

OUR LADY IN MEDIEVAL VERSE

IN that England which was Mary's dowry, men were eager to offer their gift of poetry to her. The thirteenth and two succeeding centuries are gemmed with lyrics praising and compassionating her. These poems are, on the whole, naïve in form; they have the terseness and single-mindedness of a short story. They are arrows winged direct from the heart. Simile is seldom used; praise is given direct. There are two or three poems like the magnificent ' Song to the Queen of Heaven ' whose lines pulse with a passion of wonder, but, for the most part, the lyrics have the simplicity and pathos of folksong music. They are prayers in verse. The unknown authors were not thinking of fame; their hymns are wrought for their Mother's glory:

*Levedy, I thank thee
With heart so mild,
The good that thou hast done me
With thy sweet child.*

Love fashions it, and dictates the language. It has the clean fragrance of a bunch of cowslips gathered in a sunlit meadow. The medieval poet has the direct and candid speech of the child; he possesses a like wisdom and sincerity. The themes of his songs are simple. He loves his Mother's beauty; he cries to her to aid his helplessness; he pleads to be delivered from sin, and from Hell; he echoes, though less perfectly, that poignant cry of yearning which concludes the *Salve Regina*.

*In care and counsel thou art best
felix fecundata,
To all weary thou art rest
mater honorata*

*Beseech thou him with mildest mood
That for us shed his blood
in cruce
That we might come to him
in luce.*

Such lines sing themselves into men's minds, and are not easily forgotten.

These early English poems, for all the charm of their artlessness, are sometimes weak in rhyme and metre. Those frequently are best in structure which take rhythm and rhyme from a Latin original. The grandeur of a Passion poem, 'Jesus sorrows for his Mother,' derives its beauty no less from the Latin accentuation of its stanzas than from its vowel-notes, which are as touching as the deep grave vibrations of a violoncello. This can be illustrated only by quoting the opening lines in their pristine form and spelling, for, by modernization, the peculiar beauties of this noble and dignified poem are lost.

*The mildé Lomb i-sprad o rodé
heng bihornen¹ al oblodé.*

Having made his picture of the death of God, the poet proceeds, in lines that hold sorrow in their very sound, to show us Mary looking on her Son; and, in his rugged and virile tongue, to speak of the compassion of the one for the other. A half-stanza may be partially translated thus:

*Sore and hard he was i-swungen,
feel and hands were through i-stungen,
But most of all his other wounden
he did his mother's sorrow woe.*

Among actual Latin sequences that were given an English version is the *Stabat iuxta Christi crucem*; yet the translation is not a literal one. The English poem re-tells the tale of the Mother of Sorrows with high artistry because its maker has dwelt upon its every detail with contemplative love and understanding. He does not follow

¹ i. e. bedewed.

the sequence slavishly. He re-fashions it. He heightens its effect by addressing Mary instead, describing her beside the Rood-tree, for he himself shares her grief. It is an English poem given dignity and grace from the Latin mould, yet of English fabric in its imagery and vision.

Nothing is strained or sentimentalised. It goes straight to the core of love and the mystery of the Redemption. The Latin original has proved an inspiration, yet the English poet has from the clay of his prayer before the Rood-screen created a new thing.

*The bright day went into night,
when ihesu crist thine heart light
was acquaint with pain and woe.*

From the poem of sympathy to the dramatic lyric is but a short step. The poet no longer addresses Mary: he identifies himself with her and her dying Son, and writes for them a metrical dialogue. It is the work of one who has imagined, felt, and understood. The rough dialect of the original (there are at least three versions) makes the verses homely, vivid and familiar:

*Stond wel, moder, under rodé,
bihold thi child wyth gladé modé*

Sharp becomes the realisation of the peasant-Christ whom the peasant best may understand.

Again we find the mournful low-toned vowel-sounds which, in themselves, make a sad refrain to accompany and accentuate the meaning.

