

## OUR LADY OF PITY.<sup>1</sup>

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The forms in which the Blessed Virgin was pictured in English art during the middle ages, is a subject of great interest. Foreign antiquaries have done much towards classifying the various representations of the Blessed Virgin, which have been preserved in their several countries, but very little has been done for England. This may easily be explained. The storms of the sixteenth century, and the great Puritan revolution in the middle of the seventeenth, swept away the greater part of the memorials we should now prize. The few that survived the political and religious hurricanes have many of them perished in more recent days from neglect.

It is not my intention at the present time to endeavour to explain or classify the various Marian types, but to draw attention to one form only, that of our Lady of Pity.

This representation, in which Our Lady was figured sitting with the dead body of her Divine Son in her lap, seems to have been one of the commonest forms under which she was figured in this country, but there is little mention of it in the old English literature that has survived to our time. The late Mr. Waterton quotes a pretty poem entitled *Quia Amore Languo*, in which the lines occur,

“Perfor axe pou merci, y schal pee saue,  
With pitee y rue vpon pee so.”<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Read at the Monthly Meeting of the Institute, March 15th, 1891.

<sup>2</sup> Waterton, *Pietas Mariana Britannica*

I., 239. Quoting *Political Religions and Poems*, E. E. Text Soc. p. 150.

Dr. Rock describes these objects in words which I could not improve, and which it might be unbecoming to paraphrase. "Not unfrequently," he says, "was the B. V. Mary presented to the people's eyes crownless, ungemmed, sorrowful, forlorn, as our 'Lady of Pity,' the mother weeping over that same Divine Child, that Son of hers full-grown but dead, just unnailed from the Cross, stretched, blood-stained and naked, on the ground at her feet, with his wounded head upon her lap, bedewed by the tears trickling down her own wan cheeks."

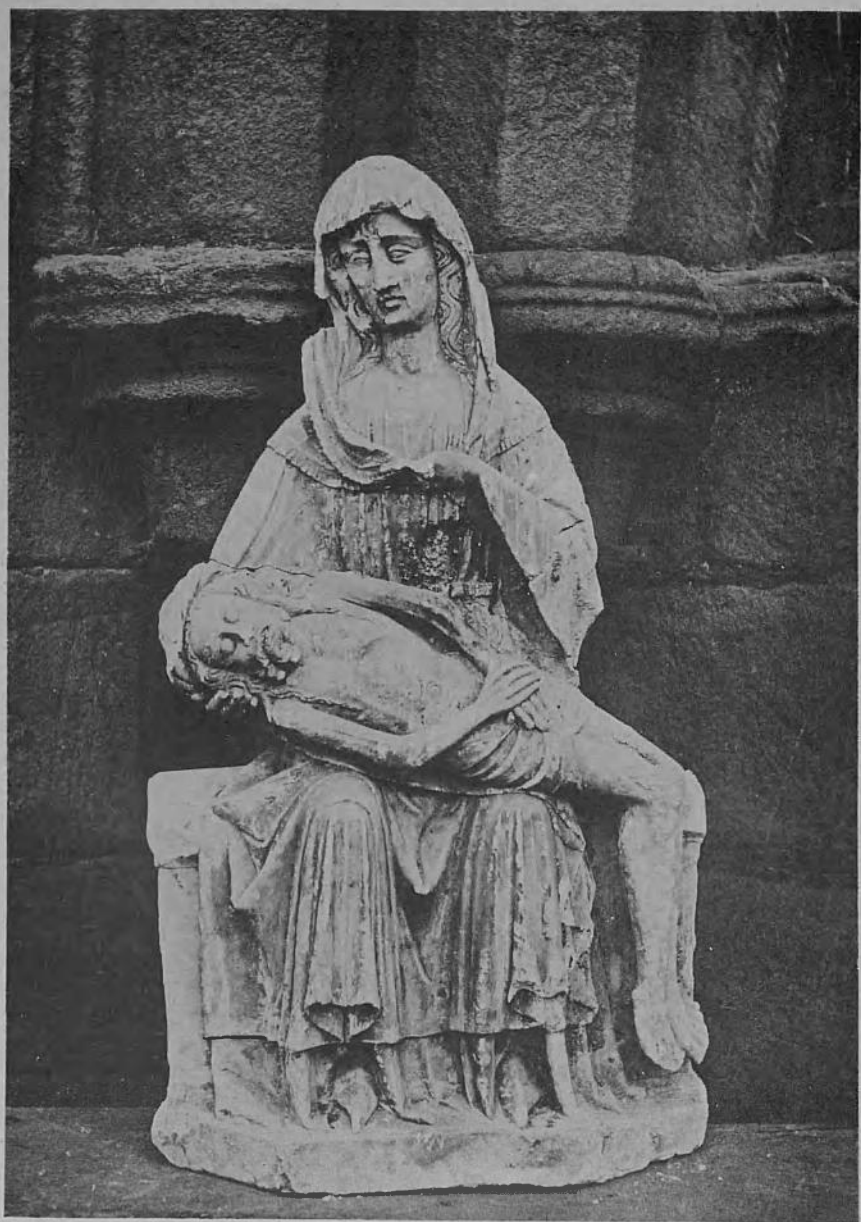
Mr. Waterton tells his readers that in the Sarum Prymer of 1534, which I have not had an opportunity of examining, there is a rubric directing that the prayer, "Obsecro te Domina," should be said before an image of our Lady of Pity.<sup>2</sup> This would seem to imply that these representations were very common. I believe that they were in old times to be found in nearly every church. After careful enquiry, extending over a long period of time, I have only been able to hear of three sculptured representations of Our Lady of Pity, which yet remain. There is, or was one, seemingly well-preserved, in the westernmost arch of the sedilia in Battlefield Church, Shropshire. The right arm of the figure of Our Lord seems to be missing, but all else is perfect. There is an engraving of this interesting sculpture in the *Archæologia*.<sup>3</sup>

