading, Blake the adapter-bard is present in this plate too. He is the figure at the top of the plate in the middle, strumming on a harp as he observes the struggle below. He is the one singing this song, telling us this tale. Blake is, at the same time, paralleling Milton’s struggle with Urizen. In singing his song, Blake is also wrestling with Milton and molding Milton into something new. Milton is Blake’s “Covering Cherub that blocks realization,” if we read the relationship as a Bloomian anxiety of influence (Anxiety of Influence 24). However, I remain unconvinced that Blake was anxious of Milton’s influence. It seems to me that Blake “was not
psychologically crippled by Milton,” but is fully confident in his ability to channel Milton, instead using him as inspiration (Wittreich 250). Blake does use Milton to correct what he sees as errors in his predecessor, but in doing so, he allows Milton to make those corrections himself by making him the primary character of the epic. Blake the bard is not singing this song alone. Milton falls to Earth as a star, entering Blake through his foot to then forge a new epic together, and this epic is presumably the very one we are reading. Blake gives us yet another procreative moment, much like the earlier one between Leutha and Satan, and the result of the procreation is Milton.

If there is any anxiety in Blake and in Milton, it is Blake’s anxiety that his works will not find an audience, not anxiety with Milton. Blake is often thought of as an eccentric hermit writing only for himself and his personal mythology. Although it is true that none of his illuminated works reached a wide audience, this does not mean that Blake did not desire recognition. He made moves throughout his career that indicate that he was interested in financial gain and outside acknowledgement. Many of his artistic works were commissioned by individual patrons, such as his Paradise Lost illustrations. However, he engaged in more large-scale ventures as well, such as his illustrations to Edward Young’s Night Thoughts, which became another flop, despite its potential for profit (Damrosch 16). He also gained several contracts through his relationship with William Hayley, mostly illustrating many of Hayley’s own works. A few years after he began composing Milton, Blake, “utterly frustrated by lack of recognition,” arranged his own public exhibition at his brother’s hat shop (Damrosch 37). This too was another failure, and even sparked a vitriolic review by Robert Hunt which called Blake “an unfortunate lunatic” and his works “wretched pictures” (Hunt 497-498). For this exhibition, Blake also published his Descriptive Catalogue as a combination catalog and artistic manifesto,
which Hunt calls “a farrago of nonsense” (Hunt 498). Blake responded by making Hunt a major villain in his next epic Jerusalem.

It is clear, then, that Blake desired some acclaim for his works, and this desire underlies his adaptation of Milton in my reading. Linda Hutcheon has posited many reasons why one might adapt pre-existing works, one of which being to boost one’s own cultural capital (Hutcheon 91). Her examples draw largely on twentieth-century film adaptations, but the same can be said of Blake and his adaptation of Milton. He takes the work of one of England’s pre-eminent poets and one whom he admires greatly, and channels that work into creating his own. Blake shows that he is a learned reader of Milton, even attempting to outdo Milton and correct his theology, setting himself above his predecessor. In his Preface to Milton, Blake calls for the “Young Men of the New Age” to throw off “Greek and Roman Models” of literature (M 1[i], E 95). Blake desires the creation of Jerusalem, the sacred city of divine inspiration, “In England’s green & pleasant Land,” using English models of the epic (M 1[i].16, E 96). By adapting Milton, Blake is answering his own call by building Jerusalem in England and placing himself on the same cultural level as Milton.
CHAPTER 2. MILTON AND CLASSICAL PREDECESSORS

The opening plates of Blake’s Milton call to mind not only Milton’s epic Paradise Lost, but also the classical epics of Homer and Virgil. The title page of Copies C and D proclaim that Milton is “a Poem in 12 Books,” alluding most immediately to Milton’s twelve-book epic, a form which Milton himself took from the classical Western tradition of using multiples of twelve books (M i [1], E 95) [Figure 1].17 The first line of the preface forces the reader to consider classical precedents by calling Greek and Roman writers by name, while also casting judgment on them. Blake writes that “The Stolen and Perverted Writings of Homer & Ovid: of Plato & Cicero, which all Men ought to contemn: are set up by artifice against the Sublime of the Bible” (M 1 [i], E 95). Harold Bloom—as well as most editors of the poem—points out that Blake’s “distinction between the Classics and the Bible here is clearly Miltonic,” citing a passage from Paradise Regained in which Jesus “exalts the Hebrew Scriptures over Greek literature” (E 909).

However, Blake takes the claim a step farther, saying that we should not only exalt biblical literature over classical literature, but that we should condemn the classics entirely. He points out that “Shakspeare & Milton were both curbd by the general malady & infection from the silly Greek & Latin slaves of the Sword” (M 1 [i], E 95). Although Milton claimed to raise scripture over classical literature, he was in fact too heavily infected by Homer, Virgil, and other writers of antiquity to succeed. Therefore, Blake must take up the cause himself.

17 The title pages of Copies A and B reduce this number to two, the actual number of books in Milton, but the “1” is thinly veiled behind wisps of clouds. Compare Figure 1 against Figure 11 from Copy A.
Blake’s attack on classical sources turns into a call to arms for artists of all types. He writes, “Rouze up O Young Men of the New Age!...Painters! on you I call! Sculptors! Architects!” (M 1 [i], E 95). These artists are the ones who must toss aside “Greek or Roman Models” and be “true to our own Imaginations” (M 1 [i], E 95). True imagination will enable artists to move past perverse models of art and create Jerusalem, the great divine city, in England. By comparing Milton to its classical precedents the Iliad and the Aeneid, one can begin to ask whether Blake’s poem answers its own call. This chapter will consider Blake’s adaptation of classical literature by examining his relationship to British Neoclassicism, his changing attitudes towards the classics themselves, and his use of ekphrasis and the garment as a symbol in Milton. Blake’s rending of the Shadowy Female’s garment in the first book of Milton serves as an acting out of the process that the preface calls for: to destroy Greek and Roman models and replace them with forms truly inspired by God.

Blake and British Neoclassicism

Blake did not always express such vocal disdain for the works of the ancient Greeks and Romans; in fact, much of his training and engraving style was based on such works. One of Blake’s closest friends was the artist John Flaxman, a leading figure of the neoclassicist movement in England. His art, particularly his illustrations, sought to imitate the style of ancient Greek vase paintings and display “pure, idealized image[s] in a severely linear style” (Mellor 118). Flaxman is perhaps best known today for his illustrations to Homer, a handful of which Blake actually engraved for a second publication in 1805 (Wark 19) [Figure 12]. Henry Fuseli and George Cumberland also had considerable influence on Blake’s developing style, and both impressed their neoclassicist leanings on him. Cumberland was particularly outspoken,
publishing treatises in which he “set up as an appreciation of Greek art as the ultimate criterion of taste and achievement and urged English artists and thinkers to imitate the Greeks” (Mellor 114). In a letter written in 1799, Blake writes “What is it sets Homer Virgil & Milton in so high a rank of Art.” (“[To] Revd Dr Trusler,” E 702-703). At this point in his career, Blake “clearly identified Greek art as the first authentic creations of the imagination” (Mellor 113). Essick and Viscomi point to another letter from 1799 in which Blake worked “in conjunction with such men as my friend Cumberland to renew the lost Art of the Greeks” (“To the Revd Dr Trusler,” E 701).18 However, Blake’s opinion is far from static, as can be seen in his later works.

Blake’s views on Greek and Roman art started to shift by 1809 when he published the Descriptive Catalogue for his only public exhibition. In this catalog, he becomes critical of Greek and Roman art, writing, “No man can believe that either Homer’s Mythology, or Ovid’s, were the production of Greece, or of Latinium; neither will any one believe, that the Greek statues, as they are called, were the invention of Greek Artists” (DC, E 531). Yes, the Greeks and Romans wrote their poems and sculpted their statues, but they were insufficient copies of past forms. Blake argues that “The Greek Muses are daughters of Mnemosyne, or Memory, and not of Inspiration or Imagination, therefore not authors of such sublime conceptions” (DC, E 531). According to Blake, the Greeks created from memory, not from inspiration, and were therefore less pure, less divine. For Blake, working from memory instead of inspiration is “like walking in another man’s style, or speaking or looking in another man’s style and manner, inappropriate and repugnant” (DC, E 547). The Greeks and Romans are no longer fully in touch with divine imagination for Blake, and their suitability as models is called into question.

