

# THE MAID OF THE MOOR

Sir,—Professor Tillyard, in your issue of May 11, has offered an interpretation of the lyric "Maiden in the moor lay" in the form of a query, hesitating, he says, because "none of the other lyrics in the manuscript is religious." May I point out first that the poem which Mr. Kenneth Sisam also prints in his *Fourteenth Century Verse and Prose* (and which is best known from Yeats's beautiful exploitation of its haunting lines), "The Irish Dance," is from the same manuscript, Bodleian MS. Rawlinson D.913, and that the dancer speaks of "the holy londe/ Of Irlande" (as Mr. Sisam points out) "because Ireland was *par excellence* 'the Land of the Saints'?"

To be sure, neither the first editor, Heuser (not *Menser*), nor Mr. Sisam suggests an interpretation of the poem "The Maid of the Moor." Yet there is little need to look outside the poem itself for its meaning, though the lines in *Piers Plowman* and the pictures by Massys may reinforce one's interpretation; the lyric is fragile, and one should beware of unduly localizing or limiting the imagery. As Professor D. W. Robertson, Jr., has recently shown (in the January number of *Speculum*) gardens, and trees and flowers and fountains, were subjected to the same kind of allegorical reading as Scripture itself. Here we seem to have the "good garden": the rose was "an unfading flower of martyrdom in *Eccles. xxviii, 14, and I, 8.*" and the combination of lilies and roses "was used to show martyrdom and purity, Charity and innocence, or related ideas." That the drink of the maiden was the "chelde water of [de] well-spring" indicates, I think, *Christus irrigans* or the Holy Spirit, or true doctrine, or baptism. And in this light, the "sevenist fulle" would be interpreted, I suggest, as the seven sacraments.

Perhaps these suggested interpretations of the imagery according to medieval allegorical reading will reinforce Professor Tillyard's explanation of the poem, though I do not feel inclined or obliged to accept the maid of the moor as an ascetic. I take the maiden here to be any member of the Church who is of pure faith, regardless of sex, for "it is explained on the authority of St. Paul that all good Christians should be chaste virgins prepared to marry Christ; that is, they should keep themselves free of the pollutions of heresy and worldly cupidity" (Robertson, *MLN*, March, 1950, p. 156). While there is, of course, no reason to reject or exclude the loveliness of the language itself, and no need to insist upon an interpretation at only one level—least of all at the level of the *sense* (at which level this lyric might be taken as a lament for a dead maiden)—I see the true significance in the *sentence*, or doctrinal content, as an imaginative treatment of certain aspects or phases of the religious life.

R. J. SCHOECK

Cornell University