



**UNIVERSITY OF  
ILLINOIS PRESS**

---

Review

Reviewed Work(s): Chaucer's Franklin in the "Canterbury Tales": The Social and Literary Background of a Chaucerian Character by Henrik Specht

Review by: George D. Gopen

Source: *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, Vol. 82, No. 3 (Jul., 1983), pp. 436-439

Published by: University of Illinois Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27709214>

Accessed: 11-09-2019 22:05 UTC

---

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



**JSTOR**

*University of Illinois Press* is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology*

ferent guises in the succeeding stories. So also A. C. Spearing identifies a hitherto unnoticed structural principle in *The Awntyrs off Arthure* whereby the moral theme emerges from the juxtaposition of the two parts. In both the stories of Guinevere's confrontation by her mother's ghost and Galeron of Galway's unsuccessful challenge to the Arthurian court, the limitations of courtly society are raised without being explicitly condemned. Mr. Spearing has recently used this same method of analysis to great effect in "Purity and Danger" in *Essays in Criticism*, 30 (1980). The conference paper provides more evidence of the ways medieval authors expected their readers to recognize moral themes in apparently unrelated narratives. It should be said that these two complementary articles on *Purity* (that is, Clannesse by its other name) show signs of that exchange of views which must have made the Binghamton conference such a pleasure. Professor Schreiber was able to refer to Mr. Spearing's well-known book on the *Gawain*-poet; Spearing's references to "recent commentators" (pp. 295-96) can now be seen to acknowledge Schreiber's then-still-unpublished paper.

Russell Peck's study of the *Alliterative Morte Arthure* as a Boethian tragedy emphasizes Arthur's diseased will. In 1981 Karl Heinz Göller edited a book of essays devoted solely to that poem, *The Alliterative Morte Arthure: A Reassessment of the Poem* (Cambridge: Brewer), and one can only end by reiterating the lament that these papers remained unpublished for so long. Their appearance at last is a tribute to the tenacity and hard work of the editors.

RUTH MORSE

Cambridge, England

CHAUCER'S FRANKLIN IN THE "CANTERBURY TALES": THE SOCIAL AND LITERARY BACKGROUND OF A CHAUCERIAN CHARACTER. By Henrik Specht. Copenhagen: Akademisk Forlag, 1981. Pp. 206; 8 plates. D. kr. 120.

In this modest book, Henrik Specht marshals the information we have on the status of franklins in fourteenth-century England, presents a picture of their life style, and tries to relate this background material to Chaucer's portrayal of the Franklin in the *Canterbury Tales*. He discusses legal, social, and economic history, the etymology of "franklin," and the concept of *gentillesse*, attempting toward the end to demonstrate the relevance of these materials to literary interpretation. Specht has few original ideas and writes in a style that vacillates from the undistinguished to the problematical, but he has succeeded in bringing together a great deal of information that helps us understand better what the word "franklin" would have connoted for Chaucer's audience. A series of books of this summative nature, one on each of Chaucer's pilgrims, would go a long way toward organizing much of what has been done in Chaucer scholarship over the last century.

The main strength of the book lies in its documentation of conclusions long accepted by most editors of Chaucer's works. Many of Specht's estimations can be found in Gordon Hall Gerould's article, "The Social Status of Chaucer's Franklin," published more than half a century ago (*PMLA*, 41 [1926], 262-79), but Specht adds interesting material from manor rolls, tax records, chronicles, legal treatises, and literary works to substantiate these conclusions.

"Franklin," a term of some ambiguity, apparently referred to a class of moneyed freemen who rivalled the squires and even some of the knights in

the wealth of their land holdings. The poll tax of 1379 indicates this with some clarity, Specht points out, in that 85 per cent of the franklins are listed as paying the same rate of tax as 61 per cent of the squires, 12 per cent of the franklins and 27 per cent of the squires paying at yet a higher rate. "The Franklins, in other words, then appear to have been on equal terms with about nine out of every ten squires (88%), as far as material status is concerned" (p. 88). At the beginning of the fourteenth century, most franklins controlled a good deal more land than did the subsistence village farmers. They used that surplus to deal actively in the land market, and by the end of the fourteenth century they had widened the gap significantly between themselves and the villeins, approaching the economic power of the titled classes, which many of them had no wish to join. Some franklins apparently took great pains to avoid knighthood, probably because of the concomitant public responsibilities, higher taxes, feudal dues, and military responsibilities (pp. 101–102).

