

J. A. Burrows<sup>1</sup>, *MEDIEVAL WRITERS AND THEIR WORK, MIDDLE ENGLISH LITERATURE AND ITS BACKGROUND 1100—1500 a.d.*, O.U.P. 1982, (OPUS series).

In this excellent introduction to the aesthetics of the Middle Ages, Professor Burrows covers, as comprehensively as can be expected in the space available, most of the problems which confront the reader or student of the period. As he makes clear in the *Preface*, those looking for a history or a survey of the literature had best go elsewhere. (Kemp Malone and A. C. Baugh, *The Middle Ages* (2nd edn. Routledge 1967) or D. Pearsall's more recent *Old English and Middle English Poetry*, vol 1, Routledge 1977. This book will be for those students, less interested in the accepted and established readings of the literature and wanting to develop their own critical equipment, so as to be able to approach a work like William Langland's *Piers Plowman* with some basic understanding of its underlying assumptions.

Professor Burrows deliberately highlights those areas which cause most problems and which are often ignored or at least taken for granted by the modern reader. In his opening chapter he even questions the term 'middle ages'. Why are his terms of reference 1100—1500 a.d.? If these are the 'middle' ages, what are they between? His answer is a typically astute and wideranging combination of political, historical and literary analysis. Few fresh insights here, but the groundwork is clearly laid, and his point about this being a period of almost total french cultural hegemony is well made. By going back to these fundamental questions, the reader is forced to think again before applying 20th. century literary criteria and mo-

des of literature to the period. The book in its traditionalist stance questions the validity of readings arising from texts 'studied exclusively in terms of the modern notion of literature'. In the 14th. century it is often difficult to distinguish between literary and nonliterary texts, and in recent years the tendency has been to exclude sermons, treatises, travel books and other productions which do not fit into the 20th. century framework. But if one does this there is practically no 'prose literature' at all—since verse was clearly the vehicle for 'fictional' creation in the modern sense of the word. Yet as Professor Burrows underlines, "many works which would be excluded [...] plainly exhibit what Jakobson calls the 'poetic function' of language" (p. 17). Thus any sympathetic reader of the *Ancrene Wisse*, that extraordinary 13th. century prose meditation, is immediately struck by its rhetorical, allegorical and structural completeness and by its use of contemporary literary techniques. "Such texts can safely be 'read as literature' — provided that one remembers not to take eloquence as a sign of fictivity" (p. 18).

In looking at these problems the study always begins from basics, and while occasionally somewhat pedantic (on the question of anonymity in Chapter 2 for example), Professor Burrows illustrates his arguments clearly using a wide range of reference which will tantalize the neophyte and provide a useful grid for those already familiar with the period. The latter will also be encouraged to look again at some of the minor works; thus Professor Burrows obviously has a penchant for the anonymous debate poem *Winner and Waster*.

The body of the book lies in the three central chapters — 'Writer's and their audience' (Ch2), 'Major Genres' (Ch3), and 'Modes of Meaning' (Ch4). Chapter 2 is clearly designed to clarify a variety of medieval conceptions; he finds space to quote widely and appropriately, using central texts as stepping stones to commentary. Thus he quotes St Bonaventure's passage on the four ways of

<sup>1</sup> J. A. Burrows other published work includes: *A Reading of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, Ricardian Poetry (Routledge 1971) and *English Verse 1300—1500* (Longmans 1977).



'making' a book: There are four ways of making a book. Sometimes a man writes others' words, adding nothing and changing nothing; and he is simply called a scribe (scriptor). Sometimes a man writes others' words, putting together passages which are not his own; and his is called a compiler (compilator). Sometimes a man writes both others' words and his own but with the others' words in prime place and his own added only for purposes of clarification; and his called not an author but a commentator (commentator). Sometimes a man writes both his own words and others', but with his own in prime place and others' added only for purposes of confirmation; and he should be called an author (auctor)" (p. 30) (from *In Primum Librum Sententiarum*, proem quaest IV).

This vital passage underpins the discussion of such concepts as 'auctoritee', 'originality' and 'making', which lie in total opposition to later romantic based concepts of literary creation. Professor Burrows points out: 'To make available the works of the great authors of the past [...] was not an unworthy aim for a writer of that time' (p. 33). And even if their work was of their own creation, it still required 'confirmation'. One must always remember that Chaucer was internationally known only as 'the great translator' (Froissart); equally any reading of *The Troilus* requires an awareness of such concepts to grasp how Chaucer manipulated them, even to the extent of creating a figure Lolius as his source, his 'auctor'; Chaucer claims to be little more than a translator or 'compiler' in the poem. This writer 'Lolius', who is blamed for the story, has never been traced, and Boccaccio, who is clearly a major source, is never acknowledged. This is all part of Chaucer's subtle manoeuvring of perspective for a variety of ends with an apparent awareness of the medieval traditions.