By 1822, Blake’s critique of Greek and Roman art had reached its pinnacle, going so far as to call these civilizations detrimental to art as an endeavor. In the short tractate On Homers

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18 See BT 267.
Poetry, Blake critiques the poetic unity of the Iliad. He writes, “Every Poem must necessarily be a perfect Unity, but why Homer’s is peculiarly so, I cannot tell” calling to mind Aristotle’s argument in the Poetics for the unity of plot in the Odyssey (On Homers Poetry, E 269). However, according to Blake, Homer breaks the rule of unity in the Iliad by telling “the story of Bellerophon & omit[ing] the Judgment of Paris which is not only a part, but a principal part of Homer’s subject” (On Homers Poetry, E 269). Therefore, Homer is not quite the exemplary poet that the Western canon holds him to be. Blake expands the critique to all classical literature at the end of the piece when he exclaims, “The Classics, it is the Classics! & not Goths nor Monks, that Desolate Europe with Wars” (On Homers Poetry, E 269). Here we begin to see the basis of his argument from the preface to Milton: that the classics corrupt man, and Christian art is the only solution. The answer is not necessarily Christianity in general, since Blake had many disagreements with organized forms of Christianity, as discussed in the previous chapter, but instead Christian art as inspired by the divine imagination—such as Gothic architecture, which he admired.

This link between classical literature and war carries over into On Virgil, the companion piece to On Homers Poetry printed on the same sheet. In the first sentence of this short treatise, he states that Greece and Rome were “so far from being parents of Arts & Sciences as they pretend.” Instead, they “were destroyers of all Art” (On Virgil, E 270). He points specifically to one line from the Aeneid in “Book VI. Line 848 [which] says Let others study Art: Rome has somewhat better to do, namely War & Dominion” (On Virgil, E 270). One can see the repeated

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19 Many editions list On Homers Poetry and On Virgil as one piece with a combined title. Erdman lists them separately, and I follow his example. See Figure 13 for the plate.

20 In Dryden’s translation, this line comes significantly later than where Blake places it, instead coming in a speech from lines 1169 and following:
Let others better mold the running Mass
Of Metals, and inform the breathing Brass;
And soften into Flesh a Marble Face:
dichotomy between war and art taken from *On Homers Poetry*, and Blake expands on this
distinction further. He writes that “a Warlike State never can produce Art,” and, as will be shown
further in the next section of this paper, the *Iliad* and the *Aeneid* cannot be true art because they
glorify war (*On Virgil, E 270*). Furthermore, “Grecian is Mathematic Form,” meaning based on
reason—a perennial sin for Blake. Art should not be based on mathematical forms, reason, and
logic, but on imagination and inspiration. Such imagination can be found in Christian art, since
“Gothic is Living Form” (*On Virgil, E 270*). In his art, Blake must attempt to correct the course
of British art and turn away from falsely inspired classical precedents.

Despite his questioning of the inspiration behind classical art, Blake still holds firm to at
least one ideal of neoclassicism: the line. In the *Descriptive Catalogue*, Blake writes that “all
depends on Form or Outline” in art (*DC, E 529-530*). He makes an even more grandiose
statement later in the catalog: “The great and golden rule of art, as well as of life, is this: That the
more distinct, sharp, and wirey the bounding line, the more perfect the work of art.” If the line is
not strong, then that is “evidence of weak imitation, plagiarism, and bungling” (*DC, E 550*). The
language of weak imitation recalls the muse of memory from earlier in the catalog, the false
muse. Blake’s adaptations, on the other hand are strong imitations because they ostensibly draw
more on imagination than memory. Although the Greeks and Romans operate under this false
muse, they gave us the strong line, in the views of British neoclassicists. Blake probably would
not quite give them as much credit as his colleagues. His response would be that Greek and
Roman artists were “lame imitators of lines drawn by their predecessors,” and had lost true

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Plead better at the Bar; describe the Skies,
And when the Stars descend, and when they rise.
But, *Rome*, ‘tis thine alone, with awful sway,
To rule Mankind; and make the World obey;
Disposing Peace, and War, thy own Majestick Way.
To tame the Proud, the fetter’d Slave to free;
These are Imperial Arts, and worthy thee.
(Dryden 6.1169-1178, emphasis in original)
inspiration (*DC, E* 550). Blake’s lines seek true inspiration from God that the Greeks and Romans were incapable of reaching.

Blake’s final illuminated work is the engraving most commonly titled *The Laocoön*, and in that work one can see his reframing of classical art in Judeo-Christian terms. The engraving depicts the sculpture *Laocoön and His Sons* surrounded entirely by captions in English, Hebrew, and Greek that are arranged in no discernable order [Figure 14]. However, the conventional title *The Laocoön* is somewhat misleading for Blake’s purposes. In creating this piece, he wished to “undermine[e] the authority of the classical work to redefine it as a copy of a much greater Hebrew original” (Johnson and Grant 349). In their edition of Blake’s poems, Johnson and Grant offer an alternative title: *[Yah] & his two Sons Satan & Adam*. This title is taken from the caption just below the image of the sculpture, which in Erdman’s edition reads “[Jehovah] & his two Sons Satan & Adam as they were copied from the Cherubim of Solomons Temple by three Rhodians & applied to Natural Fact. of. History of Ilium” (*The Laocoön*, E 273).

By using this line as the title, Johnson and Grant emphasize Blake’s adaptive mission. He erases the characters’ identities as Laocoön and his sons from Virgil’s *Aenied* and replaces them with Hebrew names. The caption also indicates that Greek sculptors falsely copied the work, and suited it to their history. They adapted a Hebrew original into a vulgar form, and Blake must adapt it back to its former glory. Several of the captions criticize the Greeks and other cultures for perverting true art. In one caption, he states “The Gods of Greece & Egypt were Mathematical Diagrams see Plato’s Works,” again criticizing the Greeks for being too mathematical, and therefore not imaginative (*The Laocoön*, E 274). Another caption points out the same line from the *Aeneid* that Blake attacked in his *Descriptive Catalogue*: “Empire against

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21 The engraving itself uses the Hebrew lettering for Jehovah—or Yah as Johnson and Grant translate—which is why both editors give the English alternatives in brackets. Erdman also chooses not to provide line numbers for this piece.
Art See Virgil’s Eneid. Lib. VI. V 848” (The Laocoön, E 274). This criticism of war in Greco-Roman art can also be seen in Milton, particularly in Blake’s adaptation of the shields of war from Homer and Virgil.

**Shields of War and Garments of Lamentation**

One of the more prominent scenes in Homer’s *Iliad* comes in the eighteenth book when Thetis entreats Vulcan to craft armor and arms for Achilles’ upcoming battle with Hector. In many critical views, this passage of *ekphrasis* is often read as Homer’s vision of an ordered universe and civilization. The shield is decorated in layers of circles, and in the central portion Vulcan crafts a cosmology, “For in it he presented earth, in it, the sea and skie, / In it, the never-wearied Sunne, the Moone exactly round / And all those stares with which the browes of ample heaven are crownd” (Chapman 18.436-438). He goes on to list the constellations in detail. The next layer depicts two cities, each with two subscenes. The first “did nuptials celebrate” with parades of brides, grooms, and celebrants (Chapman 18.445). The shield also depicts a “solemne Court of law” deciding on a murder case in the same city (Chapman 18.451). The second city scene shows “Two armies glittering in armes, of one confederacie, / Besieg’d it [the second city]” while the city’s own residents “Slue all [the] white fleec’t sheepe” of their sieging enemies (Chapman 18.463-464 and 480). The description of the shield then moves from the urban to the rural, depicting fields of corn with workers sowing and reaping, with a king setting a feast for the harvest celebration. However, even these pastoral scenes depict some violence, as “Two horrid Lions rampt, and seisd, and tugg’d off” a prize bull (Chapman 18.528). Moving forward, the final scene is of another rural celebration, as “youths and virgins danc’t” in a labyrinthine

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22 In quoting this line, I have put extra spaces between “Art” and “See” in order to replicate Blake’s spacing on the plate.
“dancing place” (Chapman 18.539 and 536). On the shield’s edge, a great ocean contains the world created within the other layers, echoing the cosmic scene in the shield’s center.

