



PROJECT MUSE®

---

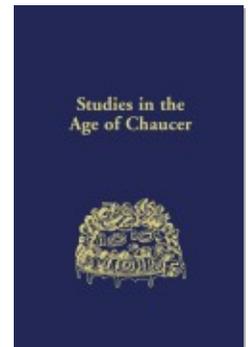
*Community, Class and Careerism: Cheshire and Lancashire  
Society in the Age of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* by  
Michael J. Bennett (review)

Paul Strohm

*Studies in the Age of Chaucer*, Volume 6, 1984, pp. 170-173 (Review)

Published by The New Chaucer Society

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/sac.1984.0009>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/658317/summary>

whether French, English, or German. Both Morris and Schmolke-Hasselmann attempt to get into the minds of those who, from Geoffrey of Monmouth to Malory, invented a “historical Arthur” — the legendary hero of chronicle and romance — in conformity with various political, social, and ideological intentions. Wright has shown how such intentions could become strategies for adaptation. To the extent that they have succeeded, these studies are examples not only of historical scholarship but also of historical criticism, criticism that relies on identifiable and demonstrable medieval practices to evaluate a work’s intention and achievement.

DOUGLAS KELLY  
University of Wisconsin, Madison

MICHAEL J. BENNETT, *Community, Class and Careerism: Cheshire and Lancashire Society in the Age of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Cambridge Studies in Medieval Life and Thought. 3d ser., vol. 18. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983. Pp. xii, 286. \$49.50.

This study of social structure in northwestern England in the period 1375 to 1425 contains material of considerable interest to literary scholars. While Bennett concludes with a particular thesis about the milieu of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, readers interested in the social setting of the alliterative revival will also find pertinent data in the comprehensive treatment of later-fourteenth-century social stratification and mobility that informs the study as a whole.

The first section of the book surveys the “social geography” of Cheshire and Lancashire, arguing that a regional oligarchy of lesser gentry united the two counties. This section includes a stimulating chapter on “Lesser Solidarities,” including structures afforded by the hundred, the parish, the manor, and the township or vill. More might have been done here or elsewhere after the example of Dhondt or Pythian-Adams to describe the guilds and fraternities

and other social units that supplemented the more physical associations under discussion. Yet the discussion of these solidarities remains a refreshing complement to more traditional and hierarchical representations of medieval society.

In the second section Bennett analyzes the social structure of the region, especially in terms of the way in which land tenure supported the distinction between a landed society of gentry living from rents and a peasantry dependent on labor. Important to those interested in literary culture is his persuasive demonstration that, as a consequence of external control of the earldom and the duchy, later-fourteenth-century Cheshire and Lancashire contained no important baronial households. Instead, with resident gentry possessing over three-quarters of the manors within the region, authority and accumulation of wealth were considerably decentralized — at least until the rise of the Stanleys in the fifteenth century. Bennett is frank about the difficulty of documenting the exact forms of land tenure available to the peasantry in the fourteenth century, though he follows most commentators in emphasizing the movement from villenage to leasehold within the period. He is adroit in balancing the claims of Hinton's argument for the peasantry as a distinct class with his own documentation of considerable variation of wealth and status among peasant families.

The greater part of the energy and originality of this study lies in its third section, which treats possibilities for social mobility that cut across the traditional divisions of landed society. In a series of conceptually energetic and well-documented chapters, he describes the routes to careerist advancement opened by the emergence of a kingdomwide "network of opportunities." "Towns, Trade and Industry" outlines possibilities created for traders and craftsmen by the emerging national economic system, with especially tempting possibilities for London entrepreneurship open to sons of provincial gentry and burgesses. Other chapters treat avenues of advancement afforded by the church and the military and expanding possibilities in law and administration. All these possibilities, and especially the latter ones, were enhanced by expanding connections between the court and later-fourteenth-century Cheshire and early-fifteenth-century Lancashire.

This cluster of chapters is enriched by the presentation of short biographies exemplifying career possibilities actually realized by persons of the region. Judicious use of predecessors and original archival research have enabled Bennett to illustrate the social mobility open to small freeholders (William Jodrell), the possibilities of entrepreneurship open to members of the gentry (Richard Clitheroe), the church as a national arena for advancement (Robert Hallum and Thomas Langley), the rewards available to successful military men (Hugh Calveley and Robert Knolles), and the way in which one family of gentlepersons consolidated its position (the Stanleys of Lathom).

Of particular interest to literary scholars is a concluding discussion of provincial culture, in which Bennett seeks to connect the alliterative revival with royal patronage in the later fourteenth century. In brief summary of an argument which he has conducted more fully and with more vehemence elsewhere (*JMH* 5 [1979]), he imagines the household of Richard II as "the most credible" context for the initial composition of the works of the *Gawain* poet. He further supposes that when Cheshire courtiers returned home after the fall of Richard in 1399 "in all likelihood the *Gawain*-poet was one of their number, and on his return sat down to rework a poem first conceived, commissioned and composed at court."

My own inclination is to emphasize the considerable value of Bennett's entire study for an understanding of the milieu of the alliterative revival, without necessarily accepting his particular thesis about the connection of *Gawain* with Richard II's court. His discussion of the absence of baronial courts in later-fourteenth-century Cheshire and Lancashire, for example, goes far toward disproving Hubert's influential suggestion that the alliterative revival was fostered among Northern magnates uncongenial to Richard and his court ("A Hypothesis Concerning the Alliterative Revival," *MP* 28 [1930-31]). Similarly, his account of a regional oligarchy of lesser gentry suggests a general hypothesis about the reception of alliterative poetry. In this sense, he offers a documentary basis for Turville-Petre's location of the audience of alliterative verse among "the gentry . . . , knights, franklins and the clergy, the educated men often with positions of local authority" (*The Allit-*

*erative Revival* [Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1977]). In fact, Bennett's specification of such families as the Booths of Dunham Massey, the Irelands of Hale, and the Chethams of Nuthurst limns out just the kind of milieu posited by Turville-Petre. The individual reader can decide whether to take the additional step of considering Richard II the likely patron of the movement; I remain unconvinced that the accepted dating of the alliterative revival need be pushed back a decade to accommodate this thesis. Nevertheless, a strength of this study taken as a whole is that it presents evidence of social organization in a way that permits us to draw our own conclusions about the likely sponsorship and milieu of alliterative works.

PAUL STROHM  
Indiana University

ROBERT L. BENSON and GILES CONSTABLE, eds., with CAROL D. LANHAM, *Renaissance and Renewal in the Twelfth Century*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982. Pp. xxx, 781. \$50.00.

"Pygmies are pygmies still, though perch on Alps," Edward Young wrote, threatening the self-assured modesty of Bernard of Chartres's image of medieval intellectuals standing on the shoulders of Classical giants, and so able to see further. Bernard's image, coined in the twelfth century, has had wide currency in the twentieth, since Charles Homer Haskins's pioneering work *The Renaissance of the Twelfth Century* (1927) gave that earlier period an interest and an immediacy it lacked before and showed that pygmies, properly placed, are giants in their turn. In 1977, just half a century after Haskins, Harvard University and the University of California at Los Angeles convened a conference to mark the anniversary, and here, expanded and annotated, are the papers. *Renaissance and Renewal in the Twelfth Century* (hereafter *Renaissance*) is a book that, like its illustrious ancestor, invites rethinking and