

Chaucer's Shipman in Real Life

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CHAUCER'S SHIPMAN IN REAL LIFE

I. THE QUESTION OF THE SHIPMAN'S NATIONALITY

AFTER carefully weighing all the available evidence regarding the Canterbury pilgrims, Professor F. N. Robinson recently declared: 'The probability is strong that Chaucer had contemporary models for his characters.' There was a real Harry Bailly, the host of a Southwark inn, and a real cook of London called Roger de Ware. Several other pilgrims whose surnames are not given are nevertheless highly individualized. Conspicuous in this group is the Shipman. Scholars have attempted to identify him, assuming, as all modern readers do assume, that he was an Englishman. Yet it may be that our assumption is unwarranted. At all events this paper will report the surprisingly far-reaching results of asking whether the truth of the matter might not be contained in the words: 'A Shipman was ther . . . of . . . Spayne.' Chaucer adds, of course, that he was 'wonyng fer by weste', which undoubtedly means 'living in the far west of England'. But the idea that a foreign sailor may have been living in this country while the poet was writing the *General Prologue* (1384-8) is not obviously preposterous.

Here are the main points in the sketch of the Shipman. In appearance he was sun-browned and bearded, he wore a knee-length tunic of coarse woollen cloth (represented in the Ellesmere illustration as black) and he carried a dagger on a strap¹ slung over one shoulder and under the other arm. His character is summed up in the expression 'a good felawe', meaning a pleasant companion and implying a rascal.² On voyages from Bordeaux he stole many a drink from his supercargo's wine barrels. He had perhaps no great thirst for fighting ('*If that he faught*'), but he had taken part in some sea-battles. When he got the upper hand he showed his disregard for 'nyce conscience' or tender feeling³ by sending the defeated crew 'hoom by water'; that is, he threw them overboard,

¹ Chaucer's expression (*Gen. Prolog.* 392) is 'on a laas', meaning possibly one of those laces or 'points' for the fashioning of which, according to the *Libelle of English Polycye* (1436), English pointmakers found Castilian kid-skin 'ful nedeful'.

² See notes on *Gen. Prolog.* 395 in the editions of Skeat, Manly and Robinson. Cf. *Gen. Prolog.* 398 and 142 ff.

though whether dead or alive is not specified.¹ As a ship's captain and pilot he was unrivalled from Hull to Cartagena.² He knew all the havens from Jutland³ to Cape Finisterre and every creek in Brittany and Spain. He was living in the west of England and 'His barge ycleped was the Maudelayne'.

In the course of this description Spain is mentioned or referred to three times, once significantly. The Shipman, we are told, knew 'the cape of Fynystere' on the Atlantic coast of Spain; he had no rival this side of 'Cartage' on its Mediterranean coast, and he was familiar with its 'every cryke'. The last statement clearly implies that he had circumnavigated the Spanish peninsula. Yet as far as specialists in the history of English seafaring are aware, no English shipmaster sailed a vessel through the Straits of Gibraltar until more than fifty years after the *General Prologue* was composed.⁴ Portugal appears to have been as far south as English

¹ *Gen. Prolog.* 400: 'By water he sente hem hoom to every lond.' Hinckley (*Notes on Chaucer*) and Brusendorff (*The Chaucer Tradition*, p. 482) interpret this as meaning that the Shipman forced defeated crews to 'walk the plank'. Professor Robinson (*Cambridge Chaucer*, 1933) suggests the same kind of death when he notes that the Shipman 'drowned his prisoners'. He is as likely, however, to have killed them before throwing them overboard. This method was common at the time. In his *History of the Wine Trade in England*, I, pp. 226, 184-5, A. L. Simon gives the following instances. In 1349 men of Winchelsea attacked some Dutch merchants on a Spanish ship, 'coming upon them and assailing the said merchants and others therein, after killing and throwing into the sea very many of the crew, brought the ship... to Dartmouth'. Another vessel, driven by a storm to Sully in Normandy, was boarded by divers persons who 'killed the men on board her and threw them into the sea'. Further instances of the slaughter of crews at the sword's point (a process which would naturally have ended in the corpses being thrown overboard) are cited by N. H. Nicolas in *A History of the Royal Navy*, II, pp. 100 ff., and still others will be cited here.

² Chaucer's 'Cartage' almost certainly means the port now called Cartagena, in south-east Spain, and not the ancient Carthage. See Manly, *Canterbury Tales*, p. 524, and Kemp Malone, *MLN*, XLV, p. 229, April 1930.

³ Professor Malone has shown (*MLR*, XX, pp. 1 ff.) that Chaucer's 'Gootlond' is much more likely to mean Jutland than the Baltic island of Gottland (King Alfred used 'Gotland' for Jutland) and that the poet probably chose Jutland because it was a cape and therefore provided a neat balance for 'the cape of Fynystere', just as the port of 'Hulle' balanced the port of 'Cartage'.

⁴ The first voyage of an English ship through the Straits of Gibraltar (or of Marrok as they were then called) known to F. L. Salzman took place in 1446 (*English Trade in the Middle Ages*, Oxford, 1931, p. 437). On the return journey the vessel was wrecked off Modon. Besides this danger of shipwreck there was the danger of falling into the hands of Spaniards to deter English merchants from employing English ships and sailors. Salzman adds: 'Clement Armstrong... writing in about 1525, says that forty years earlier Spain was still considered "a farre adventure", and that only about thirty-six years had passed since the first English voyage to Turkey and Scio in the Levant.' C. L. Scofield, speaking of Edward IV's commerce with Italy in 1463 and later, observes: 'Customs accounts supply abundant evidence that it was not English bottoms, as a rule [no exception is mentioned], which carried across the sea the various wares England's merchant king wished to send to foreign markets... Why Edward made use of foreign ships instead of ships owned and manned by Englishmen is a question easily answered. It was because English ships were much smaller than their foreign rivals—so much smaller that probably few of them wanted to undertake so long a voyage as the one through the Straits of Marrok' (*The Life and Reign of Edward the Fourth*, London, 1923, II, p. 415). In searching through the *Close and Patent Rolls* I have found that in the fourteenth century English ships went as far south as Lisbon, but no farther.

merchants of the fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries were willing to trust their goods to the comparatively small ships of their own nation. When voyages to Italy had to be undertaken, they employed large galleys owned and manned by Basques, whom the English called Spaniards,¹ or by Italians or other foreigners.² It cannot at present be stated categorically that throughout the fourteenth century our Mediterranean trade was exclusively in the hands of foreign seamen; but in favour of that conclusion there is very solid evidence, of a kind which makes any substantial alteration of it unlikely.

