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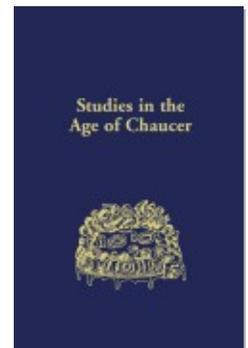
*The Ages of Man: A Study in Medieval Writing and Thought* by  
J. A. Burrow (review)

Thomas D. Hill

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As much as I may disagree with Burns' basic premise, I am not blind to the considerable merits of her work. She does provide an alternative method of assessing the Vulgate Cycle, proposes a number of problems that need solutions, and probes more deeply into the romances than anyone has done before. Her pointing out of narrative correspondences, thematic patterns, and parallelism between individual episodes—with accompanying detailed charts—will save the reader of the Vulgate Cycle months of labor. Although some of Burns' insights seem overly ingenious, many of them are instructive, and some are truly brilliant. One may disagree with much in *Arthurian Fictions*, but it is a work that no scholar of the Vulgate Cycle can afford to ignore.

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J. A. BURROW. *The Ages of Man: A Study in Medieval Writing and Thought*. Oxford and New York: Clarendon Press, Oxford University Press, 1986. Pp. xi, 211. \$39.95.

Burrow's book is an intellectual history of late classical and medieval ideas concerning the process of human growth and aging, and a survey of Old and Middle English literary texts which are concerned with these themes. There is much to praise in the book; Burrow is learned and imaginative, writes lucidly, and often has illuminating things to say. Particularly interesting is his discussion of the complexity of medieval Christian ideas concerning age. In medieval Christian thought, age is not necessarily venerable, and one should not take youthful folly for granted; but on the other hand, Christian thinkers argued that the physical disadvantages of age can have spiritual advantages. Age is thus not simply a lamentable consequence of the fall. Again, Burrow's discerning discussion of the emergence of a "cult of youth" in connection with the development of the corpus of courtly literature in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries is an interesting historical insight which seems both plausible and original.

Some questions need to be raised, however, about the implicit structure of the argument. While it is conventional to study Old and Middle English literature in sequence for obvious linguistic reasons, it seems questionable whether one can assume much literary continuity between the two periods.

Burrow is careful to underscore the difficulties implicit in discussing what is preserved in Old English as against the much richer corpus of Middle English texts, but there is so little Old English secular literature extant that to contrast earlier with later attitudes towards age in this case is essentially to contrast religious with secular ideas. If Burrow had adopted a somewhat broader comparative approach and taken into account the incomparably rich portraits of men and women at various ages in the *Íslendinga sögur*, his generalizations about earlier English and Germanic literature would seem to me more securely based. Alternatively, if he had limited himself to Old French and Middle English literature, his argument would have been based on a more coherent corpus of literature, although he would have had to alter and modify the case he makes for change and development.

There are also some omissions and debatable points of detail. In discussing the age of thirty as the age of the general resurrection, Burrow should have given more emphasis to the Biblical texts which underlie this idea (see particularly Numbers 4:3, 23, 30, 35, etc.). On page 114, footnote 59, the citation should include the exact reference to *Erec et Enide* (i.e., a reference to lines 231–33), if Burrow thinks this passage enough of a parallel to cite at all. It is misleading to give only the *PL* references to works such as Augustine's *De civitate Dei* which have appeared in modern editions; *PL* references to Jerome (p. 106, note 37) are particularly confusing since Migne reprinted two different texts of the works of Jerome with different pagination. For a startling claim such as the one that Christ lived through all the ages of man (p. 142), one wishes for references to the primary sources, not just one reference to a secondary source.

In conclusion, however, I wish to emphasize the merits of this book. J. A. Burrow is one of the best living critics of medieval English literature, and this book is a rich and informative literary history of an important topic.

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GEOFFREY CHAUCER. *The Canterbury Tales*. Verse trans. with Intro. and notes by David Wright. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1985. Pp. xxviii, 482. \$24.95, £15.00.

This is a handsomely produced book which has cost its makers a good deal of care. David Wright has translated all the verse of *The Canterbury Tales*