JOHN A. BURROW

John Anthony Burrow

3 August 1932 – 22 October 2017

elected a Fellow of the British Academy 1986

by

THORLAC TURVILLE-PETRE

John A. Burrow was Winterstoke Professor of English at the University of Bristol from 1976 until his retirement in 1998, and Dean of the Faculty of Arts from 1990 to 1993. He was the leading authority on medieval English literature of his generation, author of many books and essays, including *A Reading of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (1965), *Ricardian Poetry* (1971), *The Ages of Man* (1986), *Langland's Fictions* (1993), *Gestures and Looks in Medieval Narrative* (2002) and editions of Thomas Hoccleve's *Complaint and Dialogue* (1999) and William Langland's *Piers Plowman: the B-Version Archetype* (2018).
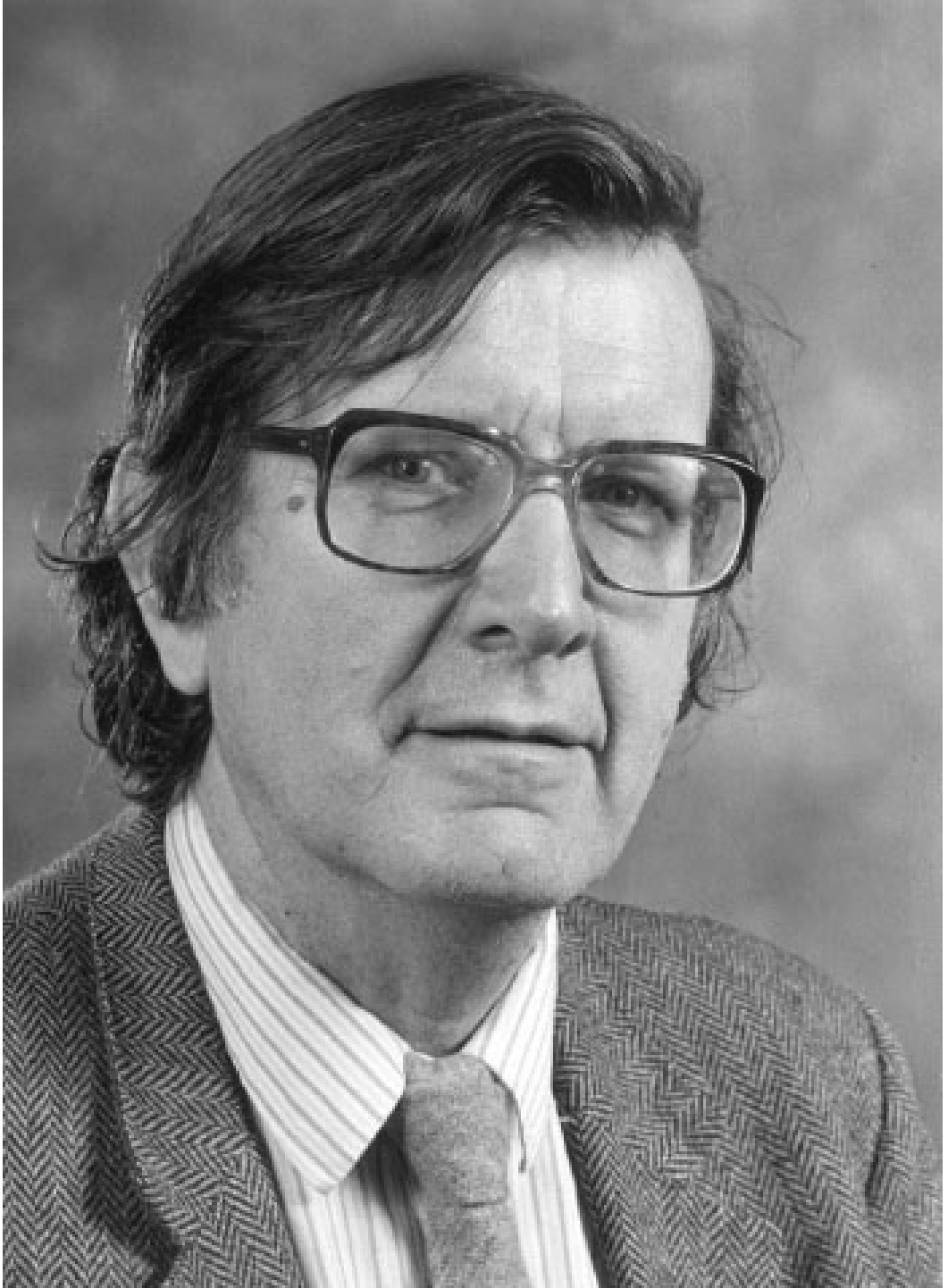
JOHN A. BURROW