We may take it, then, as highly improbable that any English shipmaster contemporary with Chaucer had sailed along the Mediterranean shore of Spain. We may also safely assume that some of the foreign shipmasters who handled our Italian trade remained in England for considerable periods between voyages. Indeed, it was one of France's complaints against us at the treaty of Leulinghen (1403) that we were harbouring too many seafaring aliens, a class much given to piracy.³ It follows that when Chaucer described a shipmaster who was living in England and knew every creek in Spain he was not necessarily, or even probably, thinking of an Englishman. He might well have had in mind one of the foreign sailors engaged in Anglo-Italian trade, a man who in consequence of voyaging back and forth between England and Italy did in fact know the whole Spanish coast.

And it turns out that a real Basque shipmaster of the poet's day, John Piers by name, is an exact counterpart of the Shipman. Piers actually settled in England as an English subject. During the years to which the *General Prologue* is ascribed he was living in Teignmouth in Devon, 'wonyng fer by weste'. He was also, during those same years, a frequent topic of London gossip, on account of various scandalous misdeeds which had spectacular consequences. The chief of these was that he had captured a vessel called the *Magdaleyn* and put her crew to death. Following on this, and connected with it, came the impeachment of an English merchant and a prolonged lawsuit which involved a Genoese nobleman and several eminent judges of Chaucer's acquaintance. In the period of the *General Prologue* no piracy was more notorious in London than this of the *Magdaleyn* by a pirate of Spain. Thus we have the poet's circle discussing, and the poet contemporaneously describing, a conscienceless shipmaster, then living in the west of England, who was associated

¹ Salzman, *op. cit.*, p. 262.

² *Ibid.*, p. 437. Basques received English safe-conducts for voyages to Italy at least as early as 1337 (*Patent Rolls*, 1334-8, p. 537).

³ C. L. Kingsford, *Prejudice and Promise in XVth Century England* (Oxford, 1925), p. 85.

with sending defeated opponents 'hoom by water', with 'Spayne' and with a ship called the 'Maudelayne'. The coincidence is sufficiently striking to speak for itself.

The passage in the *General Prologue* contains further details which accord with, or even confirm, the view that the Shipman may have been of Spanish origin. For one thing, the specific form of lack of 'nyce conscience' which is attributed to him—his killing of prisoners—was regarded in Chaucer's England as a speciality of 'Spaniards', in keeping with the traditional cruelty of their nation. It is true that in the battle of Espagnols-sur-mer in 1350, which had been preceded by a long series of Spanish aggressions and brutalities, the victorious English repaid their enemies fully in their own coin. Thereafter, however, judging from the numerous sea-fights recorded in the *Close* and *Patent Rolls* of 1350–1400, the English rarely or never slaughtered defeated crews. The Spaniards, on the other hand, continued to do so with unrelenting regularity. Illustrations of the difference in this respect between the seamen of the two nations will appear in the following pages. But we should note here that in 1369 a group of English merchants and shipowners—hoping, it would seem, to get this form of atrocity abolished by international agreement—protested bitterly that English crews were being 'barbarously murdered' by their Basque and Castilian captors.¹ Between 1384 and 1388, the period in which the *General Prologue* is generally agreed to have been written, the Basques were still giving cause for the same protest.

In 1385, for instance, some English merchants complained that when a ship of theirs had lately been taken by two Basque balingers, a number of their mariners had been 'murdered and the rest wounded'.² The wholesale slaughter of the crew of the English *Magdaleyn* by the Basque John Piers occurred in September 1383. It became known in England in 1384 and remained a source of news till near the end of 1386. These facts suggest that although English sailors of the late fourteenth century were doubtless not incapable of the Shipman's ruthlessness, it would not have been typical of an Englishman, whereas it would have been typical of a Spaniard.

Nothing that is said of the Shipman tends in the slightest degree to mark him as distinctively English.³ His dress may have had points in

¹ *CR*, 1369–74, p. 112.

² *PR*, 1381–5, p. 566.

³ Even the statement 'Hardy he was' is reminiscent of the French proverbial comparison 'Hardi comme un Basque.' The Basques themselves have an old proverb which might be remembered in connection with the Shipman's wine-stealing: 'The ass carries the wine, and drinks water.' On voyages from Bordeaux, says Chaucer, the Shipman drew many a drink from the wine casks he was carrying, while their owner was asleep ('Whil that the

common with that of English sailors, but it is certainly not unlike the national costume of the Basques. This is described in part in a twelfth-century codex for the guidance of pilgrims to Compostella.¹ The Basques, the codex tells us, wore 'short mantles. . . cut at the knee'; their long outer cloaks were 'woollen' and 'black', and each landsman at least had a horn hung 'round his neck', as the Shipman had a dagger 'hangynge on a laas. . . aboute his nekke'. A writer of the sixteenth century recorded that the Basques invariably carried a small weapon.²

Chaucer begins:

A Shipman was ther, wonynge fer by weste;
For aught I woot, he was of Dertemouthe.
He rood upon a rouncey, as he kouthe, etc.³

This passing mention of Dartmouth, and the existence there in the poet's time of a vessel called the *Magdaleyne*, probably owned by the great John Hawley, have given rise to the well-known theory that the Shipman was one of the masters of the Dartmouth *Magdaleyne*, an obscure sailor named Peter Risshenden.⁴ But the second line is not really a satisfactory foundation for that theory. Admittedly it suggests that the Shipman *might* have been of Dartmouth, but it also deliberately refrains from saying that he *was*. In connection with this odd procedure we should remember a fact well known to Chaucer's contemporaries; namely, that Spanish sailors dreaded the mere name of John Hawley⁵ and had no worse enemies in England than his henchmen.⁶ And the description of the Shipman gives us reason to suspect that Spain was his native land. Possibly therefore the suggestion that *perhaps* he was of Dartmouth is a mild Chaucerian joke, an ironic relegation of him to the last English port he would have been likely to choose, or be allowed, to live in. The aside

chapman sleep'). Pilfering of that kind was probably not uncommon, in spite of measures to prevent it. For instance, merchants travelled with their wine, and each cask was gauged at Bordeaux and unloaded and again gauged at the port of entry in the merchant's presence (F. X. Michel, *Histoire du Commerce et de la Navigation à Bordeaux*, 1867, I, p. 58, and Salzman, *op. cit.*, pp. 396-7). It is also probable that during the voyage many merchants actually did 'sleep' a considerable part of the time; for somnolence is an almost invariable effect of sea-sickness and merchants were especially liable to that ailment. They are mentioned in the *Black Book of the Admiralty* foremost among those 'whom the sea makes sick. . . and if they had a thousand marks of silver they would promise it all to anyone who would ask it and put them ashore' (quoted by Salzman, *op. cit.*, p. 24). The trip from Bordeaux to England took these unfortunates through the turbulent waters of the Bay of Biscay and the English Channel, in 'bowl-shaped boats which must have pitched most horribly'.