*' Mother, do away thy weeping;
I bear this death for mannés thing—
for own guilt bear I none.'
' Son, I feel the death wound,
the sword is at my heart ground,
as foretold me Simeon.'*

The thirteenth century is rich in Passion poetry, much of which deserves to be familiar, both because of its strong

personal love of the Redeemer, and because of its restraint. Nothing can jar more than lack of restraint in religious literature. A poem which errs painfully in this direction is the fifteenth-century *Filius Regis mortuus est*. It is apparently of the same authorship as the *Quia amore langueo* and has the same oppressive cloying qualities; it is diffuse, over-charged and hysterical. It causes Our Lady to shriek with despair and lack of self-control, and to add to its other blemishes, suggests a false theology:

*Thou tree, thou Cross, how durst thou be
Gallows to hang thy Maker so
His Sire, to Him I cry gainst thee
Who on His Son has worked this woe.*¹

From this morbid and flamboyant piece of work it is balm to return to a thirteenth-century poem whose author knew that art has power in just proportion to its restraint, and who could depict sorrow because he himself knew, in reality, its meaning:

*As she beheld the rood,
the mother that was of might
and there saw all ablood
Her Son that her was bright,
His two sweet honden
With nails all to-ronden,
His feet i-pierced too,
His sweet soft side
I-pierced deep and wide—
Wey, what was her woe!*

The one poem is false and artificial, the other true pathos; the one weak, and unedifying, the other moving through the very calm of its lines. Bad taste and insincerity are, however, rare in medieval poetry. The greater number of these unknown versifiers are no more capable of feigned love or sympathy than are young children.

¹ Modernised by Jessie L. Weston.

Despite occasional crudities, halting metre or imperfect rhyme, nearly every poem is excellent as the expression of a mood, and in the setting forth of pictures before our eyes. Colour is not used; it is merely hinted, yet vivid are the scenes we see. Gabriel's wings unfurl in gold; and the blue of Mary's mantle is wrapped about the white body of her Babe. As an example of this painting by suggestion one can quote a quatrain, probably written by St. Edmund of Canterbury, which, within its little space, reflects the splendour of the Faith as a dewdrop blazes with the iridescent glory of the sun.

*Now goeth sun under wood,—
me reweth, Marie, thy fair Rode. (i.e. countenance.)
Now goeth sun under tree,—
me reweth, Marie, thy son and thee.*

The quiet brief words conjure before us the cross, black and stark above the fiery ball of the sinking sun; while, motionless at its foot, is the Mother of God, with the dead Body of her Son upon her lap. Yet these things are not described, they are portrayed by implication alone. The miniature poem is like a seed that holds within itself the potency of the flower, such is the perfection of its craftsmanship.

It may be observed here that it is not a little remarkable that so much English poetry should have been made and written down in the thirteenth century, for English, since the Norman Conquest, had become despised; it was not the language of the cultured, which was French, nor of the learned, which was Latin. Nevertheless, the English tongue persisted in making a continuous poetic literature; and when English folk wished to express their love of God and Our Lady, they did so in their own language; making poems that breathe of the very scent of field and woodland, and have in them the soundness, the kindliness, the gentleness of the English character.

A family likeness exists between these thirteenth cen-

tury poems, albeit each has its own individuality. Phrases are echoed from one to another, as might well be, when all drew upon a common tradition and way of thought. Despite some rather hard-worked adjectives, despite the telling and re-telling of the Joys and Sorrows and Glories of Mary, each poem stands alone, each has the dew of wonder still upon it.

That wonder shows itself still, two centuries later, but there is more originality of thought, an originality which is still married to the old lovely simplicity. Of these more mature poems, 'I sing of a Mayden' is perhaps the most famous. The first and last two lines are caught up from a thirteenth century song which preludes Mary's praise with two blissful lines of spring-time: the carolling of birds, and opening of blossom in the sun. Perhaps it was that spring motif which suggested to the later poet his quiet delicate similes.

These more recent poems are also direct in speech and straightforward in narration, but they hold greater depths of mystery, like a clear pool which reflects the host of stars.

*There is no rose of swich vertu
As is the rose that bare Jhesu.
Alleluia.*

*For in this rose contained was
Hevene and erthe in litel space,
Res miranda.*

The hesitation, the tranquil and lingering phrases, give the impression of men's voices hushed into tenderness and veneration.

The later Middle Ages in England are full of wonder at Mary's Child: a wonder which pours itself out in a host of carols. Bethlehem is not viewed as a thing remote and long past. It is vividly, vitally present, so much so that the poet may describe himself as having seen Mary with the Babe in her arms. He has run with the shepherds to the manger.