The second representation with which I am acquainted stands in a niche over the arch of the porch of Glentham Church, Lincolnshire. From the architecture of the porch, I apprehend that it was executed at the very end of the fifteenth century, or, perhaps, a few years later. It does not seem ever to have suffered from violence. The features have, however, perished by the action of the weather on the soft oolite stone out of which it is carved. There cannot be much doubt that it was made for some member of the Tournay family. The charges on the shield have been so far effaced by the hand of time, that Mr. Howlett could not show them in a sketch he was kind enough to make for me; they are, however, the bearings of that family. Argent, a chevron between three bulls sable attired Or.

<sup>1</sup> *Church of our Fathers*, iii. I, 271.

<sup>2</sup> *Pietas Mariana Britannica*, I., 127

<sup>3</sup> Vol. xiv, p. 272.



PIETA AT BREADSALL.

The race is now extinct in the male line; they were, it is believed, to the last, Roman Catholics. To this fact we probably owe the preservation of this very interesting piece of sculpture.<sup>1</sup> If the drawing of the Glenthams example be compared with the engraving of that at Battlefield, it will be found that the pose of the figures is so nearly identical, that there cannot be a doubt that the sculptors had some well-known model from which to copy.

I have recently become aware that a figure of Our Lady of Pity is represented on the monumental brass of Andrew Evingar, in the church of All-hallows, Barking. It is engraved in the late Rev. Joseph Maskell's *Brief History* of that church,<sup>2</sup> the general arrangement of the figures is the same as that of the Battlefield and Glenthams examples, but though much worn away by the passing feet of centuries, it is sufficiently distinct for us to perceive that when un mutilated it was from an artistic point of view much superior to those previously mentioned.

I may be, perhaps, permitted to return for a moment to the Battlefield example. It is well known that artists have at various times endeavoured to represent a certain likeness between the features of our divine Lord and his blessed mother. The idea was well known to Dante, who says:—

“Riguarda omai nella faccia, ch’ a Cristo  
Più s’ assomiglia, chè la sua chiarezza  
Sola ti può disporre a veder Cristo.”<sup>3</sup>

The likeness between the face of the mother and son in the Battlefield example is striking. It cannot be accidental.

In the year 1877, when the church of Breadsall near Derby was restored, a remarkably beautiful sculpture of Our Lady of Pity was discovered; a descriptive account of this group accompanied by a sketch appeared in the *Journal* of the Archæological Association for 1878.<sup>4</sup> There cannot be any doubt that it had been carefully hidden by some adherent of the old faith at the time of the change of religion. The material out of which it is

<sup>1</sup> It may be well to note that in the writer's *English Church Furniture*, p. 215, there is a pedigree of this family, accompanied by monumental inscriptions from Glenthams church.

<sup>2</sup> p. 12.

<sup>3</sup> *Paradiso*, xxxij, 85-87. “Look now upon the face that most resembles Christ, for its brightness alone can dispose thee to behold Christ.” A. J. Butler's Translation, p. 413.