¹ Quoted by P. S. Ormond, *The Basques and Their Country* (1925), pp. 44-5.

² *Ibid.*

³ F. E. Hill translates the third line, 'He rode his nag as well as he knew how.' It is probably a joke at the expense of a sailor's horsemanship (as 'sleep' may be at the expense of a landsman's seamanship) and typical of the tone of the whole Shipman passage.

⁴ See Robinson, *op. cit.*, p. 762.

⁵ Salzman, *op. cit.*, pp. 255-6.

⁶ J. M. Manly, *Some New Light on Chaucer* (New York, 1925), pp. 169 ff.

certainly gives the impression of having a humorous intention, and the relegation of the Shipman to Dartmouth is avowedly tentative. This would be accounted for by the hypothesis that he was a Spaniard. On the other hand Chaucer's 'For all I know, he was of Dartmouth' has remained an unresolved difficulty in the path of the Rissshenden theory.

But apart altogether from speculation and impression, one thing is beyond dispute: the only trustworthy information we are given concerning the Shipman's place of residence at the time of the Canterbury pilgrimage is that he was living 'fer by weste'. And since Chaucer does *not* say he was a Dartmouth man, the search for the real 'Maudelayne' and its master need not be confined to Dartmouth.

The sea-fight which put John Piers of Teignmouth in possession of the *Magdaleyn* is recorded in a long legal document dated November 1385 and printed in full in the *Close Rolls*.¹ Considered by itself, this rather involved record tells only a small part of the story, which is perhaps one reason why it has remained so long unnoted by Chaucerians. To understand the outrageous circumstances connected with Piers's piracy, and its corresponding notoriety, we have to piece together other writs concerning him which have likewise been preserved in the *Rolls, Close* and *Patent*.² These writs reveal remarkably clearly the kind of man he was. His utter lack of conscience, the grossness of his many offences, and the apparent readiness with which they were pardoned, remind one not a little of 'that gorgeous old ruffian' Falstaff.

II. JOHN PIERS OF BISCAY AND THE PIRACY OF THE 'MAGDALEYN'

In the generation before that of the pirate of the *Magdaleyn* a number of seamen called Piers were living in various trading centres in the Basque province of Biscay.³ Some of their names are: Domyngo Peris, Godesow le Peres, Gonsalvo Peres, William Peres of Santander, John Piers of Bermeo, and Sanncio Petri of Castro Urdiales. They kept in touch with England through commercial voyages and through occasional service with the English navy.⁴ The man with whom we are concerned was for a long time consistently designated as of Castro Urdiales,⁵ a small port near Bermeo. The earliest reference to him discovered in

¹ *CR*, 1385-9, pp. 92-3.

² John Piers had about twenty recorded namesakes in England, but disentangling him requires only time and patience.

³ Also in Portugal, Holland, England and Ireland.

⁴ *PR*, 1338-40, p. 492; cf. *PR*, 1334-8, p. 571.

⁵ Variouslly written in the entries concerning him as 'Ceresp', 'Castre', 'Saraspe de Bermeo' and 'Queexo'.

English records appears in January 1372, the latest in January 1403.¹ We may therefore regard him as roughly contemporary with Chaucer.

Our first glimpse of this 'good felawe' shows him sailing his large ship the *Seint Marie* northwards along the coast of Brittany. This was one of the coasts, it will be remembered, whose havens the Shipman is said to have known particularly well. The year was 1371, so that Piers was probably in the neighbourhood of thirty. With the *Seint Marie* were twenty-four other vessels, Flemish and Basque, carrying wine which they had taken on at La Rochelle. As they reached the haven then called simply 'the Bay', which Nicolas takes to be Bourneuf Bay near the mouth of the Loire,² they met a convoy of English ships sailing southwards. The leaders of the Flemings and Basques decided to attack, unwisely as it turned out; for the English captured all twenty-five of their ships, took them at once to England, and imprisoned their officers and men.³ Chaucer's friend Sir Richard Stury was present at the engagement⁴ and probably on his return home gave the poet an eye-witness account of it.

The master of the *Seint Marie* contrived not to remain long in prison. At that time, under threat of invasion from France, Edward III was trying to improve his navy.⁵ He would no doubt have been glad to augment it by a fine Spanish vessel under the captaincy of a born sailor, especially as earlier in his reign he had received good service from Spanish ships and seamen.⁶ At all events Piers was soon in process of regaining his freedom by changing sides—one of his favourite devices. In January 1372, on the understanding that he would report to the English authorities within a year, he was given a safe-conduct to go home and arrange for his 'deliverance'.⁷ He made the journey in the

¹ Piers could not have been an active shipmaster much later than 1403. After that date there is an interval of eleven years apparently without any record concerning a seafaring John Piers. A man of his name who in 1414 was a shipmaster in the fleet of Henry V (Nicolas, *op. cit.*, II, p. 515) must have been a younger person. A number of seameñ called Piers (the name John is found among them) are mentioned in the *Rolls* during the second quarter of the fifteenth century in a way which shows that the group was still large, widespread, and important. Thomas Chaucer appointed a John Piers of this generation as his deputy butler in Bristol (*PR*, 1422-9, p. 384).

² *Op. cit.*, II, p. 138, note b.

