

“another, but far more amiable enthusiast”: References to Catherine and William Blake in the *Literary Gazette* and *La Belle Assemblée* (1830)

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1 IN *Blake Records*, G. E. Bentley, Jr., observes that “the publication of Cunningham’s life of Blake provoked a spate of comment upon Blake in the spring of 1830.”<sup>1</sup> Bentley records six traced reviews of Allan Cunningham’s *The Lives of the Most Eminent British Painters, Sculptors, and Architects*, vol. 2 (1830), that appeared in the first quarter of 1830.<sup>2</sup> This note first discusses a reader’s query, in all probability written in response to one of these reviews, concerning the whereabouts of Catherine Blake, then goes on to record another review of volume 2 of Cunningham’s *Lives*, which makes several new references to William Blake.

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1. G. E. Bentley, Jr., *Blake Records*, 2nd ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004) [hereafter *BR(2)*] 503.

2. See *BR(2)* 503-10. A quotation from Cunningham’s life of Blake about the poet-artist’s visions of William Wallace and Edward I appeared in the *Times* on 27 Jan. 1830 (see Angus Whitehead, “‘Visions of Blake, the Artist’: An Early Reference to William Blake in the *Times*,” *Blake* 41.1 [summer 2007]: 46-47). The same passage was printed in the *Rural Repository; or, Bower of Literature* (17 July 1830): 30-31.

3. Mark Crosby and Angus Whitehead, “Georgian Superwoman or ‘the maddest of the two?’ Recovering the Historical Catherine Blake, 1762-1831,” *Re-envisioning Blake*, ed. Mark Crosby, Troy Patenaude, and Angus Whitehead (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012) 105.

4. Letter of 19 Nov. 1828, quoted in G. E. Bentley, Jr., “William Blake and His Circle: A Checklist of Publications and Discoveries in 2006,” *Blake* 41.1 (summer 2007): 40.

5. See *BR(2)* 503-04. Presumably to fit in more text, the *Literary Gazette* merges Cunningham’s original paragraphs into considerably longer paragraphs.

6. “To Correspondents,” *Literary Gazette* 20 Feb. 1830: 125.

7. See “‘an excellent saleswoman’: The Last Years of Catherine Blake,” *Blake* 45.3 (winter 2011-12): 85-89.

I

2 Previously I have suggested that the numerous notices and reviews of Cunningham’s work, besides bringing Blake to a wider audience, may have alerted readers to the plight of his widow.<sup>3</sup> Such publicity perhaps helped Catherine Blake to sell her husband’s works and thereby support herself independently. Over a year earlier, shortly after publication of J. T. Smith’s *Nollekens and His Times*, which features a biography of Blake, the book illustrator, antiquary, and barrister William Twopenny wrote to Smith asking, “Can you tell me where the Widow of Blake the artist lives?”<sup>4</sup> By the early spring of 1830 the whereabouts of Catherine appears to have become a more public concern. *Blake Records* reveals that on Saturday, 6 February 1830, the *London Literary Gazette*; and *Journal of Belles Lettres* featured a long anonymous review of the most recently published volume of Cunningham’s *Lives*, focusing exclusively upon the life of Blake and reprinting four sustained excerpts.<sup>5</sup> Either the descriptions of Catherine in the first and final excerpts, or perhaps the concluding passage in Cunningham’s volume itself, describing Catherine in widowhood, inspired a reader to contact the paper concerning the present residence of Catherine Blake. On Saturday, 20 February 1830, in its “To Correspondents” section, the *Literary Gazette* printed a reply:

To Clericus: we do not know the address of the widow of Blake, the artist; but have no doubt she might obtain liberal sums for such remains of his productions as may be in her possession. We will make some inquiries.<sup>6</sup>

A year earlier, Catherine had moved from the residence and employment of Frederick Tatham to independent lodgings in the vicinity of Fitzroy Square.<sup>7</sup> It is unknown whether the *Literary Gazette* was able to trace her address for “Clericus,” presumably a potential customer or benefactor. However, the paper’s response would have informed its readership of Catherine’s existence and need, as well as the perceived worth of Blake’s “productions,” which, according to the *Literary Gazette*, might command “liberal sums.”

II

3 In *Blake Records*, Bentley records a “cursory review of Cunningham” and two essays devoted to Blake that appeared

in March 1830.<sup>8</sup> A further review of volume 2 of Cunningham's *Lives*, not recorded in *Blake Records*, also appeared in March 1830, in that month's issue of the society and women's magazine *La Belle Assemblée, or Court and Fashionable Magazine*, founded by John Bell.<sup>9</sup> After discussing Cunningham's lives of Benjamin West and James Barry, the anonymous reviewer notes, "The life of another, but far more amiable enthusiast, poor William Blake, who could not only 'call spirits from the vasty deep,' but *compel* them to arise and appear before him, is, in its details, singularly striking."<sup>10</sup> There follows a fairly lengthy quotation from Cunningham, which discusses Blake's drawing of visionary heads.<sup>11</sup> The reviewer comments on the visionary heads of William Wallace and Edward I discussed in the quotation:

