**Introduction to Ranulph Higden’s *Distinctiones***

By Eugene J. Crook

Ranulph Higden (d. 1364), Benedictine monk and chronicler, entered the abbey of St Werburgh, Chester, in 1299.[[1]](#endnote-1) His major writing was his universal chronicle, in seven books, known as the *Polychronicon*.[[2]](#endnote-2) Apart from that he wrote a guide to composing sermons according to the latest methods entitled the *Ars componendi sermones*,[[3]](#endnote-3) the *Speculum curatorum*,[[4]](#endnote-4) which was a manual for pastoral care, and a number of minor works including a collection of Latin sermons. The *Distinctiones*, an aid for composing sermons, is found in the longer version in the Worcester Cathedral MS F.128 and the earlier, shorter version in Worcester Cathedral MS F.80 (ff. 209-326) and MS Lambeth 23 (ff.202-50).

The *Polychronicon* went through several discrete circulations in Higden's lifetime. The Latin text survives in a short, an intermediate, and a long version. It is clear from Higden's autograph copy in the Huntington Library (MS 132) that the short version of the text written soon after 1327 is the earliest, and that the narrative was then expanded into the later and longer accounts.[[5]](#endnote-5) A chronicle was rarely finished and accepted further contributions from readers. Higden was still revising his text at the time of his death. The Latin text of the *Polychronicon* survives in over 100 manuscripts testifying to its immense appeal.

Higden’s process for lengthening and elaborating the *Polychronicon* was to be repeated in both versions of the *Speculum curatorum* where the shorter version is found in four manuscripts (B.M. MS Harl. 1004; MS Balliol College 77; Cambridge U.L. Mm. i. 20; and MS Durham B. iv. 36). The longer version is Illinois MS Pre-1650, 72.

The process of lengthening and elaborating was repeated here in the *Distinctiones* culminating in the single manuscript of the longer version in Worcester Cathedral MS F.128, ff. 1-125. All three of the *Distinctiones* MSS are written in double columns. The longer F.128 has 67 lines in each column and averages eight words per line (a total word count of about 257,000), whereas the shorter F.80 has 52 lines in each column and each column average six words per line (a total word count of about 146,000). So, we can calculate that the shorter version has just over half the words of the longer version. As in the longer version of the *Speculum*, again here not all the text of the chapters of the earlier version are to be found in the later version.

For the longer F.128, the capital letters introducing each letter of the alphabet occupy an indentation of 6 to 11 lines (usually 7 to 9 lines); “I” or “J” runs down the column for 19 lines; “Y” runs to 14 lines. The large capitals introduce the chapter words also beginning with smaller capitals (consistently 3 lines; except for “J” words where the letters run 15 to 18 lines down the left margin of the column. All the capital letters are in blue with red ornamentations. Within each chapter or word are paragraph markings (¶) with alternating red and blue ink. To the left of some columns are tracery ornaments in red.

The F.128 MS has 402 chapters or words in ff. 1-125 with a few words repeated. This compares with the earlier version’s 283 chapters with many words repeated to discuss different aspects of the same word (F.80 in ff. 209-326; Lambeth 23 in ff. 202-250).

In a useful article explaining what *distinctiones* are, Robert J. Karris[[6]](#endnote-6) cites one of the many *Distinctiones* of Alanus de Insulis[[7]](#endnote-7) (d. 1203), the *denarius:*

*Denarius* is a type of coin having the value of ten regular coins in circulation [the literal sense]. ... It is said to be everlasting life [the anagogical sense]. ... It is said to be Christ’s passion or Christ [the allegorical sense]. ... It signifies sin [the tropological sense].

As Karris admits, “not all *distinctiones* will be so neat,” nor will Ranulph Higden’s *Distinctiones* be so neat, but this is the basic pattern in the work of Alanus a century and a half preceding the work of Higden and still followed by the latter.

