

THE POETRY OF PRAISE

One of the chief functions of poetry in Antiquity, the Middle Ages and the Renaissance was to praise gods, people and things. Heroes and kings were glorified in many varieties of praise, and the arts of encomium and panegyric were codified by classical rhetoricians and later by writers on poetry. J. A. Burrow's study spans over two thousand years, from Pindar to Christopher Logue, but its main concern is with the English poetry of the Middle Ages, a period when praise poetry flourished. He argues that the 'decline of praise' in English literature since the seventeenth century has meant that modern readers and critics find it hard to judge this kind of poetry. This erudite but accessible account by a leading scholar of medieval literature shows why the poetry of praise was once so popular, and why it is still worth reading today.

J. A. BURROW is Emeritus Professor and Research Fellow at the University of Bristol. He is the author of many studies of Medieval Literature, including *Gestures and Looks in Medieval Narrative* (Cambridge, 2002).

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Preface

This 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 in it too eagerly for such ironies and reservations as may accommodate it to modern tastes and values. The subject is a large one, and I have necessarily been very selective in the citing of both texts and critical discussions.

I am indebted to Colin Burrow, Thorlac Turville-Petre and Nigel Wilson, who read and commented on certain chapters of this book, and also to audiences at the universities of Bristol, Nottingham, Oxford and St Andrews. I have received valuable advice from Tony Boorman, Alastair Fowler, Bob Fowler, Ronald Hutton, Christopher Logue, Charles Martindale, Rhiannon Purdie and John Scattergood, as well as from the two anonymous publisher’s readers. The Bristol University Library and its Interlibrary Loans department have done much to facilitate my work. To all these, I express my gratitude. The errors and inadequacies in this book are all my own.