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The role of the metrical and rhyme pattern
in Mary Magdalene

Mary Magdalene è una *mystery-morality play* anonima, scritta probabilmente a cavallo del XV sec., quando il Great Vowel Shift iniziò ad esercitare la propria influenza sul sistema fonetico del Medio Inglese.

La confusione che avvolge ogni tentativo di analisi linguistica dell'opera – e di conseguenza ogni altro tentativo di definirne la scansione metrica precisa – ha la propria base nello stereotipo dello scriba 'incompetente'. In realtà, ciò che i curatori contemporanei dell'opera evidenziano come 'errori grafici' o come 'forme obsolete' potrebbero corrispondere a una sorta di licenza poetica che l'autore si è preso per dare al testo il senso particolare che voleva conferire ad esso.

In questo articolo, partendo dal presupposto che lo scriba di *Mary Magdalene* fosse in realtà competente nel proprio lavoro, metteremo in evidenza quelle forme che sono sempre state classificate come errori degli scriba e le analizzeremo in considerazione della loro funzione all'interno della scansione prosodica dell'opera. Dimostreremo che in *Mary Magdalene* la ragione per cui tali varietà 'fuorvianti', ascritte alla mancata comprensione dello scriba, sono state selezionate dall'autore sta nel tentativo di realizzare uno schema prosodico preciso corrispondente agli scopi poetici dell'autore stesso. Tali forme verranno classificate in due categorie: (a) forme particolari che possono essere spiegate dalla struttura metrica della stanza in cui si trovano, e (b) varietà linguistiche, non comprese dai filologi, che possono essere ricostruite etimologicamente grazie allo schema ritmico della stanza in cui si trovano. Il risultato finale è che lo schema metrico e ritmico dell'opera ha un ruolo fondamentale nell'identificare quelle varietà diacroniche e diatopiche, usate dall'autore di *Mary Magdalene*, che sono sempre state apparentemente considerate come prive di senso e perciò sottovalutate in studi pregressi.

1. Introduction

Mary Magdalene is an anonymous mystery-morality play probably written at the turn of the 15th century, when the Great Vowel Shift (henceforth GVS) began to exert its influence. The overall linguistic aspects of the play have already been analysed (Baker / Murphy 1976;

Baker / Murphy / Hall 1982; Bevington 1975, Devlin 1965, Donovan 1977; Furnivall 1882; Grantley 1983; Pollard 1890, Schmidt 1885) and attempts have been made to ascertain the regional and / or dialectal area of provenance, with the result that its language has been identified as belonging to the East-Midland dialect (Furnivall 1882; Pollard 1890; Devlin 1965; Bevington 1975; Baker / Murphy 1976; Donovan 1977; Baker / Murphy / Hall 1982; Grantley 1983). Attempts have also been made to describe the metrical scansion and the rhyme pattern of the play that seem chaotic to most editors (Baker / Murphy 1976; Baker / Murphy / Hall 1982; Bevington 1975, Devlin 1965, Donovan 1977; Furnivall 1882; Grantley 1983; Pollard 1890, Schmidt 1885). According to them, evidence for this claim is to be found in the fact that the manuscript of *Mary Magdalene* is such a bad and a hurried copy of the original text that it has been classified as the earliest pirated copy of an English play (see, for instance, Baker / Murphy / Hall 1982: 31-32). This may well be true. Nevertheless, in the linguistic analysis of the play, it is precisely the rhyme and the metrical scansion that can help us to understand either the meaning of a word or the use of one dialectal and / or archaic form instead of another. The confusion looming over any linguistic analysis of the play – and consequently over any attempt to find its precise metrical scansion – rests on the general, misleading stereotypes, according to which scribes were incompetent in their work. On the contrary, scribes were not 'fools' (Laing 2001: 90)[1] and when copying their exemplars, with their own personal writing systems, they were reproducing a text maintaining the intents of its author. They probably made mistakes, but what modern editors generally classify as 'misspelling' or 'mistake' or even as 'obsolete' forms (compared with the ones occurring at that time) might actually correspond to poetical licence the author took to give the text the particular meaning he wanted (Maci 1999).

In this paper, starting from the assumption that the scribe of *Mary Magdalene* was competent in his copying, we will therefore highlight those forms which have always been classified as scribal mistakes and

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[1] A more detailed explanation about the relationship between ME scribal practice and its contemporary interpretation is offered by Laing 1999, 2000, 2001, and forthcoming. I am grateful to Dr. Laing for permission to read her paper prior to publication. See also Maci (2003).

analyze them considering their function in the prosodic pattern of the play. The paper will show that in *Mary Magdalene* the accomplishment of a precise prosodic scheme is the reason why such 'confusing' varieties, ascribed to the scribe's misunderstanding, have on the contrary been selected by the author for his own poetical purposes. Such forms will then be categorized into two classes: (a) peculiar forms that can be explained by the metrical structure of the stanzas where they occur, and (b) peculiar varieties, misunderstood by scholars, that can be reconstructed etymologically thanks to the rhyme-pattern of the stanza in which they occur. The result will be that the metrical and rhyme patterns of the play have a fundamental role in identifying those diachronic and diatopic varieties employed by the *Mary Magdalene* author which are apparently nonsense and have therefore been underestimated in previous studies.