Not only is the shield often read as an Homeric cosmography, but a peaceful one at that, despite the moments of violence in the specific scenes. Oliver Taplin sums this interpretation up nicely when he says that “the shield is a microcosm, not a utopia, and death and destruction are also there.” However, outright war only takes up “one half of one of the five circles” and the scenes of peace, both urban and pastoral peace, outweigh those of violence (Taplin 12). In his movement across scenes and layers, Homer ultimately comes to a peaceful end. The scene of war is placed firmly in the middle, moving from celebration and feasting, to war, and back to celebration. The two cities are set up as a dichotomy between peace and violence, but war becomes only a momentary interruption in the cycle of civilized society since the poet moves on to the idyllic pastoral. The one moment of violence in the middle of the rural scenes is described almost in passing, like a passive “you win some, you lose some,” and the scene quickly moves back to pastoral celebration. For Taplin, the shield of Achilles makes us think about war, but only to make us “see it in relation to peace” (Taplin 15, emphasis in original). Taken as a whole, the shield presents a “Homeric picture of the good life” (Taplin 12). The good life of peace and prosperity brought on by victories in war.

This reading of the shield glorifies war as a necessary step to lasting peace, however, the shield can also be interpreted in a more negative light considering its place in the context of the epic as a whole. Stephen Scully points out that it is ironic for a shield of peace to be given and wielded by the “death-embracing” and warmongering Achilles (Scully 31). The poem opens with an invocation to the muse to tell of “Achilles’ baneful wrath…that imposd / Infinite sorrowes on the Greekes” (Chapman 1.1-2). From the very opening lines we know that Achilles is angry and
vengeful, and his lust for war spells out death for Greek and Trojan alike. In fact, Achilles’ wrath is initially aimed at fellow Greek Agamemnon, and he refuses to fight, leading to many Greek casualties. It is only when his friend Patroclus impersonates him and dies at the hands of Hector that Achilles’ wrath is redirected and he joins the fight, with the new shield forged by Vulcan as described above. At this point, the sorrows are turned on the Trojans. The shield inspires terror in all who look upon it, regardless of the army they stand with. It is described as “terrible and awful to behold,” paralleling the description of the Gorgon’s head on Athena’s shield at other moments in the epic (Scully 32, quoting Iliad 20.259-260). 23 The shield will not bring quick peace for any parties involved in the war, unless one counts the peace of death which comes for Achilles. As Scully points out, “both Achilles and Troy are ‘clothed’ in the divine and the doomed,” for both fall by the end of the epic (Scully 31). The shield is not a sign of the prosperity to come for the Greeks on Earth, but instead an “Olympian, and a distancing vision of the mortal that only Achilles in his transcendent fury can long sustain” (Scully 40). The shield, then, is an “instrument of death” masquerading as an unattainable idyllic world (Scully 47). Not so much an utopia, as Taplin argued, but a dystopia.

Divine clothing appears often in Blake’s epic Milton, with most scholars drawing parallels to biblical costumes, particularly the Shadowy Female’s garment in the first book. As Milton descends from heaven to Earth, the Shadowy Female—the corrupt form of Orc’s emanation Vala—“howls in her lamentation / Over the Deeps,” and begins an ekphrastic speech of her own. At the end of the speech, she “put[s] on Holiness as a Breastplate & as a helmet” (M 18 [20].21, E 111). Morton Paley links this garment to Aaron’s breastplate from Exodus 28, the “breastplate of judgment with cunning work” (Paley 133, Exodus 28:15). Both are set with

23Scully translates his quotations himself from the Greek. The corresponding lines in Chapman’s translation do not describe the shield as terrible, awful, or with any similar adjective (Chapman 20.235-236). However, in Pope’s, we do get the phrase “his dreadful shield” (Pope 20.311).
gemstones and gold as well, albeit in Blake they are “the precious stones of anxiety & care & desperation & death / And repentance for sin & sorrow & punishment & fear” instead of signet stones as in Exodus (M 18 [20].23-24, E 111). Both also have writing carved into them: in Exodus, the “names of the children of Israel;” in Milton, “Writings written all over it in Human Words” (Exodus 28:29; M 18 [20].12, E 111).24 The garment also specifically mentions three of the four horsemen of the apocalypse from Revelation in the lines “The Famine shall clasp it together with buckles & Clasps / And the Pestilence shall be its fringe & the War its girdle” (M 18 [20].16-17, E 111). The garment has clear parallels to biblical material; however, I also suggest that it is a moment in which Blake had his classical predecessors in mind.

My connection between the shield of Achilles and the Shadowy Female’s garment is based on the depictions of human scenes in both. The biblical sources mentioned by Paley, Essick, and Viscomi all discuss a robe or breastplate of righteousness or holiness bedecked in gold and jewels. The Shadowy Female’s garment, while far from a robe of righteousness, is laden in jewels. However, none of these biblical garments depict human figures or scenes. In this regard, the Shadowy Female’s garment is more classical than biblical, but the Shadowy Female’s scenes are all depictions of death and destruction, a deviation from the shield of Achilles:

My Garments shall be woven of sighs & heart broken lamentations
The misery of unhappy Families shall be drawn out into its border
Wrought with the needle with dire sufferings poverty pain & woe
Along the rocky Island & thence throughout the whole Earth
There shall be the sick Father & his starving Family!
(M 18 [20].6-10, E 111)

In describing the shield of Achilles, Taplin notes that “the shield omits, for instance, poverty and misery” (Taplin 12). The starving family in the Shadowy Female’s garment stands in contrast to the feast scenes on Homer’s shield, and many of the specific descriptions that follow also echo

24 See BT 46-148 for further biblical parallels to Isaiah and 1 Thessalonians.
the scenes in Homer’s shield, but with a negative connotation. For the court of law, Blake gives us “The Prisoner in the stone Dungeon & the Slave at the Mill” (M 18 [20].11, E 111). Where Achilles’ shield depicts kings hosting harvest festivals, Blake’s garment “will have Kings inwoven upon it, & Councillors & Mighty Men,” but they demand “a hard task of a life of sixty years” (M 18 [20].15 and 14, E 111). Even the presence of the three horseman from Revelation have a Homeric spin, as they are all allegorical representations of the dark side of Achilles’ shield. For Homer, war brings victory, celebration, and peace. In Blake’s case, there is no peace or celebration; war is linked with pestilence, famine, and—through implication—with the fourth horseman death.

In its emphasis on death and violence, the Shadowy Female’s garment is more Virgilian than Homeric. In an homage to Homer, Virgil includes a long description of Aeneas’ shield in his Aeneid, and its scenes are much more focused on war and destruction. Of all the arms and armor which Venus had Vulcan make, Aeneas is most taken aback by the shield with “Roman Triumphs rising on the Gold” (Dryden 8.835, emphasis in original). These triumphs of war fill the next 140 or so lines of the book and are specific and often gruesome. Virgil details “the Rape of Sabine Dames” and the war with their husbands that follows (Dryden 8.847). One of the more horrific details is the fate of Metius:

the Traytor Metius, stretch’d between  
Four fiery Steeds, is dragg’d along the Green;  
By Tullus doom: The Brambles drink his Blood;  
And his torn Limbs are left, the Vulture’s Food. (Dryden 8.858-861)

This passage also includes scenes of Roman defeat, such as the siege by the Tuscans, who seek “To win by Famine,” and the poverty that comes after: “Then Rome was poor; and there you might behold / The Palace, thatch’d with Straw, now roof’d with Gold” (Dryden 8.867 and 868).

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25 Dryden italicizes many words in his translation, mostly names of people and places. From here forward, all italicized words in quotations from the Aeneid are Dryden’s typography, unless otherwise noted.
However, the centerpiece of the shield depicts the battle of Actium, shown as a battle between Caesar Augustus and Roman gods against Marc Antony, Cleopatra, and the gods of Egypt. At the end of this battle, “Apollo, from his Actian height, / Pours down his Arrows,” defeating Antony’s forces, and “Great Caesar sits sublime upon his Throne” (Dryden 8.940-941 and 8.963). Even though the scenes of war and violence are much longer and more detailed here than in the *Iliad*, we still end with a scene of peace and the apotheosis of Augustus and Roman civilization.