In developing at length a description of the term *gentillesse*, Specht repeats the explanation given by Gerould, Muriel Bowden, and others concerning the main source of our confusion about the status of franklins. In 1810, H. J. Todd, quoting from Waterhouse's *Commentary* on Sir John Fortescue's *De Laudibus Angliae*, indicated erroneously that franklins did not belong to the gentry. Henry Bradley, probably influenced by Todd, approved a faulty definition of "franklin" for the *NED*: "A freeholder; in 14–15th c. the designation of a class of landowners, of free but not noble birth, and *ranking next below the gentry*" (emphasis supplied). Professor Root adopted the misconception and emphasized it in *The Poetry of Chaucer*, and thus a scholarly tradition was established that tends to cause confusion even today, despite Gerould's brief but convincing rebuttal in 1926, repeated by Bowden in 1967. The *OED* has not yet corrected the erroneous definition; perhaps Specht's lengthy, well-documented discussion of the matter will help to counterbalance the influence of the *OED*.

Specht does a competent job in outlining the social and legal history necessary for us to understand the nature and effect of landholding in the fourteenth century. The materials are not new, but for the uninitiated they present a clear picture briefly. He has the curious and confusing habit, however, of combining basic, broad materials (e.g., the delineation of the duties of a reeve) with highly specific, relatively unavailable details (e.g., the enumeration of the tenurial conditions of a Ramsey Abbey freeholder, Thomas de Grauncourt of Shitlington) without giving us a sense that there is a distinction between the two. He is a bit more organized and vivid in dealing with the materials on the social status, economic holdings, and daily life of fourteenth-century franklins, which are enhanced by photographs of effigies of franklins from Herefordshire and Essex.

When he considers Chaucer's Franklin, Specht questions the validity of seeing in the character only a portrait of a particular individual (as Manly does) or only a social stereotype (as he feels Jill Mann does), and elects instead to adopt what he calls "a balanced view of the problem" (p. 21). He tries to accomplish this in part by suggesting a model for Chaucer's character, one William de Spaygne, that effectively rivals Manly's candidate, Sir John de Bussey (pp. 136–41). In his attempt to refute Manly's approach, however, Specht's energy and ingenuity ironically bring him closer to shedding new

light on Manly than to obscuring him, and the advertized “balanced view” turns out to be an alternation from one perspective to the other rather than a straightforward approach somewhere between the two.

Specht entitles his chapter on Chaucer’s Franklin “Chaucer’s Intentions,” and he remains true to that title throughout, seeking a single “accurate” interpretation that will give us the Franklin as Chaucer “intended” us to have him. Unfortunately, Specht loses sight of his own objectives and seems completely unaware of widely held critical theories that question the validity of searching for an author’s intentions. He takes to task Lumiansky, Robertson, and others for emulating one another at the game of “‘catching out’ the Franklin . . . and his ‘real’ motives”; but in pursuing Chaucer’s intentions, of course, Specht himself must try to “catch out” Chaucer, and with that comes the dissolution of his pretension to having adopted any kind of consistent critical stance. Moreover, he misinterprets Lumiansky on several major points, especially where the ambiguity of the Franklin’s character is concerned.

In this mostly derivative book, Specht does manage to make a few contributions of his own, the most interesting perhaps being his interpretation of the Host’s line, “Straw for youre gentillesse,” which interrupts the Franklin’s words to the Squire. R. B. Burlin and others have pointed out that the Host’s shift from the polite “thy” to the familiar “youre” demonstrates extreme rudeness on his part, proof of the Franklin’s lack of real gentility. Specht, who argues throughout the book for the Franklin’s *gentillesse*, notes that this is the only such shift on the part of the Host where the Franklin is concerned and suggests that the line should be read with “youre” as the polite plural rather than the familiar singular, the “youre gentillesse” then referring to the subject matter of both the Franklin’s *and* the Squire’s comments. The discomfort on the Host’s part, he suggests, is with the topic of conversation, not with the character of the Franklin. But despite his occasional insights and his ubiquitous fervor for his subject, Specht so lacks consistency in his critical stance that the literary chapter of the book neither presents us with convincing arguments nor instructs us how we are to make use of all the background material that preceded it. Specht, it seems, makes no attempt to distinguish between historical “fact” and literary “interpretation.”