Many a time have we ourselves seen these portraits; and we may here add, that the "artist of some note," alluded to by Mr. Cunningham, is almost as great an enthusiast as Blake himself—a gifted enthusiast in his own beautiful art, and a yet greater enthusiast in the science, or pretended science, of judicial astrology. His portrait, sketched by the pen, not the pencil, of Cunningham, is nearly as graphic as that of Blake. Some other capital stories of the worthy pair are given; but, for these, we must refer the reader to the work.<sup>12</sup>

The reviewer is of course referring to Blake's friend the artist and astrologer John Varley, at whose behest a number of the visionary heads were drawn, c. 1819-25.<sup>13</sup> The observation that "many a time have we ourselves seen these portraits" may suggest that s/he was acquainted with Blake. The reviewer almost certainly knew Varley and was acquainted with Linnell, the probable owner of the visionary heads of William Wallace and Edward I by early 1830.<sup>14</sup>

4 The letter of "Clericus" to the *Literary Gazette* provides further evidence that customers and therefore potential means of income continued to seek out Catherine Blake in her last years. Such customers must have assisted Catherine's ability to retain her independence in her resumed role as printer and seller of the paintings, drawings, and other works still in her possession, from the spring of 1829 until her death two and a half years later. *La Belle Assemblée's* discussion of Blake in its review of Cunningham's *Lives* demonstrates that a significantly larger number of people were aware of Blake and his work in the years following his death than has, until recently, been recognized in Blake studies.<sup>15</sup> That he is discussed so positively in *La Belle Assemblée*, the *Vogue* of its day, adds to the developing sense that he had a distinct female audience.<sup>16</sup> Blake had previously been employed by the magazine's founder, John Bell.<sup>17</sup> Further research may reveal whether he had any further connection to *La Belle Assemblée*. It is possible that he knew engravers who worked for the magazine. A careful examination of its issues c. 1806-27 (from its founding to the end of Blake's life) might reveal fashion prints engraved by Blake.<sup>18</sup> In this context it is interesting to note Blake's knowledge of fashionable women's clothing, as evidenced in his references to "Stormonts," "Balloon hats," "Robinsons," and "the Queen of Frances Puss colour" in *An Island in the Moon*,<sup>19</sup> as well as his living above first a tailor, William Enoch (c. 1803-04), then a staymaker, Mark Martin (c. 1805-21), and even alluding to stays in his annotations to Joshua Reynolds.<sup>20</sup> Both Varley and Linnell, almost certainly sources used by the anonymous writer of the review, knew numerous upper-class fashionable women both socially and professionally, and may therefore have had something to do with the appearance of this review. *La Belle Assemblée* is an unexpected and apparently unlikely publication in which to find such an admiring reference to William Blake.

8. See *BR*(2) 510-24.

9. Anon., "Monthly View of New Publications, Music, the English and Foreign Drama, the Fine Arts, Literary and Scientific Intelligence, &c.," *La Belle Assemblée, or Court and Fashionable Magazine* ns no. 63 (March 1830): 120-23.

10. *La Belle Assemblée* 121. The reviewer quotes Glendower's words to Hotspur in the first part of Shakespeare's *Henry IV*. Blake had drawn visionary heads of both historical figures, which were acquired by John Linnell (see Martin Butlin, *The Paintings and Drawings of William Blake* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981] #743, 744, 745).

11. The passage quotes "To describe the conversation which Blake held in prose with demons ... the latter the aspect of a demon" (Cunningham, *The Lives of the Most Eminent British Painters, Sculptors, and Architects*, 2nd ed., vol. 2 [London: John Murray, 1830] 170-72). Presumably for the sake of space, paragraphs are merged.

12. *La Belle Assemblée* 122. In the final paragraphs of the review, the writer, while disappointed with Cunningham's lives of John Opie and George Morland, deems the life of Fuseli the most important in the volume.

13. See *BR*(2) 346-66.

14. Butlin #734, 735.

15. See also Keri Davies, "Blake in the *Times Digital Archive*," *Blake* 41.1 (summer 2007): 45-46.

16. See Keri Davies, "Mrs Bliss: A Blake Collector of 1794," *Blake in the Nineties*, ed. Steve Clark and David Worrall (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 1999) 212-30; Angus Whitehead, "'M<sup>rs</sup> Chetwynd & her Brother' and 'M<sup>r</sup>. Chetwynd,'" *Blake* 42.2 (fall 2008): 75-78.

17. Bell had published several works featuring Blake's commercial engravings (see *BR*[2] 813, 815, 818fn).

18. See Blake's attention to fashion detail in his illuminated books, e.g., "The Little Boy Found." See Charlotte Davies, "Blake and Costume in the *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*," *Blake Journal* 9 (2005): 74-86.

19. David V. Erdman, ed., *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, newly rev. ed. (New York: Anchor-Random House, 1988) 457.

20. See Angus Whitehead, "Mark and Eleanor Martin, the Blakes' French Fellow Inhabitants at 17 South Molton Street, 1805-21," *Blake* 43.3 (winter 2009-10): 91-92.