Where Blake stands firmly apart from both Homer and Virgil is that the Shadowy Female’s garment far from glorifies violence, and instead condemns it. For Homer, war is but a momentary and necessary step in the cycle of civilization with minimal suffering, and a step that leads to peace and celebration. For Virgil, time is measured by war, and despite all the death, famine, and destruction that war brings, it also brings the glory of Rome. For Blake, the garment is all misery. The kings depicted on it and their demands result in famine, war, and disease, and all culminate in death and suffering. There is no peace, no glory, and no celebration that comes from the suffering in Blake. After the Shadowy Female concludes her speech, Orc cries out to her, saying, “Take not the Human Form O loveliest (M 18 [20].26, E 111). The human form is the garment of misery because our endless violence against each other only begets more suffering. Orc asks the Shadowy Female “Wherefore dost thou Create & Weave this Satan for a Covering?” (M 18 [20].30, E 111). The garment she intends to fashion is the work of Satan, of Falsehood, the very Falsehood that Milton descends to Earth to eliminate.

Orc continues with the most explicit condemnation of the Shadowy Female’s garment of doom and begins the process of Milton’s destruction of falsehood in the poem. Orc commands the Shadowy Female to toss aside her work and instead weave “a Garment of Pity & Compassion
like the Garment of God” (M 18 [20].35, E 112). Just as in his treatment of Leutha earlier, we see that the central tenets of Blake’s understanding of God are compassion, pity, and love. Godly love is the true inspiration of art, not a desire for glory from war. When she refuses, Orc “Rent the Immortal Females, limb from limb & joint from joint,” releasing Urizen so that Milton can begin his wrestling with the falsehood of moral law (M 18 [20].49, E 112). Blake reveals the classical shields of peace and glory through war to be dystopias, and they become true garments of misery in his adaptation. The decrees and wars of kings and the suffering that follows as represented on the Shadowy Female’s garment are further iterations of the “Satanic Mills” that grind humanity down (M 1 [i].8, E 95). Therefore, the garment must be destroyed—not glorified—so that Milton can defeat his false selfhood, and Blake can defeat false inspiration.

The Draperies of Influence

The image of the garment takes on heightened symbolic weight in Blake’s later prophetic writings as compared to his earlier poems. As Paley has observed, “there are no usages at all [of the word ‘garment’] in the singular prior to [The Four Zoas], while usages in the plural are either literal or decorative” with a total of nine occurrences (Paley 119-120). However, usage picks up significantly from The Four Zoas onward, totaling twenty-four uses and “relat[ing] to the larger theme of weaving in the later works” (Paley 120). For Paley, the garment is ultimately “a mediator between humanity and forces ‘without’ and ‘within’” (Paley 138). One such force without is history, and “[h]istory itself is the Garment of War” (Paley 135). This statement comes on the heels of Paley’s reading of the Shadowy Female scene, and one can see that although he does not link her garment to the shields of Achilles and Virgil, he does link it to

26 Paley cites Erdman’s A Concordance to the Writings of William Blake as his source, which I have included in my Bibliography as well.
history and war. The Shadowy Female’s garment, as a drapery of war depicting scenes of human suffering, becomes a moment for Blake to adapt and correct his classical predecessors. As such, the theme of weaving becomes an apt metaphor—much like molding on plate 16 [18]—for the adaptive process Blake undergoes in writing Milton, especially when one considers the motif of weaving alongside the similar motif of forging.

Although Blake adapts the shields of Homer and Virgil into a woven garment, the act of forging is also prominent in Milton, with characteristic mythic significance. The language of the forge appears early in Blake’s work, such as in “The Tyger” whose speaker invokes the images of hammers, forges, and anvils in the birth of the tiger (“The Tyger” 13-16, E 25). The creation in a forge calls to mind a divine blacksmith, much like the Roman Vulcan. In Milton, this blacksmith takes the form of Los. His forge first appears on the sixth plate of the poem in which “Loud sounds the Hammer of Los, & loud his Bellows is heard” all across England (M 6.8, E 99). In this scene, Rintrah, Palamabron, Theotormon, and Bromion help Los “forge the instruments / Of Harvest: the Plow & Harrow to pass over the Nations” (M 6.12-13, E 99). The forge and the tools created at it are associated with the apocalypse that Milton heralds by the end of the poem. The forge, then, has a hand in the destruction of the old and creation of the new, a process much like Blake’s process of adaptation.

The forge is a fitting metaphor for the process of adaptation because it involves similar methods of destruction, extraction, and creation. Technically, the process of melting and purifying ore into usable metal occurs in a smelter or furnace, which Blake describes a few lines below the first mention of Los’ forge: “The Surrey hills glisten like the clinkers of the furnace” (M 6.14, E 99). Once the ore is purified, it is reheated in the forge and then shaped using the tools associated with Los: hammers, anvils, tongs, etc. The process takes a raw material, removes
what is impure, extracts the base metal, and then shapes that base into a new form, much like the adaptive processes of literature. Blake, in adapting Milton, Homer, Virgil, and others, takes their raw material and reforms it into his adapted theme, motif, or symbol. In the case of Sin from the last chapter, she is reforged from a monstrous temptress into a beautiful rainbow, implying that readers should rethink their understanding of sin. In the case of Virgil and Homer, their shields of war are replicated in the Shadowy Female’s garment of lamentation, but this garment is vilified by Orc, who instead calls for a garment of compassion. In doing so, Blake argues that we should not glorify war as he sees Homer and Virgil doing because war does not lead to lasting peace, but only to more war. The characters and motifs—raw materials—are taken from previous influences, thrown into the smelter of Blake’s poem, and come out either with a new form or with their old form beaten down.

The weaving of a garment is also a fitting metaphor for adaptation. The raw materials—thread in this case—are given a new form in a finished garment. Blake is a weaver-poet, taking threads from other sources, and weaving them together to create something new, something which he sees as better. Blake, much like Milton on plate [16], casts off the draperies of his predecessors, and from the threads that formed them, he weaves his new epic, correcting them as he goes [Figure 3]. However, the Shadowy Female’s garment is not entirely destroyed in Milton. At the end of the poem, Jesus wears the “Garment dipped in blood”—a “Garment of War,” recalling that of the Shadowy Female—wrapped around his shoulders (M 42 [49].12 and 15). In doing so, he literally takes on humanity’s sins—most notably war—so that he can answer Orc’s call for a purified garment in a pseudo-crucifixion. That purification is yet to come, however. The last line of Milton anticipates the apocalypse: “To go forth to the Great Harvest & Vintage
of the Nations” (M 43 [50], E 144). This line references another recurring image of purification in Milton, that of the harvest, a harvest which comes in his next epic Jerusalem.

Even though the full apocalyptic harvest is not given in Milton, one can already see the literary purification of Blake’s adaptive method taking place. The Shadowy Female’s garment becomes a means of interacting with classical influences, criticizing their glorification of human suffering through war, and purifying that garment through an apocalyptic vision. The only warfare that Blake sees as profitable is the “Mental Fight” of intellectual warfare, a fight that he carries out in adapting Milton, Homer, and Virgil (M 1 [i].13, E 95). The repeated images of the forge and weaving and the creative processes they represent parallel the adaptive struggle that Blake undergoes with his sources in writing Milton. The weaving motif also alludes to another literary predecessor that is relatively understudied in Blake scholarship, and which is the focus of my next chapter: Norse mythology.
CHAPTER 3. MILTON AND NORSE MYTH

When it comes to the study of Blake and his literary predecessors, Miltonic-Christian and Greco-Roman material are the two most richly-studied sources. Thus far, I have offered readings of the fall plot device as adapted from Milton and the motif of forging and weaving as adapted from Homer and Virgil. However, both the fall and weaving can be analyzed from the perspective of their relation to Old Norse literature. This chapter offers its readings, not as counter-readings, but as additional readings. The weaving metaphor for adaptation applies nicely here because Blake is not taking his material from one source. He weaves several sources together to form his epic. Leutha is, for example, most immediately influenced by Milton’s Sin, but at the same time she is also an adaptation of Athena and Scylla. In a similar way, both the fall and weaving are amalgamations of multiple sources. By comparing these two elements of Milton to their precedents in Old Norse poetry, one can see that Blake is doing the same adaptive work as he does with Milton, Homer, and Virgil. He adapts his Norse sources, corrects them, and transforms them into something new, which, when combined with his Miltonic and classical sources, forge an epic of adaptive multiplicity.

