"His barge ycleped was the Maudelayne": *Canterbury Tales* A 410

SUMNER FERRIS

Concerning this, the last line of Chaucer's description of the Shipman in the General Prologue, J.M. Manly some years ago could assume that "modern students" would know that in the fourteenth century " 'The Maudelayne' was not merely a common but an appropriate name for ships."[1] An earlier study had shown how common the name was;[2] but neither Manly nor anybody else has explained in print why it may have been appropriate, and none of the Chaucerians whom I have informally quizzed on the matter can do so either. Despite Manly's assumption, then, present-day students of Chaucer may welcome some information about the connections between medieval mariners and the patroness after whom the Shipman's barge is named, St. Mary Magdalene.

The extra-Biblical legend of the saint is the most convenient place to begin.[3] This legend, of ancient origin, was definitively formulated in the *Legenda Aurea* and is frequently found in English art and literature of the Middle Ages, for example in the *South English Legendary,* one of the Digby plays, and a Lamentation by the saint at the Sepulchre.[4] (This last work, it will be recalled, was for some time attributed to Chaucer — who did, however, make a translation, now lost, of the Pseudo-Origen's

---

[1]*Some New Light on Chaucer* (New York: Holt, 1926), pp. 170–71.

[2]P.Q. Karkeek, "Chaucer's Schipman, and His Barge, 'The Maudelayne,' " in *Essays on Chaucer, His Words and His Works,* Part V, No. 15, Chaucer Society, 2nd Ser., No. 19 (London, 1884), pp. 453–500.

[3]Standard studies are Helen Meredith Garth, *Saint Mary Magdalene in Mediaeval Literature,* The Johns Hopkins University Studies in Historical and Political Science, LXVII, No. 5 (Baltimore, 1950), pp. 399–452, and Victor Saxer, *Le Culte de Marie Madeleine en Occident des origines à la fin du Moyen Âge,* 2 vols. (Paris, 1959).

[4]On the Middle English versions of the legend, see the bibliography by Charlotte D'Evelyn in J. Burke Severs, ed., *A Manual of the Writings in Middle English, 1050–1500,* II (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1970), 610–11, and Carleton Brown and Rossell H. Robbins, *The Index of Middle English Verse* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1943), Author and Title Index, s.v. "Mary Magdalene," p. 766. Other valuable references are in R.H. Robbins, "A Middle English Prayer to St. Mary Magdalen," *Traditio,* 24 (1968), 458–64, esp. p. 458, n. 1, and in *The Late Medieval Religious Plays of Bodleian MSS Digby 133 and e Museo 160,* ed. Donald C. Baker, John L. Murphy, and Louis B. Hall, Jr., EETS, No. 283 (1982), pp. ci–cviii.

Homilia de Maria Magdalena.)[5] Two miraculous voyages in this legend would have particularly caught the attention of medieval shipmen. In the first, the Magdalene is set adrift in an unmanned boat off the coast of the Holy Land, but Providence sees to it that she is transported safely to the South of France. In the second, the Queen of Marseilles, on her way to Rome, apparently dies in childbirth aboard ship, and she and her infant are abandoned on a rocky island; but through the intercession of St. Mary and St. Peter (once a fisherman, of course) another ship is blown back to the island, where mother and child are found safe and alive. These well-known tales of God's help in navigation and of his protection of those in peril on the sea helped to make Mary Magdalene an appropriate patroness after whom ships should be named.

The canonical accounts of the saint also explain why sailors revered her, even though in these accounts she is never off dry land. During the Middle Ages and for long afterwards the Western Church[6] insisted that St. Mary Magdalene was not just the "Mary called Magdalene, out of whom went seven devils" (Luke viii.2), who was at the foot of the Cross (John xix.25), and who wept as she waited with ointments outside the Sepulchre (John xx.1–18). Traditionally, she was also identified with the Mary of Bethany who chose the better part (Luke x.38–42), who wept for her dead brother Lazarus before Jesus resurrected him (John xi.1–46), and who anointed Jesus' feet and wiped them with her hair (John xii.1–13). Moreover, she was also taken to be the same person as the unnamed "woman in the city, which was a sinner" (apparently guilty of sexual offenses), who wept as she washed and anointed Jesus' feet and wiped them with her hair, and who was forgiven her sins because "she loved much" (Luke vii.37–50).