³ Very meagre accounts of the battle are given by Froissart and other chroniclers who are Nicolas's authorities (*ibid.*, pp. 137-8). They do not mention the time of year, or the presence of Basque ships in the Flemish fleet. This last detail is made apparent by the entry in the *Rolls* cited above (*PR*, 1370-4, p. 228). The Basques and Flemings were close trade allies and often sailed in company (Nicolas, *op. cit.*, II, pp. 264, 267; cf. *PR*, 1334-8, p. 578). Their combined fleet coming from La Rochelle with wine in 1387, like that of 1371, was captured by the English (Simon, *op. cit.*, I, p. 251).

⁴ Mentioned by Froissart.

⁵ Nicolas, *op. cit.*, II, pp. 134-5.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 507-10. In 1346 the English fleet had thirty-eight foreign ships (the Strangers' Fleet), seven of which were Spanish.

⁷ *PR*, 1370-4, p. 228.

Seint Marie and returned to England, as we learn from information later supplied by John of Gaunt, 'there to abide in the king's allegiance'.¹ For about three years at this stage of his career—from 1372, presumably, till about the middle of 1375—Piers lived in England as an English subject.²

In the summer of 1375 he accompanied the English fleet which conveyed Sir Thomas Felton to Bordeaux. On the return journey the ships called in 'the Bay' to load cargoes for home. While they were at anchor there, in the month of August, Castilian galleys came in and assailed them savagely, capturing some, burning others, and according to Spanish custom killing the masters and crews.³ Piers's *Seint Marie* was among the captured and he among the comparatively few survivors; from which we may perhaps infer that he had refrained from provocatively stubborn resistance. All told, the English lost thirty-seven ships.⁴ One of these belonged to a merchant of Plymouth named John Sampson, of whom we shall hear more. Later it was to prove to his disadvantage to know that in the battle of 1375 John Piers of Biscay had been an officer in the English navy.

Piers met his second capture in 'the Bay' in the spirit of 'Dæs ofereode, þisses swa mæg'. Again his method was to change over to the winning side. Not improbably he did this at the first opportunity, since the Castilians were his natural allies. After the battle they remained in 'the Bay' for a solid month celebrating their triumph. A chronicler,⁵ whose disgust is manifest, records that they made merry uproariously; they even flew from their masts streamers so extravagantly long that they trailed in the water. By the time these revels were ended and Piers sailed again for Spain he must have added appreciably to his already poignant knowledge of one of the 'havenes... in Britaigne'.

¹ *CR*, 1374-7, p. 416: 1376, ? September.

² During this period he is likely to have taken part in some of the twice-yearly expeditions of the English wine fleet to Bordeaux.

³ The writ of 1376 cited above describes Piers as 'now taken at sea by the king's Spanish enemies'. This clearly refers to the 1375 battle of 'the Bay', for 1376 was the year in which the settlements it necessitated were begun (Nicolas, *op. cit.*, II, p. 153).

⁴ In a list of the ships which were captured in 'the Bay' in August 1375 the last item reads: 'une nef pris ovesq le seignour de lespre' (Nicolas, *op. cit.*, II, p. 510). Nicolas copied this list from State Papers, Tower, No. 963. x. E. I have not seen the manuscript, but the last word means nothing as it stands. It could however be 'cespre', another variant of the many forms of Castro Urdiales noted above, one of which was 'Ceresp'. If this guess is correct, as in view of Piers's participation in the battle seems highly probable, then the master of the *Seint Marie* was also its owner. One might add that the general estimate of the social status of Chaucer's Shipman, fairly represented perhaps by the phrase 'rough sailor', is questionable. The statement that 'His barge ycleped was the Maudelayne' may well mean that he owned it. Cf. below, p. 506, note 4.

⁵ Quoted by Nicolas.

The English gave his fidelity, or possibly his survival, the benefit of the doubt till late in 1376. Then they disposed of £40, 'part of the price of a ship of his', which they had held for him in case he should return to their service.¹ Ultimately he did return, but not of his own free will. During eight years following on the last battle of 'the Bay' the *Rolls* are lacking in any indication that he visited England. It would not be surprising if he had developed a temporary preference for the Mediterranean reach of his trade route, where he would be in no danger of meeting ships of the navy from which he had deserted. When we next hear of him, in 1383, he had evidently just made a voyage to Genoa.

In that year he took aboard the *Seint Marie* goods belonging mainly to Payn Doria, a member of the renowned Genoese family of merchant princes.² Together they set sail for Middleburgh or some other North Sea port.³ On 7 September of the same year, somewhere north of Lisbon, they met the *Magdaleyn* of Bristol.⁴ She was heading for Lisbon with a cargo of cloth and wool valued at £1000, a sum which has to be multiplied by about fifteen to represent its modern equivalent. Piers must have watched the approaching English vessel with speculation in his eyes. If he attacked her he would be committing an act of war against a country to which he had sworn fealty. He would also be exposing his Genoese employer to liability for a heavy fine, since a truce was in force between Genoa and England.⁵ But the *Seint Marie* was the larger ship and well armed,⁶ and Piers not subject to scruples. He therefore undertook⁷ to give battle. The ensuing fight, with the odds well on his side, is the only one in which he is known to have engaged either voluntarily or successfully. A sentence of Chaucer's fits the case

¹ *CR*, 1374-7, p. 416.

² In 1315 Lambus Doria and 'other nobles of the family of Dore' received from England thanks 'for their offer to aid the king with galleys and men-at-arms, on horse and foot, in the war against the Scots' (*CR*, 1313-8, p. 310). Cf. *CR*, 1377-81, p. 291; *CR*, 1381-5, p. 197, etc.

³ Probably starting from Genoa. Earlier in the same year a ship on which another member of the Doria family had laded goods sailed from that port (*CR*, 1381-5, pp. 197, 436). On Middleburgh as the possible destination of Payn Doria, see *ibid.*, p. 367.

⁴ *CR*, 1385-9, pp. 92-3.

⁵ *CR*, 1381-5, pp. 197-8; February 1383.

⁶ Spanish ships in general were larger than English (see, e.g., Nicolas, *op. cit.*, II, p. 111) and the *Seint Marie*, later described by the English as a 'cog'—their largest type—was apparently big even for a Spanish ship. She was offered for sale with all her 'armaturis' at £173 (without *armaturis* at £133) as against £100 or less charged for other Spanish vessels about the same time (*PR*, 1381-5, pp. 398, 405; *PR*, 1385-9, pp. 226, 218, 252, 302).