Old Norse literature became available to a broader European audience in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and English scholars saw this literature as part of their greater cultural heritage. Heather O’Donoghue argues that, at this time, Denmark and Sweden “began to construct the earliest histories of their own nation.” They realized that Icelandic Old Norse texts “provide[d] copious evidence for Scandinavian history, [and] could also be expounded on by
Icelanders” (O’Donoghue 12). As a result, many texts became available in Latin for the first time, notably Snorri Sturluson’s *Prose Edda*. English antiquarians also participated in a similar nation-building historical enterprise. They saw a common ancestor between the English and Icelanders in the Goths. Since the Goths were seen as “the bearers of political liberty and democracy,” English antiquarians linked these desirable qualities with Iceland and Old Norse myth, such that their writings were littered with “references to a Gothic Odin” who brought law, poetry, and wisdom to northern European peoples (O’Donoghue 12). English scholars, hopeful that England, too, is a home of such values and achievements, were keen to bring these Old Norse writings into the big tent of “English” myth-history.

A strong interest in Old Norse literature continued throughout the eighteenth century leading up to the start of Blake’s career. O’Donoghue argues that a “taste for the wild and supposedly ‘sublime’ poetry of the ancient North” flourished in this period, as well as an interest in ancient poetry more generally (O’Donoghue 13). In 1763, Paul Henri-Mallet published two books about the myth, history, and culture of the ancient North, and these were translated into English by Thomas Percy in 1770 as one volume titled *Northern Antiquities*. Even before this monumental work became available in English, Thomas Gray published his two Norse Odes—“The Fatal Sisters” and “The Descent of Odin”—in his 1768 *Poems* (Rix). It is on the basis of these poems that O’Donoghue calls Gray the “first major poet in English to engage with Old Norse myth” (O’Donoghue 65). It is also through these two poems that we can see a strong textual link for determining Blake’s exposure to Old Norse literature and myth.
The Fatal Sisters and the Shadowy Female

Blake’s understanding of Norse myth is most immediately influenced by Gray, whose work he had close contact with through illustrations. His familiarity with Gray’s work can be seen on one level through his various visual depictions of his predecessor’s poems throughout his career. Blake used Gray as a source for productions both in his exhibition of 1809 and for a piece displayed by the Royal Academy in 1805. However, his most intimate interaction with Gray’s poetry came in 1797 when he was commissioned to produce an illustrated edition of Gray’s Poems for Anne Flaxman, wife of friend and fellow artist John Flaxman. Two of the poems in this collection—“The Fatal Sisters” and “The Descent of Odin”—were Gray’s own adaptations of Latin translations of two Old Norse poems. By the time he wrote these poems, Gray had shifted from his popular “reflective ‘graveyard poetry’” of his earlier career into the “wholly different register of the sublime, with its terrifying images, its supernatural action, and its mythic settings,” all of which would and did appeal to Blake (O’Donoghue 67). In “The Fatal Sisters,” we encounter another source for Blake’s Shadowy Female and her garment of death which, like the shields of Homer and Virgil, becomes another target for Blake’s critique of the glorification of war in the Shadowy Female scene.

Gray’s “The Fatal Sisters” tells the story of an eleventh-century Scot’s encounter with the Valkyries and their loom of death. As Gray’s prose headnote details, a battle in Ireland involving “Sigurd, earl of the Orkney Islands” and “Sictryg with the Silken Beard” against the latter’s “father-in-law, Brian, king of Dublin” rages as a “native of Caithness” wanders through his province on Christmas Day. This Scotsman followed a “number of persons on horseback” into a crevice in a hillside, where he encounters twelve gigantic figures resembling women” (“Sisters”
These women, Gray tells us, are the Valkyries, deities meant to carry souls of the fallen to Valhalla. However, Gray’s Valkyries are not armor-clad and riding flying horses, as one might be accustomed to seeing these figures. Instead, they are “employed about a loom,” weaving and singing the song which Gray then presents as the poem proper (“Sisters” 19). In the poem, Gray describes their loom as “the loom of hell,” and its specific details live up to such a fearsome epithet (“Sisters” 2). The loom itself is made of “Glitt’ring lances.” The weights holding the loose threads down are “Each a gasping warrior’s head” (“Sisters” 12). The shuttles weaving the threads are “Shafts…dipt in gore,” and a “Sword, that once a monarch bore / Keep the tissue close and strong” (“Sisters” 13, 15-16). Most gruesome of all, the threads are spun from “human entrails” so that the cloth produced is a bloody “crimson web of war” (“Sisters” 10 and 25). In his illustration to the scene, Blake reproduces these horrific details accurately [Figure 15].

As the Valkyries weave, they relate to the Scot both their divine duty and the action of the battle through their song. They state that their purpose is to control the outcome of war, to literally weave the bloody garment:

We the reins to slaughter give,
Ours to kill, and ours to spare:
Spite of danger he shall live.
(Weave the crimson web of war.) (“Sisters” 33-36)

The name Fatal Sisters is appropriate since they have control over soldiers’ fates, and since their duty is a deadly one. Their song moves next to the battle raging in Ireland. They tell the Scot that Sigurd has fallen, “Gor’d with many a gaping wound,” and that “Fate demands a nobler head; / Soon a king shall bite the ground,” referring to Brian of Dublin (“Sisters” 42-44). The poem closes with the end of the battle, and the Valkyries ride from the cave and “Hurry, hurry to the

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27 As with the prose Preface to *Milton*, the headnotes of Gray’s poems are not numbered by line, so these first few citations refer to the page number. When quoting the poems themselves, citations indicate line number. All italics are Gray’s unless otherwise noted.

28 From here forward, citations for Gray indicate line numbers.
field!” to fulfill their duty as ferrywomen of the dead (“Sisters” 64). One also gets the impression that these new deaths will supply fresh material for their loom, as if weaving from the entrails of the dead is their pastime between wars.

Gray’s Fatal Sisters weave a garment of death, much like the Shadowy Female in Blake’s Milton, although this connection is surprisingly absent from extant criticism. Paul Miner made the connection between Gray’s poem and Blake’s prophetic works long ago, arguing that the “The Fatal Sisters” “points in the Blakean direction by incorporating the weaving and battle scenes into one, with the drawn swords as part of the sisters’ weaving equipment” (Miner 204-205). However, Miner does not go into much detail, simply linking the Valkyries to the twelve daughters of Albion who “weave at a loom of blood and death” and stating that “Gray’s poem appears to have had a crucial place in the development of Blake’s later symbolism” without exploring that place or development (Miner 206). As previously discussed, Paley discusses the garment as a prophetic symbol for Blake, mentioning that “it is reassuring to Blake to find the loom in such disparate places as The Cave of the Nymphs, the Bible, and Norse mythology transmitted via Gray” because of his idea that “all existing mythologies are…derived from the Holy Ghost,” albeit some iterations—Homer and Virgil—corrupt that myth (Paley 125). However, Paley does not do much to compare Blake’s garments to non-biblical sources, including the Norse via Gray.

O’Donoghue makes a compelling comparison between “The Fatal Sisters” and Blake’s prophetic works, including Milton, but again leaves out the scene of the Shadowy Female. She links weaving and forging in Blake “with the production or controlling of destiny” (O’Donoghue 96). Enitharmon is perhaps the only positive weaver, since she is tasked with “weaving the Web of Life” in Milton (M 6.28, E 100). However, O’Donoghue notes that “the dominant association
of weaving in Blake’s work is with war,” as demonstrated in my previous reading of the Shadowy Female’s garment (O’Donoghue 97). The same can be said of Gray’s Fatal Sisters, for whom the act of weaving seems to empower them to control the fate of men through war, or if not to control, to at least be omnisciently aware of it, as if they can see the wars unfolding. She links Gray’s Valkyries and their weaving of war to Milton through Tirzah and her sisters who “weave the black Woof of Death,” (M 29 [31].56, E 128). The use of the word “woof” is significant since it comes directly from Gray, whose Valkyries describe their work as “the woof of victory” (“Sisters” 16). Blake and Gray are both possibly punning on two definitions of woof and its homonym whoof, with “woof” as a synonym for weft—or “the threads that cross from side to side of a web, at right angles to the warp;” whereas “whoof” is defined as an “imitation of a gruff abrupt cry or noise” [“woof, n.1” and “whoof, int. (n and v.)”]. Blake’s change from a victory howl to a death rattle is significant, though, since for him war is unnecessary suffering imposed by moral law.