Two, or possibly three, prominent and recurring matters in these Biblical narratives would have made the Magdalene dear to the Shipman and his contemporaries. The first and most striking of these is the activity for which she has always been best known: her weeping. One thinks, for example, of Richard Crashaw's poem, "Sainte Mary Magdalene or the Weeper," and of many another continental poem that Crashaw knew. There were also countless Renaissance and baroque paintings of the

---

[5]*Legend of Good Women,* F 427–28, G 417–18. See, of recent date, John P. McCall, "Chaucer and the Pseudo Origen *De Maria Magdalena:* A Preliminary Study," *Speculum,* 46 (1971), 491–509, and Rosemary Woolf, "English Imitations of the *Homelia Origenis de Maria Magdalena,*" in *Chaucer and Middle English Studies in Honour of Rossell Hope Robbins,* ed. Beryl Rowland (London: Allen & Unwin, 1974), pp. 384–91.

[6]On the confusion see, e.g., *The New Catholic Encyclopedia,* s. vv. "Mary Magdalene" and "Mary and Martha of Bethany."

weeping Magdalene, and her name gives us, of course, the word "maudlin." There is an easy and natural association between salt tears and salt water and between copious tears and the ocean. (Cf. Crashaw's likening her eyes to "two faithfull fountaines; / Two walking baths; two weeping motions; / Portable and compendious oceans.") The associations would have seemed even more appropriate in Chaucer's time when, as we have seen, the Magdalene was already connected with sea-faring; and they would have been reinforced still further, if perhaps in circles more intellectual than the Shipman's, by etymologies in the *Legenda Aurea* that took the name "Mary" to signify "bitterness," "bitter sea," or "star of the sea."[7]

Also, the ointment that the saint so often uses in the Bible and that is the basis of the emblematic vase that she is depicted with would have been significant to the medieval shipowner. It was expensive, compact, lightweight, low-risk, high-profit luxury merchandise: in short, the kind of cargo you would pray to own part of.

Finally, only Mary Magdalene witnessed the death and resurrection of both Lazarus and Jesus. The story about the Queen of Marseilles and her dead child in the later saint's legend clearly owes its origin in part to a pious wish to have the Magdalene not only witness but herself bring about a similar miraculous resurrection. Death comes unexpectedly otherwise than by water, but the dangers from that element are so great and so sudden that those who went down to the sea in ships would have had special reason to honor St. Mary Magdalene, who was associated with providential rescue not just from the jaws of death but from death itself.

On the other hand, the Shipman probably had another, far less pious reason for christening his barge as he did. In rough seas or ashore in his home port of Dartmouth, in the company of his wife or confessor, the Shipman might well have held forth gratefully, and no doubt sincerely, on the physical safety and spiritual balm he derived from dedicating his ship to the Magdalene. But if what we popularly and traditionally believe about sailors and their love lives is true, then in calm seas or ashore in Hull, Bordeaux, or Carthage, in the company of other master mariners, or chatting up a pretty ship's chandler's daughter, the Shipman would have been hoping to encounter a beautiful, long-haired, red-headed magdalene — one who "loved much" but had not yet repented.[8]

---

[7]See Garth (n. 3 above), pp. 413–14.

[8]On the beauty and hair color of the Magdalene see Garth, pp. 399–400. It may be indecorous to say so in a scholarly journal, but those of us of middle age will recall the 1953 film, *The Captain's Paradise*, as a modern parallel to what is said of the Shipman in the present study.

The Shipman and his fourteenth-century colleagues probably took pleasure in calling their ships *Magdalene,* intending that most landdwellers should recognize the nautical piety but miss the nautical bawdiness of the allusion. I don't think that Chaucer missed it.

California University of Pennsylvania

Announcements

The North Central Names Institute will be held in Sugar Grove, Illinois, in October, 1984. For details, write or call Laurence Seits, Waubonsee Community College, Sugar Grove, IL 60554

The Annual Connecticut Onomastic Symposium will be held at Eastern Connecticut State College, Willimantic, Connecticut, in October, 1984. For details, call or write to Arthur and Gina Berliner, Route 169, Brooklyn, CT 06234; or Dean A. Reilein, Mountain Road, Mansfield Center, CT 06250

The Annual Meeting of the South Central Names Institute will be held at East Texas State University, Commerce, Texas, in June, 1984. Please write to Fred Tarpley, Dept. of English, ETSU, Commerce, TX 75428