2. *The manuscript: authorship, date and provenance.*

The text of *Mary Magdalene* is preserved in the Bodleian MSS Digby 133, where it occupies ff. 95r–145r. The first page has the initials M.B., identified as those of Myles Blomefylde (see Baker / Murphy / Hall 1982: ix-x for a detailed description of Myles Bloomfylde's biography). At the end, the words "explicit oreginale de Sancta Maria Magdalena" have been taken by editors as meaning that the MS referred to a play. Since the text of *Mary Magdalene* in the MS Digby 133 is not the original one but a very bad and hurried copy, it seems likely that the scribe copied the inscription found at the end of the original (Baker / Murphy / Hall 1982: xxvii).

The initials of Myles Blomefylde at the beginning of the play might lead to the conclusion that he was the author of the play. Yet, the paper used has a watermark dated 1510–1525 which confutes the supposition of Myles' authorship, since Myles was born in 1525. The fact that the text of *Mary Magdalene* is a copy, as said before, makes the identification of its author impossible.

Mary Magdalene is wholly in one hand and the scribal practice follows the tradition of the 1520s. This, combined with the date of the watermark, has led some scholars (Baker / Murphy 1967, 1976) to the con-

clusion that the play had been written in the second decade of the 16th century, and therefore later than 1485, the supposed date of composition given by Furnivall (1882: 301). Yet, even if the scribal tradition and the watermark suggest an early 16th century date, this might refer to the date of the copying whereas the original play might be several years earlier than the surviving manuscript (Donovan 1977: xi).

On the basis of the linguistic study of the text, scholars (Furnivall 1882: xiv and note to 53; Pollard 1890: 193; Devlin 1965-66: iv; Bevington 1975: 689; Donovan 1977: xv; Baker / Murphy / Hall 1982: xxxvi; Grantley 1983: 442) have agreed on an East Midland provenance, more closely identified as Norfolk or East Anglia.[2]

3. Versification, rhyme and alliteration in Mary Magdalene.

Mary Magdalene has been regarded as the play bridging the gap between mediaeval and modern drama (Saintsbury 1906: 337). Probably written at the turn of the 15th-16th centuries, it is clear that it reflects the prosody of that period – the 'regular' Old English (henceforth OE) prosody had been erased by a chaotic ME one which underwent the influence of the Italian sonnet, classical verse, and the two combined together. Of course, the resulting prosody could not be a success: the pattern of the Italian sonnet applied to verse in England before Wyatt and Surrey still showed the defects of English prosody and the use of classical prosody in English was a failure – in a language characterized by accent and intonation, the attempt to write in quantitative verses was not very successful (Saintsbury 1906: 303-4, 318-9; Hollander 1981: 5).

No wonder, then, that the play shows a rather irregular metrical division. It has a four-stress verse, typical of the late medieval drama of East Anglia (Baker / Murphy / Hall 1982: xxxiii); it is generally in iambic lines, which may have from eight to sixteen syllables, especially in the first part. According to most editors, the metrical scansion of the play might regularly point to iambs when the play is read silently and syllables can be elided, but since in some cases final syllables cannot be syn-

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[2] Schmidt (1885: 385) claims the language of *Mary Magdalene* is in the West-Midlands dialect with features belonging to Kentish.

copated because of the rhyme, the scansion seems uneven. This is also in consideration of the fact that the lack of any norms of spelling in late ME, in general, and in the play, in particular, might result in the occurrence of extra syllables which "can defeat the best efforts of a modern critic" (Donovan 1977: xxvii).

The stanzaic structure of *Mary Magdalene* is chaotic largely because of imperfect copying (Baker / Murphy / Hall, 1982: xxxiii; Schmidt 1885: 387): more than 30 lines are missing, most of them in tail–rhyming stanzas.[3] The main sections of the play are in double quatrains and tail–rhyming stanzas, following either an *abab bcbc*, an *abab cdcd*, an *abab cdcd effe* pattern, or even more complex ones. Consecutive stanzas are linked together thanks to rhyming verses; occasionally, unrhymed lines separate stanzas. Generally, however, stanzas end with one character's speech or where the sense indicates the sentence should end (the only *enjambement* found in the play is probably at ll.2082-83); they also mark the conclusion of a scene.