*I saw a fair maiden sitting and singing,
 She lulled a little child, a sweet lording,
 Lullay my lyking, my dear son, mine sweeting
 Lullay my dear heart, my own dear darling.*

This type of carol tends to become dramatic. Mary and Jesus are no longer merely seen; they converse together, and the Child foretells His Passion, while bidding His Mother not to weep therefore. One of these lullaby carols, which is of the most charming, consists of an intimate and loving dialogue between Mary and the little Son whom she nurses at her breast. There is a slight note of tears in it, while the playfulness which dances over it like sunlight upon ripples is the merriment of Merry England.

Amid all the nameless song-writers whom we know only by their works, there stands one who has made himself of the immortals: Geoffrey Chaucer. In writing of God's sinless Mother, his poetry winged itself to its most dazzling height. In him the voice of Catholic England became wholly articulate; and in his laud of Mary there is that sense of expansion, like the throwing open of a window upon Eternity, that we know to be genius. Consider that invocation to the Queen of virgins he sets in the mouth of his second nun:

*Thou maid and mother, daughter of thy son,
 Thou well of mercy, sinful soul's cure,
 In whom that God of bountee chose to won; (i.e. dwell.)
 Thou humble and high over every creature,
 Thou noblest so far forth our nature,
 That no disdain the maker had of kind
 His son in blood and flesh to clothe and wind.*

*Within the cloister blissful of thy sides,
 Took mannés shape the Eternal Love and Peace,
 That of the tryne compass Lord and guide is,
 Whom earth and sea and heaven out of release
 Ay reverence; and thou virgin weemeles, (i.e. unstained.)*

*Bare of thy body (and dweltest maiden pure)
The creator of every creature.*

What might Shakespeare not have written of her, what magnificence might he not have added to his own magnificence, what display of faith to his own inherent Catholicism, had it not been for the disastrous cleavage of the 'Reformation.'

In place of the chorus of praise to Mary, sweet and natural as a starling's song, there are now but a few stray tributes to her glory, until we arrive at the modern era.

A sixteenth century priest, Richard Verstegan (Rowlands), writes for her a lullaby which has its best lines at the commencement:

*Upon my lap my Sovereign sits,
And sucks upon my breast;*

It draws from medieval tradition in that it dwells with delight on Mary's nursing of her Babe, but it has not the medieval strength or universal homeliness.

Crashaw writes his ornate and spacious Shepherds' Hymn: a radiant thing which draws its splendour from the Woman clothed with the sun, yet not the veritable pastoral. The medieval could produce the real homespun thing, the song which the rough shepherd could sing at the Crib because he, who was a sinful and humble man, had seen all that was common and ordinary irradiated by the God who had taken to Himself a Mother. The old simplicity of language dies away, the language of childlike souls who had crept into the arms of Mary's motherhood.

*Mother, blithe wert thou
when thou saw heaven-king
Of thee born without woe
That shaped thee and all thing.*

Herrick makes quaint verses for her; Henry Vaughan sees her to be the true Love's knot; while even the Puritan Milton must call her the Virgin blest, for none of these

non-Catholic poets could remain cramped by the limitations of his creed, but must, perforce, stretch out his hands towards the largeness of Truth, and so fulfil Mary's prophecy of her own benediction by the sons of men.

If the medieval homage to Mary may be compared to the veneration of the shepherds, then her modern votaries may be compared to the gift-bearing Kings. Their poems are hewn from the richness of their imagination and culture: they are conscious of their art, wise men inspired by her beauty to fashion for her the highest beauty of verse. Robert Stephen Hawker, Catholic as he was by nature, bedazzled by the marvel of the divine motherhood, writes as if to the liquid music of the harp:

*Lo! where they pause, with inter-gathering rest,
The Threefold, and the One,
And lo, He binds them to her orient breast,
His manhood girded on.
The zone, where two glad worlds forever meet,
Beneath that bosom ran;
Deep in that womb the conquering Paraclete
Smote Godhead on to man.*

So, too, Francis Thompson, within the austere and virile rhythm of the *Assumpta Maria*, flashes light from facet upon facet of the mystery of the Incarnate God, drawing upon scriptural, classical and mythical allusion for the wealth of his imagery.

So, too, Chesterton, in his *Little Litany*, makes new the ancient tale: while in essence it has the simplicity and homeliness of pristine English poesy, in form and phrase it possesses the new ornament and mysticism.

Medieval and modern, each praises in his own manner; the latter making, as it were, jewelled rosaries; while the former lay garlands of wild flowers at her feet. The medieval poems, which all men can understand, are perhaps the most truly of the spirit of England, and of all that we associate with her.

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