

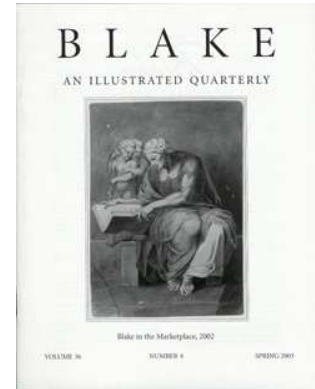
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R E V I E W

Barbara Lachman, *Voices for Catherine Blake: A Gathering*

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Barbara Lachman. *Voices for Catherine Blake: A Gathering*. Lexington: Schola Antiqua Press, 2000. 132 pp., some reproductions in black and white. \$25.00 paper.

Reviewed by EUGENIE R. FREED

Barbara Lachman's "Gathering" of "Voices for Catherine Blake" intends to offer a tribute long overdue. In spite of growing feminist interest in Blake's oeuvre from the 1970's onward, Blake scholarship has only perfunctorily recognized the significance of the role Catherine played in the conception and creation of the bulk of her husband's extant work. In this limited-edition book Lachman has tried to make amends by giving a voice—several voices—to the not-especially-articulate woman whom her husband, after many years of marriage, compared to "a flame of many colours of precious jewels . . ." (E 709).

Little has been recorded concerning the historical Catherine. Apart from cursory anecdotes arising from the four years of her widowhood, few facts other than her name and the dates and places of her baptism, marriage and death are known about Catherine as distinct from her husband. Hardly anything that she is actually supposed to have said was thought worth reporting by her husband's acquaintances, and though Blake himself and those who knew him record her active participation in the production of *his* works, only three drawings—one an idealized portrait of her husband—have been authenticated as *her* own work.<sup>1</sup> To produce a *factual* biography of Catherine Blake would take the skill and pertinacity of a social historian of the caliber of the late E.P. Thompson (who did not attempt it). To *fictionalize* the biography or autobiography of an historical personage is a perilous undertaking, the more so when the person concerned lived in such intimate propinquity as Catherine did to a milieu continuously raked over, mined, and sifted through by scholars with diverse special interests. Whether Barbara Lachman has succeeded in avoiding all or most of the inherent hazards, or whether her "Gathering" falls inadvertently into the trap of self-projection, amongst other possible pitfalls, must be for the individual reader to decide.

Lachman's interest in visionaries has already been directed towards Hildegard of Bingen, on whom she has published two studies. In the present fictionalized autobiography, Lachman attempts to recreate imaginatively Catherine Blake's unique experience of loving and living with the visionary William Blake for forty-five years. Catherine, a "sin-

cere believer in all [Blake's] visions,"<sup>2</sup> was involved throughout her married life in many of the practical phases of their realization in her husband's works, and ultimately—Lachman suggests—learned from him to enter into the "Spiritual World" (E 702) herself.

This "Gathering" includes a diversity of narrative voices. They speak *through* Catherine or support her point of view, tell *about* her, and speak *to* her. The narrative structure of the book is complex, at times confusingly so. Mostly, Catherine tells her own story, but periodically the voice of an omniscient narrator takes up the tale, speaking of Catherine in the third person. This narrator sometimes distances herself from her protagonist by directly addressing the reader as well. Sometimes the narrative switches disconcertingly from first to third person, or vice versa, in mid-paragraph. Sporadically yet another voice interjects, addressing Catherine directly (at first formally as "Mrs. Blake"), and drawing her out about aspects of her life in the question-and-answer style of a series of radio or TV interviews. During her sojourn in Felpham Catherine begins to write long letters to her "Friend in Imagination," a woman friend of her own creation who eventually "replies" in letters through which Lachman provides Catherine with yet another voice, emanating from "parts of myself I don't know about" (51) in reflections upon her own subconscious motivations and responses. And on occasion the voice of a "dream-Catherine" (42) speaks, in an account of an obsessively recurring dream experience. Recollecting such dreams, her husband assures her, will take her to "the very next closest neighbourhood [to dreams], . . . that of visions" (42-43).

Lachman invents the fiction of a "note book" (26), presumably rather like William's, in which Catherine jots down observations, musings, "bits and pieces" (85) of her extraordinary life with William, thereby offering "several windows, through which you have a glimpse of what Will and I together have lived" (7). Sometimes the notebook provides a "welcome ear" (26) for thoughts Catherine feels she cannot share with her husband. The interviewer who appears at intervals, and whom we're encouraged to identify with the author, claims to have had access to these "autobiographical fragments" (47).

When the book begins Catherine is an old woman. She summons up misty memories of her hard but unremarkable life prior to William's entrance into it, before beginning to recreate that first meeting and the early years of their marriage, when her husband taught her to read and write and insisted upon her becoming fluently literate. The final pages describe the years of Catherine's widowhood, her daily conversations with the spirit of her departed hus-

1. Martin Butlin, *The Paintings and Drawings of William Blake*, 2 vols. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1981) vol. 1: C1-C3, 625-26; vol. 2: plates 348, 1191, 1192.