<sup>4</sup> Vol. xxxiv, pp. 348—351.

formed is alabaster. Mr. Alfred Wallis, the gentleman who contributed the account to our contemporary, says that the alabaster of which it is made, came in all probability from the quarries at Chellaston, a place about nine miles distant from Breadsall. It was his opinion that the sculpture was executed on the spot by some wandering artist, who was, he suggests, probably a foreigner. In this latter conclusion we think him mistaken. The Breadsall sculpture, though presenting slight differences (the pointed shoes of Our Lady for example) is in character almost identical with the three other specimens known; all of them seem to us to have a marked English character. In this specimen as in the others we have mentioned, there seems to have been on the part of the artist, a desire to represent a likeness in the features between the holy mother and her divine Son.

One of the older chapels in Cromer church was dedicated to Our Lady of Pity. An image and an altar existed there under that invocation. This chapel seems to have been in existence in 1388.<sup>1</sup>

There was an image of our Lady of Pity in the Church of Bishop's Stortford in the fifteenth century as the following extract testifies:—

“Solutum Adae Drakelowe pro emendatione candelabri coram ymagine beatae Mariae de Pietate,” 1431—1440.<sup>2</sup>

There cannot be much doubt that the most solemnly beautiful representation of the pity of Our Lady that is in existence, is preserved in the chapel of the Albergo de' Poveri, at Genoa. It is an alto-relievo by Michael Angelo. The Blessed Virgin is represented supporting the head of the dead body of her Son whose lips she had just kissed.<sup>3</sup>

In the interesting account of religious customs which had passed away, known as *The Rites of Durham*, a manuscript written at the end of the sixteenth century, we meet with the following account of the image of Our Lady of Pity, which existed in that great Northern Minster before its spoliation.

<sup>1</sup> Walter Rye, *Cromer Past and Present*, pp. 83—158.

<sup>2</sup> Records of St. Michael's, Bishop's Stortford, ed. Glasscock, p. 9.

<sup>3</sup> Webb, *Continental Ecclesiology*, p. 401.

"There was betwixt two pillars, on the leaft hand in the north allie as you tourne into the Galleley from the north church dour, our LADY OF PITTIES ALTER, being enclosed of either syde with fine waynscott, with the picture of our Lady carrying our Saviour on her knee, as he was taken from the crosse, very lamentable to behoulde."

By far the best known representation of this holy subject is by Michel Angelo. It is now in the chapel della Pietà, in Saint Peter's, Rome. It has often been engraved. An excellent woodcut thereof may be seen in the *Michel Angelo* of Charles Clement.<sup>2</sup> It ought to be compared with the existing English examples. Though so far superior to anything our native artists could produce it is most interesting to find that the greatest of Italian sculptors did not strike out a new line for himself, but was content in the general arrangement of his subject to tread in the path which time had consecrated.

By the obliging co-operation of Mr. H. Swainson Cooper, I am enabled to add the following note from the Rev. R. B. Billinge :—

"The sculpture on Urswick church tower, is in my mind, certainly a 'mater Dolorosa;' the form held in the Virgin's arms is that of a man, not a child. The church is dedicated to the Virgin, or St. Mary-in-the-Fields. I have not any photograph, but hope shortly to have one. The sculpture is, I should say, in its original niche. There are two other niches in the front of the tower, which are empty."

Mr. Cooper adds :—

"This description seems to leave no doubt as to the subject. The material of the sculpture is red sandstone."

I append references to such examples of Our Lady of Pity as I have met with in my reading. It will of course be understood that the list makes no pretention to being exhaustive

- Archæologia, xij, 218.
- xvii, 127.
- xl, 115, 117, 119.
- xlvi, 308.
- l, 34.

<sup>1</sup> *Surtees Soc.*, vol. xv, p. 33.

<sup>2</sup> p. 14.



- Burton's History of Kidderminster, p. 68.  
Bury St. Edmonds (Camden Soc.) Wills and Inventories, p. 85.  
Derbysh. Arch. Soc. Jour., vj, 79.  
Essex Arch. Soc. Jour., II, 155.  
Gibbons', Lincoln Wills, 201, 212.  
Glasscock, Bishop's Stortford, 9.  
Oliver, Monasticen Dioc. Exon, 323.  
Peacock, English Ch. Furniture, 184, 237.  
Ripon, Chapter Acts (Surtees Soc.) 264.  
Ripon, Memorials of (Surtees Soc.) III, 229, 245, 252, 264, 268, 276.  
Rock, Church of our Fathers, ii, 209 ; iii, i, 271.  
Surrey Inventories, 80.  
Waterton, Pietas Mariana Britannica, I. 127, 240. II. 14, 28, 29, 31,  
32, 39, 50, 51, 54, 55, 60, 99, 111, 113, 114, 115, 116, 119, 127, 134,  
139, 142, 155, 229, 238, 249, 291, 299.  
Weaver, Wells Wills, 31, 35, 40, 62, 71, 104, 111, 196.