KEATS-SHELLEY HOUSE – TREASURE OF THE MONTH (FEBRUARY 2015)

**Scallop-shell reliquary**

One of the most curious – though most easily overlooked – items in the collection of the Keats-Shelley House is, to sum it up quite simply, a silver scallop-shell reliquary containing locks of hair of John Milton and Elizabeth Barrett Browning. The history of the reliquary and its contents spans more than three centuries, and travels from Italy to England and back (crossing the Atlantic en route). It also contains a source of inspiration to poets including John Keats himself.

On 21 January 1818 Leigh Hunt – a sometime poet and leading critic and essayist of his day– showed John Keats his assortment of locks of hair. Hunt’s collection included celebrity locks from the heads of an impressive array of writers, poets, and political giants including Jonathan Swift, Dr Samuel Johnson, , Lucrezia Borgia, and the Emperor Napoleon, to name just a few, as well as Keats and (later) the Brownings themselves. What bewitched Keats most, though, was Hunt’s lock of hair of the seventeenth-century poet John Milton, which in turn had an illustrious provenance behind it, belonging, as it had, to Joseph Addison, Dr Johnson, and literary translator John Hoole, who’d rendered the work of Italian poets Torquato Tasso, Ludovico Ariosto and Pietro Metastasio into English. It’s hardly surprising that Keats was impressed, and he subsequently wrote a poem to mark the occasion, titled ‘Lines on seeing a Lock of Milton’s Hair’, the opening stanza of which runs as follows:

Chief of organic Numbers!
Old Scholar of the Spheres!
Thy spirit never slumbers,
But rolls about our ears
For ever and for ever.
O, what a mad endeavour
Worketh he
Who, to thy sacred and ennobled hearse,
Would offer a burnt sacrifice of verse
And Melody!

Bordering on doggerel, this is not Keats at his lyrical best by any stretch of the imagination, and was not published during the poet’s lifetime. Keats would narrate the experience two days later in a letter to his friend Benjamin Bayley: ‘I was at Hunt's the other day, and he surprised me with a real authenticated lock of *Milton's Hair*. I know you would like what I wrote thereon - so here it is […]’. Keats then proceeds to record the full poem to Bayley, which, he confesses, was written ‘at his [Hunt’s] request - perhaps I should have done something better alone and at home’ (John Keats to Benjamin Bayley, 23rd June 1818). The poem’s quality aside, however, that this same lock of Milton’s hair had also inspired Leigh Hunt himself to compose three sonnets on precisely this subject in 1818 before showing it to Keats is testament to its mytho-poetic allure, its tantalising connection to the past and to one of the central figures in all of English literature.

But the story doesn’t end here. Many years later – and long after the death of Keats in 1821 – Leigh Hunt divided the lock of Milton’s hair and gave part of it to Robert Browning as a means of congratulating his friend on the success of his work. In a letter sent by the Brownings to Hunt dated 6th October 1857 Elizabeth Barrett Browning personally thanks Hunt for the gift of the lock of hair. When Elizabeth died in Florence almost four years later, after fifteen years of married life with Browning, the poet kept the lock of Milton’s hair and years later again, it was placed, together with a lock of Elizabeth Barrett’s hair, in this silver scallop-shell reliquary, once the property of Pope Pius V – the pontiff who, in England, is most famous for having excommunicated Queen Elizabeth I.[[1]](#footnote-1)

The reliquary had been presented to Browning by one Katherine de Kay Bronson, a wealthy American socialite and collector who’d settled with her husband Arthur Bronson in Venice from 1876, which is where she met Browning. The story of the lock of Elizabeth’s hair, however, provides yet another sub-plot. Elizabeth had given a lock of her hair to Browning near the beginning of their relationship, and it is referred to in two of her *Sonnets from the Portuguese* which were written during this period (1845-1846, though not published till 1850) as well as in the romantic missives she and Browning penned to one another during this time (the couple were married on 12 September 1846). On 2nd December 1845 Browning wrote to her: ‘I was happy, so happy before! But I am happier and richer now… I will live and die with your beautiful ring, your beloved hair --- comforting me, blessing me’ while in *Sonnets from the Portuguese* XVIIIElizabeth Barrett Browning confesses:

I never gave a lock of hair away

a man, dearest, except this to thee,

Which now upon my fingers thoughtfully

I ring out to the full brown length and say

‘Take it.’

That Browning would one day come to place the lock of his wife’s hair alongside that of Milton’s is perhaps the ultimate tribute to her, and one which symbolically attests to her poetic posterity.

The reliquary, together with its contents, was purchased by Dallas Pratt at the National Auction Gallery, New York in 1933 and joined the ranks of his exquisite collection, which comprised literary manuscripts, autograph letters, rare books, antique maps and others treasures and curiosities. Dallas Pratt was a passionate collector of all things Keats-related and in 1971 he gifted the greater part of his Keats collection permanently to the Keats-Shelley Memorial Association for safe keeping and display at the House in Rome. To this day many precious items in the Keats-Shelley House collection form part of the Dallas Pratt bequest, including autograph manuscripts by Keats, Whitman, Wilde and Wordsworth.

1. According to Harvey Rachlin ‘there is no evidence that Robert Browning placed the locks of either Milton or Elizabeth […] in the reliquary when he was alive. More likely, the locks were placed there after the poet died in 1889, either by his son, Robert Wiedeman Barrett Browning, or by his daughter-in-law, Fannie Browning.’ See *Lucy’s Bones, Sacred Stones, and Einstein’s Brain*, Henry Holt and Company (New York: 1996), pp. 272-3. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)