John Anthony Burrow, who died at the age of eighty-five on 22 October 2017, brought new grace and sensitivity to the understanding of medieval English literature and was one of the most influential literary scholars of his generation. He wrote with clarity and wit, and had no time for the narrow professionalism that characterises so much academic writing. He was born and brought up in Loughton, Essex, the only child of William Burrow, an accountant, and his wife, Ada (née Hodgson), a teacher. He went to Christ Church, Oxford, in 1950 to study English. Looking back on his experience of Oxford after fifty years, he wrote:

> Oxford English in the 1950s offered three alternative courses. Courses I and II concentrated on early English writings, philology, Old Norse, and the like, but most undergraduates, including myself, followed Course III. The outline of that more general programme was determined by a set of required Finals papers which extended over all periods of English from Anglo-Saxon and Middle English up to 1830.[1]

Even the 'general programme' leant rather heavily towards philology.

In 1953 he met the girl who was to become his wife, Diana Wynne Jones, later to become a celebrated author of fantasy novels for young readers. She later recalled meeting a group of students:

> One of them said, 'Diana, you know John Burrow, do you?' I sort of looked. Not properly. All I got was a long beige streak of a man standing with them in front of the old Arthur Ransome cupboard. And instantly I knew I was going to marry this man.[2]

They married three years later, while he was an assistant lecturer at King's College London. In 1957 they set up house in Iffley Road, Oxford, with John lecturing for Oxford colleges. Appointed Fellow of Jesus College in 1961, he collaborated with his friends John Carey and Christopher Ricks to breathe much-needed fresh life into the English syllabus. He describes this time:

> Among the lecturers on Middle English subjects were such distinguished names as J. A. W. Bennett, C. S. Lewis, and J. R. R. Tolkien, but some of us thought that, in the medieval work as elsewhere, too little attention was paid to the qualities of the writings as literature.[3]

The Burrows moved out of Iffley Road into a college house off the Cowley Road. Diana gave a memorable description:

> In 1967, the new house was ready. It had a roof soluble in water, toilets that boiled periodically, rising damp, a south-facing window in the food cupboard, and any

[1] J. A. Burrow, 'Should we leave medieval literature to the medievalists?', *Essays in Criticism*, 53 (2003), 278.

[2] D. Wynne Jones, *Reflections: on the Magic of Writing* (New York, 2012), p. 292.

[3] Burrow, 'Should we leave medieval literature to the medievalists?', 278.

number of other peculiarities. So much for my wish for a quiet life. We lived there, contending with electric fountains in the living room, cardboard doors, and so forth, until 1976, except for 1968–9, which year we spent in America, at Yale. Yale, like Oxford, was full of people who thought far too well of themselves, lived very formally, and regarded the wives of academics as second class citizens.[4]

Diana was not fond of Oxford and was delighted when in 1976 John was appointed to the Winterstoke Chair of English Literature at Bristol, though his arrival was delayed for some months by a horrific car crash in which he managed to save his family by turning the wheel at the last minute, at the cost of severe injury to himself. At Bristol he served as Head of Department and as Dean of the Faculty of Arts (1990–3). He inevitably had to deal with a number of difficult situations and was deeply troubled when the University imposed a series of staff cutbacks, which however he handled with great compassion: 'His was intellectual leadership of a really meaningful kind, rather than of the sort often invoked in manuals of management technique,' one colleague writes. Though he was greatly admired as a humane administrator, his first loves were teaching and writing, and somehow he continued to do both throughout. As a great believer in the idea that critical writing should be informed by the experience of teaching, he wrote a wonderfully lucid and concise introduction to medieval authors during this period.[5] He was an outstanding teacher, as I myself remember, his demands for high standards always moderated by kindness and humour. He once asked a student whether she had learnt her Old English paradigms. 'Do you mean', she replied defensively, 'parrot-fashion?' He sucked his pipe ruminatively and asked, if she had not learnt them in the fashion of a parrot, how she had learnt them: 'Sieve-fashion?'

