

Text as Performance: Toward a More Authentic Experience of the Lydgate Canon

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The alterity described by Hans Robert Jauss has become a fundamental principle guiding medievalists in their attempts to understand the literature of the Middle Ages. Medieval scholars have long recognised the need to historicise the literature that they study, but despite this necessary concern with historicity, the task before the scholar is not easy. The leap from the twentieth century to the Middle Ages is a long leap indeed, requiring intellectual flexibility, specialised knowledge, and a careful focus. As Ralph Hanna observes, “pre-print volumes are remarkably alienating objects for anyone coming to them with print conceptions” (7). While years of study may enable one to discourse at length and with relative ease regarding the concepts prevalent in medieval society, it nevertheless takes considerable cognitive focus to approach the texts of this period with a mindset approximating that of a member of a pre-print culture. The lens of modernity exerts an overriding influence that can be overcome only through conscious and sustained mental effort.

The poems of John Lydgate, despite having experienced tremendous popularity in their own day—in a way that the works of Chaucer did not—seem particularly vulnerable to diminution when viewed through the eyes of the modern reader. Contemporary assessments ranked Lydgate equal with Chaucer and Gower, and his popularity continued largely unabated for centuries. Alain Renoir summarises succinctly: “During his mature lifetime and for more than three hundred years afterwards, his countrymen ranked him on a level with the greatest poets; today, he is generally despised as one of the dullest versifiers in the English language” (1). Thomas Percy, in 1765, may have been the first to speak of “the dull and prolix legends of Lydgate” (qtd in Renoir 6), but it was not until 1802, when Joseph Ritson published his

scathing characterisation of Lydgate as a “voluminous, prosaick, and driveling monk” whose “fatiguing productions...by no means deserve the name of poetry” (qtd in Schirmer 258) that Lydgate’s achievements came under serious attack. Since that time, his poetry has continued to struggle—rather unsuccessfully—against critical indifference and disdain.

A number of explanations have been advanced to explain this notable and rather surprising decline in Lydgate’s popularity. The aegis of Romanticism, under which Ritson published his *Bibliographia poetica*, cannot account wholly for the fall of Lydgate’s poetry from Fortune’s wheel, although it cannot be disputed that the medieval sensibilities that informed Lydgate’s work offered little to commend him in the Romantic period. Thomas Lounsbury was willing to dismiss Lydgate’s popularity as a popularity by default, for he was writing “at a time when the paucity of English literature did not encourage discrimination” (qtd in Renoir 13). While this analysis may arguably apply to the fifteenth century, it cannot explain why Lydgate continued to enjoy a favourable reputation throughout the Renaissance. Walter Schirmer and, even more emphatically, Alain Renoir, have argued that Lydgate was a transitional figure, bridging the years between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, and that his work makes sense only when viewed in this context. Others, including Eleanor Hammond and Derek Pearsall, have attempted to account for Lydgate’s reputation as a product of the social and political conditions in effect during the late medieval period. Lois Ebin acknowledges the utility of such contextualisation but rejects these approaches as inadequate because of their emphasis on external factors, rather than on the logic of the poetry itself, as a means of approaching and understanding Lydgate’s works.

Focusing on the criticisms leveled against Lydgate’s poetry, these scholars have attempted to find a means of resuscitating the reputation of “the monk of Bury.” The attempt to defend Lydgate’s “prolixity and dullness” begins, however, at the wrong end, with what may be a self-defeating process of attempting to justify his weaknesses rather than arguing from his strengths. Although some would seem loath to acknowledge it, there is more to Lydgate criticism than an unvarying panoply of detraction and disdain; particular aspects of his writing style have elicited favourable comment again and again. Lydgate’s descriptive skills and the vivid representations of his sensually evocative verse have repeatedly earned him praise and admiration. Schirmer, for example, in a discussion of the *Troy Book*, remarks that “The tribute paid to [Lydgate’s] talent for description is merited...by his portrayal of the festival,

in which he surpasses Guido [Lydgate's source for the *Troy Book*],...and the colorful account given of the eight-day festivities with their tournaments, feastings, and dances....The imaginative scenes, too, gain in color and vigour in Lydgate's version" (45). A.C. Spearing finds that "Lydgate's most remarkable and characteristic descriptive skill depends on the evocation of space, light, and color, often with haunting delicacy, to produce picturesque effects of a kind comparable to those found in some of the masterpieces of late-medieval manuscript illumination" (347).