Mary Magdalene is also characterized by a great use of alliteration, especially in boasting speeches, such as the Emperors' opening speech (ll.1-19), Herod's bombast (ll.140-166), Pilate's vaunt (ll.229-243), and the King of Marseilles' boast (ll.925-49). It is worth noting that alliteration is used by evil and powerful characters, including devils. This use of alliteration is indicative of arrogance and impertinence. In some cases, alliteration underlines new directions of the play, particularly in opening speeches, such as the speech of Cyrus (ll.49-84), necessary to introduce his part in the play. 'Good' characters generally do not use alliteration; if they do, alliteration has the function of emphasising themes. Minor characters normally do not employ alliteration, except in the few burlesque scenes.

We must make two digressions here. Firstly, in the previous para-

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[3] Baker / Murphy / Hall (1982: xxxiv) postulate the loss as follows: four lines after l.228, the second half of an eight-line stanza with an *aaabcccb*-rhyme pattern; after l.237, the first *b*-line of an *ababbcbc* double quatrain; the *a* rhyme line following l.328; two lines in the passage ll.498-536; a tail-rhyming line after l.542; the line after l.670; one line in the passage after l.726; three lines after ll.737-739; the last *c*-line of the double quatrain formed by ll.846-52; the second *b*-line of an *abab* quatrain after line 920; the line after l.944; a *c*-line of an *aaabcccb* tail-rhyming stanza after l.1175; a line in ll.1241-48; a *c*-line from an *aabccb* tail-rhyming stanza after l.1333; one line after l.1353; one or two lines in ll.1349-55; one line between ll.1439-1445; the line after l.1495; one or two lines in ll.1520-25; the lines after l.1529, l.1701, and l.1893.

graph, we have seen it is commonly held that when *Mary Magdalene* is read silently and syllables can be elided, the metrical scansion of the play points to an iambic structure. But if this is a play, this text was not to be 'read silently', but performed.[4] Even if we admit that the play was 'read', we must make a distinction between oral and silent reading modes[5]. Silent reading requires such sub-skills as word analysis (phonic and phonemic awareness), word recognition, fluency, word meaning, and background knowledge; oral reading, instead, implies:

> a reader's perceptual skill at automatically translating letters into coherent sound representations, unitizing those sound components into recognizable wholes and automatically accessing lexical representations, processing meaningful connections within and between sentences, relating text meaning to prior information, and making inferences to supply missing information. (Fuchs / Fuchs / Hosp 2001: 239-240).

The key point is the difference between the phonemic awareness of silent reading and the phonemic awareness and representation of oral reading. As it takes longer to read words aloud than to read them silently, there is more time to process what one reads aloud. Silent reading, though maintaining our awareness of the syllable presence and phonemic value, makes us skip some syllables rather than elide them in actual pronunciation.

Secondly, according to most editors, the metrical scansion of the play seems chaotic and uneven, because of the lack of any norms of spelling in late ME, which in the play resulted in the occurrence of extra syllables. Yet, we must remember that the metrical scansion of the play is accentual and not syllabic: ME had a prosody based on the coincidence of metrical stress and word accent (Schipper 1910: 171-182). As a matter of fact, some editors (Baker / Murphy / Hall 1982) have pointed ed out that the play tends to be written in iambs which may have from eight to sixteen syllables. It seems, therefore, that the presence or the

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[4] Baker / Murphy / Hall (1982: xxxiv) confirm the fact that "*Mary Magdalene* seems to have been a play that had an active life over some years".

[5] Silent and oral reading modes differ a lot one from the other. A deeper insight into the issue can be seen on the web site http://www.nifl.gov/readingprofiles (which lists the oral and silent reading skills).

absence of certain syllables is irrelevant to the realization of metrical stress. We must concede, however, that the metre seems chaotic. Indeed, when alliteration occurs in *Mary Magdalene*, the lines tend to resemble what Saintsbury calls *doggerel*, 'i.e. a bad verse which attempts to a certain norm or form and fails' (1906: 337). As Saintsbury (1906: 392) recalls, the limited poetical skills of the author are not to be blamed, but rather the massive influence of Italian and Classical prosody on the Middle English (henceforth ME) one.

Furthermore, the absence of any spelling norms in ME does not mean that the exemplar copyists had was 'corrupted' or that the scribes were not competent in their work. The fact that ME scribes did not feel any obligation either to preserve the original spelling or to "observe complete consistency in adapting the spelling of [their] original to make it conform to [their] own practice" (Brook 1963: 56) is not synonymous with a 'lower' quality of the represented language. Normally, ME scribes, while copying their texts, would translate their exemplar into their own dialect. To be more precise, as better explained by Laing (forthcoming) any ME scribe could be either a *Literatim*, a *Translator* or a *Mixer*. *Literatim* scribes had no difficulty in reproducing the language of the manuscript in exactly the same way as their exemplar, regardless of their regional or dialectal provenance. As Laing states, they saw one language in one place and switched off their own language in the operation. *Translators* had no difficulty in understanding the language of the manuscript and reproduced it in the linguistic variant they required (in this case, their own dialect could switch on or off, according to their regional provenance and to whether the written forms of their exemplar were familiar to them or not). As Laing (forthcoming) further pinpoints:

> a 'translator' […] did not need to adapt all the forms of his exemplar because many were familiar to him, but […] did not increasingly change less familiar forms to his own preferred usage as he settled into translating mode.