2. Seymour Kirkup, who had met William and Catherine Blake at the home of Blake's patron Thomas Butts, wrote this of Catherine in a letter to Lord Houghton in 1870. See G. E. Bentley, Jr., *Blake Records* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969) 221.



band (123-24),<sup>3</sup> her own visions and her attempts to record them. In the space between, the order of her remembrances is not especially chronological. As they occur to her, Catherine notes, describes, and comments upon various aspects of the couple's everyday lives together, and on significant events that affected her husband, and therefore herself. Some of the incidents that happened during their three-year stay at Felpham, and Blake's trial at Chichester at the end of that period, intersperse accounts of prior and subsequent events; the Felpham period seems to return continually to Catherine's mind as a kind of watershed between the earlier and the later periods of their marriage.

Certain vignettes that Lachman evokes or invents in order to distinguish Catherine's own viewpoint from the intertwined lives of the couple have the ring of authenticity. The recurrent intrusion of the Felpham memories, both inspiring and traumatic, is eminently plausible. So is Catherine's self-conscious awareness of the intellectual background she lacks, her misgivings that her husband may be dissatisfied with her "ever-wanting intelligence" (40). Such insecurities give rise to the jealousy mingled with fear that rears up to plague Catherine—and consequently, her husband—from time to time throughout her married life. As a working-class woman not only devoid of formal education but also barren, she feels overwhelmed by a sense of her own inferiority to the cultured and accomplished Mary Ann Linnell, wife of Blake's latter-day disciple and benefactor John Linnell, and mother of several young children whose company Blake loved.<sup>4</sup> "Mrs. Linnell and her lovely Family" (E 779) make Catherine wince; "It was as if Mrs. Linnell still wanted Will to open his eyes to the subtle qualities he might have missed in a woman by tying his life to mine" (123). In the earlier years of the marriage Catherine's jealousy extended not only to relationships like her husband's friendship with the brilliant "adventurers" (17) Mary Wollstonecraft, but also to his total immersion in his work.<sup>5</sup> There are moments of irrational fear when Catherine feels threatened by what appears to her in her husband's demeanor as an "indifference that specifically excluded her . . ." (39). At other times she knows with certainty that under William's guidance she is "surely expanding in size and

understanding" (44), that he recognizes her "as real, a live addition to the world of beauty we served" (44).

Catherine speaks persuasively and with frankness of her sexual relationship with her husband. He "has always admired my body in a way that would scandalize my own mother and most of Battersea if I had any reason to tell them" (17). On the "sacredness of physical love" (95) they are in complete accord. She confides to William the imagery of her own sexual dreams and "coupling visions" (46), some of which he appropriates and transposes to the pages of *The Four Zoas* (74-75). As to the question of their childlessness, Catherine alludes to her own exhausted mother's "seven birthings in ten years . . . Another beast of burden. A workhorse always delivering . . ." (22). Such early memories may well have left the historical Catherine with little inclination to bear children of her own, even if she had had the choice, as wives never did have in her lifetime. Yet Catherine is so upset by rumors of her "failure as a wife" (22) that she gathers up the courage to tell her husband "if he was wanting a natural son, to lie with some cow like Hagar in the Bible" (22). He roars with "laughter and amazement," reassuring his wife that his passion "is for expression . . . but it does not demand issuance in broods of children" (22). But that profound sense of stigma was never to leave Catherine, haunting her even after William's death in her suspicion that John Linnell and his fertile wife were united in "their mutual sympathy over Will's misfortune at having spent a lifetime with me" (123).

In this connection Lachman is unable to resist elaborating that "long-exploded story of Blake and his wife basking in the nude in the tropical sunshine of London,"<sup>6</sup> Adam and Eve in their Edenically secluded garden in Lambeth. Catherine explains their nudity as part of a sexual "ritual that celebrated a kind of innocence deepened through experience . . . enhancing pleasure by flooding the senses" (23). She offers her own prosaic version of the exquisite sunrise passage in Blake's *Milton*,<sup>7</sup> to make the point that a sexual relationship like hers with her husband "might be in the cause of something other than propagation, might serve to deepen the appreciation two human beings had for one another and the world of nature" (24).

Catherine describes many of the events that marked the Blakes' married life. Most of her accounts rehearse incidents already well documented, often in Blake's own letters; Catherine's versions here seldom offer a fresh perspective. Nevertheless, Lachman does succeed at times in conveying the frightening emotional intensity of some of these situations through the experience of a woman whose whole world turns about the man she loves:

3. "His widow . . . saw Blake frequently after his decease: he used to come and sit with her two or three hours every day." Anon., *The Monthly Magazine* xv (March 1833): 245; *Blake Records* 373.

4. *Blake Records* 304-05; David Linnell, *Blake, Palmer, Linnell & Co.: The Life of John Linnell* (Lewes, East Sussex: Book Guild, 1994) 87. A year before Blake's death John and Mary Linnell insisted upon naming a newborn son William in honor of Blake—rather to his distress, since he felt that he was usurping the rights of Mrs. Linnell's father Thomas Palmer (E 779-80).