A *distinctio* is the act of discerning that words can have several literal meanings or refer to several spiritual meanings (allegorical, tropological, anagogical, etc.).[[8]](#endnote-8) For example the literal meaning of *denarius* changes over time. According to the earliest definition the literal meaning was the ten fingers. Then referring to coins, 1) a Roman silver coin which consisted of ten, and afterwards eighteen asses; 2) a gold coin of the value of 25 silver denarii; 3) in later times a copper coin. Finally, *denarius* was a metonymy for “money.”[[9]](#endnote-9) The spiritual meanings (anagogical, allegorical, and tropological) were imposed upon a convenient “carrier” word like *denarius* that was well known and understood over the centuries by theologians and preachers.

That Higden understood this process of defining and dividing words according to their onion-like layers of meaning is well illustrated in his *Ars componendi sermones*. Chapter 9: “Let the Theme be Adequately Divided” he begins:[[10]](#endnote-10)

Above all, one must be sure that the theme selected should be such that enough divisions can be made. This is quite clear when the theme contains three meaningful words, such as, “Your king comes” [Matt. 21:5]. ...

For example, on the birth of Our Lord or on the Annunciation [*natale domini vel in annunciacione*], this theme is proposed ... [Gal. 4:4-5]. Thus, three things are said: indicated here is how the healer’s assistance is abundantly lavished, in the words, “He sent his son”; secondly, how humility, powerfully displayed, heals because the Son was “born of a woman, born under the law”; thirdly how helpfulness, fruitfully expended, is channeled in many directions, where it reads “that he might redeem those who were under the Law.”

Higden continues to pick apart the first subdivision into three more words to explain:

These partitioned sections admit division into parts; for example, in *God* (*Deus*) simplicity shines forth, in *sent* (*misit*) expenditure, in *son* (*filius*) abundance, and so for the other members. Nothing should be lacking and thus these three can be confirmed by three authorities or by one in which verbally there are the three words, *God, sent*, and *son*.... But because it is difficult to find such authorities, general themes containing these many words are not subsumed into a single division.

Here Higden has laid out the process by which a *distinctio* is created upon the word or theme *natale* or *annunciacione*. But it is the last line that gives rise to his work on his own set of ready-made *distinctiones* for the preacher: “But because it is difficult to find such authorities....”

In the F.128 version of Higden’s *Distinctiones* we find his ready-made set of divisions and authorities to help any preacher for the word *Nasci, Natus* (*To Be Born, Born*) in chapter 242:

Just as we read, there are three substances in Christ: divinity, flesh, and spirit, so then three nativities. In this it recalls the Scripture: divine from the Father, carnal from the mother, and spiritual from the Spirit. From the Father is born God, from the mother is born man, from the Spirit is born the Spirit. From the Father the way, from the mother the truth, and from the Spirit life. And from the Father is born all time, from the woman old age, from the Spirit he is born frequently.

Concerning the first, Psal. [109:3]: “Before the day star I begot you.”

Concerning the second, Isai. [7:14; 9:6]: “Behold a virgin shall conceive,” and it follows, “A child is born to us.”

Concerning the third, Mala. [4:2]: “Unto you that fear my name, the Sun of justice shall arise.”

Taking “birth” as the starting point, he demonstrates what he had discussed in the *Ars Componendi*: the division into three parts (divinity, flesh, and spirit). From each part further divisions (divinity = Father, God, the way, all time). Each part is corroborated by an authority from scripture: Psal. [109:3], Isai. [7:14; 9:6], and Mala. [4:2]. Further parallels are found:

The Church represents these three nativities in those three masses which it celebrates on Christmas. For the eternal generation which is hidden is represented by the mass at night. Wherefore says Isai. [53:8]: “Who shall declare his generation?” The second nativity, the carnal, which is partly hidden in a way, but partly busy, partly open as far as the deed is represented by the second mass at dawn. The third nativity, the spiritual, which is open by the effect is represented by the third mass.