Mixers were somewhat in the middle as they, very likely, started their job as *literatim* but switched on their language in progress (Laing forthcoming).

We believe that the scribe of our only extant copy of *Mary Magdalene* was a *literatim* because he reproduced the same diatopic and diastratic variants the author of the play might employ for his own poetical purposes, which explains why the language of our manuscript is so rich in internal variants. If he had been a *translator*, for example, he would not have maintained the *–eth* desinence in the present indicative plural forms in a text where the language adopted clearly points to a Midlands dialect,[6] but would have smoothed all such variants in the only possible features allowed by his own dialect. As Laing (forthcoming) puts it, in 'the language of a literatim, the language of a scribe is irrelevant. The person(s) 'become(s)' the place(s) […] and/or the time(s)'.

This was a necessity, since not only texts but also scribes were not physically linked to the area of their origin, as they could move about (Beadle 1991: 90, 93). It must be remembered that in ME the whole spelling system was undergoing a radical process of change. The Norman Conquest influenced written English with its widespread use of French and Latin in England, although the drawing up of documents in English did not completely cease. The resulting confusion forced scribes to adopt their own spelling system (Laing 1991: 33-39). While copying, scribes had to decode their original exemplars and to re-encode them with different encoding solutions so as to make clear the sense and the meaning of the original manuscript (Laing 1999). In some cases, they even invented nonsensical spellings because they did not understand the strange and archaic words used in the original text (Laing 1991: 39).

As to *Mary Magdalene*, its manuscript was copied by one scribe who had an inconsistent style, probably due to the fact that his exemplar was inconsistent, according to Baker / Murphy / Hall (1982: xxxi- xxxii).

In our examination of those particular forms categorized as 'inconsistencies', 'nonsensical spellings' or 'misspellings' by modern editors we found that they tend to be mainly caused by the metrical scansion, the rhyme requirements and the general prosodic pattern of the play.

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[6] The final desinence *-eth* used for the present indicative plural form was an OE Southern feature still found in early ME. Yet, we have discovered that in *Mary Magdalene* such a desinence did not occur under the Southern influence: it was just a Southern graphical feature used with a Northern grammar rule, according to which it was possible to use a plural desinence in the present indicative only when the subject of the sentence was a pronoun immediately preceding the verb. Further, in the text of *Mary Magdalene*, this seems possible only when noble characters speak (Maci 2003).

3.1. *The metrical scansion: the pleonastic use of 'to do'.*

Maci (2003) shows that some of the forms found in the play occur because of their function as social markers. This also seems the case of the pleonastic use of the verb *to do*, which occurs in the pagan Emperor's utterances and in those of Mary Magdalene's pagan father, where their bombasts are also underlined by alliteration, as well as in the converted King of Marseilles' prayer. In all these cases, the pleonastic auxiliary seems to be the prerogative of noble people's speech. Yet, the verb *to do* used as a pleonasm has another function: that of creating additional syllables to accomplish the metrical scansion of the stanza in which it occurs. The first case can be seen in ll.43-44:

> (1)   EMPEROR. *Lord and lad to my law doth lowte!*
> *Is it nat so? Sey yow all wyth on showte!*

It is the opening scene, in which the pagan Emperor appears in all his futile power and strength. The rhythm of the speech is marked by the scansion of the metrical feet: l.43 presents two trochees followed by two iambs, the latter of which is recalled by l.44 that begins with two trochees followed by two anapaests. It seems as if the pitch of voice of a powerful man were accompanied by war-like drums, signalling the rhythm of a marching soldier. All this is favoured by the pause provided by the unstressed *doth*.

The same war-like drum rhythm continues in l.61, where we find Cyrus, Mary Magdalene's father, demonstrating his own power to the audience:

> (2)   *& lord of Ierusalem who agens me don dare*

The line opens with an initial iamb followed by three anapaests, closed by another iamb. Such parallelism is possible thanks to the pleonastic *don* which not only provides an unstressed syllable necessary to accomplish the metrical pattern of the line, but also emphasises the punishment implied by Cyrus' words.