Burrow's first book, *A Reading of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (1965), focused precisely on 'the qualities of writings as literature' that he found lacking in earlier studies. It remains an essential guide to a remarkable poem.[6] It takes the reader through the text, fit by fit, examining in detail precisely what the poet means, analysing action and guiding interpretation, in a fashion quite different from anything earlier critics had attempted. There is a danger of undervaluing Burrow's critical approach, for he made it all look so easy. Every sentence he wrote is pellucid, every judgement he made is so persuasive, that readers forget that the ideas were new until they read them. The argument of *A Reading of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, expressed methodically, logically, and with precise clarity, is that the poem is about *trawthe*, which has a sense much wider than 'truth'; the key section of the book is Burrow's analysis of

[4] Wynne Jones, *Reflections*, p. 292.

[5] J. A. Burrow, *Medieval Writers and their Work: Middle English Literature 1100-1500* (Oxford, 1982, 2nd edn 2008).

[6] J. A. Burrow, *A Reading of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (London, 1965).

trawthe in the description of the pentangle painted on Gawain's shield. This is the passage dismissed in the standard edition of the poem with the complaint that 'the pentangle itself is not even mentioned by name after the elaborate account of it'.[7] This uncomprehending comment quite missed the point, for Burrow showed that the pentangle hangs over the action and over our evaluation of Gawain's conduct throughout the poem. His perceptive interpretation of detail is everywhere apparent, as when he notices that the third time Gawain and his host meet to exchange what they have gained during the day, the occasion on which the hero withholds his winnings, Gawain is dressed in a blue coat and hood: 'For his one act of duplicity Gawain wears *blue*— the traditional colour of faithfulness, occurring here and nowhere else in the poem.'[8]

The same close reading characterised *Ricardian Poetry* published six years later, a study of four contemporary writers, Chaucer, Gower, Langland and the *Gawain*-poet.[9] Critics, and there were many, called it 'formalist', a description which Burrow rejected.[10] Reviewers were sharply divided on the merits of the book. The best account of its reception is by Charlotte Morse in the Festschrift presented to Burrow on his retirement. She explains:

> In publishing *Ricardian Poetry* John Burrow offered the term 'Ricardian' as a replacement for the familiar 'Age of Chaucer'. As much as any recent theorist of literature, Burrow had a political agenda within English studies. By elevating Chaucer's three major contemporaries to something like parity with him and perceiving these four major Middle English poets as constituting a period, Burrow hoped to enhance the status of medieval English literature in the larger field of English literature.[11]

Burrow unashamedly restricted his discussion to 'high art', and critics objected that these four exceptional writers were, by definition, not representative of the Ricardian age. They also complained that wider considerations—politics, the author in society, manuscript contexts, philosophy, theology, art and architecture, and so on—were not addressed. Morse distinguished between British and American critics of the time, the former relying on criteria based on taste, the latter 'bemused by a kind of British criticism that offers leisurely commentary, marked by sometimes brilliant *aperçus*, but no argument'.[12] Burrow himself acknowledged that in *Ricardian Poetry*:

---

[7] *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, ed. J. R. R. Tolkien and E. V. Gordon, revised by Norman Davis (Oxford, 1967), p. xxi.

[8] Burrow, *A Reading of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, p. 112.

[9] J. A. Burrow, *Ricardian Poetry* (London, 1971).

[10] Burrow, 'Should we leave medieval literature to the medievalists?', 279.

[11] C. Morse, 'From Ricardian poetry to "Ricardian Studies"', in A. J. Minnis, C. Morse and T. Turville-Petre (eds.), *Essays on Ricardian Literature* (Oxford, 1997), pp. 316–17.

[12] Ibid., p. 324.

the four poets were considered and compared synchronically, with little regard for the historical circumstances from which they arose or to which they might have made reference. In recent years, however, the interest of literary scholars in the Ricardian period—and in the Lancastrian period that followed it—have taken a sharp turn towards history.[13]

He remarks tartly of some of these scholars: 'Were it not for the quotations, [readers] might not notice that the texts under consideration were poems at all.'[14] But it was not historicist criticism to which he objected, for, after all, good historicist explorations inform and guide the reading and appreciation of texts. Rather his complaint was that critics neglected literary qualities in order to mine texts for some other purpose.