The chapter on genre is of necessity too brief, and does little more than outline the problems of establishing genres at the same time as stressing how

important they were in works like *The Canterbury Tales*. One problem is that English has no work like Dante's *De Vulgari Eloquentia* to guide the critic. "English literature would appear to have had no critical tradition of its own until the sixteenth century; and yet poems such as *Sir Gawain*, *Troilus* or *Confessio Amantis* could hardly have been produced by men who had not thought profoundly about the art of English poesy" (p. 60).

Not only is there little guidance but the student must also clear away confusions which more modern terminology has created. Thus the common dramatic genre distinction between 'mystery' and 'morality' plays was adopted from French by 18th. Century antiquarians, while the only genre term widely used about the drama in the 15th century was 'miracle'. Nor can the modern distinctions of drama be applied to the period: "All the plays in fact seem ready to pass at any moment across the great frontier between Comedy and Tragedy as if it were not there — which indeed it was not" (p. 59). (Tragedy was in fact used as term for genre in verse). Instead it is 'time' which Professor Burrows suggest is generically significant; the plays deal either with historical time, in which the Fall and Redemption of mankind takes place, (Mystery), or the lifetime of the individual in which he too falls and is redeemed, (Morality).

The same problems arise in dealing with the 'lyric', which includes so many types of verse that any meaningful boundaries are difficult to find. The medieval lyric has little to do with the modern variety, 'which expresses the poet's own thoughts and sentiments' (p. 61). "In many medieval firstperson poems, the 'I' speaks not for an individual but for a type. The speaker is to be understood not as the poet himself, nor as any other individual speaker, but as a lover, a penitent sinner, or a devotee of the Virgin" (p. 61). (An awareness of this medieval influence is equally valuable in attempting to understand the sonnets of the 16th. century). Professor



Burrows goes on to trace the features of the complaint, the religious lyric and also those fragments which would seem to be related to the folk song and music. He categorises but never simplifies always making the reader aware of the variety and richness of the literature.

Narrative distinctions are then moved onto. Professor Burrows uses the terms 'history' (Lazamon's *Brut*), 'lives' (Guy of Warwick) and 'tales', each of which must be defined in terms of their scope and their scale. Such distinctions are useful in most cases, but what of that meditative encyclopaedia *Piers Plowman*? These are problems which are not developed though the difficulties are admitted. Genre is of course central to any reading of the *Canterbury Tales*; the whole relation between the teller and the tale in the work involves the social standing of each genre. Thus most modern readers "interpret them in a realistic even a sociological fashion. Unlike that other great fourteenth-century collection of tales, Boccaccio's *Decameron*, the *Canterbury Tales* has a body of story-tellers which is socially very varied" (p. 78). Therefore, Burrows asks rhetorically, should it not follow that the 'romance' genre was a genre of the courtly class because it was told by a Knight, and the 'fabliau' a genre of the lower classes since it is related by the Miller? More accurately both characters tell tales in which they might realistically be expected to appear, not expected to tell. Romance was an extremely 'popular form' in the social sense of the term. So once again Chaucer is blurring the distinction between the fiction of the pilgrimage and the fictions it encloses: "Romances and fabliau represent, in the system of vernacular genres established by French poets in the 12th. century, the two opposite extremes of secular narrative. In the *Canterbury Tales*, the tales of the Knight and the Miller stand in bold opposition..... establishing the two poles of its secular story-telling" (p. 81). The other tales of the secular sort such as the Franklin's 'Breton lay' or Chaucer's own burlesque

of the popular English minstrel romance fit in on this scale. Professor Burrows is careful, however, to distinguish between the secular scale and the religious, even though the distinctions cannot always be clearly drawn. He points out that the religious tales have their own genres distinct and yet in some degree parallel with secular set. So the Saint's Life stands at the top and the Exemplum at the bottom. Indeed in what ways can the Exemplum a moral illustrative tale used widely in Sermons, be distinguished from fabliau, which have many similar characteristics? The lack of clear distinction..... serves as a reminder (if any is needed) that the genres of Middle English Literature are not to be regarded as a fixed set of sharply distinguished categories... yet... however blurred their boundaries, they do represent markedly different ways of making plays, lyrics and stories. [...] Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* illustrates forcibly the determining power, then as now, of genre. Character, setting, plot and style are all, in these Tales, varied according to generic principles. We have seen, too, how one and the same feature—a devil, a first person pronoun, a nameless character—can function differently according to the genre in which it appears. So recognition of genre is not merely an academic exercise: it is an indispensable condition of understanding" (p. 84–85).

