

# The Name-Type Maid(en)well<sup>1</sup>

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Some years ago, as part of a study of terms represented in both the toponymic and legal record, I compiled a provisional corpus of English place-names with the qualifying element *Maid(en)*, ultimately from Old English (OE) *mægden* ‘maiden, virgin’.<sup>2</sup> These form a heterogeneous set within which it is possible to identify discrete groups of formations. Among them are compounds with fortification-words such as Maiden Castle, recently discussed by Richard Coates and identified as a literary topos.<sup>3</sup> Others include compounds with religious terms such as Maiden’s Cross, indicative of dedications to the Virgin Mary. Another group comprises compounds with topographical generics relating to water, such as Maidens Bridge, Maidenford, Maiden Spring and Maiden Well. These have yet to be accounted for. As no unifying explanation has been established for the corpus as a whole, Coates argues in favour of examining a particular sub-set of formations in isolation,<sup>4</sup> and demonstrates the validity of such an approach with regard to the name-type Maiden Castle. I wish to follow this up in the present paper by focusing on a further sub-set, the name-type Maid(en)well, although I shall argue that this is in fact more closely related to one of the other groups of *Maid(en)* names than has previously been recognised.

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<sup>1</sup> A version of this paper was presented to the Eighteenth Annual Conference of the Society for Name Studies in Britain and Ireland in Falmouth, 27–30 March 2009. I am grateful to those present for their comments. The article has benefited in particular from the advice of Mr John Freeman, who read it in draft and contributed many valuable suggestions.

<sup>2</sup> C. Hough, ‘Place-name evidence relating to the interpretation of Old English legal terminology’, *Leeds Studies in English*, 27 (1996), 19–48 (pp. 21–24, 32–48).

<sup>3</sup> R. Coates, ‘Maiden Castle, Geoffrey of Monmouth and Hārūn al-Rašīd’, *Nomina*, 29 (2006), 5–60.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 6–7.

The appendix sets out all the occurrences of this name-type that I have been able to trace, together with the historical spellings from volumes of the English Place-Name Survey and other sources.<sup>5</sup> The names are listed in chronological order of their first appearance in written records. None is actually attested from the Anglo-Saxon period, but Maidwell in Northamptonshire is recorded in Domesday Book, and so too is Maidenwell in Lincolnshire, albeit in the simplex form *Welle* (OE *wella* ‘well, spring’) to which the *Maiden* element has subsequently been added.<sup>6</sup> Others may of course be much older than their earliest recorded spellings, and it is likely that further instances of the name-type have failed to survive. Four out of the twenty-one known occurrences are lost field-names recorded once each between the twelfth and fourteenth centuries,<sup>7</sup> and the vagaries of survival are further illustrated by the fact that *Maidenwelleforlong* in Dorset derives from a lost place-name *Maidenwelle* which must already have been in existence.<sup>8</sup> Others may yet come to light. Foxall describes the field-name Maiden’s Well as ‘not uncommon’ in Shropshire;<sup>9</sup> so although only three were found by my trawl of the English Place-Name Society volumes so far available for that county,<sup>10</sup> it is fully possible that

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<sup>5</sup> Not included here is the Old English boundary marker *into mægðan wyllan* (775), the possible etymon of the Gloucestershire field-name Magdalene mead well, as the weak inflection supports an alternative derivation from OE *mægðe* ‘may-weed’ (A. H. Smith, *The Place-Names of Gloucestershire*, 4 vols, English Place-Name Society, 38–41 (Cambridge, 1964–65), i, 113).

<sup>6</sup> It is of course not uncommon for names recorded first as simplexes to be extended in this way. As Paul Cullen has recently noted in connection with *Thorp* names, it is difficult to know whether to describe the additional element as an affix or a specific (‘Thorps in a changing landscape’, paper presented to the first SPASE [Sense of Place in Anglo-Saxon England] workshop, University of Leicester, 28 February 2009).

<sup>7</sup> Appendix nos 2, 5, 7 and 8.

<sup>8</sup> A. D. Mills, *The Place-Names of Dorset*, 3 vols so far published, English Place-Name Society, 52–53, 59/60 (Cambridge, 1977–89), i, 70.

<sup>9</sup> H. D. G. Foxall, *Shropshire Field-Names* (Shrewsbury, 1980), p. 40.

<sup>10</sup> M. Gelling in collaboration with H. D. G. Foxall, *The Place-Names of Shropshire*, 5 vols so far published, English Place-Name Society, 62/63, 70, 76, 80, 82 (Nottingham, 1990–2006).

more will be uncovered as the Survey progresses.<sup>11</sup> Tantalisingly, Rattue refers to ‘eight Maiden Wells’ but identifies only two, so that it is uncertain whether or not the remaining six are additional to those included in the appendix.<sup>12</sup>

The geographical distribution of Maid(en)well appears to be restricted to southern Britain. I have found none in Scotland or the Isle of Man,<sup>13</sup> and none in England further north than Lincolnshire, where the sole occurrence is in the south of the county. In this respect the name-type contrasts both with Maiden Castle, which is found mainly in the north,<sup>14</sup> and with Lady Well, a formation represented extensively in northern Britain<sup>15</sup> but also common as far south as Devon and Somerset.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Since the Shropshire volumes are as yet unindexed, it is also possible that I may have missed relevant names. J. Jesch, ‘Scandinavian women’s names in English place-names’, in *A Commodity of Good Names. Essays in Honour of Margaret Gelling*, edited by O. J. Padel and D. N. Parsons (Donington, 2008), pp. 154–62, identifies at least two place-names containing feminine personal names that I had overlooked in an earlier trawl through every volume of the English Place-Name Survey published up to 1998. However, she also includes some that I had omitted on the grounds that alternative etymologies are to be preferred.