Indeed, when reviewing critical fashions such as 'the death of the author', he wrote: 'Texts without authors are often no more reliable guides to their own meaning than authors without texts.'[15] Yet it is just such a situation that often faces the medievalist, and in the same year he studied an extreme instance of the problem in the case of the Rawlinson Lyrics, precariously surviving on a narrow strip of parchment in a guardbook of fragments. They had attracted fanciful criticism, and in 'Poems without Contexts' Burrow argued that in the regrettable absence of external information about them, it is important to identify the genres to which they belong as some sort of control over interpretation.[16] On the other hand, with Thomas Hoccleve we have a wealth of information, with records from his service in the Privy Seal and indeed from autobiographical passages in his poetry describing a mental breakdown.[17] Hoccleve's Victorian editor, F. J. Furnivall, took these at face value, as a self-portrait of a 'weak, sensitive, look-on-the-worst side kind of man'.[18] More sophisticated critical approaches saw such comments as absurdly naive. These self-references, it was argued, are merely conventional, references not to the author but to the fictional 'author'. To believe otherwise is to fall prey to the 'autobiographical fallacy'. In his British Academy Gollancz lecture, 'Autobiographical poetry in the Middle Ages', Burrow characterised the 'conventional fallacy', whose victims 'combine a learned and sophisticated awareness of literary convention with an apparently naive and reductive notion of what real life is like—naive and reductive because they talk as if non-literary experience were not itself shaped by conventions'.[19]

---

[13] Burrow, 'Should we leave medieval literature to the medievalists?', 280.

[14] Ibid., 280–1.

[15] J. A. Burrow, 'Alterity in medieval literature', *New Literary History*, 10 (1978–9), 388.

[16] J. A. Burrow, 'Poems without contexts', *Essays in Criticism*, 29 (1979), 6–32; reprinted in J. A. Burrow, *Essays on Medieval Literature* (Oxford, 1984), pp. 1–26.

[17] For the Hoccleve life-records see J. A. Burrow, *Thomas Hoccleve*, *Authors of the Middle Ages 4* (Aldershot, 1994).

[18] F. J. Furnivall (ed.), *Hoccleve's Works: The Minor Poems*, EETS ES 61 (London, 1892), p. xxxviii.

[19] J. A. Burrow, 'Autobiographical poetry in the Middle Ages: the case of Thomas Hoccleve', *Proceedings*

Autobiography in poetry was a subject to which he would return, as indeed he returned to Hoccleve, securely establishing him as a significant poet, one to be added to 'the canon of the good and the great' as he put it in a polemical essay 'The sinking island and the dying author'.[20] Previously Hoccleve had been greatly undervalued and misrepresented. Burrow quotes one critic who described Hoccleve as 'a bungler, misfit, and perpetual also-ran'.[21] His job as a privy-seal clerk may mislead us into imagining him as a lowly functionary, but Burrow shows us that it would be closer to the mark to think of him as a courtier, in day-to-day contact with the great officers of the royal court and on intimate terms with some of them, and depicted as presenting a copy of *The Regiment of Princes*, his work of guidance for good rule, to Henry Prince of Wales.

Burrow also did much to establish Hoccleve's text and promote a new understanding of it. Hoccleve's poetry holds a very special interest for an editor, since there are three holograph manuscripts containing a total of 7,000 lines of verse, though one of these manuscripts, Durham University Library MS Cosin V. iii. 9, has lost the first two quires containing Hoccleve's *Complaint* and the first 252 lines of the *Dialogue*, which only survive in scribal copies.[22] These holographs provide a unique opportunity to study Hoccleve's orthographic and metrical practices, uncovering significant details that had not previously been noticed. Burrow shows, for example, that Hoccleve employed the *punctus elevatus* to mark questions, but only questions of a certain sort. In modern English *yes/no* questions end on a rising pitch, whereas *wh-* questions generally do not. It is the former that are marked by the *punctus elevatus*, not the latter, which also indicates that Middle English questions had the same intonational pattern as they do today.[23] Burrow also confirmed that Hoccleve's decasyllabic verse obeys a strict syllable-count, as French verse but unlike Chaucer's, which led him to secure conclusions about the circumstances in which final -*e* and -*es* counted as a syllable.[24] These conclusions contradict the accepted view among philologists of the

---

of the British Academy, 68 (1983), 389–412; reprinted in J. A. Burrow (ed.), *Middle English Literature*: *British Academy Gollancz Lectures* (Oxford, 1989), p. 228; and reproduced in J. A. Burrow, *English Poets in the Late Middle Ages* (Farnham, 2012), Essay V, p. 228.