The last two instances of the pleonastic use of the verb *to do* are to be found in the 'moving' scene (ll.1887-1898) in which the King of

Marseilles, now converted to the Christian religion, sailing back from Rome where he has been baptized by St. Peter, stops at the rock where he had laid the dead body of his wife and the baby she had had. To his wonder and to the audience's relief, the baby is alive and healthy, and so is his mother. His happiness is expressed in a fervent prayer to the Lord which has its climax in l.1890:

    (3)   *blyssyd be þat lord þat þe dothe socur*

and in l.1897:

    (4)   *A, þe sonne of grace on vs doth shynne!*

Both lines have trochaic feet, a frame possible thanks to the occurrence of *dothe*, the necessary stressed syllable. Therefore, in all the instances examined, the presence of the pleonastic *do* supports not only the alliteration running throughout, but also the creation of parallel or mirroring metrical feet along the line.

3.2. *Metrical scansion and rhyme pattern:*
     Southern infinitive desinences.

The presence of additional syllables necessary for metrical purposes is most evident in other 'scribal misunderstandings'. In the play there occur some infinitive verbs with the Southern desinence *-en*[7] which have always been regarded as scribal misspellings (Baker / Murphy / Hall 1982). However, the possibility of a scribal mistake in the play may be indirectly confuted by the fact that the Southern desinence is typical of *monosyllabic* verbs as in the case of *shewyn* (l.898) and of *rewlyn* (l.1689). There is, however, another case, *abydyn* (l.1990) which is disyllabic. Why is the final infinitive Southern desinence added in a linguistic environment that did not usually allow it? It can be observed that the final Southern desinence does not occur in all situations, but only when such important

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[7] In the South, the desinence used for the infinitive *-en*, *-n* (< OE *-an*) remained until the end of 14th century and somewhat longer in monosyllabic forms, whereas in the Midlands *-en*, *-n* disappeared earlier (Brunner 1970: 71)

and good characters as Jesus, Martha, Mary Magdalene or the converted King of Marseilles speak. It seems therefore that the -*en* serves as a social marker indicating fine and polite speech. Secondly, if we consider the situation in which such a form occurs, we can see that this may be related to metrical scansion: the presence of the unnecessary Southern desinence may be regarded as a way to create an additional syllable for the author's metrical purposes. This is the case of l.898:

(5)   *The agreement of grace, her shewyn I will*

This line is uttered by Jesus who is asking Mary and Martha to take him to Lazarus' burying place. Since it is the scene of Lazarus' resurrection, it must be very solemn. Christ's words must be pronounced with special intensity and clarity, underlined by the alliteration of [g] and [r] in *agreement* and *grace*. Here, the line has a regular metrical pattern where the sequence of the anapaestic feet could be lost if the final –*yn* of *shewyn* had not occurred. Such an alternation is then taken up again by Martha who says *A, Lord, yower preseptt fulfyllyd xall be* (l.899), as if perfect Christianity were associated with proper speech, though the parallelism is interrupted by an initial iamb: perfection only pertains to God and not to human beings who can only aspire to it.

The occurrence of a final unnecessary Southern syllable is even more striking in the case of a disyllabic infinitive verb in l.1990:

(6)   *In þis deserte abydyn wyll wee*

where thanks to the presence of the final -*yn* of *abydyn* the line is resolved in an anapaestic trimeter (in which final *wee* is accented because of rhythmical reasons). The presence of a final anapaest seems confirmed by the fact that all the lines (ll.1990-2002) forming the stanza in which Mary Magdalene speaks end with an anapaest: Mary can use anapaests because by now she has been raised to the stature of a saint thanks to her purification obtained with thirty years of ascetic life.

Another function assigned to the unnecessary Southern infinitive desinence of both monosyllabic and disyllabic verbs is that of accomplishing a rhyme pattern which would not be possible without this Southern variant. An example is given by the following rhyme (ll.164-166):

(7) *How sey þe phylyssoverys be my ryche **reyne**?*
     Am nat I þe grettest governowur?
     *Lett me ondyrstond whatt can ye **seyn**!*

and by the rhyme indicated below (ll.1327-1330):

(8) *IMPERATOR. Crafty was þer connyng, þe soth for to **seyn**!*
     Thys pystyll I wyll kepe wyth me yff I can,
     *Also I wyll have cronekyllyd þe ȝere and þe **reynne**,*
     þat nevyr xall be forgott, whoso loke þeron.

The rhymes *reyn/seyn* (ll.164-166) and *seyn/reynne* (ll.1327-1330) would not perfectly rest on [ɛɪn][8] of *reyne* (< Old French (henceforth OF) *reigne, raigne, rengne*) and of *seyn* (< OE *sĕcgan*), if the occurrence of the infinitive inflectional ending -yn typical of the Southern and Eastern dialects (Mossé 1991: 76) did not occur. The same is true for the perfect rhymes in (9) (ll.507-510), (10) (ll.1011-1014), (11) (ll.1708-1711), and (12) (ll.1749-1752), all of them possible thanks to the presence of the final -(*e*)*n* desinence:

(9) *LUXSURYA. Lady, þis man is for ȝow, as I se **can**,*
     To sett yow i[n] sporttys and talkyng þis tyde!