Among modern readers, then, Lydgate's poetry achieves excellent marks for its vivid, pictorial descriptions but earns censure for its dullness and excessive verbal ornamentation. These two qualities, although they may engender opposing reactions in twentieth-century readers, should not be viewed simply as the manifest strengths and weaknesses of an author more prolific than skillful. Neither quality exists in isolation from the other, and both spring from the same source: the visual and performative nature of Lydgate's poetry.

Given that so many of Lydgate's poems are known to be public or occasional pieces meant for dramatisation or display—pageants, mummings, and picture poems—the tendency to read these texts as though they were written solely for silent reading by an isolated individual is both puzzling in relation to the known context of the poetry and telling insofar as it reveals the stubborn pertinacity with which the modern framework is applied to the study of works known to have been produced under vastly dissimilar cultural circumstances. One reason for the misevaluation of Lydgate's work—and a reason which renders the tendency to misread far more understandable—lies in a mistaken assessment of Lydgate's relationship to Chaucer.

Chaucer's works have withstood the test of time far more successfully than have those of any other English writer of the Middle Ages. He is credited with being "the father of English poetry" and with inaugurating a new era in literature written in English. Spearing pictures Chaucer sitting at his desk, the pages of the manuscript of *Troilus and Criseyde* piling up around him, and being suddenly struck by the realisation "that he had created not merely an entertainment for transient courtly performance, but, in the fullest sense of the word, a book—a book possessing something of the potential for permanence that had hitherto been associated only with Latin writing" (334).

Critical theorists who insist that Lydgate was an imitator of Chaucer (and a poor one at that) read him according to the latter part of Spearing's observation: as

an author producing a book in the modern sense of the word. The idea of the text as “an entertainment for...performance” is discarded because it is believed that Lydgate was a self-conscious imitator of Chaucer, an idea inspired in part by the praise that Lydgate himself sings of Chaucer. As John M. Bowers points out, however, such praise, while not necessarily insincere, may have been inspired more by political considerations than literary ones. Thus, the literary significance of these paeans to Chaucer could easily be overestimated. A careful analysis of Lydgate’s works leads the thoughtful reader to the conclusion that Lydgate, although owing a debt to Chaucer, developed his own conceptions of poetry and his own approach to the artistry and work of the poet. Both the language of Lydgate’s poetry, as well as the circumstances under which his works are known to have been displayed or performed, require the reader to approach the texts—if he or she wishes to do them any sort of justice—by considering them as visual or performance art, as well as literature.

It is easy, especially for a scholar studying Lydgate in the Early English Text Society editions, to forget that Lydgate lived in the era before the printing press. The modes of production and methods of transmission of the written word were quite different from what they are today. Typically, when one thinks of reading, one envisages the activity in terms of the modern practice of a person sitting down with a book, quite alone, and reading silently for one’s own pleasure or instruction. A person may forget—if indeed he or she ever knew—that this was not always considered the natural or the normal way to approach reading. Anyone who experiences Lydgate’s works in such a manner approaches them in a way that would have been far from the conception of the author and is most likely to find it very difficult, if not impossible, to see how Lydgate’s works could have held such great appeal for his medieval audience.

Reading has not always been a silent and solitary act; reading aloud to oneself or in a group was at one time the norm. Derek Pearsall suggests that the looseness of Lydgate’s syntax, which would present no difficulty in an oral performance, must be an indication that the habit of composition for oral reading persisted despite the demise of the practice, but the logic of such a position is difficult to maintain. There is no evidence to support the conclusion that Lydgate lived in such seclusion that he remained ignorant of the prevailing modes of textual transmission. Although eventually the custom largely gave way to silent, individual readership, evidence from many sources points to the widespread practice of oral reading in Lydgate’s day. Joyce Coleman, in *Public Reading and the Reading Public in Late Medieval England and*

France, marshals an avalanche of evidence to demonstrate that medievalists, influenced by Walter Ong's *Orality and Literacy*, have typically underestimated the nature and role of late medieval group, public, and oral reading.

