

Maiden in the mor° lay, moor  
 In the mor lay,  
 Sevenight° fulle, sevenight fulle. a week  
 Maiden in the mor lay,  
 In the mor lay,  
 Sevenights fulle and a day.

Welle° was hire mete.° good / food  
 What was hire mete?  
 The primerole° and the— primrose  
 The primerole and the—  
 Welle was hire mete.  
 What was hire mete?  
 The primérole and the violet.

Welle was hire dring.° drink  
 What was hire dring?  
 The chelde° water of the— cold  
 The chelde water of the—  
 Welle was hire dring.

What was hire dring?  
 The chelde water of the welle-spring.

Welle was hire bour.° abode  
 What was hire bour?  
 The rede rose and the—  
 The rede rose and the—  
 Welle was hire bour.  
 What was hire bour?  
 The rede rose and the lilie flour.

iambic, continues the sorrow through the *b*-alliteration of the stressed words, *beste*, *bon*, and *blod*.

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D. W. ROBERTSON, JR.

[On "Maiden in the mor lay"]†

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An excellent example of poetic *aenigma* is afforded by the fourteenth-century poem called "The Maid of the Moor." The interpretation offered here was developed in collaboration with Professor Huppé, who also shares responsibility for the approach as a whole. \* \* \* On the surface, although the poem is attractive, it cannot be said to make much sense. Why should a maiden lie on a moor for seven nights and a day? And if she did, why should she eat primroses and violets? Or again, how does it happen that she has a bower of lilies and roses on the moor? The poem makes perfectly good sense, however, if we take note of the figures and signs in it. The number seven indicates life on earth, but life in this instance went on at night, or before the Light of the World dawned. The day is this light, or Christ, who said "I am the day." And it appears appropriately after seven nights, or, as it were, on the count of eight, for eight is also a figure of Christ. The moor is the wilderness of the world under the Old Law before Christ came. The primrose is not a Scriptural sign, but a figure of fleshly beauty. We are told three times that the primrose was the food of this maiden, and only after this suspense are we also told that she ate or embodied the violet, which is a Scriptural sign of humility. The maiden drank the cool water of God's grace, and her bower consisted of the roses of martyrdom or charity and the lilies of purity with which late medieval and early Renaissance artists sometimes adorned pictures of the Blessed Virgin Mary, and, indeed, she is the Maiden in the Moor, the maiden who was at once the most beautiful of all women and the divinity whose humility made her the most accessible of all saints.

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† From D. W. Robertson, Jr., "Historical Criticism," *English Institute Essays: 1950*, ed. A. S. Downer (New York: Columbia University Press, 1951), pp.

3-31. [See pp. 128-129, above.] Reprinted by permission of the author and the publisher.

E. T. DONALDSON

[On "Maiden in the mor lay"]†

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I cannot find that the poem, as a poem, makes any more "sense" after exegesis than it did before, and I think it makes rather more sense as it stands than the critic allows it. Maidens in poetry often receive curiously privileged treatment from nature, and readers seem to find the situation agreeable. From the frequency with which it has been reprinted it seems that the "Maiden in the Moor" must have offered many readers a genuine poetic experience even though they were without benefit of the scriptural exegesis. I do not think that most of them would find it necessary to ask the questions of the poem that Robertson has asked; indeed, it seems no more legitimate to inquire what the maiden was doing in the moor than it would be to ask Wordsworth's Lucy why she did not remove to a more populous environment where she might experience a greater measure of praise and love. In each case the poetic *donnée* is the highly primitive one which exposes an innocent woman to the vast, potentially hostile, presumably impersonal forces of nature; and the Middle English lyric suggests the mystery by which these forces are, at times, transmuted into something more humane, even benevolent, by their guardianship of the innocent maiden. The poetic sense is not such as necessarily to preclude allegory, and I shouldn't be surprised if medieval readers often thought of the Virgin as they read the poem, not because they knew the symbols and signs, but because the Virgin is the paramount innocent maiden of the Christian tradition: such suggestivity is one of poetry's principal functions. Robertson's hard-and-fast, this-sense-or-no-sense allegory, however, seems to me so well-concealed and, when explicated, so unrevealing that it can be considered only disappointing if not entirely irrelevant. The function of allegory that is worth the literary critic's attention (as opposed to cryptography, which is not) cannot be to conceal, but is to reveal, and I simply do not believe that medieval poets veiled their poems in order to hide their pious message from heretics and unbelievers. In allegory the equation is not merely  $a$  equals  $b$ , the literal statement reanalyzed equals the suggested meaning, but is something more like  $a$  plus  $b$  equals  $c$ , the literal statement plus the meaning it suggests yield an ultimate meaning that is an inextricable union of both. Patristically the primrose may be a figure of fleshy beauty, but actually (and the actual is what