     *MARY. Cal hym in, tavernere, as ȝe my loue wyll **han**,*
     And we xall make ful mery yf he wolle abyde!

where the rhyme rests on [æn], as both *can* (from OE *cŭnnan* with *ă* of the Modern English (henceforth ModE) form deriving from the indicative present–stem *ic cănn*) and *han* (from OE *hăbban*) have etymological OE *ă*;

(10) *MARY MAGDLEYN. Now to þe monument lett vs **gon**,*
     Wheras ower Lord and Savyower layd was,
     *To anoynt hym, body and **bone**,*
     To make amendys for ower trespas.

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[8] The original palatal realization of *-gn* absent in the English sound–system, was resolved into an alveolar [n] preceded by a [ɪ] glide (Pope 1934: 450). The diphthong developed in this way coalesced with ME *ei* with which it shared the GVS developments.

in which the rhyme might rest on [oːn] of *gon* (< OE *gān*) and *bone* (< OE *bān*), as both words have radical OE *ā* which developed to late OE *ọ̄* and then to late ME *ọ̄* due to the GVS;

> (11) *REX. Wyff, syn þat ʒe woll take þis wey of pryse,*
> *þerto can I no more **seyn**.*
> *Now Jhesu be ower gyd, þat is hye justyce,*
> *And þis blyssyd womman, Mary **Mavgleyn**!*

where the rhyme rests on [ɛːn] of *seyn* (< OE *sĕcgan*) and *mavgleyn* (< Latin (henceforth L) *Magdalēna* or < OF *maudlin*), which also seems the realization of the rhyme:

> (12) *REX. A, my dere wyffe, no dred ʒe have,*
> *Butt trost in Mary **Mavdleyn**,*
> *And she from perellys xall vs save!*
> *To God for vs she woll **prayyn**.*

where, in *prayyn* (< OF *preier*), OF *ei* entered ME and coalesced with native *ei* with which it followed the lowering to ME *ai* and the consequent development to late ME. The presence of the final Southern desinence –*yn* in *prayyn* is here clearly added to accomplish the rhyme, as the same verb appears as *pray*, without the Southern ending, in the rhyme formed by ll.1682-1684:

> (13) *To allmythy God he halp me **pray**,*
> *And he xall crestyn yow from þe fynddys powyr,*
> *In þe syth of God an **hye**!*

and in the rhyme (ll.1693-1696):

> (14) *REGINA. Now, worshepfull lord, of a bone I yow **pray**,*
> *And it be pleseyng to yower hye dygnite.*
> *REX. Madam, yower dysyere onto me **say**.*
> *What bone is þat ʒe desyere of me?*

There is an interesting rhyme (ll.534-535) in which a monosyllabic verb with the Southern desinence -*en* rhymes with the word *ten* which has been misleadingly regarded by modern editors as the number 'ten' and not as a verb.

> (15) *CORIOSTE. Now, be my trowth, ʒe be wyth other **ten**.*
>   *Felle a pese, tavernere, let vs **sen**—*

Most scholars, disregarding the existence of the rhyme, have emend-ed the sentence *with other ten* in various ways: Adams (1924: 235), one of the first editors of *Mary Magdalene*, emended the expression 'with other things grieved'; yet, at this stage Mary is showing no sign of grief: Mary is dancing with Curiosity, one of the deadly sins, and is actually leaving the mode of living of the perfect Christian to follow the wrong teachings of the Devil. For this reason Baker / Murphy / Hall (1982: 204) claimed that *ten* is actually a scribal error and that *ten* is the cardinal number. Grantley (1983: 352), on the other hand, supposes that ten is the past participle of the verb *tēn* (< OE *tēon*) meaning 'to lead, to draw'. Hence the whole line could be rendered "now, by my troth, you are led by another", referring to the dance and in a more sinister sense, to the corruption of Mary's soul. These interpretations can be true and there are apparently no clues to what is the right one. Yet, none of these editors has ever etymologically reconstructed the word taking into consideration the rhyme in which *ten* occurs. If we consider the rhyme, we can easily disre-gard Baker / Murphy / Hall's (1982) claims: if *ten* were the cardinal num-ber, it should be pronounced as [ten] which clashes with the fact that the word is rhyming with *sen*, the Southern infinitive form of 'to see', which here should be pronounced as ME *sēn*. Only Grantley's interpretation can be accepted because it is certainly supported by the rhyme, which per-fectly rests on [iːn] of *ten* and of *sen* 'see' (< OE *sēon*), since both had OE *ēo* > [øː] which coalesced with the existing ME *ē* sharing with it the later GVS developments. That is a clear example of how the rhyme can help us to eliminate the ambiguity surrounding the etymological inter-pretation of any forms regarded by modern editors as 'scribal errors'.