⁷ Chaucer describes the Shipman as 'wys to undertake'. The phrase probably refers to professional decisions. By the Laws of Oléron, says Salzman (*op. cit.*, p. 249), 'before a ship set sail it was the duty of the master to consult his mariners, and ask what they thought of the weather. Some were sure to say that it was good and some that it was not; in that case he must take the advice of the majority, or he would be personally responsible for the ship and cargo if they were lost.' The master also was chiefly responsible for decisions about jettisoning cargo in a storm.

admirably, especially with emphasis on the first word: 'If that he fought, and hadde the hyer hond, By water he sente hem hoom to every lond.' Having got the upper hand of the *Magdaleyn*, Piers proceeded 'to slay the men thereof' and throw their bodies into the sea. His next step was to 'carry off' his prize, which evidently means that he put her in charge of a 'prize crew', as was usual in such circumstances,¹ and instructed them to take her wherever he chose for safe-keeping. He himself had his profitable contract with Doria to fulfil, and continued on his northern course in the *Seint Marie*.

In or about December the vessel was in the English Channel battling with heavy seas and a furious gale. Already it must have been true of Piers, as of the Shipman, that 'With many a tempest hadde his berd been shake.' But for the rest of his days he can have remembered no storm more ruefully than that of the winter of 1383, which deprived him simultaneously of the use of both his ships. It forced the *Seint Marie* and two other Spanish galleys into Plymouth harbour for shelter.² When the inhabitants saw this windfall they put out in small boats and laid firm hold on it, with an eye to private gain. By reason either of their thoroughness or of the violence of the storm the galleys 'were driven ashore'.³ The recorder of the incident sums up the situation succinctly by remarking that the Spaniards were 'unable to escape'. In that plight, he adds, they 'voluntarily gave themselves up with their ships and goods to the king'.

On 22 January 1384 Richard II commissioned John Lincoln and Walter Leicester to see that his new Spanish lieges and their goods were taken from the men of Plymouth and put in charge of proper custodians. Piers and another Basque called Joel Lanh', both of whom owned some of the *Seint Marie's* cargo, had been lucky enough to fall into the hands of John Sampson.⁴ He was the man who knew that in the last battle of

¹ Nicolas, *op. cit.*, II, p. 100; Simon, *op. cit.*, I, p. 226; Froude, *History of England* (1870), XI, p. 382; *PR*, 1385-9, p. 349.

² *PR*, 1381-5, p. 417.

³ *PR*, 1381-5, p. 422. For the possibility that the mishap was engineered by the inhabitants of Plymouth, see Simon, *op. cit.*, I, pp. 183-4. Seamen who wanted to detain a ship visiting their harbour commonly cut its anchor-cables and let it drift ashore at high tide.

⁴ Sampson's prisoners are described as 'two alien merchants, enemies of the king' (*PR*, 1388-92, p. 382). Clearly they were Piers and Joel Lanh', the two men who later received a pardon connected with Sampson and the capture of the *Seint Marie* in Plymouth (*PR*, 1381-5, p. 490). Cf. the records just cited with *CR*, 1381-5, p. 462, in the light of the fact that in the late Middle Ages 'the extent to which the owners or masters of ships were also merchants is surprisingly large' (N. S. B. Gras, *Early English Customs System*, Harvard Economic Studies, 1918, p. 374). The records of Piers show that he was at once shipmaster, shipowner, and merchant—a combination to which, incidentally, the word 'shipman' would apply as well as any. Cf. above, p. 504, note 4.

'the Bay' the master of the *Seint Marie* had served with the English. For some reason (provided perhaps by Piers) Sampson refused to deliver up the two most important of his Basque prisoners. Instead, he let them go. Piers betook himself, probably at once, to Teignmouth, which had formerly proved hospitable to Basques;¹ Langh' went to Kingsteignton. The King soon heard of Sampson's defiance of his commissioners, and also, apparently, of Piers's piracy of the *Magdaleyn*. On 22 February he issued a second writ,² this time to Edward de Courtenay Earl of Devon, Sir William Botreaux of Cornwall, etc., ordering them to arrest Sampson. The order was duly carried out and the offender sent to the Tower to await trial in Parliament.³ His default in letting Piers and Langh' escape was found in the end to have been due to 'ignorance'. It is difficult to see what else the term could have referred to than Sampson's ignorance of the recent act of war against England by the men of the *Seint Marie*. It looks as though the pirate of the *Magdaleyn*, fresh from the wholesale murder of an English crew, had posed as still a loyal English subject, and his captor had made the mistake of believing him and treating him accordingly.

Some six months after Sampson's arrest a Devonshire justice of the peace, John Prestcot,⁴ obtained his release on bail⁵ and summoned Piers to an inquiry into the charges against him. Prestcot's only concern was to get evidence which would help to acquit his friend Sampson, and the mere fact that Piers was summoned indicates that he had help of that kind to give. But he failed to present himself at the inquiry, not being the man to take any risk whatever out of respect for the golden rule. Sampson's impeachment was voted in December and he was sent back to prison. He was not pardoned till 1391, when a re-examination of his case revealed that he had released his prisoners 'in ignorance'.⁶

While the ex-master of the *Seint Marie* remained in discreet obscurity his vessel was confiscated.⁷ In the words of the relevant writ, it was 'adjudged to the king as enemies' goods'. Richard tried in May 1384 to sell her to Edward de Courtenay for the large sum of £133 (with all her 'armaturis' the sum came to £173) but unavailingly. The price was not lowered when the offer was renewed in June, so that it may have been the same great 'cog' which was referred to in October 1386 as 'the king's Spanish ship'.⁸ In any case by midsummer of 1384 the English

¹ *CR*, 1374-7, p. 416; cf. *CR*, 1385-9, pp. 349, 582. Irrelevantly, it was in Teignmouth in 1818 that Keats found his black-letter edition of Chaucer.

² *PR*, 1381-5, p. 422.

⁴ *PR*, 1377-81, pp. 50, 513, 572.

⁶ *PR*, 1388-92, p. 382.

⁸ *PR*, 1385-9, p. 218.

³ *CR*, 1381-5, p. 593.

⁵ *CR*, 1381-5, p. 462.

⁷ *PR*, 1381-5, pp. 398, 405, 416.

government had settled its account with the Basque pirate on the recognized principle of a ship for a ship—the *Seint Marie* for the *Magdaleyn*. It had not, however, satisfied the former owners of the Bristol vessel. They consequently looked about them for a possible source of reimbursement and fixed on the wealthy Payn Doria.

