NEWS

Honors; Cambridge Companion to Blake

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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 Lon-
don 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 fabrica-
tions” (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 Gal-
ery, preoccupied, after viewing the great works of the mas-
ters of his youth, and describes herself, next day, listening
in awed, indeed terrified, incomprehension as he bursts
forth in exultation at “having emerged from twenty years of
darkness” (49). Ultimately Catherine ventures to iden-
tify 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 con-
cludes 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 cre-
tation 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 her-
self 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 emo-
tional 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 assump-
tions 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 vir-
tue somewhat surprising in the wife of an obscure London
artisan in 1790.” That Catherine is “most eager to affirm”
Swedenborg’s principles about “the right of women to en-
franchisement” (65) may reveal more about Lachman’s pri-
orities than those of Catherine Blake. And I have to con-
fess 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 over-
shadow 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 increas-
ingly 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 at-
tempts to get into the head of an historical personage, symp-
thetically 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.


NEWSLETTER

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.

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