<sup>12</sup> J. Rattue, *The Living Stream. Holy Wells in Historical Context* (Woodbridge, 1995), pp. 42, 173, 174. The Maiden Wells identified are in Great Brickhill, Buckinghamshire, and in Portesham, Dorset. I owe this reference to Dr Alan James.

<sup>13</sup> Various sources were checked for Scotland. The absence of the name-type from the Isle of Man was established from G. Broderick, *Placenames of the Isle of Man*, 7 vols (Tübingen, 1994–2005).

<sup>14</sup> Coates, ‘Maiden Castle, Geoffrey of Monmouth and Hārūn al-Rašīd’, 45.

<sup>15</sup> C. Hough, ‘“Find the lady”: the term *lady* in English and Scottish place-names’, in *Names in Multi-Lingual, Multi-Cultural and Multi-Ethnic Contact: Proceedings of the 23rd International Congress of Onomastic Sciences, August 17–22, 2008, York University, Toronto, Canada*, edited by W. Ahrens, S. Embleton and A. Lapierre with the assistance of G. Smith and M. Figueredo (Toronto, 2009), pp. 511–18; *eadem*, ‘Women in the landscape: place-name evidence for women in north-west England’, *Nomina*, 31 (2008), 45–66 (p. 64).

<sup>16</sup> J. E. B. Gover, A. Mawer and F. M. Stenton, *The Place-Names of Devon*, 2 vols, English Place-Name Society, 8–9 (Cambridge, 1931–32), ii, 379; J. Scherr, ‘Names of springs and wells in Somerset’, *Nomina*, 10 (1986), 79–91 (p. 84). The distribution of Lady Well, and of other well-dedications to the Virgin Mary, is mapped in Rattue, *The Living Stream*, p. 74.

Whereas Lady Well is securely identified with dedications to the Blessed Virgin, partly on the basis of proximity to chapels of St Mary,<sup>17</sup> a wider range of interpretations has been put forward for the Maid(en)well names, with none gaining widespread acceptance. The most common gloss is ‘maidens’ spring’, the definition given for instance by the editors of the English Place-Name Survey for Northamptonshire<sup>18</sup> and followed by Ekwall,<sup>19</sup> Gelling,<sup>20</sup> Padel<sup>21</sup> and Watts.<sup>22</sup> The meaning of the compound, however, remains obscure. Cameron simply comments that ‘the significance of *maiden* is not known’,<sup>23</sup> while Field draws a comparison with Childwell, which he takes to mean ‘young men’s spring’,<sup>24</sup> and

<sup>17</sup> For instance, Lady Well in Falkland parish, Fife, is near Chapelyard, described in 1643 as ‘the chapel and place of the Blessed Mary commonly called Our Lady Chapel’, and the lost field-name *Lady Well Park* (1811) in the same county is close to the parish church of Leslie, where again there was a chapel of the Blessed Virgin Mary (S. Taylor with G. Márkus, *The Place-Names of Fife* volume 2 *Central Fife between the Rivers Leven and Eden* (Donington, 2008), pp. 150–51, 379).

<sup>18</sup> J. E. B. Gover, A. Mawer and F. M. Stenton, *The Place-Names of Northamptonshire*, English Place-Name Society, 10 (Cambridge, 1933), p. 117.

<sup>19</sup> E. Ekwall, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of English Place-Names*, 1st–4th edns (Oxford, 1936–60), s.vv. *Maidenwell*, *Maidwell*.

<sup>20</sup> M. Gelling, *Place-Names in the Landscape* (London, 1984), pp. 32, 297. The later version of the book, M. Gelling and A. Cole, *The Landscape of Place-Names* (Stamford, 2000), lacks the glossarial index, but groups Maidenwell and Maidwell with qualifiers referring to ‘categories of people’ (p. 33).

<sup>21</sup> O. J. Padel, *A Popular Dictionary of Cornish Place-Names* (Penzance, 1988), p. 113.

<sup>22</sup> *The Cambridge Dictionary of English Place-Names*, edited by V. Watts (Cambridge, 2004), p. 393.

<sup>23</sup> K. Cameron, *A Dictionary of Lincolnshire Place-Names*, English Place-Name Society, Popular Series 1 (Nottingham, 1998), p. 85.