Coleman takes for a starting point the texts of authors such as Chaucer and Lydgate. On the basis of their references to the process of reading, two types of reading practices may be inferred: private, scholarly reading, and oral reading for pleasure. Examples of the former may be found in Lydgate, as when he discusses sources that he has consulted in writing his own works; no hint of orality inheres in his "this said Tullius as I reede" (*Troy Book* 6.228). Both Chaucer and Lydgate, however, in discussing the works they are composing, make repeated reference to what the reader is about to *hear*. In *The Siege of Thebes*, Lydgate relates, "And as I coude with a pale cheere, / My tale I gan anon as ye shal here" (175-76). Although the prologue to *The Fall of Princes* seems to imply that Duke Humphrey will read the text privately (it refers to his looking at his books when he wishes to read), this inference is mitigated by the text itself, which contains dozens of variations on the "as ye shall hear" theme. For example, Lydgate, recording Fortune's words to Bochas, states: "But as soone as she gan disapeere, / He took his penne and wrot as ye shal heere" (6:986-87). In the *Troy Book* Lydgate writes: "And of his exile the soth he told also, / As ye han herde in the storye rad" (1406-7). Earlier in the poem, Lydgate's narrator, who is supposedly speaking the story aloud, states, "I am weary mor therof to write" (823). Coleman suggests that Lydgate, creating a fictional situation involving a speaker narrating to listeners, finds it difficult to keep the story separate from the "real-world" event of a writer writing a book that will be read aloud to a listening audience. In such circumstances, the author would be liable to think of the oral narrator as writing and to describe the audience in the text as "hearing read."

Additional evidence that the texts may have been intended for performance comes from the historical record, from what we know of the practices of the time. Lydgate, as a commonplace of monastic life, would have experienced the oral recitation of text. Additionally, many paintings from the period depict readers and books in various settings, engaging in reading for personal, professional, scholarly, or monastic purposes. The record is mixed, suggesting that the two practices coexisted: some pictures show a reader reading alone, and others record the practice of a text being read aloud to a group. This leads Coleman to the conclusion that "what one finds in later medieval England, at least, is a state of acute mixedness, manifested both in the voiced textuality of the read-aloud manuscripts and in the interactions of

that mode of reception with private reading as ascribed by authors to themselves or to their audiences” (27).

Christopher de Hamel approaches the question from a different angle. He notes that in England, unlike the situation in Italy and France, a tradition of illumination for secular texts failed to develop. Although he notes that it is “difficult to know how to interpret” this fact (144), he surmises that the large-scale lack of pictorial illustration may have been due to the custom of oral performance of texts, a practice which would have rendered illustrations superfluous. Nevertheless, the extreme resistance to the idea of oral reading in the late medieval period reasserts itself in de Hamel’s conclusion that although the well-known frontispiece to Chaucer’s *Troilus and Criseyde* (Cambridge, Corpus Christi College, MS 61) depicts Chaucer as standing at a lectern, reading (or, more accurately, reciting) his text to an aristocratic audience, the representation must be nothing more than an artistic fiction. This assumption of fictitiousness, however, finds a direct contradiction in the *Troy Book*, in Lydgate’s description of the role of the poet:

Al þis was tolde and rad of þe poete.
 And while þat he in þe pulpit stood,
 With dedly face al devoide of blood,
 Singinge his dites, with muses al to-rent,
 Amydde þe theatre schrowdid in a tent,
 Þer cam out men gastful of her cheris,
 Disfigurid her facis with viseris,
 Pleyng by signes in þe peoples siȝt,
 Þat þe poete songon hath on hiȝt. (2.896-904)

Despite de Hamel’s scepticism, historical as well as literary records confirm the presence of public reading at social events. Coleman reports that “historical and literary reports consistently associate British public reading with festive occasions and relaxation” (31); records of such events record public, oral reading along with other diversions such as harping and singing. The art of the storyteller has largely died out in our day, but public reading, or storytelling from a written script, was viewed as a social and entertaining activity in the late medieval period. Geoffrey of Vinsauf takes the oral reading and performance of poetry for granted when he asserts that “the final labor [of poetry is] to see that a voice managed discreetly may enter the ears of the hearer and feed his hearing, being seasoned with matched spices of facial expression and gesture” (qtd in Coleman 31). The French and Burgundian nobles may

have had these ideas in mind when they sponsored public readings of commissioned texts as a means of disseminating dynastic propaganda (Coleman 31).