He represents the three kinds of birth (eternal, carnal, and spiritual) by aptly citing the one day of the year when three masses were celebrated by each priest at specific times to celebrate the birth of Christ. He now begins to examine the divisions of Christ’s “double nativity, one from the part of the Father, the other from the part of the mother,” and how we also should be born doubly: “to the world and to God”. He cites Augustine’s *De catechizando rudibus* on the birth of Jacob as a parallel to Christ’s eternal nativity before going on to the carnal nativity:

Christ was born of a mother, just as a flower from a thorn, just as the creator from a creature, just as gold from the earth. First, he shows his purity. Second is his humanity. Third is his goodness or planning.

¶ Concerning the first, Matt. 2[:1]: “Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Juda, in the days of king Herod.” Wherefore as it is said the thorns suffocate the flower growing among them, as it is said in Luke 9[:7-9]. So, the Jews and Herod endeavored to extinguish the flowering Christ among them. Wherefore that fits as well, Job [14:1]: “Man born of a woman, living for a short time, is filled with many miseries.”

So, Higden provides scriptural authorities for the first of the three parts of the carnal birth as we see above from Matt. 2[:1], Luke 9[:7-9] (Christ among Jews is like the flower among thorns), and Job [14:1] (the shortness of life). He then proceeds to corroborate “creator from a creature” and “gold from the earth” with similar recourses to scriptural authorities. There follow further perorations on “blood” and then he closes with a final set of three:

The Church celebrates three nativities, namely, of Christ, Mary, and John the Baptist. As a sign of the three spiritual nativities by which we are reborn to health, namely, with John in water, with Mary in penance, with Christ in glory.

¶ Concerning the first, John 1[:26]: “I baptize with water.” Concerning 1 John 2[:29]: “Everyone who does justice, is born of him.”

And thus, the chapter on “Birth” concludes with the triple examination of the celebrations of the nativities of Christ (glory), Mary (penance), and John the Baptist. He first corroborates the necessity of baptism with two quotations from 1 John as above, next he attends to original sin (baptism) and sin (penance), and finally how saints are celebrated by their birth into the glory of heaven.

These divisions of a theme represent the basic structure of each word or chapter in the *Distinctiones*. But he was also interested in ornament as he says in the *Ars Componendi* chapter 13: “About Winning over the Audience”:[[11]](#endnote-11)

It is expedient for the preacher, as long as this is inoffensive to God, that from the start he render his audience willing and attentive listeners and concerned about following the argument. This can be done in many ways. In the first one, let something unusual, subtle, and curious be proposed—possibly [the narrative] of some authentic miracle—which is able to be applied to the topic and attract the audience. For example, if the theme were, “A spring rose out of the earth” [Gen. 2:6], reference to a certain fountain in Cicilia [Sicily] which Gerald of Wales talks about in his *Topographia hibernie* can be made....

Higden addresses two methods here: 1) a miracle or saint’s life, and 2) a recognized authority. The medieval audience would certainly have responded favorably to either strategy, and Higden mixes plenty of each into his chapters. Although this is not exemplified in the chapter on “Birth” the following chapter 243 “Neglect” (*Necligencia*) he quotes from

(Pseudo-)Chrysostom:[[12]](#endnote-12) “naturally we are stronger than the devil, but if in fighting we are neglectful, he is stronger, although he is weak. For nothing makes the devil strong except our neglect.”

Gregory in the *Pastorale*:[[13]](#endnote-13) “being neglectful is like to a man in ermine furs in battle.”

(Pseudo-)Boethius, *De disciplina scholarium*:[[14]](#endnote-14) “just as in one work the mother is constancy, so in all disciplines the step-mother is neglect.”

Gregory:[[15]](#endnote-15) “you have avoided the great rocks; see lest you slip on the sand.”

Higden in his efforts to inject points of interest prefers such apothegms.