<sup>24</sup> J. Field, *Place-Names of Great Britain and Ireland* (Newton Abbot, 1980), p. 50. Again, the interpretation of Childwell is uncertain. Alternative possibilities are discussed in C. Hough, ‘Chilton and other place-names from Old English *cild*’, *Journal of the English Place-Name Society*, 36 (2004), 63–82 (pp. 67, 74). Comparison with place-names putatively from OE *brȳd* ‘bride’ may also be misleading, as combinations with *wella* are more plausibly derived from an OE *\*brȳd* ‘welling, surging’ or *\*brȳde* ‘gushing or surging stream’ proposed by M. T. Löfvenberg, *Studies on Middle English Local Surnames* (Lund, 1942), pp. 26–27.

Coates raises the possibility of an implied contrast between the Lincolnshire Maidenwell and a nearby Burwell, perhaps ‘stream of the peasants’.<sup>25</sup> Horovitz offers ‘the spring frequented by maidens’,<sup>26</sup> and Padel suggests that ‘They may sometimes refer to a folk custom’.<sup>27</sup> Mills gives ‘spring of the maidens’ without comment for Maidenwells in Pembrokeshire,<sup>28</sup> but explains Maidwell in Northamptonshire as a place where maidens gathered,<sup>29</sup> and suggests ‘perhaps alluding to a “fertility” spring’ for the field-name Maidenwell in Dorset.<sup>30</sup> The possibility of an ‘allusion to “fertility” springs’ was also raised by Smith,<sup>31</sup> and is followed by Room in connection with Maiden Wells in Pembrokeshire, although he takes Maidwell in Northamptonshire to refer to ‘a spring or stream where young women and girls gathered’.<sup>32</sup> With reference to the Pembrokeshire name, Charles comments: ‘Wells were probably frequented by maidens in connection with fertility rites. Alternatively, the allusion may be to the Virgin Mary’.<sup>33</sup> He is followed in this by Owen and Morgan, although they reverse the order of the two possibilities: ‘*mægden* is a common el[ement] in E[n]glish p[lace]-n[ame]s sometimes associated with the Virgin Mary, or simply with social gatherings’.<sup>34</sup> Rattue groups the Maiden Wells with pagan names such as Pin Well and Fairy Well, but on what basis is unclear.<sup>35</sup> Finally, Cox assigns the lost

<sup>25</sup> R. Coates, ‘Reflections on some major Lincolnshire place-names. Part one: Algar-kirk to Melton Ross’, *Journal of the English Place-Name Society*, 40 (2008), 35–95 (p. 48). Coates notes that the locations are some two and a half miles apart.

<sup>26</sup> D. Horovitz, *The Place-Names of Staffordshire* (Brewood, 2005), pp. 380–81.

<sup>27</sup> Padel, *A Popular Dictionary of Cornish Place-Names*, p. 113.

<sup>28</sup> A. D. Mills, *A Dictionary of British Place-Names* (Oxford, 2003), p. 315.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> Mills, *The Place-Names of Dorset*, iii, 329.

<sup>31</sup> A. H. Smith, *English Place-Name Elements*, 2 vols, English Place-Name Society, 25–26 (Cambridge, 1956), ii, 32. Maidwell is here assigned to Norfolk, presumably in error for Northamptonshire.

<sup>32</sup> A. Room, *The Penguin Dictionary of British Place Names* (London, 2003), p. 307.

<sup>33</sup> B. G. Charles, *The Place-Names of Pembrokeshire*, 2 vols (Aberystwyth, 1992), ii, 722.

<sup>34</sup> H. W. Owen and R. Morgan, *Dictionary of the Place-Names of Wales* (Llandysul, 2007), p. 309.

<sup>35</sup> Rattue, *The Living Stream*, p. 42.

Leicestershire field-name *Maydens well* to the headword OE *mægden* ‘a maiden, a young unmarried woman’, explained as ‘in p[lace-]n[ame]s, usually in allusion to places owned by them, or to places which they habitually frequented’,<sup>36</sup> although he takes *Madyn’ well* and *maidewellewong* in the same county to represent sacred wells dedicated to the Blessed Virgin.<sup>37</sup>

The three main possibilities, then, appear to be:

- a general meeting place for young women;
- a place where young women engaged in fertility rites or other folk customs;
- a dedication to the Virgin Mary.

The first cannot be disproved, although the more instances of this name-type that come to light, the less plausible it may seem. Even allowing for the role of analogy, it seems unlikely that a certain type of water feature would so frequently be chosen as a meeting-place by young women as opposed to other groups of people.<sup>38</sup> A logical objection to the second may be that maidens are actually the least likely type of women to be concerned with fertility rites—unless they were indeed hoping for a miracle! The third appears to be ruled out by the analysis of the first element as a plural form.<sup>39</sup> As we have seen, the most common interpretation of this name-type is ‘maidens’ spring’, taking the qualifier to be a genitive plural. Since there is only one Virgin Mary, a reference to her would require a genitive singular,<sup>40</sup> which is clearly attested only in the

<sup>36</sup> B. Cox, *The Place-Names of Leicestershire*, 4 vols so far published, English Place-Name Society, 75, 78, 81, 84 (Nottingham, 1998–2009), iii, 141, 328.