Thus, when reading Lydgate's poems it is advisable to keep in mind that they were most probably drafted in the belief that one of the ways in which the text would be encountered by his audience would be through an oral reading. The metre and stanzaic forms of Lydgate's poetry, coupled with medieval conceptions of the relationship between music and poetry, suggest that musical performance should also be considered as a possible medium for the transmission of Lydgate's texts. This possibility is in keeping with Michael Camille's observation that "We tend to privilege the written above the spoken, but this was reversed in the still semi-oral culture of the Gothic period" (164). Evidence from a number of fronts points to the likelihood that many of Lydgate's works were either performed originally as musical compositions or were intended for adaptation in musical form.

Evidence regarding Lydgate's conceptions of the subjects of poetry and music may be found in Lydgate's works, which contain several instances of songs being mentioned as a means of disseminating poetry. In *The Title and Pedigree of Henry VI*, Lydgate describes the research undertaken for the French original of the work, speaking of it as "cronycles to be song & rad" and a "werk / Euer aftir to be rad & song" (45, 269-70).¹ In the envoy to the *Fall of Princes*, Lydgate refers to "the soueryn balladys of Chaunccer, / Which, among alle that euvre wer Rad or songe, / Excellyd al othir in our Englyssh tonge" (9.3405-07). Later in the envoy, he refers to performances at solemn feasts, in which "tragedyes in especial" were to "Be rad and songe at feestys funeral" (9.3448-49). Perhaps even more tellingly, he speaks of Chaucer as a composer of "...ful many a fressh dite / Compleyntis / baladis / roundelis / virrelais / fful deletable / to heeryn and to see" (352-54). *Henry VI's Triumphal Entry into London* contains a tableau representing Music, one of the seven liberal arts. Lydgate describes the participants, Boethius and his orchestra, as follows: "He and his scolers theyre wyttes dydde applye, / With touche off strenges on orgons eke pleyng, / Theyre craffte to shewe at komyng off the Kyng" (248-50). Elza Tiner indicates that "Lydgate also suggests music as a way to present poetry, a tradition mentioned in his sources" (46).

Further evidence may be gathered from the language of Lydgate's poetry. Lois Ebin has conducted a careful analysis of Lydgate's poetic language, with an eye toward determining Lydgate's own conceptions of the craft and work of the poet. She finds that one of his recurrent terms for poetic practice, "sugrid," refers synaest-

thetically to the sounds of words used by the poet. Oral performance, poetry, and music are encompassed within its scope; according to Ebin, “Lydgate’s most common and most original use of the word ‘sugrid’ is as a descriptive term for the pleasing sound of speech, music, or poetry” (*Illuminator* 28).

Modern scholarship differentiates between music and poetry, with the former falling under the heading of fine arts and the latter into the realm of literature. This careful distinction between the two types of composition was not observed in the Middle Ages, in which “the musical aesthetic of Augustine,” as Robert Edwards terms it, influenced much critical thinking regarding the craft of poetry. His delineation of the influence of both musical and rhetorical theory as they affected the work of the poet provides important contextualisation for understanding the intellectual background affecting Lydgate’s approach to his work. Edwards writes,

The traditions are firmly in place in classical antiquity, and they continue through the entire Middle Ages and the rise of vernacular literature. Moreover, these traditions do not bear only on the meaning of texts; they also address the conditions of composition. They present conceptual frameworks that were thought in the Middle Ages to define the projects of writing, and so they stand, as it were, as a discursive authority even before the creative acts they explain. (xiii)

Edwards defines the major elements of this medieval aesthetic of lyric as fiction, rhetoric, and music. A fiction would be that which was “made up” or invented, as opposed to a composition in a discursive or historical mode. Rhetoric, an important concept for any understanding of the literature of the Middle Ages, served as the basis for artistic structure and expression; it was the science that governed the poetic arts.² Augustinian musical theory emphasised order and relationship. In *De musica*, verse is conceived of as reflecting a musical proportion based on mathematical ratios, a proportion which reflects a providential ordering of experience. An inherent connection exists between the properties of verse and the propensities of hearing and memory. Edwards explains that “by emphasizing that poetry is a rational art, an aesthetic construction built on recurrent proportions, [Augustine] can connect powers of the senses to powers of the soul. Thus, sound and hearing, which can be divided into numerical units, assume a relational meaning to memory and reason” (6). The poetic craft, by reflecting divinely ordained proportion and through its use of imagery and figurative language, points beyond itself to the timeless and eternal. Thus

sound, music, memory, poetry, and didacticism coalesce into an organic whole in which form, function, and meaning are mutually reinforcing.

The intertwining of music and poetry is a theme that is sounded again and again in medieval writing on the craft of composition. Edwards recalls Dante's assertion, in *De vulgari eloquentia* (2.3.4), that all verse is song, but he too quickly dismisses Dante's claim as pointing to a figurative rather than a literal truth. More recent scholarship, however, suggests that the literal element of late medieval poetry as musical performance should not be discounted. Medieval poetic theory makes it clear that the boundaries separating the two art forms were largely invisible, if not non-existent, during the Middle Ages. Music theory classified lyric poetry, which could encompass a wide range of forms, among them love songs, debate poems, pastoral poems, laments, hymns, prayers, songs, and historical or didactic poetry, as a kind of music. Edwards concludes rightly that "the medieval lyric drew, as Dante's remarks show, on a long tradition that encompassed music theory [and] the social function of entertainment" (5).

Additional evidence regarding the relationship of poetry to performance is preserved in the works of Eustache Deschamps, a poet and musician associated with the Duke of Orleans and then the court of Charles V. The work of the French court poets and musicians influenced that of their counterparts in England. Nigel Wilkins has traced some of the connections that influenced the cultural interchanges between England and France during Lydgate's time:

In the late fourteenth century a network of Anglo-French poetic exchange had involved, among others, Machaut, Froissart, Deschamps, Granson, Chaucer, and Gower. Charles d'Orleans...entered into a comparable network especially from August 1432 when he was put into the keeping of William de la Pole, third earl, later duke of Suffolk. At about this time Suffolk married Geoffrey Chaucer's grand-daughter Alice and at Wingfield and Ewelme provided a resort for cultured company, including especially the poet "monk of Bury," John Lydgate, who had been a friend of Alice Chaucer's father, Thomas (197-8).

Although no concrete evidence exists to confirm the supposition, it seems reasonable to assume that Lydgate would have been exposed to the ideas of Deschamps, if not during his residency in England, then during his sojourn in France. It is unlikely that Lydgate, as the premier poet of his day, would have been excluded from these lines of influence.

In 1392, Deschamps completed *L'Art de Dictier*, which treats poetry as a subcategory of music. He describes two kinds of music: artificial, or composition for singers and musicians, and natural, or composition of words. The two may be combined but may also be separate, thus yielding three categories of musical-poetic performance: words without music, music without words, or both together. According to Tiner, “Deschamps suggests that lyrics were performed without music (i.e., read aloud or recited) in a variety of places” in “informal situations where a group of singers would not be desirable”: in the private chambers of the noble household, perhaps to enhance a secret meeting between lovers; to entertain a small audience; or to refresh a sick person (47). Deschamps’ advice to poets includes a reminder to them to consider the options for the performance of their work, a reminder that it would seem that Lydgate heeded well.

The critical tendency to draw sharp distinctions between medieval music and poetry is particularly perplexing in light of the fact that the oft-used terms “ballade” and “roundel” may be applied with equal propriety to poetry or to musical compositions. While it is well-known that the contents of medieval manuscripts do not conform to any recognisable taxonomy, it is interesting to note the presence in Trinity College MS R.3.20 of a copy of Lydgate’s *The Lyfe of Seynte Margarete* along with a collection of ballades and roundels. R.J. Lyall surmises that the core of the collection was formed around the Lydgate materials that comprise folios 145-332, later supplemented by additional Lydgatian works and seven French ballades and roundels at one time thought to have been written by the earl of Suffolk.³ While it would clearly be inappropriate to base any firm conclusions upon such slight evidence, it is at least informative to note that even works by Lydgate which do not appear likely to be adapted for musical performance were not considered to be incompatible with poetry that may have been set to music.