The Latin of Higden’s text is meant as a standard measure or guide for what is to be preached, and very little is expressed in English or French. Sermons would have been in English to the working class, in French to the fighting class, or in Latin to the praying class. In the *Ars Componendi* Higden has a warning for preachers, chapter 10: “Let the Theme allow for Parallel Passages”:[[16]](#endnote-16)

If someone is preaching in English, *to go* (*ire*) can be used instead of *to walk* (*ambulare*), since in English the words are interchangeable. ... It is not proscribed to do this in the mother tongue, unless learned men are present who know the Scriptures and note the verbal incongruity and, on account of this, ridicule the preacher.

Although there is no discernable way to date the compositions of the two versions, one may assume that just as the later version of the *Speculum* was composed after the Black Death of 1348 to assist the monks who were now called to work in the care of souls, so now the longer version of the *Distinctiones* would provide valuable assistance to monastic preachers addressing lay audiences in their pastoral care.

1. John Taylor “Higden, Ranulph” in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* Published online: 23 September 2004

https://www-oxforddnb-com.proxy.lib.fsu.edu/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-13225 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. *Polychronicon Ranulphi Higden monachi Cestrensis*, ed. C. Babington and J. R. Lumby, 9 vols., Rolls Series, 41 (1865–86). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. *The* Ars Componendi Sermones *of Ranulph Higden, OSB* ed. Margaret Jennings (Davis Medieval Texts and Studies, 6) (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1991) and *Ars componendi sermones* trans. Margaret Jennings and Sally A. Wilson (Dallas Medieval Texts and Translations, 2) (Leuven: Peeters, 2003). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. *Ranulph Higden,* Speculum Curatorum: *A Mirror for Curates* ed. and trans. Eugene Crook and Margaret Jennings (Dallas Medieval Texts and Translations 13.1: The Commandments; 13.2: The Capital Sins) (Leuven: Peeters, 2012; 2016). Book III: The Sacraments is forthcoming. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Cf. V. H. Galbraith, ‘An autograph manuscript of Ranulph Higden's *Polychronicon*’, *Huntington Library Quarterly*, 23 (1959–60), 1–18. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Robert J. Karris, “St. Bonaventure’s Use of Distinctiones: His Independent of and Dependence on Hugh of St. Cher,” *Franciscan Studies* vol. 60 (2002), pp. 209-250 [209-210]. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Alanus de Insulis, *Liber in Distinctionibus Dictionum Theologicalium* (Patrologia Latina 210:685-1012). [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Siegfried Wenzel, “*Distinctiones* and Sermons: The *Distincciones Lathbury* (*Alphabetum Morale*) and Other Collection in Fourteenth-Century England,” *Mediaeval Studies* 78 (2016), pp. 181-202 [182]. Here is a convenient illustration based on the word “bird.” [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. “denarius” in *A Latin* Dictionary, ed. Charlton T. Lewis and Charles Short (Oxford: At the Clarendon Press, 1966), p. 545a. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Ranulph Higden, *Ars componendi sermones* trans. Margaret Jennings and Sally A. Wilson (Dallas Medieval Texts and Translations, 2) (Leuven: Peeters, 2003), p. 43. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Ranulph Higden, *Ars componendi sermones* trans. Margaret Jennings and Sally A. Wilson (Dallas Medieval Texts and Translations, 2) (Leuven: Peeters, 2003), p. 49. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. (Pseudo-)Chrysostom, *Opus imperfectum in Mattheum* homilia 29 cap. 12:29 (Patrologia Graeca 56:785). [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Probably not Gregory, rather Bonifacio d’Orvieto. See the note at this place in the text. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. (Pseudo-)Boethius, *De disciplina scholarium* 6 (Patrologia Latina 64:1235). [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Probably not Gregory, rather Bernard, *Eugenii Papae Epistola ad Capitulum Cisterciense, Epistola* 273.2 (Patrologia Latina 182:477). [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Ranulph Higden, *Ars componendi sermones* trans. Margaret Jennings and Sally A. Wilson (Dallas Medieval Texts and Translations, 2) (Leuven: Peeters, 2003), p. 44. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)