<sup>37</sup> Cox, *The Place-Names of Leicestershire*, iv, 125, 207, 373.

<sup>38</sup> Analogy may of course be a factor in some instances. For instance, Horovitz, *The Place-Names of Staffordshire*, pp. 380–81, associates Maiden’s Well in Staffordshire with Maidensbridge and Maiden Field in the same county.

<sup>39</sup> This was the view taken in Hough, ‘Place-name evidence relating to the interpretation of Old English legal terminology’.

<sup>40</sup> However, Cox, *The Place-Names of Leicestershire*, iv, 207, derives the lost field-name *maidewellewong* from a genitive plural despite explaining it as ‘no doubt an early name of *Our Lady’s Well*, once a sacred site associated with fertility’.

earliest spelling of the lost Herefordshire street-name *Meydeneswelle* (c.1288).<sup>41</sup>

Parallels with other dedications to the Blessed Virgin, including the ubiquitous Lady Well and Mary Well,<sup>42</sup> provide a strong context for a similar interpretation of Maid(en)well. I should therefore like to examine the strength of the evidence for a plural qualifier. This rests essentially on the occurrence of medieval spellings with medial <e>, the expected reflex of an Old English genitive plural <a> inflection. The Old English inflectional system was already beginning to break down before the end of the Anglo-Saxon period, so it is normal for a wide range of inflections to be levelled to <e> in spellings from Domesday Book and even before.<sup>43</sup> The only historical form in the corpus to contain a medial <a> is the mid-fourteenth-century spelling of Maidenwell in Cornwall (no. 10), and this is much too late to be a genuine Old English inflection. I suspect that it should instead be regarded alongside other place-names in Cornwall with an intrusive <a> that is sometimes even retained into the modern form. Examples include Bennacott, Bullapit and Polapit, none of which is derived from a genitive plural.<sup>44</sup>

The remaining twenty place-names in the corpus may be divided into those that have a medial <e> in at least one spelling, and those that do not. The latter group comprises nos 7, 9, 12, 13, 14, 15, 17, 18, 19, 20 and 21. Recorded only from the fourteenth century onwards, these are of course less likely to preserve etymological evidence. Indeed, the four names containing medial <s> (nos 12, 13, 14 and 17) are unrecorded

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<sup>41</sup> Appendix no. 6.

<sup>42</sup> The latter name-type sometimes appears as St Mary's Well, while Lady Well is itself from a genitive form, as with Lady Chapel and Lady Day (cf. C. Barber, *The English Language: A Historical Introduction* (Cambridge, 2000), p. 159).

<sup>43</sup> For instance, Pillaton in Cornwall appears in Domesday Book as both *Pilatona* and *Piletone* (Padel, *A Popular Dictionary of Cornish Place-Names*, p. 139).

<sup>44</sup> Padel, *A Popular Dictionary of Cornish Place-Names*, pp. 53, 139. Bennacott is attributed to a personal name, Bullapit and Polapit to singular nouns, an alternative possibility being that Polapit is a corruption of Bullapit. Dr Padel (private correspondence) kindly informs me that he sees no problem in postulating that the <a> in <Medenawille> 1347 is an intrusive vowel, paralleled by an intrusive <a> or <e> in other names.

before the seventeenth century, by which time this inflection could represent genitive singular or plural. Generally earlier, and of greater potential interest, are the names with medial <e> spellings. These fall into two categories, depending on whether medial <e> follows the first or second syllable of the name. Where it follows a single syllable *ma(i/y)d-*, as in all spellings of place-names 4, 8 and 16, medial <e> represents not an inflection but the loss of final *-n* from the qualifier *mægden*.<sup>45</sup> This is illustrated for instance by Maidenwell in Lincolnshire (no. 3), whose historical spellings alternate between full and shortened forms of the qualifier. Loss of final *-n* is characteristic of the Northumbrian dialect of Old English, but does not apply to nouns in *-en* such as *mægden*.<sup>46</sup> In southern varieties of Middle English, however, the letter begins to be lost after unstressed vowels from about 1100, a process that then spread to the midlands.<sup>47</sup> The entry for *maid* in the *Oxford English Dictionary* identifies it as one of ‘A number of Old English words ending in *-en* [that] show loss of final *-n* in southern texts early in the Middle English period’, while the earliest citation, from a thirteenth-century copy of an Old English homily, illustrates an alternation between *mede* and *mædene* in different manuscripts:

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<sup>45</sup> Smith, *English Place-Name Elements*, ii, 32; i, 72, drew attention to a parallel with place-names from OE *byden* ‘vessel, tub’, such as Bedwell and Bidwell. The revised entry for *byden* in D. N. Parsons and T. Styles, *The Vocabulary of English Place-Names (Brace-Cæster)* (Nottingham, 2000), pp. 109–10, also raises an alternative possibility of a derivation from a variant *\*byd(e)*.

<sup>46</sup> A. Campbell, *Old English Grammar* (Oxford, 1959), §472.