† From E. T. Donaldson, "Patristic Exegesis in the Criticism of Medieval Literature: The Opposition," *Critical Approaches to Medieval Literature*, ed. D. Bethurum (New York: Columbia University Press, 1960), pp. 1-26. Reprinted by permission of the author and the publisher.

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poetry is made of) it is one of the commonest of the lovely flowers which nature in its benevolent aspect lavishes upon mankind and, in this case, all-benevolent lavishes upon the maiden of the moor. Robertson asks the question "Why should she eat primroses?" I hope that if I answer "Because she was hungry," it will not be said of me that a primrose by the river's brim a yellow primrose was to him, and it was nothing more.

\* \* \*

JOHN SPEIRS

[On "Maiden in the mor lay"]†

\* \* \*

Who is this 'maiden' who has spent a seven-nights' vigil on the moor beside a well? It is unlikely that we can ever know exactly, and there is perhaps no need that, as readers of what to us is a *poem*, we should. She is sufficiently defined in the poem for the purposes of our response to the poetry—a child of nature, whether human or faery, her meat the primrose and the violet, her drink the chilled water of the well-spring.

The reference to a well-spring suggests the possibility that the song may originally have had some connexion with the 'well-wakes'—the worship of wells—which, there is abundant evidence, went on all through the Middle Ages. These well-wakes were particularly associated with St. John's Eve and so with the rites, ceremonies and practices of the great Midsummer festival as a whole.

We may guess from what is said in the song that the maiden, if she is human, has been undergoing some rite of initiation or purification. If she is a faery being—or the human impersonator of such in a dramatic dance—she may be the spirit of the well-spring. We know that the word 'maiden' was often used in a special sense as the title of a witch, the leader of a coven; one of the nuns of Diana, as it were.

This song also is evocative of a tranced mood. It has a kind of solemn gaiety, solemn like the gaiety of a child absorbed in what to it is a serious game. This quality would further suggest that this poem may in fact have been connected with rites and dances designed to promote fertility or in some other respect to influence the course of nature magically—in the spring or summer, as the flowers suggest. When we speak, as we well may, of this song's

† From John Speirs, *Medieval English Poetry: The Non-Chaucerian Tradition* (London: Faber & Faber Ltd.; New

York: Hillary House Publishers, Ltd.), pp. 63-64. Reprinted by permission of the publishers.

enchancing innocence or magical lightness we may be nearer than we perhaps think to the literal truth.

There are six English lines in a Latin Christian context in another MS (Magdalen College, Oxford, MS 60, of the end of the fourteenth century) which are about another maid beside a well.

At a sprynge wel under a thorn  
Ther was bote of bale, a lytel here a-forn;  
Ther by-syde stant a mayde,  
fulle of love y-bounde.  
Ho-so wol seche trwe love  
yn hyr hyt schal be founde.