The similarities between the Shadowy Female and Gray’s Fatal Sisters follows a similar pattern as Tirzah and her sisters. Before beginning her speech, “The Shadowy Female seeing Milton, howl’d in her lamentation / Over the Deeps,” recalling the howling woofs of war from Gray, but also anticipating the transformation to the woof of death that Blake makes later in Milton (M 18 [20].2-3, E 111). Her speech is itself described as the woof of death, since she “howls in articulate howlings” (M 18 [20].4, E 111). As I have argued in the last chapter, the garment which the Shadowy Female weaves is a garment of suffering “woven of sighs & heart broken lamentations” (M 18 [20].6, E 111). The garment is tied by “War its girdle,” implying that war is what will enable the garment of suffering to entrap mankind (M 18 [20].17, E 111).

29 The OED also lists a usage of “woof” specifically with reference to the barking of dogs in 1804, the year Blake is believed to have started writing Milton, so there is a possibility for another layer to the pun available to him, although not to Gray (“woof, v. 2”).
The Shadowy Female’s garment is, like that of the Fatal Sisters, clearly a garment of war and of suffering, and so she, like Tirzah and her sisters, takes on a Valkyrian role.

However, there are differences between the Shadowy Female’s garment and the Fatal Sisters’ web of war, and they hinge on the product of the weaving itself. The Fatal Sisters’ web is woven from the entrails of the dead, but it does not actually depict scenes of suffering. Their song describes them “Wading through th’ensanguin’d field” and choosing who will live or die (“Sisters” 30). However, the reader must remember that the narrative action of the poem remains in their cave. They do not leave the cave for the battlefield until the last line. They have the power of sight, so they can see the battle take place and affect the outcome, and both of these powers are linked to weaving, but the web itself is not a tapestry depicting the battle. Or, if it is, Gray declines to tell us. All we know about the web itself is that it is crimson and woven from the bloody intestines of the fallen. The entrails are not from those warriors taking part in the battle in Ireland though, instead they are from previously-fallen soldiers. That is why the sisters must leave the cave, to ferry the chosen to Valhalla, and to gather fresh raw material for their loom of hell. The garment itself is not as important, instead the focus is on the act of weaving. Gray describes in detail the pieces of the loom and the process of weaving but denies that level of detail for the actual product. Even the choice of the word “web” is significant, for although some entries in the OED imply an article of clothing, most define the word as a work in progress or a raw cloth, not a finished garment (“web, n.”). To modern ears, the word would most likely be associated with the work of a spider and entanglement, not clothing or fabric at all.

For Blake, the Shadowy Female’s garment itself takes on more importance than the act of weaving, since her product both predicts and depicts scenes of suffering, as argued in my last chapter. It is important to consider the narrative carefully in this moment because the Shadowy
Female is not actually weaving, nor is the garment woven yet. Instead, the Shadowy Female is telling us what she would depict on the garment if she were to weave it. She does not describe the process of weaving in much detail at all, beyond stating that the scenes will be “Wrought with the needle” and that there will be “Writings written all over it” (M 18 [20].8 and 12, E 111). Her speech is filled with ekphrastic descriptions of scenes of suffering, a motif which Blake takes from Homer and Virgil. The associations with “The Fatal Sisters” are there, as seen in the howling and the fact that the Shadowy Female is describing a garment and not a piece of armor. However, Blake blends Valkyrian allusions with Greco-Roman and even biblical ones in this one moment. The garment itself is woven together from threads of multiple influences and allusions.

One must also recall that Orc repudiates the Shadowy Female’s garment of war, which is Blake’s indictment of war as suffering brought on by selfish kings and false laws. Therefore, we must ask the same question of “The Fatal Sisters” that we did of Homer and Virgil’s shields: does the poem glorify war? The description of the loom is certainly a grotesque moment, but the poem does not end on this image. Instead, the poem ends on a triumphant note as the Valkyries ride to the field. As they finish weaving, they sing:

    Hail the task, and hail the hands!
    Songs of joy and triumph sing!
    Joy to the victorious bands;
    Triumph to the younger king. (“Sisters” 53-56)

War becomes, for the Valkyries, triumphant and joyful. They focus not on the dead at the end of the poem, but on the victorious. As in Homer and Virgil, they move from the grisly details of war into the celebration and joy it brings the victorious. The reader is meant to consider the brutal side of war, but the message the sisters leave us with is that war leads to triumph and that

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30 Recall Viscomi and Essick’s associations of Blake’s “Holiness as a breastplate” with Aaron’s breastplate from Exodus and other biblical books (M 18 [20].21, E 111).
all should “Learn the tenour of our song” (“Sisters” 58). They command the Scot to carry out this duty, spreading their song and war across “Scotland, thro’ each winding vale / Far and wide the notes prolong” (“Sisters” 59-60). The death of war is pushed to the side as the triumph of victory takes center stage, and the Valkyries boast that all should know their song, and by extension, know war. The final line is itself a call to arms: “Hurry, hurry to the field!” (“Sisters” 64). The Valkyries must themselves go to the fields to carry out their divine duty, but they are also calling the Scot, and all who hear their song through him, to hurry to the fields of war.

By weaving threads of “The Fatal Sisters” into his Shadowy Female’s garment, Blake also includes the poem and Old Norse culture in his critique of war. The Goths and Northmen were associated with liberty and democracy in Blake’s cultural milieu, but he would have undoubtedly associated them with war as well. “The Fatal Sisters” exposes some of the violence of war, but ultimately ends on a triumphal note, much like the shield scenes from Homer and Virgil. This is unacceptable for Blake, as war among humanity in Milton leads to suffering, not to glory or joy. The only war that can lead to positive results is the mental warfare against one’s own Selfhood, which Milton undertakes through Blake in Milton.

**Odin’s Descent and the Apocalypse of the Selfhood**

Gray’s second Norse Ode, “The Descent of Odin,” describes the journey of Odin, the leading deity from the Asgardian pantheon, to the underworld. Unlike in “The Fatal Sisters,” Gray’s headnote to the poem does little to fill in the context of Odin’s journey, and he even removes some of the opening lines from the original (Rix). Instead, the poem opens in media res with Odin “saddl[ing] straight his coal-black steed” and riding off (“Descent” 2). However, knowing Odin’s motivation is helpful for a comparison to Blake’s Milton. Odin’s son, Baldr—
which Gray anglicizes to “Balder”—learns in a dream of his upcoming death. As a result, Odin descends to the land of the dead to learn from a völva, Gray’s Prophetess, how Baldr will die so that that his death can be prevented (Rix). The details of Odin’s quest carry many similarities to Milton’s journey in Blake’s Milton. Like Milton’s fall to earth, Odin’s descent is a redemptive quest for “truth” in which he must cast aside his Selfhood.