[20] J. A. Burrow, 'The sinking island and the dying author: R. W. Chambers fifty years on', *Essays in Criticism*, 40 (1990), 19; reprinted in Burrow, *English Poets in the Late Middle Ages*, Essay III.

[21] J. A. Burrow, 'Hoccleve and the "Court"', in H. Cooney (ed.), *Nation, Court and Culture: New Essays on Fifteenth-Century English Poetry* (Dublin, 2001), n. 16; reprinted in Burrow, *English Poets in the Late Middle Ages*, Essay XVII.

[22] The holographs are reproduced in J. A. Burrow and A. I. Doyle, *Thomas Hoccleve: a Facsimile of the Autograph Verse Manuscripts*, EETS SS 19 (Oxford, 2002).

[23] J. A. Burrow, 'Hoccleve's questions: intonation and punctuation', *Notes and Queries*, 49 (2002), 184–8, reprinted with revisions in Burrow, *English Poets in the Late Middle* Ages, Essay XX; and J. A. Burrow, 'Intonation and punctuation in the Hoccleve holographs', *Notes and Queries*, 60 (2013), 19–22.

[24] See J. A. Burrow, 'Some final -es in the Hoccleve autographs', in M. Calabrese and S. H. A. Shepherd

historical development of these sounds. Still further, it became clear to Burrow that Hoccleve's spelling system was highly regular, so that a text that survives only in scribal copies may confidently be restored to its original Hocclevian forms in all its detail. This is what he set out to do in his edition of the *Complaint and Dialogue* for the Early English Text Society, in which the reconstructed text is printed side by side with the scribal copy in Bodley MS Selden Supra 53.[25] For twenty-three years, from 1983 to 2006, Burrow served as the Director of the Early English Text Society, chairing the meetings of Council with his usual urbanity and grace, and steering many editions through to publication.

Piers Plowman was an abiding preoccupation. He had begun a never-to-be completed postgraduate thesis on the poem, an offshoot of which was an early essay, 'The action of Langland's second vision',[26] recently described as 'one of the most influential essays ever written on the poem'.[27] In it Burrow uncovers the structure of the second dream, previously seen as a succession of brilliant vignettes—the seven deadly sins, the ploughing of the half-acre, the tearing of the pardon—revealing a well-organised plot, following the sequence from sermon, confession and pilgrimage, and ending with pardon; following, that is to say, the Church's standard penitential scheme. Burrow argued, though, that Langland polemically substitutes St Truth for St James, so that the pilgrimage is the good work of ploughing and *anything but* a literal pilgrimage.

Burrow kept returning to Langland throughout his career. A book that has perhaps not been as celebrated as it deserves is *Langland's Fictions*. What is particularly striking is the willingness to accept that at times Langland got things wrong and let his imagination run away with him, as in the Tree of Charity episode in the B text where Piers attacks the devil (who is scrumping the fruit) with one of the three props, the one representing God the Son—an episode that leads up to Langland's account of the Incarnation. 'Yet', says Burrow, 'nothing that Piers represents can possibly be supposed to have initiated the Incarnation,' so Piers is written out of the C text revision. This 'illustrates Langland's tendency to treat his earlier imaginings rather ruthlessly, as if they no longer held his interest; but in this particular case surely something had to be

---

(eds.), *Yee? Baw for Bokes: Essays on Medieval Manuscripts and Poetics in Honour of Hoyt N. Duggan* (Los Angeles, CA, 2013), pp. 45–53.

[25] J. A. Burrow and A. J. Doyle, *Thomas Hoccleve's Complaint and Dialogue* EETS OS 313 (Oxford, 1999). Burrow sets out the arguments for reconstruction in J. A. Burrow, 'Scribal mismetring', in A. J. Minnis (ed.), *Middle English Poetry: Texts and Traditions. Essays in Honour of Derek Pearsall* (Woodbridge, 2001), pp. 169–79, where he compares Chaucer's practice.