On the basis of the Laws of Oléron it could be claimed that, at a time of truce between Genoa and England, Doria should not have allowed his Spanish employee to attack an English ship. The Bristol merchants, through their representative John Fulbrook, made this claim and sued Doria for £1500.¹ In the end he was fined 100 marks (less than £67), but even that amount he paid only when his opponents had admitted him entirely guiltless of their further charge; namely, that he had aided and abetted Piers 'to take and carry off the ship and goods of John Fulbrook, etc., and to slay the men thereof'. Although this case was assigned to seven of the most distinguished judges in the country—Sir Robert Tresilian, Sir Robert Beaknap, Sir William Skipwith, Sir Roger Fulthorpe, Sir David Hanmer, Sir John Holt and Sir William Burgh²—it 'needed much examination' and so dragged on 'long', 'at great cost' to the plaintiffs.³ The settlement was finally arrived at, by the unusual procedure of the 'mediation' of the justices, in November 1385.

In the following November some of the Bristol merchants were once more at law, disputing the allocation of Doria's 100 marks.⁴ Thus, three years after the event, the stir which Piers's exploit created was still producing ripples of news. We may take it that no London official concerned with ships would have missed all the talk about a piracy which attained such prolonged and widespread publicity. But we may note several special reasons for Chaucer's being well informed on the subject.

As a man who had friends in Parliament he cannot have failed to know of Sampson's impeachment or of its initial cause. In regard to the Fulbrook-Doria case, one month before it was settled he had been appointed a justice of the peace for Kent.⁵ That appointment made him

¹ *CR*, 1385-9, pp. 92-3.

² Sir Robert Tresilian was Chief Justice of the King's Bench; Sir Robert Beaknap was Chief Justice of the Common Pleas; and Sir David Hanmer had been appointed in 1384, with Tresilian, to hold pleas before the king (*DNB*).

³ A record of 1386, a year after the *Magdaleyn* case was settled, informs us that John Fulbrook and John Corbyndon 'for themselves and the merchants of Bristol long sued at great cost before the council one Payn Dore of Genoa' (*PR*, 1385-9, p. 244). From this entry we know that the *Magdaleyn*'s owners were Bristol men, and by inference that the *Magdaleyn* was a Bristol vessel.

⁴ *PR*, 1385-9, p. 244.

⁵ *Life-Records of Chaucer* (Chaucer Society), no. 183, 12 October 1385.

a colleague of Bealknap, a chief arbiter in the suit. Three of the others—Hanmer, Holt and Burgh—had been commissioned in 1384 to examine his Customs accounts.¹ And he had at least heard of the defendant, for in 1372 he had been sent to Genoa to arrange a commercial treaty with its merchants² and must then have come into contact with the Doria family. The business headquarters of the Genoese in London, which Payn Doria doubtless visited in the course of the prolonged trial, were on the Galley Quay, beside Chaucer's Wool Quay.³ The seizure of the *Seint Marie* also involved two men who were known to the poet: Edward de Courtenay, a kinsman of the King, and Gilbert Maufeld, a prominent London merchant. Maufeld brought the confiscated cargo to London, and there in June 1384 delivered eleven bales of coney skins to their Lombard owner.⁴ The history of this shipment must have been told in the London Customs House, which Chaucer was then attending daily. The *Magdaleyn*, too, had been carrying wool, and Chaucer was the controller of Customs on wool, hides and woollfells. It is altogether inconceivable that he should have remained unaware of a scandalous event which touched in so many ways his personal interests, and which occupied so much of the time and attention of his acquaintances.

The government's confiscation of the *Seint Marie*, and the Bristol merchants' partially successful attempt to hold Doria responsible for the *Magdaleyn* piracy, cleared the air for Piers. Possibly he took advantage of his improved situation to devise some means of regaining royal favour, for in 1385, on St George's day, he was pardoned the outlawry of having ignored Prestcot's summons. This pardon of 23 April 1385⁵ was directed to him as 'of Teyngmouth'. He was still of Teignmouth in July 1388.⁶

During these years he found an employer in a Genoese merchant-owner or 'patron' called Bernard de Reco. How early this connection began is uncertain, but Piers may have been acting as master of Reco's vessel when she was captured on the Seine, at some time prior to 24 July 1387, by the English admiral of the north.⁷ The admiral sent his prize in charge of a subordinate to Hull. The King and Council then ordered her south for the purpose of restoring her to Reco, whereupon she disappeared. After many months the authorities suspected that she was in the vicinity of Southampton, in a disabled condition, local felons having removed part of her tackle.⁸ All this would have been enough

¹ *PR*, 1381-5, p. 359.

² *Life-Records*, no. 68.

³ G. G. Coulton, *Chaucer and His England* (1908), pp. 78-9.

⁴ *CR*, 1381-5, p. 381.

⁵ *PR*, 1381-5, p. 522.

⁶ *CR*, 1381-5, p. 409.

⁷ *PR* 1385-9, p. 342.

⁸ *Ibid.*, and *CR*, 1385-9, p. 349.

to cause discontent among the crew of the ill-fated vessel, and we know that Piers and eighteen mariners terminated their engagement with Reco by deserting.¹ Before long they were signed on by another Genoese patron, Janotus Larcarius. Reco heard of this and again appealed to the King and Council, asking them to compel the deserters to leave Larcarius and return to him. The interest of these matters for us is that Piers may perhaps have voyaged in uncomfortable circumstances to Hull, and that his services as master were apparently in demand. Of the Shipman Chaucer said:

But of his craft to rekene wel his tydes,
His stremes, and his daungers hym bisides,²
His herberwe, and his moone, his lodemenage,
Ther nas noon swich from Hulle to Cartage.³

Early in 1388 Piers made a voyage to Bordeaux⁴ which does nothing to raise our estimate of his conscience. On 2 June the London sheriffs were ordered to arrest part of the cargo he had brought home. Further details concerning the matter are given in a record⁵ dated 16 July:

To John Slegh the chief butler, or to his representative in the port of London. Order, upon petition of John Piers master of a barge called '*la Michel*' of Tengenuth, to pay the sums due to him, that he have no matter for a second suit whereby the king must needs be vexed; as his petition shows that at Bordeaux he received of Peter Paylet twenty tuns of wine to be taken to London to the said Peter's use, and the butler has arrested and is detaining the same to the king's use for that by confession of the said Peter and others in chancery, being examined upon oath touching the ownership of the wine, it appears that the same is of William Bonewe of Bordeaux clerk who forfeited to the king's majesty by reason of certain misprisions, praying that the king will order payment of 12*l.* 6*s.* 8*d.* due to the petitioner for the freight thereof and 5*s.* 6*d.* in arrear for the 'lodemenage'⁶ of the barge, as appears by charter produced in chancery.