5. Seymour Kirkup recorded that Catherine had "told me seriously one day, 'I have very little of Mr. Blake's company; he is always in Paradise'" (*Blake Records* 221).

6. G. E. Bentley, Jr., "William Blake and His Circle: A Checklist of Publications and Discoveries in 2000," *Blake/An Illustrated Quarterly* 34 (2001): 133. See also *Blake Records* 53-54.

7. *Milton* 31 [34]: 28-63; E 130-31.



All is bitter taste when he is sad. The round world squares and makes corners of despair. Fright hides in the corners. Angles packed with demons spitting filth, eyes that drool. ... And when he dies, I wonder will even the lamplighter neglect his rounds and leave us all in darkness? (21)

Their mutual joy in the creation of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* and of *America*; their sense of London as a city that "reeks with fear, hunger, foment" (20) after news comes from Paris of horrific events following the French Revolution; William's friendships with Tom Paine, with Captain Stedman, with Fuseli; the couple's brief encounter with the Swedenborgian New Jerusalem Church—all pass under review, as well as events of their later life in London and the autumnal blooming of the William Blake cult created by the young disciples who called themselves "The Ancients."

In Felpham, between these early and later periods, Catherine has to deal with frequent illness as well as the importunities of their patron Hayley, whom Blake accused of trying to "act upon my wife" (E 506). To Catherine, Hayley is "sweet syrup, slippery butter" (32) as he tries by his manipulative arts to use her as a conduit through which to convey to her husband his treacherous "concern" that "Mr. Blake will not continue to find work among H's friends if he insists on indulging his own fancies" (32). Later they have to endure the ordeal created by the "untrue fabrications" (35) of the soldier Scofield, who charged Blake with "assault and seditious words" and obliged him to stand trial at Chichester.

Catherine tells of their return to London from Felpham to take up residence in South Molton Street; of her husband's coming back home from the Truchsessian Gallery, preoccupied, after viewing the great works of the masters of his youth, and describes herself, next day, listening in awe, indeed terrified, incomprehension as he bursts forth in exultation at "having emerged from twenty years of darkness" (49). Ultimately Catherine ventures to identify for herself that "spectrous Fiend . . . the ruin of my labours for the last passed twenty years of my life. . . . the enemy of conjugal love . . ." (E 756). That "Fiend," she concludes shrewdly, is "the marketplace, where works of art are bought & sold, and artists bought & sold . . ." (52). From that moment Blake gives up engraving the designs of other artists, or soliciting such work, and plunges into the creation and realization of *Milton* and of *Jerusalem*.

I find it difficult to make an overall assessment of this "Gathering." On the credit side, in trying to imagine herself into the mind and heart of a woman whose love for and relationship with her artist husband were her whole life, Lachman often convincingly evokes Catherine's emotional responses—her complexity of feelings about herself, for her husband, and about their shared work. A welcome new dimension emerges as well in projections of Catherine's intellectual growth under the stimulus of her husband's en-

couragement, and suggestions of her burgeoning interest in reading.

On the other side: at some points Barbara Lachman's own late-twentieth-century, North American, feminist assumptions intrude too obviously into her version of Catherine Blake. A reviewer better qualified than myself has noted the "novelty" of Catherine's supposed work for the blind as "a proper middle-class North American housewifely virtue somewhat surprising in the wife of an obscure London artisan in 1790."<sup>8</sup> That Catherine is "most eager to affirm" Swedenborg's principles about "the right of women to enfranchisement" (65) may reveal more about Lachman's priorities than those of Catherine Blake. And I have to confess that two of the "voices" of this "Gathering" jar in my ears—those of the TV-style interviewer and the pop-psych analyst who writes the letters from Catherine's "Friend in Imagination." In my view these devices threaten to overshadow the sensitivity and genuine empathy with which the author enters her protagonist's consciousness at other points. For instance, in establishing a sense of everyday realism in the Blakes' lives it is certainly appropriate to learn what kind of food William and Catherine might have eaten for dinner, where Catherine might have shopped for the ingredients, and how she contrived to cook in the increasingly confined spaces of the couple's successive lodgings. But is it really appropriate to receive this information through the interrogation of a talk-show host?

Barbara Lachman's venture is a brave one, but from where I stand, only intermittently successful. A writer who attempts to get into the head of an historical personage, sympathetically and in good faith, as Lachman does, should at least get the historical parameters right. Like many of those interested in Blake's work, I *do* feel the need to know a great deal more about Catherine Blake, an unsung heroine who has yet to be acknowledged as the courageous woman of many parts that she had to be in real life. But these *Voices for Catherine Blake* leave me still largely unsatisfied.

8. Bentley, "William Blake and His Circle . . .," 132.

## N E W S L E T T E R

At the Modern Language Association convention for 2002, Morton D. Paley was honored with the Distinguished Scholar Award of the Keats-Shelley Association of America.

*The Cambridge Companion to William Blake*, ed. Morris Eaves, was published in January 2003.

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