Chapter 4, "Modes of Meaning", deals with certain kinds of meaning, and not with generalisation about the medieval worldview (c.f. C. S. Lewis: *The Discarded Image*). It is the unfamiliar modes which are concentrated on, including 'allegory and personification', attempting at one level to persuade the modern reader to abandon the XXth. century prejudices against these literary forms. Using the dinner given by Conscience in *Piers Plowman* (Passus XXIII—B-text), Professor Burrows illustrates the subtlety and range of technique employed by Langland. These are scenes which require complex translation by the reader; the problems are ma-



de clear. But as he points out many of them stem not simply from different expectations but from 'simple causes, most often from ignorance of the Bible', itself treated as a complex of allegory, history, morality and anagogy. This is an ignorance unlikely to be quickly remedied, but one which all critics of English Literature should remember. The chapter goes on to deal with 'exemplum', (on the smaller illustrative scale), 'pre-signing' and other important tools employed by the medieval author, while consistently returning to his purpose with snappy if somewhat simplistic distinctions: "Modern minds typically try to understand things and events by looking for historical or scientific explanation; but medieval men saw both nature and history as 'books' in which things and events were to be understood, not in terms of cause or mechanism but as a form of symbolic communication from God to man" (p. 97). So literature was in some ways no more fictive than the world.

A disappointingly thin chapter on the influence of Middle English literature is followed by a usefully comprehensive introductory bibliography to the period in general. The book will no doubt encourage some to explore further and will at least give the student some aid with this verse and prose written in an idiom so different from our own. While Histories provide the facts, Professor Burrows' short study provides the basic tools for personal appreciation of the literature, and this book is a very concrete first step towards a study of the period.

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Volker Klotz, ABENTUEUR-ROMAE. SUE, DUMAS, FERRY, RETCLIFFE, MAY, VERNE, Carl Hanser Verlag, Munchen-Wien 1979, ss. 231, nrb. 1.

Czy w ogóle możliwa jest jednolita teoria powieści? Na pytanie to, w pełni usprawiedliwione znanymi od dawna i wciąż na nowo podejmowanymi próba-

mi określenia cech konstytutywnych tego gatunku, trudno odpowiedzieć pozytywnie, na przeszkodzie bowiem do stworzenia takiej teorii stoi bogactwo form kompozycyjnych powieści, będące pochodną elastyczności jej konturów gatunkowych. „W wielu wypadkach rodzi się wątpliwość, czy mamy oto w dalszym ciągu do czynienia z powieścią, czy słusznie czynimy używając tej szerokiej, tradycyjnej nazwy gatunkowej bez ostro wyprecyzowanego członu wyróżniającego w postaci przymiotnika” (J. Trznadłowski, *Rozważania nad semiologią powieści*, Wrocław 1976, s. 35). Można hipotetycznie założyć, że w następstwie dążeń do uściślenia terminologii genologicznej i prób typologii składników wyróżniających odmiany gatunkowe powieści, rozwój teorii dotyczącej tego typu wypowiedzi literackiej pójdzie w kierunku badań szczegółowych nad wariantami gatunkowymi, przy czym sam gatunek zostanie potraktowany jako zjawisko o cechach rodzajowych. Podejmowane dotąd badania nie mają jeszcze charakteru kompleksowego, badacze skupiają uwagę na niektórych odmianach powieści, inne zostawiając w cieniu; teoria nie wytrzymuje tempa rozwoju materiału przedmiotowego.

Tym cenniejszy jest zatem dorobek w zakresie teorii powieści stworzony przez takich m.in. badaczy, jak N. Atkinson, M. Summers, Th. Narcejac, G. Lukacs, L. Edel, D. Welsh, u nas zaś K. Bartoszyński, W. Ostrowski, M. Jasińska, M. Głowiński, J. Trznadłowski, T. Cieślikowska, J. Sławiński. Dorobek ten powiększa się dzięki rozważaniom Volkera Klotza, zawartym w studium *Abenteuer-Romane. Sue, Dumas, Ferry, Retcliffe, May, Verne*; do zespołu tych odmian powieści, które pobudziły zainteresowanie teoretyków i wyzwoliły inwencję badawczą (wśród nich szczególnie powieść historyczna, psychologiczna, kryminalna), włączyć należy i powieść przygodową. Wobec ubogich w polskim literaturoznawstwie badań nad tą odmianą powieści, ostatnie stwierdzenie brzmi mało przekonująco, zwłaszcza jeśli zauważymy, że nazwa genologiczna „powieść przy-