

JOHN KEATS AND OUR LADY

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IN a recent issue of *Dominicana*¹ an article appeared which brought out the tender devotion which Christina Georgina Rossetti, a Protestant poetess of the nineteenth century, had for our Blessed Mother. In examining the field of English Literature, it is revealing to find such outstanding Protestant poets as Rossetti, Keats, Wordsworth, and Coleridge who have written directly about Mary or have woven her into their poems. In this paper we will discuss John Keats who has given us some of our most widely quoted lines, as for example, the first line of *Endymion*. "A thing of beauty is a joy forever." We will attempt to show that this non-Catholic poet manifests a warm love and devotion for Our Lady.

It might be well at the outset to review the highlights of Keats' life. John Keats was born in London in the stable of the Swan and Hoop Inn. His parents were hostlers and stable keepers who died when the poet was very young. After his early schooling, he apprenticed himself to a surgeon at Edmonton, but at this time writing poetry seemed to be his chief concern. When a young man, he was intensely in love with Fanny Brawne, but refrained from marriage because of increasing ill health. In 1820 he was definitely threatened with consumption and was ordered to Italy to safeguard his health. On the boat he became desperately ill. After arriving in Italy, he gradually grew worse and in a few months all hope for his recovery was abandoned. He died within two months and was buried in the Protestant cemetery in Rome at the early age of twenty-six.

Keats was not only the last but also the most perfect of the Romanticists. He was at all times an artist, keenly sensitive to beauty. His works contain a superabundance of imaginative and sensuous richness. While Scott was merely telling stories, and Wordsworth reforming poetry or upholding the moral law, and Shelley advocating impossible reforms, and Byron voicing his own egoism and the political discontent of the times, Keats lived apart from men and from all political measures, worshipping beauty like a devotee, perfectly

¹ Winter, 1940.

content to write what was in his own heart, or to reflect some splendor of the natural world as he saw or dreamed it to be.²

To prove Keats' love for our Lady, we will quote the first nine and the last two lines of his famous poem "The Eve of St. Agnes," the most perfect of his mediaeval poems. It is a long poem treating of the beliefs associated with the eve of the feast of St. Agnes. The poem is a vivid painting of a romantic mood such as comes to all men at times to glorify a workaday world.

St. Agnes' Eve—Ah, bitter chill it was!
 The owl, for all its feathers was a-cold:
 The hare limped trembling through the frozen grass,
 And silent was the flock in woolly fold:
 Numb were the Beadsman's fingers, while he told
 His rosary, and while his frosted breath,
 Like pious incense from a censer old,
 Seemed taking flight from heaven, without a death,
 Past the sweet Virgin's picture, while his prayer he saith . . .
 The Beadsman, after thousand Aves told,
 For aye unsought for slept among his ashes cold.

It is surely astonishing and consoling to find lines such as these coming from the pen of an outstanding Protestant poet. The very title itself is significant as the feast of St. Agnes, a virgin martyr, is an important feast in the Catholic calendar. Incidentally, the reason for the emphasis on the extreme coldness of the night is due to the popular belief of that time that January 21, the feast of St. Agnes, was supposed to be the coldest day of the year.

How cleverly Keats brings in the idea of the monk, calling him a *Beadsman*, a religious with his fifteen decade rosary hanging from his belt, his fingers chilled as he recited his *rosary*, that is Mary's rosary. He then pictures our monk passing a picture of Mary, our Blessed Mother, or as the poet writes *the sweet Virgin*. How unusual to find a Protestant referring to our Lady or the Mother of God as the sweet virgin, since so many of them do not believe in the virgin birth of Christ. Then in the next to the last line he writes: "The Beadsman, after thousand Aves told," here he alludes to the Aves, that is Hail Marys—the beginning of the Annunciation.

To find Keats writing of a beadsman, mentioning the rosary directly, describing our Blessed Mother as the sweet Virgin is surely

² *English Literature*, W. J. Long, Ginn & Co. Boston, 1909, p. 418.

remarkable. Yet, in a way, is it so strange, for what is more fundamentally poetic than our Blessed Mother and her rosary.

It is true that many poets in seeking for the epitome of beauty and grace have chosen our Lady for their model. Where could they find a creature intrinsically more beautiful and more noble? To Keats, beauty and truth were one and inseparable and as a result he could not refrain from manifesting his admiration and love for the Mother of God and her rosary, despite the fact that he was a staunch Protestant. Poetry is nothing more than the outpouring of the heart. Since this is true an admiration and respect for Mary and her rosary must have been embedded in this Protestant's heart, else he would not have woven them so deftly into his exquisite poem.