This lack of critical sophistication unfortunately is paralleled by a lack of sophistication in his rhetoric. The book’s title suggests that there might be such problems: *Chaucer’s Franklin in the “Canterbury Tales”* . . . (where else would we expect to find him?). Throughout we find Specht relying heavily on metadiscourse, taking far too much time to remind us where we have been and to preview for us where we will go from here. He phrases many of his most emphatic points in the weak form of rhetorical questions: “Can anyone, having read this, doubt that Henry junior, though in material terms on an equal footing with knights and esquires, was, like his father, a *franklin*?” (p. 90). The adversarial reader need only respond, “Yes.”

It is unclear whether Specht was aiming this book at undergraduates or at scholars. While he certainly includes a good deal of scholarly material, handled quite soberly, much of his prose demonstrates the kind of enthusiasm and deals with the kind of materials far better suited to people approaching Chaucer for the first time. He speaks of Kittredge, Manly, and Root as if he had just discovered them and were sharing this find with us. Sometimes he seems to lack awareness of the nature of his audience altogether: Compare

"No man, and certainly no writer, is an island" (p. 22) with "The mode of transmission conveying to Chaucer this social and literary typology may have been of a more or less concrete nature" (p. 23).

For all its flaws, though, the book succeeds in bringing together much of the background we need to know about franklins and the Franklin, and the bibliography should prove helpful for those who wish to pursue the topic further. Much of the material is interesting, and the presentation, though heavy-handed, is orderly. It is brief enough to read in one afternoon and, with all its weaknesses, will reward the effort.

GEORGE D. GOPEN

*Loyola University of Chicago*

THE LATE MEDIEVAL PLAYS OF BODLEIAN MSS DIGBY 133 AND E MUSEO 160.

Edited by Donald C. Baker, John L. Murphy, and Louis B. Hall, Jr. New York: Oxford University Press for the Early English Text Society (Original Series 283), 1982. Pp. cx + 284; 3 illustrations. \$35.

The Digby and E Museo plays have been bedfellows for a hundred years, ever since Furnivall edited them together, and this new edition still links them "for bibliographical convenience because of their long association." They have, of course, nothing else in common—Digby from East Anglia and Essex, with plentiful dross and with loquacious baddies whose rant soon ceases to be funny, with coarse humour and theological doggerel, E Museo an austere North Midland or South Yorkshire compilation with Carthusian affinities and with noble eloquence on the Deposition and Resurrection themes; they had read Margery Kempe at Mount Grace Charterhouse, but the editors prefer the Hull house as the provenance of this manuscript. E Museo is sustained, logical, exhaustive in its theological probing around its subject; Digby is haphazard and self-indulgent, though its two better plays, the *Killing of the Children* and *Wisdom*, are conceived and executed in a spirit remote from the two worse, the *Conversion of Saint Paul* and *Mary Magdalen*, and *Wisdom* perhaps deserves the luxury of being twice edited in recent years—the last occasion was among the Macro plays in 1969. Whereas Joseph of Arimathea's opening speech in the E Museo *Burial* is almost enough to justify tail-rhyme, Magdalen in Digby cannot even versify the lovely Compline hymn *Christe qui lux es et dies*, and it is coming to something when we have to welcome the "humour" in her pompous line *Your debonarious obedience ravisheth me to tranquillity*. Apparently "alliteration tended to increase rather than diminish during a play's active life," and this is banefully brought out in the worst lines; our increasing knowledge of East Anglian and East Midland alliteration (as in the *Blacksmiths*, and in the lament for Sir John Berkeley of Wymondham, recently discovered by Thorlac Turville-Petre) is giving the lie to the old idea of the North and West as the sole *rum-ram-ruf* areas.

This edition is lavish, perhaps more so than the plays deserve, and I welcome the etymologies given in the Glossary (despite recent EETS policy) for some of the more testing words like *brunte* and *tayve*. It is significant that the Digby *Conversion* and *Magdalen*, with their execrable strainings of words, appear to me insufficiently, the other plays adequately or excessively, glossed. Many little points in these two rather paltry plays need further elucidation, and I intend to list all those that might prove ambiguous: