

THREE ENGLISH WITNESSES

To select all the witnesses to the English devotion to the Assumption would be an endless task. The fact was celebrated in painting and sculpture so often in the middle ages that even the thorough work of the later iconoclasts has left a great number of beautiful monuments. A recent book reproducing hundreds of medieval English roof bosses included a number of delightful little carvings of the Assumption—one coming from Westminster Abbey itself. Observant writers have pointed out that the resplendent figure of the 'assumed' Virgin appears on the arms of Eton and of the London borough of Marylebone.

In literature, too, it appears often. The intention of this note is to show three samples of the English witness to the Assumption in pre-reformation writing—samples taken more or less at random but all three showing a deeply theological appreciation of the doctrine.

I

At the end of the twelfth century a *Riwle* was written for three English sisters, all of them anchoresses. In it we find an early form of the devotion of the Rosary, instructing the sisters to say *Paters* and *Aves* while considering certain aspects of the life of our Lady. The 'mysteries' considered in this simple form of meditation are the 'five great joys that Mary had'. The last of these five is the same as the two last mysteries of the Rosary as we know it today. The consideration runs thus:

Sweet Lady, Saint Mary, for the same great joy that filled all the earth, when thy sweet blissful Son received thee into his infinite bliss, and with his blissful arms placed thee on the throne, and a queenly crown on thy head brighter than the sun; Oh high, heavenly queen, so receive these salutations from me on earth that I may blissfully salute thee in heaven. *Hail Mary, etc.* (*Ancren Riwe*, Part I. Morton's version, p. 32.)

Here we find the Christian mind, already saturated with the truth, praying about it in such wise that the mind is easily raised and rested in God. There is no explicit reference to the bodily assumption, but that is implied throughout all the English devotion to the glorification of Mary, as is witnessed in the works of art already mentioned.

II

Mother Julian of Norwich in the fourteenth century is also more anxious to cull the spiritual meaning of the full presence of Mary in heaven, than to observe her in her bodily reality. She knows that our Lady is in heaven bodily and she looks forward to her own

arrival in heaven that she may be shown the glory of the Mother of God. But for now Mother Julian is shown the meaning of the risen glory of Mary as the glory for all mankind:

For the high, marvellous, singular love that he (Christ) hath to this sweet Maiden, his blessed Mother, our Lady Saint Mary, he shewed her highly rejoicing . . . as if he said: 'Wilt thou see how I love her, that thou mightest joy with me in the love that I have in her and she in me?'

And also (unto more understanding this sweet word) our Lord speaketh to all mankind that shall be saved, as it were all to one person, as if he said: 'Wilt thou see in her how thou art loved? For thy love I made her so high, so noble and so worthy; and this pleaseth me, and so will I that it doth thee.'

For after himself she is the most blissful sight.

But hereof am I not learned to long to see her bodily presence while I am here, but the virtues of her blessed soul. . . . And when our good Lord had shewed this and said this word: 'Wilt thou see her?' I answered and said: 'Yea, good Lord, I thank thee; yea, good Lord, if it be thy will.' Oftentimes I prayed this, and I weened to have seen her in bodily presence but I saw her not so. And Jesus in that word shewed me ghostly sight of her. . . . He shewed her then high and noble and glorious and pleasing to him above all creatures.

And he willeth that it be known: that so all those that please them in him should please them in her, and in the pleasance that he hath in her and she in him. (*Revelations of Divine Love*. c. 25.)

III

The same attitude to the truth is revealed in another fourteenth-century treasure—the *Pearl*. In this long poem the author is speaking with the soul of his child who had died at the age of two and was now enjoying the glories of heaven. The child explains how even she, despite her infancy, is the bride of Christ and the queen of heaven, so wonderful and infinite is the love of God. But a doubt crossed the mind of the child's father:

'Blissfull', quoth I, 'may this be so?
Speak I amiss, be not displeasid.
Art thou the Queen of heavens blue,
whom all the world must honour now?
We believe in Mary, from whom sprang grace,
who bore a child from virgin flower,
and who can take from her the crown,
save she excel her in some worth?

And for her peerlessness of charm
Phoenix of Araby we her call,
the bird immaculate of form,
like to that Queen of Courtesy.'

'Courteous Queen!' said then that joy,
 kneeling to earth, her face enveil'd,
 'Matchless Mother, Merriest Maid,
 Blest Beginner of every grace!'
 Then rose she up, and there she paused,
 and spake toward me from that spot;—
 'Sir! folk find here the prize they seek,
 but no usurpers bide herein.

That Empress in her empire hath
 the heavens all and earth and hell;
 from heritage yet she driveth none,
 for she is Queen of Courtesy.

'The Court of the Kingdom of Living God
 hath in itself this property,—
 each one that may arrive therein
 is king or queen of all the realm,
 and yet shall not deprive another;
 but each is glad of others' weal,
 and would their crowns were worth five such,
 were their enhancing possible.

But my Lady, from whom Jesu sprang,
 She holdeth empire high o'er all;
 and this displeaseth none of our host,
 for she is Queen of Courtesy.'

(*Pearl*. Edited and modernised by Sir Israel
 Gollancz, vv. 36-8.)

We are thus elegantly shown that the Assumption is unique only in the way that the supreme analogue is unique among all the analogata—unique, that is, as the one model which is yet copied and shared by all those whose infinite privilege it will be to be eventually raised to heaven. This is then no divine 'stunt' or pageantry to show off to the world the nobility of the King of heaven, as used to be the custom among earthly lords when they chose their queens. But it is part of the work of our redemption. Our English forefathers, used as they were to the most splendid and cultured of pageants, were not misled by this to anticipate real pageantry in heaven. Like all the mysteries of the Christian religion, the Assumption and the Crowning of our Lady with glory in heaven are spiritual realities in which the Christian is made a partaker.