¹ *CR*, 1385-9, p. 582.

² 'Ever near at hand'—Skeat.

³ Since Chaucer was here emphasizing distance, why did he choose 'Hulle' instead of the most northerly port in England, Berwick? He seems to have had a reason for choosing 'Cartage', over and above the fact that it conveniently rhymed with 'lodemenage'. For Cartagena is almost as far north in the Mediterranean as the Shipman's span of pre-eminence could possibly have extended. Beyond it lived the seamen of Catalonia, Genoa and Majorca, who were by a long way the most expert navigators in Europe, the acknowledged princes of their craft and the compilers of the still famed compendiums of sea-lore known as *Portolani*. (See C. Moran, *Spain: Its Story Briefly Told*, 1930, p. 69; *Encyc. Brit.*, ed. 14, *s.v.* 'Maps' and 'Portolano'; *NED*, *s.v.* 'Portolano'.) If 'Cartage' was not an altogether fortuitous choice, as it seems not to have been, the same may be true of 'Hulle'.

⁴ *CR*, 1385-9, p. 409.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 522.

⁶ The earliest use of *lodemenage* given in the *NED* is quoted from the Shipman passage. By it Chaucer meant 'pilot's art' (Hinckley, *Notes on Chaucer*). In the poet's day the word was commonly used as a law-term for 'pilot's fee'. Nicolas (*op. cit.*, II, p. 476) cites some instances of this in 1345/46. For piloting a vessel out of 'les Donnes' to the port of Sandwich the price then was 6*s.* 8*d.*, no small amount. For the Black Prince's voyage from Bordeaux to Plymouth after the battle of Poitiers, the 100 mariners were paid £100, the shipmaster (? William Pierres) £20, and the two 'mariners' who piloted £8. 13*s.* 4*d.* (*Black Prince's Register*, 1351-65, Part IV, pp. 253-4, 236). Although these payments were at royal rates, they again suggest that neither shipmastering nor piloting were ill-paid. (Cf. Salzman, *op. cit.*, p. 238.) The sums Piers charged Paylet must represent

Clearly someone had told the London authorities about Paylet's attempted fraud. Whoever the informer was, he must have had such knowledge of the arrangement made in Bordeaux as the master of the *Michel* would have been in a position to obtain. And from what we know of Piers's opportunism, it is not unnatural to think that he may have been bribed to silence in Gascony and played the turncoat in England. Paylet's refusal to pay him confirms the view that he had in some way served his employer ill. It is further confirmed by the King's settling the bills for freight and for 'lodemenage', not because Richard was accountable for them by law, but on the enigmatical plea that he wished to avoid further vexation.¹ The shadow of double-dealing which lies over the transaction seems not to fall clear of Piers. But his part in it only strongly suggests, where other evidence has proved, that he earned the implication of rascality in the mediaeval expression 'a good felawe'.

The ship belonging to Larcarius which Piers joined while he was still legally bound to Reco was preparing to sail from Sandwich in February 1389. In spite of Reco's elaborate effort to prevent his shipmaster leaving England in this way, Piers probably succeeded. He is not mentioned again in English records for nine years, and then only as a visitor. In 1398 he rashly called at Dartmouth in a time of truce, with the result that his barge, the *Seint Michel*, was seized.² In 1402 another barge of his, the *Seint Pierre*, was taken at sea by a fleet partly commanded by John Hawley of Dartmouth, and either not restored at all or not till the following year.³ But since 1388 is the latest date that is in the least probable for the *General Prologue* we need not follow the Basque shipmaster's subsequent adventures in detail. His long-continued residence in England after the Plymouth episode, considered in conjunction with his pardon and his voyage to Bordeaux with the English wine fleet, indicates that his conscience had for the third time permitted him to escape the inconvenience of capture by the device of changing sides. And his connection with Teignmouth during that period—probably from early in 1384, certainly from early in 1385, till the second but a small part of the total fees due to him, for Paylet freighted only 20 tuns of wine, about a quarter of a barge's cargo capacity (see *Issue Rolls of the Exchequer*, 44 Edward III, p. 250; Simon, *op. cit.*, I, p. 222, and Salzman, *op. cit.*, pp. 394–5).

¹ Common enough in medieval records but not infrequently appearing to cover something better left unexplained.

² *CR*, 1396–9, p. 367: 21 December 1398. The *Michel* is here said to be of 'St Maius (de Sancto Maio) in Spain'. Her cargo was iron, a commodity of which Biscay had a virtual monopoly (*Encyc. Brit.*, s.vv. 'Basque Provinces').

³ C. L. Kingsford (*op. cit.*, p. 84) gives some details of the fight. On this visit also the cargo was of iron, but Piers owned it himself. He is here described as 'of Lakecio in the kingdom... of Castile'. After 1379 Castile included the *seignurie* of Biscay.

half of 1388 or later—shows him to have been, like the Shipman, 'wonyng fer by weste' at the time of the Canterbury pilgrimage.¹

It has gradually become apparent that Piers was both a good shipmaster and a good lodeman or harbour pilot. The English naval authorities (who accepted and re-accepted him) would hardly have valued the services of an officer so apt to desert had he not been unusually capable. At a time when wrecks were exceedingly common, there is no sign that Piers ever lost a vessel through any hazard of seafaring except capture. And we have seen that Reco evidently thought highly of his skill as master. As for Piers's 'lodemenage', whether or not he himself steered the *Seint Marie* into Plymouth in the storm of 1383, on the voyage from Bordeaux to London in 1388 he undoubtedly acted as lodeman. Other things being equal, a resident pilot is always preferred, and there were plenty of London pilots eager for, and probably even insistent on, employment.² These specialists must have been set aside by virtue of the justified confidence placed in Piers.³ In itself the 1388 record is enough to establish his ability as a pilot. And since sea law did not allow a shipmaster to remain at the helm in an unfamiliar harbour,⁴ it shows further that in 1388 Piers was already well acquainted with the approach to London. He and the controller of customs on wool and wine would have had opportunities to meet.