<sup>47</sup> The *Oxford English Dictionary* (<<http://www.oed.com/>>, henceforth *OED*), s.v. *N, n.*, draft revision March 2009, notes: ‘In Middle English the retention or dropping of the letter after unstressed vowels varied in the various southern and midland varieties; it probably began in the south from about 1100, slightly later in the midlands’.



**a1225** (OE) *Ælfric's Homily De Initio Creaturae* (Vesp. A.xxii) in R. Morris *Old Eng. Homilies* (1868) 1st Ser. 227 To ane mede [OE *Royal mædene*] þe was Maria zehaten.<sup>48</sup>

The significance of this is that medial <e> in our corpus can only be taken as an inflection where it follows the full, two-syllable form of the qualifier, as in the lost field-names *Maydenewelle* in Gloucestershire and Wiltshire (nos 2 and 5), the 1477 spelling <Maidenewell> of the lost field-name *Madyn' well* in Leicestershire (no. 11),<sup>49</sup> and the four thirteenth-century spellings of Maidwell in Northamptonshire (no. 1) as <Maydenewell>.<sup>50</sup> These four place-names, then, with the possible addition of Maidenwell in Cornwall (no. 10),<sup>51</sup> comprise the evidence for a plural qualifier, and hence the case against a dedication to the Virgin Mary.

It is theoretically possible that there are two groups of names here: one with a singular qualifier referring to the Virgin Mary, and another with a plural qualifier referring to groups of young women.<sup>52</sup> All except nos 1,

<sup>48</sup> *OED*, s.v. *maid*, n.<sup>1</sup>, draft revision September 2008. The meaning 'A virgin; *spec.* the Virgin Mary' is sense 1.a of this entry, and sense 2.a of the entry for *maiden*, n. and *adj.*, draft revision March 2009.

<sup>49</sup> The apostrophe within the spelling *Madyn' well* (1467 x 1484) also presumably represents an inflectional *-e*, although an inflectional *-a* is theoretically possible.

<sup>50</sup> Again, earlier spellings of this place-name reflect loss of final *-n* from the qualifier.

<sup>51</sup> If the doubtful spelling <Medenewille> is accurate: see note 77.

<sup>52</sup> A point in favour of this possibility may be the fact that the lost Berkshire field-name *Maydewell* (1316) in the parish of Bray (no. 8) is in close proximity to the parish of Maidenhead (*Maideheg* 1202), apparently 'landing-place of the maidens'. On the other hand, the interpretation of Maidenhead itself is far from clear, with the connection between the landing-place and the putative maidens remaining uncertain. Various possibilities are canvassed by M. Gelling, *The Place-Names of Berkshire*, 3 vols, English Place-Name Society, 49–51 (Cambridge, 1973–76), i, 53, and although Smith, *English Place-Name Elements*, i, 278, identifies 'words denoting people' among the main types of qualifiers found in combination with OE *hȳð* 'a port, a haven, a landing place on a river-bank', Maidenhead is the only example cited within this category. It should also be noted that the early spellings are not conclusive for a plural qualifier.

2, 5 and 11 could fall into the former category, although the alternation between thirteenth-century spellings of Maidwell in Northamptonshire as <Maydenewell> and <Maydenwell> may give us pause, showing how easily a medial <e> inflection could be elided.<sup>53</sup> The overwhelming impression, however, is of a name-type, for which a single, consistent interpretation should be sought. Moreover, the strongest circumstantial evidence for a religious association is in fact for Maidwell in Northamptonshire, which was close to a church dedicated to Mary. The editors of the English Place-Name Society volume note the proximity of two churches, dedicated respectively to Mary and to St Peter, mentioned in an eighteenth-century account as being already long destroyed.<sup>54</sup> The churches are also recorded in the sixteenth-century spellings of the place-name.<sup>55</sup> I should like to explore the possibility that this and all other occurrences of the Maid(en)well name-type are dedications to the Virgin Mary.

As we have seen, the medial <e> inflection found in medieval spellings of four—possibly five—names within the corpus is the expected reflex of the Old English genitive plural following the levelling of inflections towards the end of the Anglo-Saxon period. It is therefore consistent with a genitive plural. But it is equally consistent with alternative derivations. The same reflex developed from other origins, including for instance <an>, the oblique inflection of so-called ‘weak’ personal

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<sup>53</sup> Alternatively, an intrusive <e> could be added, comparable to the medial <a> of the spelling <Medenawille> for Maidenwell in Cornwall (no. 10). Gover, Mawer and Stenton, *The Place-Names of Devon*, i, xxxvi, note that ‘A medial inflexional syllable usually survives in Devon and is sometimes inserted with no warrant. Examples ... are frequently spelt in M[iddle] E[n]glish] with a rather than the e commonly found in other M[iddle] E[n]glish] dialects’.

<sup>54</sup> Gover, Mawer and Stenton, *The Place-Names of Northamptonshire*, p. 117, quoting from J. Bridges, *History and Antiquities of Northamptonshire*, edited by P. Whalley, 2 vols (Oxford, 1791), ii, 45, 47.

