

THE MAID ON THE MOOR

Sir,—In the thirtieth volume of *Anglia*, W. Hensler published about a dozen poems or fragments (two of them in French), scribbled on the leaf of a manuscript in the Bodleian. They are the jottings, apparently, of a fourteenth-century minstrel. One of these songs is about a maiden who spent seven nights on the moor, with primroses and violets for her food, spring-water for her drink, and flowers for her bed. It has become known to a wider public through being included in Kenneth Sisam's *Fourteenth Century Verse and Prose*. Miss Edith Sitwell, with her fine ear for poetic melody, has commented on its charm in her *Poet's Notebook*. Some readers will think further

comment superfluous or even a profanation. But others will think that a curiosity about who the maiden was can coexist with appreciation. Neither editor tries to satisfy this natural curiosity.

Could the maid on the moor be an ascetic? In the B-text of *Piers Plowman*, passus xv, lines 288-9, the penitent Mary Magdalene "by mores lyued and dewes." The corresponding passage in the C-text, passus xviii, lines 21-2, gives the same information and adds that Mary of Egypt (another repentant sinner) ate but three small loaves in forty winters. In the Philadelphia Museum of Art there are twin pictures by Quentin Massys (1466-1530) showing these two saints in naked penitence, living in the open country by a pond. But the lyric is so fragile that one hesitates to make its subject penitential, while none of the other lyrics in the manuscript is religious. Can any reader offer a better explanation?

E. M. W. TILLYARD.