[26] J. A. Burrow, 'The action of Langland's second vision', *Essays in Criticism*, 15 (1965), 247–68; reprinted in Burrow, *Essays on Medieval Literature*, pp. 79–101.

[27] R. Hanna, *The Penn Commentary on Piers Plowman* 2 (Philadelphia, PA, 2017), p. 48.

done to clear up the mess'.[28] This is part of Burrow's discussion of 'Fictions of history', where he contrasts Langland's imaginative version of biblical history with the standard 'historical' retellings such as that in a probable source, Deguileville's *Pèlerinage de Jhesucrist*. The question of Langland's self-representation is taken up in the chapter 'Fictions of self?'. The question mark is significant. As with Hoccleve, the poet describes his life and gives his opinions in his own voice, but since we know almost nothing about William Langland except from the poem, his real life is much more in doubt than Hoccleve's, whose autobiographical statements are backed up by documentary evidence. Thus many critics regard the 'autobiographical' passages as a fictional creation of 'Long Will'. Burrow argued that this is not a simple alternative between truth and fiction, since in life individuals create and project a variety of self-representations: 'The right starting-point, rather, is to recognise that, when Langland imagines himself as Long Will, he is doing something which everyone does all the time anyway.'[29] That is, he is creating a self-image, his 'writer self', one who is constantly being questioned about the value of such a time-wasting occupation as writing *Piers Plowman*, and so he is confronting 'some of the difficult moral issues involved in that creation'.[30] This anxious self-questioning is, after all, one of the forces driving the poem.

We had previously worked together happily on *A Book of Middle English*,[31] and so, convinced by Burrow's earlier exercise in the reconstruction of Hoccleve's text, I asked him to join me in reconstructing the archetypal text of the B Version of *Piers Plowman* for the Piers Plowman Electronic Archive. In other respects he seemed an unlikely editor of an electronic text, having set his face resolutely against using the internet or even email. But as committed recensionists, we both wanted to challenge the conclusion of the editors of the Athlone text that 'the B version of *Piers Plowman* would be the despair of a recensionist'.[32] In fact we were convinced that the establishment of the stemma of the manuscripts of the B Version was reasonably straightforward, and we thought we could present a fairly secure reconstruction of the archetypal text from which all the surviving witnesses descended, accompanied by annotations justifying our choice of reading. We were able to take advantage of the technology so that, in addition to the reconstructed archetype, we could present in parallel the lines from the

---

[28] J. A. Burrow, *Langland's Fictions* (Oxford, 1993), p. 75.

[29] Ibid., p. 90.

[30] Ibid., p. 91.

[31] J. A. Burrow and T. Turville-Petre, *A Book of Middle English* (Oxford, 1992, 3rd edn, 2005).

[32] G. Kane and E. Talbot Donaldson (eds.), *Piers Plowman: the B Version* (London, 1988), p. 62. For Burrow's view see J. A. Burrow, 'The Athlone edition of *Piers Plowman* B: stemmatics and the direct method', *Notes and Queries*, 61 (2004), 339–44.

ten important witnesses.[33] To set all this up electronically relied upon a team of technical experts with skills of a high order which neither of us possessed. Resulting from this close work with *Piers Plowman*, Burrow wrote eighteen notes and short articles on cruces in the poem, excavating new interpretations from this much-studied text.

In three books, *The Ages of Man*, *Gestures and Looks in Medieval Narrative*, and his last book, *The Poetry of Praise*, Burrow takes a single theme and explores it in relation to particular Middle English poems. Anticipating *The Ages of Man* were two classic studies of the three-age scheme (youth, middle age and old age) in Langland and in Chaucer.[34] As in Dante's *Divine Comedy*, Will, the narrator of *Piers Plowman*, undergoes a mid-life crisis in which he realises how far he has wandered from the direct path. Will is forty-five, at the end of middle age according to this scheme; Burrow argues that this is to be read as autobiography, expressing Langland's own uncertainties about the value of his life to date. The essay on Chaucer's 'Knight's Tale' shows how the story was constructed upon the three-age scheme of youth (Emily and the two lover knights), middle age (Theseus as mature ruler of Athens), and old age (Thesius' father Egeus, who offers sententious maxims on the inevitability of death), with their corresponding gods. *The Ages of Man* begins by tracing the development of the various age-schemes that were adopted by medieval writers: the four ages that Bede relates to the humours and the seasons, the six ages that Augustine links with the ages of the world, the seven ages that Ptolomy associates with the planets.[35] The second half of the book shows how these ideas are taken up in different ways in works such as *Beowulf*, *The Owl and the Nightingale*, and a number of *The Canterbury Tales*.