<sup>55</sup> Similarly, Maiden Well in Buckinghamshire is close to a chapel of St Mary. However, Rattue (*The Living Stream*, p. 103) regards this as a Christianizing initiative reflecting the strength of Catholicism in the early sixteenth century: ‘as late as 1519 ... a chapel to SS Mary and John the Baptist was licensed beside the Maiden Well in Great Brickhill (Buckinghamshire)’. If he is correct, the coincidence of dates raises the possibility that a similar explanation may apply in Northamptonshire.

names and nouns such as OE *hlāfdige* ‘lady’. The genitive singular inflection of so-called ‘strong’ feminine personal names and nouns was <e>, so this is precisely the inflection that we should expect with a feminine singular qualifier. I wish to suggest that the spellings in question do not reflect a genitive plural, but a feminine genitive singular.

The reason this has not to my knowledge been suggested before is no doubt that the Old English noun *mægden* ‘maiden, virgin’ is grammatically neuter, not feminine. As such, the expected genitive singular inflection is <es>, preserved in the late-thirteenth-century spelling *Meydeneswelle* of the lost street-name in Bromyard, Herefordshire (no. 6).<sup>56</sup> Even words from Old English neuter nouns, however, could develop a genitive singular in <e> during the Middle English period. Discussing the loss of final *-n* in words such as *eve*, *game* and *morrow* as well as *maid*, the *OED* editors suggest:

It is probable that the Middle English developments in these words are motivated at least in part by analogy with contemporary developments in noun inflections, with invariable *-e* in the singular and *-en* in the plural in all grammatical cases becoming a frequent noun paradigm...<sup>57</sup>

Used as a name for the Virgin Mary, moreover, it is possible that natural gender may have taken precedence over grammatical gender.<sup>58</sup> The

<sup>56</sup> Mr John Freeman (pers. comm.) also kindly informs me of a nearby and parallel *Nonnewall street* 1428, *Nouewalstrete* [for *Nonewalstrete*?] e16th, *Nonwall Strete* c.1550, *Nunwalle Streate* 1575, which is difficult to account for. I am grateful to him for the following extract from P. Williams, *Bromyard: Minster, Manor and Town* (Bringsty, 1987), p. 52: ‘It is unfortunate that the delightful name Maydewell Lane has since been changed, for this street cannot be positively identified. It does seem likely though that Nunwell must have something to do with the maiden’s well for there is no record of a nunnery in Bromyard. However, there was in Nunwall Streate a plot of land called the Roode land [cited as *Le Roode land* on p. 62 – JF] which belonged to Thomas Pope in 1575; perhaps the rent was donated at some time for the holy rood or cross in the church or for the chantry of the Blessed Virgin Mary.’

<sup>57</sup> *OED*, s.v. *maid*, n.<sup>1</sup>, draft revision September 2008.

<sup>58</sup> Another motivation for a possible re-inflection of *mægden* as a strong feminine may have been the analogy of nouns with the Old English strong feminine suffix *-en*, used to form nouns denoting female persons or animals from nouns denoting

general tendency in the formation of Anglo-Saxon personal names is for natural gender to follow grammatical gender, so that grammatically masculine deuterotheremes give masculine names, and grammatically feminine deuterotheremes give feminine names. There are exceptions, however, as with masculine names with feminine deuterotheremes, such as *Byrhtnoth* and *Sigemund*. In such instances, the names inflect according to natural, not grammatical gender. Thus Colman draws attention to the ‘different grammatical behaviour of personal name-elements from that of their common-word cognates’, whereby—

The common word declines according to its grammatical gender, whatever the natural gender of its denotatum (even if pronominalisation may be according to natural gender); e.g. *cild*, *wif*, with neuter inflections despite male or female denotata; *mund*, with feminine inflections despite neuter denotata. With personal names, the natural gender of the referent triggers the choice of grammatical inflection: the grammatical gender of the common word is overridden. The name-element behaves differently from the common word.<sup>59</sup>

Similarly, Coates notes that ‘when the deuterothereme was inflected, male names were generally treated as *a*-stems and female ones as *ō*-stems ... even where that was at variance with the morphology of the related lexical word’.<sup>60</sup> The use of *mægden* as an epithet for the Virgin Mary lies somewhere between a lexical word and a personal name: an interesting theoretical area which has been much discussed in the linguistic literat-

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males, as with *gyden* ‘goddess’, *menen* ‘maid-servant’, *þēowenn* ‘maid-servant’ and *-wyrgegn* ‘female monster’ (Campbell, *Old English Grammar*, §592). I am grateful to Mr Freeman for suggesting this to me, and for pointing out that the *Middle English Dictionary*, s.v. *maiden* (<<http://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/med/>>), gives a genitive singular form as ‘(early) *meidene*’, although there appear to be no examples of this in the citations.

<sup>59</sup> F. Colman, ‘Names will never hurt me’, in *Studies in English Language and Literature. ‘Doubt Wisely’*. *Papers in Honour of E. G. Stanley*, edited by M. J. Toswell and E. M. Tyler (London, 1996), pp. 13–28 (pp. 15–16).