“The Descent of Odin” depicts a quest for knowledge through hidden identity. Odin rides “Down the yawning steep…/ That leads to Hela’s drear abode” where he encounters the “dog of darkness” guarding the path (“Descent” 3-5). He continues past the dog, as “The groaning earth beneath him shakes,” until he reaches “the portals nine of hell” (“Descent” 14 and 16). Once there, he summons a Prophetess from the grave, and she asks, “Who is he, with voice unblest, / That calls me from the bed of rest?” (“Descent” 35-36). One might expect the all-powerful Odin to answer with his name, using his power and reputation to make the Prophetess tell him what he wants, but this is surprisingly not what occurs. Instead, Odin calls himself “A traveler, to thee unknown” (“Descent” 37). His reason for doing so is revealed at the end of the poem. After a few rounds of questioning the Prophetess, Odin learns that “In Hoder’s hand the hero’s [Baldr’s] doom” and that another of Odin’s sons not yet born will avenge Baldr, smiling “on Hoder’s corse” (“Descent” 35 and 69). Odin then engages in what O’Donoghue calls a “wisdom contest” with the Prophetess, saying that if she can answer his riddle, he will leave her (O’Donoghue 75). The riddle somehow reveals to the Prophetess Odin’s true identity, as she proclaims, “Ha! No traveler art thou, / King of men, I know thee now” (“Descent” 81-82). She then shoos Odin off, saying that no one else shall question her “Till Lok [sic] has burst his tenfold chain” and Ragnarök reforges the world (“Descent” 90).
There are many parallels between Gray’s “The Descent of Odin” and Blake’s work, particularly along the lines of imagery and syntax. The groaning of the earth in particular sounds Blakean. In Gray, this line anticipates the punishment of Loki—the mastermind who sets up Baldr’s death at the hands of Höðr—since earthquakes are caused by him writhing in his chains (O’Donoghue 75). Blake’s prophetic later poetry is filled with similar images of apocalyptic floods and quakes. For instance, in Milton specifically, Albion—the physical representation of Britain—tries to “rise to walk into the Deep,” but falls “down with dreadful groans” (M 39 [44].50-51, E 141). The wording of Odin’s questions to the Prophetess are also reminiscent of Blake’s poetry. Odin asks “What dangers Odin’s child await, / Who the author of his fate?” and “Who th’avenger of his guilt, / By whom shall Hoder’s blood be spilt?” (“Descent” 53-54 and 61-62). The grammatical structure of these questions is seen often in Blake’s work, perhaps most notably in “The Tyger”: “What the hammer? what the chain, / In what furnace was thy brain? / What the anvil?” (“The Tyger” 13-15). Gray’s syntax is his own since in the original Old Norse, the questions are posed more straightforwardly; for instance, “Who are they?” in the original becomes “whence their sorrows rose?” in Gray (“Descent” 79, O’Donoghue 75). These aspects of Gray’s poetry stuck with Blake, and he uses them throughout his own body of work.

As is the case with Milton in Blake’s epic, Odin’s descent involves the denial of his identity to succeed. He does not take off his robes of identity like Milton does, instead putting on a disguise of a traveler, but the denial of the self is still present. It is worth pointing out that the traveler is yet another perennial Blakean figure, as seen in Milton travelling to earth, in the “The Mental Traveller” from the Pickering Manuscript, or in the figure from the frontispiece to Jerusalem [Figure 16]. Disguised as a traveler, he pursues knowledge, much like Milton pursues
the true divine form of inspiration by battling his Selfhood, Satan. However, Odin’s quest is somewhat unfulfilled. He does learn that Baldr will die at Hödr’s hands, but he does not learn of the involvement of Loki in the plot. The Prophetess tells him that Loki will be punished, but the cause of the punishment is not stated. At this point, Odin thinks he has learned all he needs, and so enters a boastful battle of wits with the Prophetess, at which point his identity is revealed, and his Selfhood regains control. Although he uses a disguise, he still attempts throughout the interview with the Prophetess to assert his power as All-Father and control her. With every answer she gives, he repeatedly tells her to listen to him, to “Once again my call obey,” or “my spell obey” (“Descent” 51 and 63). The riddle he poses to the Prophetess is a proud attempt to one-up her. Until this point, she has had the knowledge he desires. Now, he thinks he has what he needs, so he wants to show her who is truly wise. His Selfhood comes back into play in the form of this boastful pride, and this leads to the failure of his quest. He is unable to prevent Baldr’s death, and by extension his own death in the apocalypse Ragnarök, all because his pride and vanity take over, and his Selfhood keeps him from full knowledge.

Milton, on the other hand, is successful in his quest, although his success also leads to an apocalypse. Milton descends to earth to battle his Selfhood in the form of Satan through Blake. The union with Blake inspires the poem Milton, but it also releases Satan upon England. Milton calls out to Satan, and “Satan heard! Coming in a cloud, with trumpets & flaming fire” (M 38 [43].50, E 139). He advances as a storm: “Loud Satan thunderd, loud & dark upon mild Felphams Shore / Coming in a Cloud with Trumpets & with Fiery Flame” (M 39 [44]. 22-23, E 140). In the midst of this chaotic scene, Milton’s emanation Ololon cries out for him to flee, but Milton replies, listing all that he must cast aside from his identity:

I come in Self-annihilation & the grandeur of Inspiration
To cast off Rational Demonstration by Faith in the Saviour
To cast off the rotten rags of Memory by Inspiration
To cast off Bacon, Locke & Newton from Albions covering
To take off his filthy garments, & clothe him with Imagination
To cast aside from Poetry, all that is not Inspiration (M 41 [48].2-7, E 142)

So saying, Milton summons Jesus, who takes on “a Garment dipped in blood,” the “Garment of War…the Woof of Six Thousand Years,” recalling the Shadowy Female’s garment (M 42 [49].12 and 15, E 143). As stated in the last chapter, in order to save humanity from war, Jesus takes on the garment of war, taking our sin upon himself, as Blake’s version of the crucifixion. This paves the way for the “Great Harvest & Vintage of the Nations” which will purify the world of its collective Selfhood (M 43 [50].1, E 144).

Once again, Blake takes the source material—a fall to a lower realm in pursuit of knowledge—and gives it his own corrective twist. Odin descends to learn how he can prevent his son’s death, and the apocalypse that will result from it. However, Milton desires apocalypse. He wants the great harvest and vintage because that is how humanity can destroy its Selfhood and Albion the universal man can join with Jerusalem. Descending to earth and casting aside his Selfhood is the only way for Milton to kickstart this chain of events. Odin travels in a disguise, cloaking his Selfhood temporarily, but still maintaining it undercover. When his pride wins over, his Selfhood is revealed through the disguise and leads to his downfall. Milton, on the other hand, does not cloak his Selfhood, but willingly removes the garment of heaven so that he can descend to the mortal plain, and then he casts aside his Selfhood in his speech to Ololon. Blake takes the Odinic mistake of slipping back into Selfhood and corrects it in his epic. So, in both sources from Old Norse, we see Blake continuing the process he used with Milton, Homer, and Virgil. He incorporates themes, images, and even plots from the sources into his poem, but then turns them back upon themselves, pointing out their flaws and correcting them as he adapts them.
CONCLUSION

Blake’s *Milton* is a poem obsessed with what it means to be “English.” Blake lives in a historical moment when the empire seems fallible. The American colonies have fought a successful war of independence, and all of Europe reverberates from the revolutions in France. Both revolutions challenged the monarchy, an institution Blake was not entirely fond of, but they also called into question the very definition of English identity. It is this question which Blake felt drawn to answer, and *Milton* is one of his attempts to give England a moral compass and shape the future of English art. I return again to the poem that closes the Preface:

I will not cease from Mental Fight,  
Nor shall my Sword sleep in my hand:  
Till we have built Jerusalem,  
In Englands green & pleasant Land. (M 1 [i].13-16, E 95-96).

Jerusalem, the city of God, is the emanation of Blake’s Albion, an ancient and poetic name for England itself. In *Milton*, Albion is the physical representation of England, but he is also a representation of the people and cultures that constitute the country. In adapting Christian, Greek, Roman, and Norse sources, Blake enters a conversation with many of the cultures that have molded the England in which he lives. Therefore, his poem *Milton*, by weaving all these sources together, serves as Blake’s construction of Albion as well, a mythic England where the features of its constituent cultural influences are brought together to lead the country to its emanation Jerusalem.

In Blake’s myth, Albion is the universal man and often the literal land of England. Throughout *Milton* he is compared to features of physical landscapes. During the trial of Satan
and Palamabron, the heavenly figures “mourn’d one toward another / Upon the mountains of Albion” (M 8.26, E 102). He is described as “rocky Albion,” and Satan’s mills are built “Among the rocks of Albion” (M 11 [12].4 and 7, E 104). Blake refers to “Albions land: / Which is this earth of vegetation on which now I write” (M 14 [15].40-41, E 109). There are two references to “Milton of the land of Albion” (M 20 [22].59, E 115 and 23 [25].36, E 119). The most telling comparison of Albion to the physical landscape of England—or more accurately, all of Britain—comes towards the end of the poem when Albion attempts to rise after Milton confronts Satan. The detailed description covers fifteen lines, for which I list a selection: “London & Bath & Legions & Edinburgh / Are the four pillars of his throne,” “London is between his knees,” “his right hand covers lofty Wales / His left Scotland,” and “his right elbow / Leans on the Rocks of Erins Land, Ireland ancient nation” (39 [44].35-36, 39, 41-42, and 44-45; E 140-141). Albion’s body encompasses the entirety of the British Isles, so that he is literally a physical body built of Britain.