Once again we can marvel at his mastery of close reading. Here he is in *Gestures and Looks*, analysing 'the minute notation of non-verbal behaviour' when Troilus first sets eyes on Criseyde in the temple (Chaucer, *Troilus and Criseyde*, I. 288–94):

> She was previously (before Troilus saw her) said to be taking up only a small amount of temple space, 'in litel brede', standing near the door 'ay undre shames drede'; and the downward direction of her present look matches that description, conforming to familiar images of female 'shame'. But the look also serves to appropriate some of her small standing-area insofar as it is directed 'a lite aside' from the vertical, for gaze is one way of defining and indeed defending personal territory.[36]

[33] *The B-Version Archetype*, *The Piers Plowman Electronic Archive*, vol. 9 (2014); http://piers.chass.ncsu.edu/texts/Bx. A printed edition has now been published: J. A. Burrow and T. Turville-Petre, *Piers Plowman: the B-Version Archetype (Bx)* Society for Early English and Norse Electronic Texts (Chapel Hill, NC, 2018).

[34] J. A. Burrow, 'Langland *Nel mezzo del cammin*', in P. L. Heyworth (ed.), *Medieval Studies for J. A. W. Bennett, Ætatis Suæ LXX* (Oxford, 1981), pp. 21–41. J. A. Burrow, 'Chaucer's *Knight's Tale* and the three ages of man', in Burrow, *Essays on Medieval Literature*, pp. 91–108.

[35] J. A. Burrow, *The Ages of Man* (Oxford, 1986).

[36] J. A. Burrow, *Gestures and Looks in Medieval Narrative* (Cambridge, 2002), p. 129.

In *The Poetry of Praise* Burrow explains that 'the study of praise in medieval poetry grew out of the observation that modern critics and readers (myself included) commonly find it hard to come to terms with the many varieties of eulogistic writing that are encountered there. So we either turn our eyes away from this "poetry of praise" or else look into it too eagerly for such ironies and reservations as may accommodate it to modern tastes and values.'[37] He traces the theme back to early masters of eulogistic writing, 'the superlative manner known to Greek rhetoricians as "auxetic"',[38] a term which Burrow revives to cover praise of everything from a hero to a bowl. Roman rhetoricians from Cicero onwards divide the epideictic mode into *laus* and *vituperatio*, praise and dispraise, and these terms were a fundamental way of analysing poetry in the Middle Ages. From a popular thirteenth-century Latin version of Aristotle's *Poetics* he cites: 'Every poem and every poetic utterance is either blame or praise.'[39] This is so different from modern ways of understanding literature that we are prompted to find ironic intentions in such praise. Is Beowulf a flawed hero, preoccupied with his own valour at the expense of the safety of his people? Is Chaucer's Knight a brutal killer who hides his savagery in a cloak of Christian chivalry? Burrow argues that such ironic readings are misplaced, and that where a writer intends irony it is clearly signalled.

The idea for the book probably originated in an essay published a year earlier, in which Burrow introduced the work of the late medieval Scottish poet William Dunbar.[40] Having outlined Dunbar's life and career, he notes that 'the surviving corpus of mostly quite short poems exhibits such a wide variety of types that it is hard to give a synoptic account of them'.[41] It is here that he hits upon the notion of dividing them into *laus* and *vituperatio*, since 'these two modes played a large part in the work of earlier poets, not least those with court connections like Dunbar'. This approach works wonderfully well to encompass the extraordinarily aureate praise of the *Ballat of Our Lady* as well as the humorous *Flyting of Dunbar and Kennedie* savaging Walter Kennedy: 'He and his mistress go begging at the mill for scraps with nothing to their name but lice and long nails. Dunbar gleefully imagines him being pursued through the streets of Edinburgh by a rabble of boys and dogs.'[42]

This essay encouraged Burrow to devote further attention to Dunbar. 'Dunbar's art of asking' analyses the many artful ways the poet tried to prise open James IV's