3.3. *Etymological reconstructions.*

Another ambiguous rhyme is *expert / desert* found in the stanza formed by ll.686-691:

> (16) *JHESUS. Woman, in contryssyon þou art **expert**,*
>   *And in þi sowle hast inward mythe,*
>   *That sumtyme were in **desert**,*

> *And from therknesse hast porchasyd lyth.*
> *Thy feyth hath savyt pe, and made þe bryth!*
> *Wherfor I sey to þe, 'Vade in pace'.*

Ambiguity is due to the fact that the only two editors who try to interpret the lines give opposite meaning to l.688: Bevington (1975: 711) glosses the verse as 'that deserves future grace'; Baker / Murphy / Hall (1982: 205-206) as 'that before were in the desert', and considers the desert as the wasteland of the spirit in which Mary was before her repentance, since ll.686-689 emphasize the contrast of what has happened before and after the repentance. If we look at the rhyme, it apparently rests either on unaccented [ært] > [ərt] of *desert* (< OF *desert*, 'an arid place') and on accented [ært] > [ɜːrt] of *desert* (< OF *desert*, 'what is deserved'). As a matter of fact, the same distinction appears nowadays as we have two different pronunciations for *desert* meaning 'an arid place' (/ˈdezət/; Wells 1990: 201) or *desert* meaning 'what is deserved' (/diˈzəːt/; Wells 1990: 201). Although the author of the play apparently employs the double sense *desert* might have (considering that Jesus is speaking of light and brightness obtained by darkness, power from contrition, and therefore 'things to be deserved' from the desert), if we look at the rhyme, however, the kind of vowels occurring in the final syllable of both *expert* and *desert* seems to suggest that *desert* might have the sense emended by Bevington, that makes the rhyme very likely rest on final accented [ært] and which seems indirectly confirmed by the occurrence of a less frequently-used Received Pronunciation (henceforth RP) of *expert* as [ekˈspəːt] (Wells 1990: 260).

Another ambiguous that meaning can be explained thanks to rhyme is found in ll.893-896:

> (17) JHESUS. *Wher have ʒe put hym? Sey me **thys**.*
> MARY MAGDALEN. *In hys mo[nv]ment, Lord, is he.*
> JHESUS. *To that place ʒe me **wys**.*
> *Thatt grave I desyre to se.*

The rhyme occurs in a stanza which precedes the scene of Lazarus' resurrection and in a dialogue between Jesus and Mary Magdalene. The atmosphere is tense and moving as Jesus has not arrived in time to save

Lazarus from death. We have already seen that Jesus, symbol of perfection, cannot speak a corrupted language and for this reason we believe the rhyme must be perfect. Yet, Adams (1924: 242), Baker / Murphy / Hall (1982: 281) and Bevington (1975: 717) translate *wys* as the verb 'to guide'. This cannot be possible since, as we said above, Jesus' speech and rhyme must be perfect. On the contrary, we believe that the verb means 'to point the way' (see OED). The confusion might arise from the fact that the editors have regarded *wys* as deriving from OE *wīsan* (which had a late ME form *wyse*) and not from OE *wĭssian* (of which a late ME variant *wys(se)* existed). The rhyme clearly shows that the verb intended here is *wys* 'to point out (the way)'; if so, it can perfectly rest on [ɪs] of *thys* (< OE *ðĕs*).

A comic relief scene occurs in ll.1186-1201, forming a stanza which follows an *aaaa aaaa aaaa bb cc* rhyme pattern: here is the hilarious 'Leccyo Mahowndys' in which gibberish Latin is used by a boy who is mocking a pagan minister at the court of the king of Marseilles:

> (18) *Leccyo mahowndys, viri fortissimi sarasenorum:*
> *Glabriosum ad glvmandum glvmardinorum,*
> *Gormonoorum alocorum, stampatinantum cursorum,*
> *Cownthtys fulcatum, congrvryandum tersorum,*
> *Mursum malgorum, mararaʒorum,*
> *Skartum sialporum, fartum cardicutorum,*
> *Slavndri strovmppum, corbolcorum,*
> *Snyguer snagoer werwoliforum*
> *Standgardum lamba beffettorum,*
> *Strowtum stardy strangolcorum,*
> *Rygour dagour flapporum,*
> *Castratum raty rybaldorum,*
> *Howndys and hoggys, in heggys and hellys,*
> *Snakys and toddys mott be yower bellys!*
> *Ragnell and Roflyn, and other in þe **wavys**,*
> *Gravntt yow grace to dye on þe **galows**!*

