

Novels, Poems, and Coon Songs

*You will flop your snow-white wings and try to fly;
I know the angels they will giggle
When I do that awful wiggle,
When I do the hoochy coochy in de sky!*

—Gussie Davis (1894)

While people in the streets argued about the petitions, Blake spent her time in solitary pursuits: she read novels and devotional literature, wrote poetry and letters, prayed and sang ‘coon songs’. One report suggests that she was not even kept informed of the petitions.¹ For a time she was in possession of the laudanum that Stripp had brought her and she could have attempted suicide, but did not. Her state of mind is not very easy to reconstruct, yet the hints that have been preserved suggest that she lived a complex inner life in prison, as she must have while still free. She alternated between regret and defiance, serious reflection and comic forgetfulness. In a conversation with Matheson, the Crown prosecutor, just days before her execution, Blake said, ‘I seem to be possessed of two natures, one good and one very bad, and they seem to control me at different times. I am either good or very bad. You cannot think me altogether bad?’² This was the best Blake could do to describe the various currents of her being, yet the statement is a dramatic oversimplification, since her goodness could not always be separated from her theatrical sense of self, and the evil she had done had roots in something other than bald perversity.