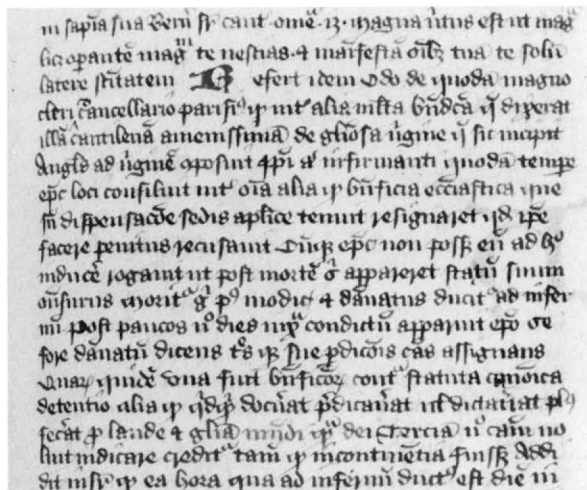


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Angelus ad virginem

A new work by Philippe the Chancellor?



1 *Speculum laicorum* (Oxford, University College, 29, f.93r): the anecdote that attributes *Angelus ad virginem* to a 'great cleric, Chancellor of Paris' begins in line 3 with the words 'Refert idem Odo'

Angelus ad virginem subintrans in conclave (ex.1) may be the most famous song of the English Middle Ages after *Sumer is icumen in*. Every reader of Chaucer knows that the young Oxford scholar Nicholas sings it to the accompaniment of a psalter in *The Miller's Tale*.¹

And al above ther lay a gay sautrie,
On which he made a-nyghtes melodye
So swetely that all the chambre rong;
And *Angelus ad virginem* he song;
And after that he song the Kynges Noote.
Ful often blessed was his myrie throte.

It is no surprise that Chaucer knew the song and felt free to assume that his readers would recognize its opening words. All the surviving sources of the poem with its familiar tune (or polyphonic settings of it) were apparently written in the British Isles and there are two Middle English verse translations of the poem in existence.² Yet in spite of this testimony to the song's popularity, its background is largely obscure: we do not know when, where or by whom it was written.

Now, appropriately enough, an English source has come to light which provides a possible solution to the mystery: a collection of edifying stories, entitled *The Mirror of the Laity* (*Speculum laicorum*), compiled during

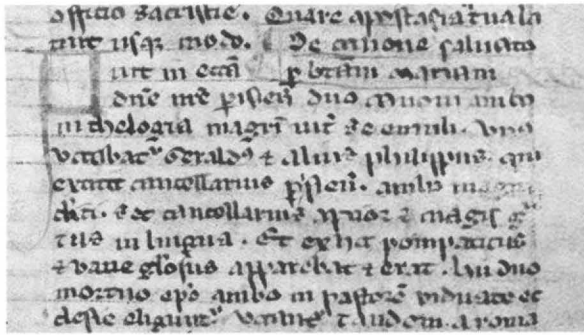
the last quarter of the 13th century. One of the stories concerns a cleric who held benefices without papal dispensation. Not particularly promising material, perhaps, for a storyteller with his mind upon the needs of priests in pulpit and confessional; but this author knows how to deliver asides that hold an audience (illus.1):³

Refert idem Odo de quodam magno clerico, cancellario Parisius, quod inter alia multa benedicta que dixerat illam cantilenam amenissimam de gloriosa uirgine que sic incipit Angelus ad uirginem composuit.

The same Odo [of Cheriton] tells of a certain great cleric, Chancellor of Paris, who, among many other blessed things which he uttered, composed that sweetest song about the Virgin that begins thus: *Angelus ad virginem*.

In view of the English provenance of the *Speculum laicorum* it seems likely that this 'sweetest song about the Virgin' is *Angelus ad virginem subintrans in conclave*; like Chaucer, this author seems to assume that his hearers will know the song, and this is further evidence of its popularity in England. As for the 'great cleric, Chancellor of Paris', this sounds like Philippe the Chancellor (*d* 1236), a well-known poet whose many Latin lyrics almost all survive with music.⁴

Ex.1 *Angelus ad virginem* (London, British Library, Arundel 248, f.154r)



2 London, British Library, Add.33956, f.71r: an extract from a story very similar to that in the *Speculum laicorum*; here the protagonist is named in lines 6–7 as ‘Philippus . . . Cancellarius Parisiensis’

Fortunately, we can be fairly sure of this identification since a related story appears in other manuscripts, where the ‘great cleric’ is named as ‘Philippus . . . Cancellarius Parisiensis’ (illus.2).⁵

Angelus ad virginem does not, to my knowledge, appear in any known source of Philippe the Chancellor’s songs, but this may not be significant: our current information about the canon of his works seems to be incomplete.⁶ The *Speculum laicorum* story has some authority for it is attributed to Odo of Cheriton (the ‘idem Odo’ mentioned in the first line of the Latin),⁷ who was in a good position to be accurately informed about the doings of Chancellor Philippe. By 1219 Odo had spent a good deal of time at the University of Paris; Philippe became chancellor in 1218.⁸ The careers of the two men overlapped in Paris and they may well have been acquainted with each other.