Albion is also the universal father, both of Blake’s cosmic beings and mankind.

Throughout Milton, reference is made to Albion’s children collectively. As the Bard begins his song in the first book, he is described as “sitting at eternal tables, / Terrific among the sons of Albion” (M 3.22-23, E 96). Albion has daughters too, who are sometimes characterized as divine, as in the lines “whom they please / They take up into their Heavens in intoxicating delight” (M 5.9-10, E 98). At other times, they are linked with earthly realms, as on the same plate a handful of lines lower when Blake lists figures from the English Civil War—Charles, Cromwell, and James—and describes the war as “the night of prosperity and wantonness… Among the Daughters of Albion among the Rocks of the Druids” (M 5.41-42, E 99). These generic sons and daughters of Albion, then, appear to be humans either living on earth or in the
afterlife in heaven. Albion is also the patriarch of Blake’s named godlike figures. In *The Four Zoas*, Albion is split into the titular four characters: Tharmas, Urizen, Luvah, and Urthona. This poem, unfinished at Blake’s death, was begun in 1796-1797 and reworked throughout his life (*E* 817). In *Milton*, we also see the Zoas linked to Albion as they are described as “his Four Zoas,” implying creation from or pieces of him (*M* 35 [39].28, *E* 135). Therefore, Albion is the father of all beings in Blake’s myth.

Albion, then, is not only the land but also the people of Britain, and it is the latter which Blake wishes to rouse in *Milton*. He does so by awakening Albion in his poem itself. As Milton falls, Rintrah and Palamabron call out to Albion “Awake thou sleeper on the Rock of Eternity Albion awake / The trumpet of Judgment hath twice sounded: all Nations are awake / But thou art still heavy and dull: Awake Albion awake!” (*M* 23 [25].3-5). On a literal level, they are calling to Albion the being, but on a figurative level, they are also calling to the nation and the people that he represents: the British. The call echoes Blake’s cry in the Preface: “Rouze up O Young Men of the New Age!” (*M* 1 [i], *E* 95). He continues, “Painters! on you I call! Sculptors! Architects!” (*M* 1 [i], *E* 95). The resurrection of Albion depends on purifying the arts of the cultures that came together to form Blake’s English culture. Hebrew, Greek, Roman, Norse, and Christian influences are part of the patchwork that is the culture of England, but that garment needs to be mended, a process which Blake sets out to do by adapting those sources in *Milton*. In doing so, he builds a new Albion, one purged of the negative influences from each constituent culture. Albion is built on Judeo-Christian sublime through Milton, Greco-Roman epic from Homer and Virgil, and Gothic liberty through Old Norse poems, but he is purged of the Urizenic laws, the glorification of war, and the dominance of the Selfhood that pervade them.
One might ask, if *Milton* is an attempt to write a national epic free from the negative influences of literary predecessors, why would Blake include those influences at all? The answer lies in the process of adaptation. Blake wanted to prove that his predecessors are flawed, and that he can correct their flaws to become a true national poet. In order to achieve the first goal, he must use their themes, motifs, and plots. His adaptation is a case in infidelity, so to say. In adaptation studies, the problem that many critics see in the critical conversation about adaptations is called the fidelity discourse. This usually manifests in the typical “book was better than the movie” line. Adaptations are typically measured by how well they reproduce the source material. However, doing so implies “that adapters aim simply to reproduce the adapted text” when, as one can see through Blake, that is not always the case (Hutcheon 7). He wishes to adapt the source material, but not reproduce it completely. He wants to correct it. The rhetoric of fidelity, infidelity, desecration, etc. implies a hierarchy of form, notably source over adaptation. Hutcheon argues, along with other adaptation critics, “that the time has come to move away from this negative view” and instead consider infidelity as a productive form of adaptation too (Hutcheon 86). In the case of Blake, his adaptation is built on infidelity. He wants us to recognize his sources, but also recognize that those sources are flawed. Then, through adapting them, he molds them into a more perfect form.

Blake is typically characterized as a personal poet, both in the sense that he created a personal mythology, but also in the sense that he only wrote poetry for himself, not for a large audience. However, on the issue of audience, his poetry and artistic career prove otherwise. He submitted many pieces to the Royal Academy, some of which were exhibited there. He assembled his own public exhibition at his brother’s shop, printing an advertisement and catalogue for that show. His Preface to *Milton* is addressed to his fellow English artisans, as well...
as the English people in general. The first section of *Jerusalem* is titled “To the Public” and has many direct addresses to a reader: “I also hope the Reader will be with me,” “Therefore [Dear] Reader,” etc. (*Jerusalem* 3, E 145). Therefore, Blake clearly imagined an audience and desired recognition.

One means of gaining recognition from an audience is through adaptation. As Hutcheon argues, the use of adaptation builds cultural capital for the adaptor (Hutcheon 91). The reader recognizes the adapted material—Milton, Homer, Virgil, etc.—and therefore associates Blake’s work with those sources in his or her mind. Blake then builds on that foundation of cultural capital by correcting the sources. In doing so, he proves to his audience—and to himself—that he is superior to his predecessors. He can not only use the forms and themes of Milton, Homer, Virgil, etc., but he can perfect them. He can take the sources, purge them of their impurities, and create a poem that is “true to our own Imaginations” (*M 1 [i], E 95). *Milton*, in adapting Miltonic, Greco-Roman, and Old Norse sources, is Blake’s means of placing himself in a corrective conversation with those predecessors so that he can unite Albion with Jerusalem. To return to Macfarlane, he writes poetry as *inventio* originality. Although Blake often asserts a *creatio* form of originality, drawing inspiration directly from divine muses, his poetry itself is invested in borrowing, permuting, and transforming pre-existing material so that he is an *inventio* poet. He draws on the cultural influences that constitute the English character, mixes and purifies them in his poetic forge, and crafts a new national myth that frees those literary ancestors from their own shortcomings.

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31 The brackets and italics in this quote are in the Erdman edition and “indicate words or letters deleted or erased or written over” in Blake’s original (*E* xxiv).
Figure 1. Object 6 from Copy 2 of Blake’s illustrations to Edward Young’s *Night Thoughts*, printed in 1797. Blakearchive.org.
Figure 2. The title page—plate i [1]—from Copy D of Milton. Blakearchive.org.
Figure 3. Plate [16] from Copy D of *Milton* depicting Milton derobing. Blakearchive.org.
Figure 4. Plate [32] from Copy D of *Milton* depicting Milton entering Blake’s foot as a falling star. *Blakearchive.org.*
Figure 5. Blake’s illustration to Book II of *Paradise Lost*, from the 1807 set. Blaekarchive.org.
Figure 6. Blake’s illustration to Book II of *Paradise Lost*, from the 1808 set. Blakearchive.org.
Figure 7. Blake’s illustration of a prelapsarian Satan, c. 1805. Blakearchive.org.
Figure 8. A rare image of a winged Satan after his fall, from illustrations to *Paradise Regained*, c. 1816-1820. Blakearchive.org.
Figure 9. Plate 11 [12] from Copy C of Milton with Leutha’s first appearance and the rainbow wash in the background. Blakearchive.org.
Figure 11. The title page—plate i [1]—from Copy A of Milton. Blakearchive.org.
Figure 12. “Homer Invoking the Muse,” engraved by Blake from a design by Flaxman. The British Museum Online Collection, Registration number 1973, U.1189.2. BritishMuseum.org. [Note: I have cropped the original image to remove some shadows.]
Figure 13. The single plate containing *On Homers Poetry* and *On Virgil*, Copy B. BlakeArchive.org.
Figure 14. *The Laocoön*, Copy B. BlakeArchive.org.
Figure 15. Blake’s illustration of the Valkyries and their loom of hell from Thomas Gray’s “The Fatal Sisters.” BlakeArchive.org.
Figure 16. The frontispiece from Blake’s *Jerusalem*, Copy E. BlakeArchive.org.
REFERENCES