This sketch of the career and character of John Piers of Biscay and Devon has revealed his striking resemblance to Chaucer's Shipman. Piers was a shipmaster; he lived in the far west of England during the

¹ Concerning the second line of the Shipman passage, 'For aught I woot, he was of Dertemouthe', we have already noted that because of Dartmouth's conspicuously anti-Spanish feeling, and the possibility that the Shipman was Spanish, the remark may have been ironic. Another circumstance which should perhaps be noted is that the man whose history we have been tracing had a namesake in Dartmouth, a sailor of Hawley's school who was appointed chief ship-searcher there in 1386 (*Fine Rolls*, 1383-91, pp. 154-5). He was still living in Dartmouth in 1408, when we find him engaged in piracy (*PR*, 1405-8, p. 418). Thus John Piers the piratical Englishman of an anti-Spanish port which had a vessel called the *Magdaleyne*, and John Piers the piratical Spaniard who owned another vessel called the *Magdaleyn*, were living not far apart in Devon while the *General Prologue* was in process of composition. A mocking pretence of confusing the two men might have been calculated to amuse those of the poet's audience who knew or had heard of them both, including such eminent persons as Hawley, Edward de Courtenay and the King. We cannot of course be sure that Chaucer was aware of the existence of John Piers of Dartmouth. But if he knew the master of the Dartmouth *Magdaleyne* who has been considered the probable original of the Shipman, he is not much less likely to have known one of the officials of the port.

² They were officially given the exclusive right to navigate ships on the Thames in 1514 (Salzman, *op. cit.*, p. 240), but it had apparently been unofficially recognized much earlier (cf. *PR*, 1361-4, p. 151 and *PR*, 1334-8, p. 578).

³ The supercargo paid the 'lodemenage' fee and so chose the lodeman. Part of the *Michel's* cargo in 1388 must have belonged to some person or persons other than Paylet. Perhaps Piers himself owned some of it, but he was bound to obtain the consent of his chapman for any undertaking in 'lodemenage'.

⁴ Salzman, *op. cit.*, p. 240.

General Prologue period; the marked unpopularity of his nation in Dartmouth would have given ground for associating him ironically with that port; he probably wore 'a gown of falding to the knee', 'a laas aboute his nekke' and 'a dagger'; he deserved the title 'good felawe'; he joined in the expeditions to Bordeaux for wine; he 'took no keep' of nice conscience; *if* he had the upper hand in a sea-fight he slaughtered his prisoners; he was notably excellent in seamanship; he had memorable experience of tempests; he knew the coast of Brittany and the whole coast of Spain, and the greatest of his considerable claims to renown was that he had acquired a vessel called the *Magdaleyn*. The Shipman passage reads like a review of the same career and character, in the spirit 'a litel what smyllynge' which pervades the *General Prologue*:

A SHIPMAN was ther, wonynge fer by weste;
 For aught I woot, he was of Dertemouthe.
 He rood upon a rouncey, as he kouthe,
 In a gown of falding to the knee.
 A dagger hangynge on a laas hadde he
 Aboute his nekke, under his arm adoun.
 The hote somer hadde maad his hewe al broun;
 And certainly he was a good felawe.
 Ful many a draught of wyn had he ydrawe
 Fro Burdeux-ward,¹ whil that the chapman sleep.
 Of nyce conscience took he no keep.
 If that he faught, and hadde the hyer hond,
 By water he sente hem hoom to every lond.
 But of his craft to rekene wel his tydes,
 His stremes, and his daungers hym bisides,
 His herberwe, and his moone, his lodemenage,
 Ther nas noon swich from Hulle to Cartage.
 Hardy he was and wys to undertake;
 With many a tempest hadde his berd been shake.
 He knew wel alle the havenes, as they were,
 Fro Gootlond to the cape of Fynystere,
 And every cryke in Britaigne and in Spayne.
 His barge ycleped was the Maudelayne.

Is it possible that Chaucer could have written that passage when the piracy of the *Magdaleyn* and the pirate of Spain were at the height of their notoriety without thinking of Piers, or without realizing that many persons who heard it (the King, Edward de Courtenay, Maufeld, Tresilian, Bealknap, Hanmer, Holt, Burgh, etc.) would also think of Piers? These men were even then dealing with, or had only just ceased to deal with, the extensive consequences of the pirate's lack of conscience. And they would have found that every detail in the description confirmed

¹ Meaning 'Coming from Bordeaux'. See Robinson's note.

the broad hint of identity given at the end of it.¹ One is tempted to believe that in mentioning the 'Maudelayne' in association with 'Spayne' the poet could no more have failed to *intend* an allusion to the recent piracy of the *Magdaleyn* than a writer of today who mentioned in the same breath a ship named the *Morro Castle* and the coast of New Jersey could fail to intend an allusion to the outstanding sea disaster of 1935. In any case, those who will try to enter as nearly as possible into the mind of the author of the *General Prologue*, and into the minds of some of its earliest readers, will surely not find it easy to conclude that the portrait of the Shipman is in no way indebted to the Spanish pirate of the *Magdaleyn*.

In concluding his survey of attempts to identify Chaucer's pilgrims, Professor Robinson remarked: 'Curiosity on this subject, it is proper to add, is not merely trivial. Such inquiries and conjectures, like the search for literary sources, help toward an understanding of the poet's imagination and of the material on which it worked.' Unfortunately almost nothing is known about the two best authenticated originals of pilgrims, the real Harry Bailly who was the host of a Southwark inn and the real Roger de Ware who was a London cook. About John Piers, on the other hand, thanks to his rascal's habit of strewing his path with legal records, we have a comparative wealth of information. Hence, if Piers were in fact the prototype of the Shipman, we should at last be in a position to watch the poet at work, line by line, as he sketched from a contemporary model one of the timeless portraits of the Canterbury collection.

MARGARET GALWAY.

LONDON.

¹ The public for which Chaucer wrote, says Professor Manly, was like "society" in any of our smaller cities. . . . and we may be sure they caught every sly reference to persons and things they knew' (*New Light*, p. 76). Dr Coulton speaks of the London of Chaucer's day as 'this busy capital of some 40,000 souls where everybody could see everything that went on, and it was almost possible to know all one's fellow-citizens by sight' (*Chaucer's England*, p. 81).