In this case the maid—judging by 'bote of bale' and 'trwe love'—is Mary. She has, however, an unmistakable affinity with the maiden by the well-spring, 'the spirit of the fountain'. The lines, though they have lost the movement of the dance and are rhythmically uncertain and even flat, illustrate how the imagery of the songs of the earlier religion was being adapted to Christian meanings.

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## PETER DRONKE

[On "Maiden in the mor lay"]†

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The anonymous English song of the moor-maiden (written down, with some other snatches of lyric, on a scrap of parchment in the early fourteenth century) must be understood in the light of the popular beliefs to which it alludes.<sup>1</sup> This makes it rather less enigmatic than has often been thought, though no less enchanting.

\* \* \*

What is a moor-maiden? She is a kind of water-sprite living in the moors; she appears in a number of German legends, especially from Franconia.<sup>2</sup> It is appropriate that the English song should be a dance-song, as one of the commonest legends associates the moor-

† From Peter Dronke, *The Medieval Lyric* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), pp. 195–196. Reprinted by permission of the Hutchinson University Library and the author.

1. Some scholars have mistakenly proposed a Christian interpretation for the song, unaware that it was precisely the un-Christian, 'lewd, secular' nature of the words which led Bishop Richard de Ledrede, who held the see of Ossory in

Ireland from 1317–60, to compose a sacred Latin text to replace them. (Cf. R. L. Greene, *Speculum* XXVII, 1952, 504–6).

2. Cf. H. Bächtold-Stäubli, *Handwörterbuch des deutschen Aberglaubens*, VI, 565, s.v. *Moorjungfern* (with principal references; further references in E. Fentsch, 'Volkssage und Volksglaube in Unterfranken', *Bavaria*, IV [1866], i, 203 ff.).

maiden with a dance. She tends to appear at village dances in the guise of a beautiful human girl, and to fascinate young men there, but she must always return into the moor at a fixed hour, or else she dies. Sometimes it is only for one hour in the week that she is allowed to leave the moor and mingle with human beings—this perhaps is also why in the song she waits in the moor 'sevenistes fulle ant a day'. Like other water-sprites, a moor-maiden may be linked with a particular well-spring; in two German folksongs such a well-maiden gives the children who come to the spring flowers 'to make them sleep' (whether sleep here implies death is not certain from the context). In the English song, however, the well and the flowers evoke the moor-maiden's more-than-earthly serenity and well-being: she has none of the cares and needs that mortals have. Is the lyric simply a meditation on this theme? I think it far more probable that the theme was made vivid for the dancers by a mime. Then at the start of the song a girl playing the moor-maiden would have lain as if asleep; the dancers approach her, admiring her beauty, and some of the young men try to wake her, at first in vain. Then, perhaps, a bell strikes: suddenly 'sevenistes fulle ant a day' are up, she comes of her own accord into the centre of the round, and is at once the acknowledged queen of the dance. An admirer offers her dainties to eat, which she refuses; he offers her primroses and violets, and these she pretends to eat. Another admirer offers her wine—again she makes a gesture of refusal; instead she goes to drink at her well. All the dancers make her a bed of flowers; she reclines on it; the bell sounds once more, and she falls back into sleep, again as out of reach as at the beginning. It is along these lines, I think, that we can picture the living reality that such a song may have been.

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## THOMAS JEMIELITY

[On "I sing of a maiden"]†

An apparently artless and conventional work, the medieval lyric "I Sing of a Maiden" is a highly imaginative poem, replete with liturgical symbols and allusions and very candid about the physical intimacies of Christ's conception in Mary. The poem celebrates the divine communion with man at the heart of the Christian myth, that paradoxically virginal yet fruitful intercourse with Mary which conceives the redemption that is Jesus. Yet, in the imagination of

† From Thomas Jemielity, "I Sing of a Maiden": God's Courting of Mary," *Concerning Poetry* (Western Washington

State College, Bellingham, Wash.), 2 (1969), 53–71. [See p. 170, above.] Reprinted by permission of the publisher.