

Jana Malá Štěpánková

“Chivalry in Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*” (BA thesis, ÚALK FF UK, Prague 2012, 91 pp.)

(opponent’s review)

Jana Malá Štěpánková’s thesis is “concerned with reflection of chivalry and chivalric culture” in Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* and “with the relation of his testimony to the social reality of the late Middle Ages” (p. 5).

Chapter 1 of the thesis outlines the specific character of the *Tales* in the context of the period and Chaucer’s life. Chapter 2 discusses the gradual formation of the code of chivalric virtues and „the chivalric archetypes“ (p. 36) as reflected in the portrayal of Chaucer’s *Knight* and *Squire*. Chapter 3 offers a discussion of these virtues in characters of those *Canterbury Tales* that cannot be classified as romances. Chivalry as one of the central defining features of romance is then explored in the concluding Chapter 4, dealing with Chaucer’s renderings of that genre in the *Canterbury* collection.

The principal problem of the thesis consists in the breadth of the chosen topic, which could not even be effectively and successfully explored in what almost certainly far exceeds the maximum required length of BA theses. In other words, a much narrower focus would have been beneficial (see also the requirements and recommendations concerning BA theses at <http://ualk.ff.cuni.cz/thesis-ba.html>). Even the somewhat narrowed scope of the criteria for analysis as defined on pp. 14-15 would be manageable only in application to two or three tales.

More specifically, Jana Malá Štěpánková’s reflections of “Chivalry in Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*” would have benefited from being thematized by focusing on no more than two or three central issues in a close-reading analysis centred on carefully selected passages or texts, such as, for example, on representation of one specific virtue of the chivalric code, on the “squire ideal” as opposed to the “knight ideal” or on knightly attributes in selected Chaucer’s non-knightly characters, to suggest but a few possible topics. Such an analysis could have done without the historical probe offered into the formation of the chivalrous rank (which itself does not bear a straightforward link to the bulk of the thesis’ coverage and would need much more space to be covered sufficiently) and should have started in a more immediate way by comparing definitions of “the knight” and chivalric code in relevant, recent and preferably more “Chaucerian” literature. Apt detailed characterizations, such as in Malá Štěpánková’s analysis of *The Man of Law’s Tale* (the female heroine as knight, pp. 45-46), of *The Merchant’s Tale* (the idea of “demoted romance”, p. 50), of *The Knight’s Tale* (“love over war” theme, p. 62f.), as well as some lucid summaries (as that concerning burghers adopting chivalrous values on p. 54-55) demonstrate in themselves that this would have been a path worth taking.

On the one hand, Jana Malá Štěpánková has produced a carefully laid-out thesis that reflects a very good knowledge of her source text (duly stressing, in particular, the multi-layered narrative perspective of the *Tales*) as well as her analytical response to her secondary materials and is written in a clear and grammatically correct manner. On the other hand, the extensive thematic scope of her thesis and the lack of a clear focus have prevented her from producing a text that would be a product of more systematic and developed research couched in consistently logical and thoughtful terms.

This can be demonstrated by reference to a selection of comments and observations that follow and should be discussed at the defence.

1. The secondary sources used, both on the historical and the literary side, appear somewhat random and scattered in time (cf., for example, the problem of basing the description of Chaucer's England on André Maurois' account, or the problem of not having used such seminal texts as Helen Cooper's *Oxford Guides to Chaucer: The Canterbury Tales*).
2. Chapter 3 would have come across in clearer terms if the generic characteristic of the analysed "borderline" romance tales (p. 56) had been spelled out right away and the ensuing discussion had been organised around those criteria.
3. Why is the "combination of antique history with a knight as a protagonist" in *The Physician's Tale* (p. 40) described as "uneasy"? How does this relate to the other *Tales* specifically and medieval literature generally?
4. Would it be possible to classify, at least very roughly, Chaucer's narrators with regard to the genre of tales they choose to tell (a question prompted by the discussion of the Physician's attitude to his story on p. 40 and asking for an elaboration of what follows later on pp. 54-55)?
5. Would it be possible to sum up explicitly the distinction implicitly drawn in Chapters 3 and 4 of the thesis between "traditional chivalric ideals" (p. 75) and their counterpart?
6. What is the Czech equivalent of (*medieval*) *romance* (it is not "romance", p. 5)?

Conclusion: The thesis is a carefully written piece of work containing some independent analysis but unfortunately also too broadly-conceived and descriptive to be consistently probing. I recommend it for defence with a preliminary VERY GOOD mark.

Prague, 14 June 2012

Doc. PhDr. Jan Čermák, CSc.