<sup>60</sup> R. Coates, ‘Names’, in *A History of the English Language*, edited by R. Hogg and D. Denison (Cambridge, 2006), pp. 312–51 (p. 320).

ure.<sup>61</sup> Whereas lexical words generally have variable reference, referring to any member of a particular category, personal names have constant reference across a range of uses, identifying a particular individual. The term *Maiden* used of the mother of Jesus Christ exhibits constant reference, as also do phrases such as *Blessed Virgin* and *Our Lady*, conventionally capitalised in Present-Day English to indicate their name-like status. It therefore seems reasonable to suggest that the morphology of the qualifier in the name-type Maid(en)well may follow that of a personal name, inflecting according to natural rather than grammatical gender.

Changes of inflection in an onomastic context are also discussed by Sandred, who argues that apparently anomalous inflections in boundary clauses, sometimes taken to reflect either change of gender or multiple gender, may instead be connected with the new toponymic use of the word.<sup>62</sup> Similarly, it may be possible that the apparently anomalous genitive singular <e> inflection of the Old English neuter noun *mægden* can be accounted for in terms of its use in a new quasi-anthroponymic context.

In conclusion, I suggest that the name-type Maid(en)well represents a dedication to the Virgin Mary, directly paralleling Lady Well, Mary Well, and others such as Chibbyr Woirey (Manx), Ffynnon Fair (Welsh), Tobar Moire (Gaelic), Virgin's Well and Virgin Mary's Well.<sup>63</sup> It would therefore form part of a larger group of religious formations including Maiden's Cross mentioned at the beginning of this paper. Comparison with the latter group may provide some support for this hypothesis. Of the four secure occurrences of the name-type Maiden's Cross identified in my earlier corpus,<sup>64</sup> Maidenscrouch Farm in Hertfordshire, from

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<sup>61</sup> See for instance T. Burge, 'Reference and proper names', in *Semantics: A Reader*, edited by S. Davis and B. S. Gillon (Oxford, 2004), pp. 424–34; J. M. Anderson, *The Grammar of Names* (Oxford, 2007).

<sup>62</sup> K. I. Sandred, 'Reading a Kentish charter', in *Names, Places and People. An Onomastic Miscellany in Memory of John McNeal Dodgson*, edited by A. R. Rumble and A. D. Mills (Stamford, 1997), pp. 320–25.

<sup>63</sup> All are mapped in Rattue, *The Living Stream*, p. 74.

<sup>64</sup> Hough, 'Place-name evidence relating to the interpretation of Old English legal terminology'. A potential fifth occurrence, the Cheshire field-name Mad Cross (1848), is insecure as there are no early spellings (J. McN. Dodgson, *The Place-*

Middle English *crouche* ‘cross’, is recorded as *Maydenes cruch* (1433) and *Mayden Crouch* (1601).<sup>65</sup> The two occurrences of the minor name Maiden’s Cross in Cheshire are, like the place-names Danes Well (Shropshire), *Maydens well* (Leicestershire), Maiden’s Well (Staffordshire) and Maids Well (Norfolk) in the present corpus, unrecorded before the seventeenth century.<sup>66</sup> Significantly, however, the earliest known instance of the name-type is a lost Cumberland field-name recorded *c.*1210 as *Maydane Cross*.<sup>67</sup> Here the qualifying element exhibits the same <e> inflection as the problematic spellings of Maid(en)well, and I suggest that the referent is the same.

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*Names of Cheshire*, 5 vols in 7, English Place-Name Society, 44–48, 54, 74 (Cambridge and Nottingham, 1970–97) [part 5.2 completed and edited by A. R. Rumble], i, 87).

<sup>65</sup> J. E. B. Gover, A. Mawer and F. M. Stenton, *The Place-Names of Hertfordshire*, English Place-Name Society, 15 (Cambridge, 1938), p. 93.

<sup>66</sup> Dodgson, *The Place-Names of Cheshire*, iii, 216, 220.

<sup>67</sup> A. M. Armstrong *et al.*, *The Place-Names of Cumberland*, 3 vols, English Place-Name Society, 20–22 (Cambridge, 1950–52), i, 69.

### Appendix

1. Maidwell, Northamptonshire<sup>68</sup>
  - Medewelle* 1086, *-wella* c.1155
  - Maydewell(e)*, *-i-*, t.Hy 2 *et passim* to 1475
  - Meidewell(e)*, *-y-*, 1181 *et freq* to c.1245(1425)
  - Meydell* 1227
  - Madewell'* 1204, 1276
  - Maydenewell* 1235, 1253, 1275, 1287
  - Maydenwell* 1247, 1285
  - Maydwell Marie, Petri* 1526
  - Meadwell* 1675
  
2. f.n. *Maydenewelle* (12th), Gloucestershire<sup>69</sup>
  
3. Maidenwell, Lincolnshire<sup>70</sup>
  - Welle* 1086
  - Madewelle* 1209–35
  - Maidenwell'* 1212
  - Maidewelle* 1230
  - Maydenwell'* 1242–43
  
4. f.n. *maidewellewong* (e.13th), Leicestershire<sup>71</sup>
  - maidewell'* 13th
  - Maydewelle siche* 13th
  
5. f.n. *Maydenewelle* (1260), Wiltshire<sup>72</sup>

<sup>68</sup> Gover, Mawer and Stenton, *The Place-Names of Northamptonshire*, p. 117.

<sup>69</sup> Smith, *The Place-Names of Gloucestershire*, ii, 119.

<sup>70</sup> Cameron, *A Dictionary of Lincolnshire Place-Names*, p. 85.

<sup>71</sup> Cox, *The Place-Names of Leicestershire*, iv, 207. B. Cox, 'The Place-Names of Leicestershire and Rutland' (unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Nottingham, 1971), p. 230, dates the first spelling to a.1150, 12th.

<sup>72</sup> J. E. B. Gover, A. Mawer and F. M. Stenton, *The Place-Names of Wiltshire*, English Place-Name Society, 16 (Cambridge, 1939), p. 450.

6. st.n. *Vico de Meydeneswelle* (c.1288), Herefordshire<sup>73</sup>  
*Maydenwalle lone* 1390  
*Maydwellane* e.16th  
*Maydewell Lane* 1575  
*Madewell Lane* 1775
7. f.n. *Maidenwelleforlong* (1306[1372]), Dorset<sup>74</sup>
8. f.n. *Maydewell* (1316), Berkshire<sup>75</sup>
9. Maiden Wells, Pembrokeshire<sup>76</sup>  
*Mayden Welle* 1336  
*Mayden Wells* 1583  
*Maiden Wells* 1818
10. Maidenwell, Cornwall<sup>77</sup>  
*Medenawille* 1347  
*Medenwille* 1421–42  
*Madyn Wyll* 1483  
*Medynwyll* 1505 x 1515
11. f.n. *Maydyn' well* (1467 x 1484), Leicestershire<sup>78</sup>  
*Maidenewell* 1477(e.16th)

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<sup>73</sup> I owe these spellings to Mr John Freeman, who also informs me that the name seems to have been replaced by Frog Lane at some time between 1775 and 1858.

<sup>74</sup> Mills, *The Place-Names of Dorset*, i, 70.

<sup>75</sup> Gelling, *The Place-Names of Berkshire*, i, 52.

<sup>76</sup> Charles, *The Place-Names of Pembrokeshire*, ii, 722.

<sup>77</sup> Padel, *A Popular Dictionary of Cornish Place-Names*, p. 113, cites the 1347 form. The others were kindly supplied by Dr Padel in private correspondence, together with a further spelling reported by Gover as *Medenewille* c.1450, which has not been checked.

<sup>78</sup> Cox, *The Place-Names of Leicestershire*, iv, 125.



12. f.n. *Maydens well* (1601, 1638, 1698), Leicestershire<sup>79</sup>  
*Maidens well* 1712  
*Maiden's well* 1742
13. Danes Well, Shropshire<sup>80</sup>  
*Greate Maydons Wall* 1615  
*Litle Maydons Wall* 1615  
*Maidens Well* 1840
14. Maiden's Well, Staffordshire<sup>81</sup>  
*Meadenswall (Close)* 1623  
*Maydenswall (Close)* 1646  
*Maidenswall (Close)* 1665
15. f.n. Maidenwell (1838), Dorset<sup>82</sup>
16. f.n. Madewell (1839), Shropshire<sup>83</sup>
17. f.n. Maids Well (1839), Norfolk<sup>84</sup>
18. f.n. Maiden Well Croft (1845), Shropshire<sup>85</sup>
19. Maiden Well, Berkshire<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Cox, *The Place-Names of Leicestershire*, iii, 141.

<sup>80</sup> Gelling in collaboration with Foxall, *The Place-Names of Shropshire*, v, 151.

<sup>81</sup> Horovitz, *The Place-Names of Staffordshire*, pp. 380–81.

<sup>82</sup> Mills, *The Place-Names of Dorset*, iii, 329.

<sup>83</sup> Gelling in collaboration with Foxall, *The Place-Names of Shropshire*, ii, 70.

<sup>84</sup> K. I. Sandred and B. Lindström, *The Place-Names of Norfolk*, 3 vols so far published, English Place-Name Society, 61, 72, 79 (Nottingham, 1989–2002), ii, 166.

<sup>85</sup> Gelling in collaboration with Foxall, *The Place-Names of Shropshire*, iv, 116.

<sup>86</sup> Gelling, *The Place-Names of Berkshire*, ii, 382.

20. Maiden Well, Buckinghamshire<sup>87</sup>

21. Maiden Well, Dorset<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> Rattue, *The Living Stream*, p. 103. The name is not included in A. Mawer and F. M. Stenton, *The Place-Names of Buckinghamshire*, English Place-Name Society, 2 (Cambridge, 1925), which has little coverage of minor names.

<sup>88</sup> According to Rattue, *The Living Stream*, p. 131: ‘At Portland (Dorset), Maiden Well was filled in after a typhoid outbreak in 1896’. Portland is covered in Mills, *The Place-Names of Dorset*, i, 217–30, but I do not find the name listed.