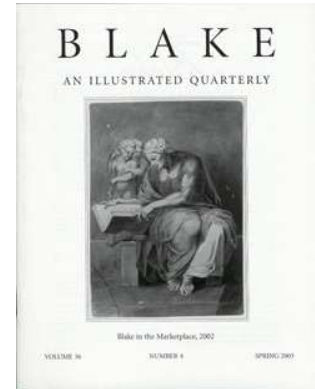


AN ILLUSTRATED QUARTERLY  
**BLAKE**

N E W S

## Honors; Cambridge Companion to Blake

Blake/An Illustrated Quarterly, Volume 36, Issue 4, Spring 2003, p. 151



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.

For other news, please visit the newsletter section of our web site at [www.blakequarterly.org](http://www.blakequarterly.org).