The ambiguous rhyme is in ll.1200-1201: ambiguity is created because of the meaning given by the editors to the expression *in Þe wavys*. Although Pollard (1890: 224c) emends *wavys* as *wowes* in order to make it rhyme with *gallows*, Baker / Murphy / Hall (1982: 211) translate it as 'in the way'. If Pollard's intuition is right, then *wowes* derives

from OE *wāwa* and means 'distress', 'trouble', 'misery'. Yet, *wawys* might also be a variant for *wough* (< OE *wǭh*, which in the inflected forms developed to OE *wǭȝ*-), 'evil', common from the 9th century to the 15th century (OED). If *wavys* derives from OE inflectional form *wǭȝ*-, it then developed to ME *wow*- [woʊ] which, in accordance with the GVS, changed to [woː-] in the 16th century. In this case, the rhyme might be perfect, resting on late ME [oʊz] of *wavys* and *galows* (< OE *galȝa*), in which final *-ow*, apparently considered as a diphthong,[9] followed the above–mentioned developments. Further support deriving from a philological analysis of the rhyme is found in the following stanza comprising ll.1297-1303:

> (19) *Soferyn, and it plese yower hye empyre,*
> *I have browth yow wrytyng of grett **aprise**,*
> *Wyche xall be pleseyng to yower desyre,*
> *From Pylatt, yower hye **justyce**.*
> *He sentt yow word wyth lowly intentt;*
> *In ewery place he kepytt yower cummavndement,*
> *As he is bovnd be hys **ofyce**.*

Here, the stanza is following an *ababccb* tail-rhyming pattern. The *b*-lines obviously form a perfect rhyme on [ɪs] of *aprise* (< OF *apprise*, 'thing learned'), *iustyce* (< OF *justice*) and of *ofyce* (< OF *office*), as in all words the original OF long vowel was shortened in ME because the OF stress was retracted (Bliss 1952: 139). The pronunciation of *apryse* as [a'prɪs] might be accounted for by analogy with the historical variant of words such as *sacrifice*, *promise*, etc. (see also Cercignani 1981: 308). This also gives us a clue as to the real meaning of *aprise* which is 'information' – a sense which in OED is recorded from 1303 to 1425 – and not 'worth', as it has been 'translated' by Bevington (1975: 729) and Baker / Murphy / Hall (1982: 233).

The last controversial rhyme is the one found in the following stanza (ll.1433-1438):

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[9] From RP of *gallows* as ['gælɜʊz] it might be inferred that final *ow* was treated as a diphthong and not as a spelling variation of *-us* probably on analogy with the adjectival suffix *-ous* in which unaccented *us* developed to [əs].

> (20) *MASTYR. Of sheppyng ye xall natt faylle,*
> *For vs þe wynd is good and **saffe**.*
> *Yond þer is þe lond of Tork[y]e*
> *I wher full loth for to lye!*
> *Yendyr is þe lond of Satyllye—*
> *Of þis cors we thar nat **abaffe***

The rhyming pattern of this stanza is *abc cab*. The *b*-lines are take to rhyme on [æːf] of *saffe* (< OF *sauf*) and of *abaffe* (< OE intensive *a* + *be–ǽftan* 'behind', 'back'). Since the word *abaffe* apparently stands for a plural present, it cannot be translated as 'abashed' (Bevington 1975: 733), but as 'turn back' (Baker / Murphy / Hall 1982: 231), also considering the fact that OED quotes the entries *abaft* 'backwards (of direction)' (in 1275 only), and *baft* 'back (of position), with reference to the back of ship' (but in this case it derives from OE *beǽftan*, now archaic, used from the 9th to the 19th century; see also MED).[10]

4. *Conclusion.*

For a present-day researcher who takes for granted the analysis made by previous editors, however great their input has been to the creation and development of theories related to the study of the ME period, the metrical scansion and the rhyme pattern of *Mary Magdalene* may be bewildering, chaotic and ambiguous, not only because the play is an imperfect copy characterized by the lack of any norms of spelling, but also and above all because it is taken for granted that the play is to be read silently. Yet, *Mary Magdalene* is a play, which implies that it must be performed, and spelling is not so important so long as the metrical structure is safeguarded.

What modern editors term inconsistencies are actually incorrect or misleading etymological interpretations of peculiar diatopic and diachronic forms. If there were any inconsistencies, they were not necessarily the scribe's fault. In fact, variants may have a clearly marked so-

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[10] The form of this verb has not been found in the *Etymological Dictionary of the English Language*, the *English Dialect Dictionary*, MED, the *Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology*, the OED, or in Stratman (1891).

cial function: they are used when noble people speak, when Jesus is on stage, when important characters play a crucial Catholic role in the play itself. Yet, these variants are also prosodic devices, as we can see in the case of the pleonastic use of the verb *to do*, in the adoption of the Southern infinitive desinence in mono- and disyllabic verbs, which were necessary to accomplish the rhyme or to create an additional syllable for metrical reasons. Further, we have seen that some words, especially in tail-rhyming stanzas, are not inconsistent when their correct etymology is taken into consideration; they were actually modern editors' inconsistencies, who have not been able to see that the rhyme in which such 'scribal misspellings' occurred played a fundamental role in the identification of the real etymological meaning.

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