[37] J. A. Burrow, *The Poetry of Praise* (Cambridge, 2008), p. vii.
[38] Ibid., p. 2.
[39] Ibid., p. 8.
[40] J. A. Burrow, 'William Dunbar', in P. Bawcutt and J. Hadley Williams (eds.), *A Companion to Medieval Scottish Poetry* (Woodbridge, 2006), pp. 133–48.
[41] Ibid., p. 135.
[42] Ibid., p. 142.

purse, in poems contrasting the long-term value of his services as court poet with the contribution of other craftsmen, shipwrights and glaziers, or likening himself to a faithful old horse neglected by his royal master.[43] In 'Dunbar and the accidents of rhyme' Burrow explores the ways in which searching for the rhyme drives a poem in a certain direction, particularly in refrain poems where the same rhyme-sound occurs multiple times: Dunbar's poem on the court official James Dog provides a notable case in point ('frog' 'hog', 'clog', 'bog', 'Magog', 'schog').[44] From Dunbar Burrow turned to his English contemporary, John Skelton, with an article reinterpreting Skelton's 'Collyn Clout' as an attack on Cardinal Wolsey, and finally, as one of his last essays, a substantial survey of Skelton's satires and invectives, thus neatly combining an earlier interest with a new subject.[45] In this essay he is delighted to discover Rap, comparing the tradition of flyting to modern dissing, and Skeltonics, the verse form Skelton uses for invective, to lines of Rap.

In the preface to *Langland's Fictions* Burrow records that the four chapters formed the Alexander Lectures given at Toronto in 1989, and that chapters were also read at Hakone in Japan and Alcala de Henares in Spain. Some years later we travelled together to a memorable *Piers Plowman* conference at Asheville in North Carolina in the beautiful foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains, where he lectured on the significance of winking in *Piers Plowman*.[46] However, he was not, it must be said, a keen traveller. An early boating holiday on the Norfolk Broads ended in near disaster, knocking a fisherman flying and nearly drowning Diana. Later family holidays were regularly taken with less drama in the Lake District, usually staying in Troutbeck. In what turned out to be his last serious walk, he and I got up very early to avoid the unaccustomed heat, and walked up Ill Bell and along the ridge.

After Burrow's retirement in 1998, he and Diana continued to live in the Polygon in Clifton, in a wonderful Georgian house on five floors, in which the ground floor was filled with copies of Diana's books, and John's study was up several flights of stairs. The house was always lively and full of visitors. He was left bereft by Diana's death in 2011. He expressed his grief in a poem both witty and moving, entitled 'Diagonal', quoting from *Tristram Shandy* Walter Shandy's verdict on his brother's impending marriage: 'Then he will never be able to lie *diagonally* in his bed again':

---

[43] J. A. Burrow, 'Dunbar's art of asking', *Essays in Criticism*, 65 (2015), 1–11.
[44] J. A. Burrow, 'Dunbar and the accidents of rhyme', *Essays in Criticism*, 63 (2013), 20–8.
[45] J. A. Burrow, 'The argument of Skelton's *Collyn Clout*', *Chaucer Review,* 51 (2016), 469–77; J. A. Burrow, 'Satires and invectives', in S. Sobecki and J. Scattergood (eds.), *A Critical Companion to John Skelton* (Cambridge, 2018), pp. 88–101; this volume is dedicated to John Burrow's memory.
[46] Published as J. A. Burrow, 'Gestures and looks in *Piers Plowman*', *Yearbook of Langland Studies*, 14 (2000), 75–83.

> Some passer-by had snapped the sapling off
> With nothing but a thread of wood and bark
> To join it to the root. We bound it up,
> My wife and I, with strips of cloth and twine
> And saw it grow into a 'forest giant'
> Just like the tree-book said it ought to be,
> Taller than any other tree around.
>
> But it was Diana, not the tree, that died,
> So I may watch its branches from the house
> Diagonal in bed as I do now.

Sadly, for a man who enjoyed walking in the woods around Bristol and in the Lake District, the polio from which he had suffered as a boy hit back at him in later life, and he became increasingly disabled. Though he could no longer leave the house, he accepted his confinement with remarkable stoicism, and continued writing and publishing prolifically to the end, leaving his last essay completed on his desk at his death.

Note on the author: Thorlac Turville-Petre is Emeritus Professor, Faculty of Arts, University of Nottingham.