How might *Angelus ad virginem* have passed to England, where it enjoyed such popularity? Again, the *Speculum laicorum* offers an answer. It is almost certainly the work of a mendicant friar, possibly a Franciscan.⁹ Philippe the Chancellor was buried at his own request in a Franciscan chapel.¹⁰ The links between French and English Franciscans were well developed during this period. In 1229 the enforced exodus of English students from the University of Paris brought back to their homeland some friars who had been studying there. One novice who made the trip was Henry of Burford, described as ‘cantor fratrum Parisius’.¹¹ Only two years before, the Franciscan composer Julian of Speyer, ‘magister cantus in aula regis Francorum’ before his entry into the order, is recorded as having left ‘Anglia’ to go to Germany.¹² It was one such gifted Franciscan musician, Henry of Pisa, who set half a dozen works by Philippe the Chancellor during the 13th century.¹³

Perhaps *Angelus ad virginem* came to England with

travelling Franciscans. Devotion to the Virgin was a central concern of Franciscan spirituality and preaching. So was the use of song, including vernacular song, to sway the laity to contrition; is this why we have two vernacular versions of *Angelus ad virginem*? Once again, the internationalism of medieval song and the interrelation of vernacular and Latin traditions come to the fore.

¹(A), 3213–18; text from F. N. Robinson, ed., *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer* (London, 2/1957), p.48. For a recent study of *Angelus ad virginem* see J. Stevens, ‘*Angelus ad virginem*: the History of a Medieval Song’, *Medieval Studies for J. A. W. Bennett*, ed. P. L. Heyworth (Oxford, 1981), pp.297–328. See also E. J. Dobson and F. L. Harrison, eds., *Medieval English Songs* (London, 1979), pp.176–83, 261–8.

²For details of the known manuscripts of *Angelus ad virginem*, and of the vernacular versions, see Stevens, *op cit*, pp.299–302, 308–10.

³The *Speculum laicorum* has been edited by J. T. Welter (*Le Speculum Laicorum* (Paris, 1914)), who dates the work between 1279 and 1292. The text quoted here is from Oxford, University College, 29, f.93r (illus.1); Welter, pp.62–3.

⁴For details see R. Falck, ‘Philippe the Chancellor’, *The New Grove*.

⁵The substance of these stories is that an ecclesiastic is visited by Philippe the Chancellor’s ghost and told how the chancellor is faring in the afterlife. The details vary. In the *Speculum laicorum* he relates that he has been damned for his benefices held without papal dispensation (among other reasons); in another version (the one found in the manuscript reproduced here as illus.2) he states that he has been saved from damnation by the Virgin. It is in this second version that the name of the ‘great cleric’ is given as ‘Philippus’, though the song entitled *Angelus ad virginem* is not, as far as I am aware, ever mentioned (see *Romania*, 1 (1872), pp.193–5). It is tempting to see a common tradition behind these two versions, in which the reference to *Angelus ad virginem* was somehow connected with the chancellor’s salvation at the hands of the Virgin.

⁶For a list of genuine and doubtful works see Falck, *op cit*. The 13th-century Italian chronicler Salimbene relates that the Franciscan composer Henry of Pisa set half a dozen works by Philippe the Chancellor; two of the poems he lists by incipit (*Virgo, tibi respondeo* and *Pange lingua Magdalene*) are not listed in the *New Grove* work-list. It is worth stressing here that Henry of Pisa is a greatly neglected figure; Salimbene provides fascinating information about his activities and methods of working, and some of his pieces, both monophonic and polyphonic, may well survive. For Salimbene’s text see O. Holder-Egger, *Cronica Fratris Salimbene de Adam Ordinis Minorum*, Monumenta Germaniae Historica, *Scriptorum*, 32 (Hanover and Leipzig, 1905–13), pp.181ff.

⁷I do not find the story in Odo’s *Fables*.

⁸See A. C. Friend, ‘Master Odo of Cheriton’, *Speculum*, 23 (1948), pp.641–58.

⁹See Welter, *op cit*, p.vii–ix.

¹⁰See R. Steiner, ‘Some Monophonic Latin Songs Composed around 1200’, *MQ*, 52 (1966), p.59.

¹¹See A. G. Little, ed., *Tractatus Fr. Thomae vulgo dicti De Eccleston de adventu fratrum minorum in Angliam* (Paris, 1909), p.38. The *Tractatus* was completed towards 1258–9.

¹²There is a large literature on Julian. For the reference to his position ‘in aula regis Francorum’ see *Analecta franciscana*, 4 (1906), pp.308, 544. For some of the bibliography on Julian see S. J. P. Van Dijk, *Sources of the Modern Roman Liturgy*, 2 vols. (Leiden, 1963), 1, p.6, n.4 (where ‘Anglia’ is tentatively interpreted as ‘English Normandy’), and see also p.84.

¹³See fn.6 above.