That some of Lydgate’s compositions were written expressly for musical performance is already well established, for the mummings and triumphal entries are known to have included a variety of entertainments, such as readings, pantomime, song, and dance. Tiner has examined evidence which suggests that some of Lydgate’s shorter occasional ballades and roundels were meant to be sung, and she points out that several of Lydgate’s verse forms are compatible with musical settings that survive from the period. Such poems include *On Gloucester’s Approaching Marriage*, written in rhyme royal, and the *Ballade to King Henry VI Upon His Coronation*, which employs an eight-line ballade stanza with ten to eleven syllables per line. Interestingly, it shares its opening line (“Moost noble prynce of Cristin prynces alle”) with

another performance-oriented composition, the *Mumming at Windsor*. The musicality of *My Lady Dere*, a poem composed in an eight-line ballade stanza with seven to eight syllables per line, becomes apparent when even a single stanza is read aloud:

Euery maner creature
 Disposed vn-to gentylesse,
 Boþe of kynde and of nature
 Haþe in hert[e] moost gladnesse
 Fo[r] tabyde in sothfastnesse
 Wher his ioye is moost entier
 And I lyve euer in hevynesse
 But whenne I se my lady dere (1-8).

The “mixed media” nature of musical and poetic composition in the Middle Ages has left an uncertain legacy for the historian. Tracing the relationship between words and music dating from the medieval period can be a difficult task, for written texts known to have been sung are often preserved quite separately from the settings for which they were intended. For example, a study of Continental troubadour melodies found 2500 songs among thirty different manuscript collections.⁴ Only four of the manuscripts contain any music, and none contains music for all of the poems in the collection. The difficulty of speaking authoritatively about the complicated interplay of medieval poetry and music finds expression in Nigel Wilkins’ observation that

In a context where some manuscripts give song texts alone but omit settings which certainly existed, where apparently non-musical poets such as Chaucer are praised for their “songs,” and where the practice of *contrafactum*, or the fitting of a new text to already existent music, was extremely common, it will be understood that there is at times uncertainty as to whether a poem in lyric form was originally set, or was later set to music (184).

English history has not been kind to the student of late medieval music, for very few such polyphonic settings have been preserved along with the words of the songs. Tentative conclusions, at least, may be drawn from the observable popularity of the French style of poetry and music in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries. The works of the late medieval triumvirate, Chaucer, Lydgate, and Gower, bear witness to the influence of Continental practice on artistic form in England.

Some “mixed-repertory” works do survive, and a number of examples of *contrafactum* have also been identified.⁵ The significance of the discovery of settings that survive for portions of Lydgate’s works should not, therefore, be downplayed. Tiner reviews two such compositions in her article “‘Euer aftir to be rad & song’: Lydgate’s Texts in Performance.” The first is just a brief snippet—two lines from the lover’s complaint in *The Temple of Glas*, which are included in a Continental composition dating from about 1450. The Italianate English of the manuscript leads Tiner to conclude that a combination of oral and written transmission may have been involved, with the Italian scribe trying either to recall the words of an English song or to adapt the writing to conform to the pronunciation in the region.

The second song is found in a British Library manuscript dating from 1500 or earlier. The composer is William Newark, who served as Master of the Children of the Chapel Royal from 1493 to 1509. *Tyed with a Lyne* is a ballade written in rhyme royal, and it is only one of the many songs contained in the manuscript.⁶ In a statement with implications that extend to much of what Lydgate has written, John Stevens has characterised the songs in this manuscript as being “elaborately verbose and heavily patterned” and as constituting “very dull reading” (qtd in Tiner 43). Stevens’ criticism of the stylistic monotony of the songs preserved in British Library MS Add 5465 (Fayrfax Manuscript) cuts to the heart of the debate regarding the demise of the Lydgate canon, for it foregrounds the fact that works written for musical or oral performance do not function as effectively when read as literary texts.⁷

Wilkins reminds us that “music was a very basic ingredient in life in the middle ages, at all levels and on all conceivable occasions” (185). It becomes increasingly difficult, when we recall Lydgate’s status and role as the poet of public occasion, to maintain the assertion that his poetry functioned within a written rather than a performance-based modality. Such a belief contradicts what we know of medieval poetic theory and practice. Although the existing evidence does not allow for certainty, we should allow the possibility that Lydgate intended that either some or much of his work would be adapted for musical setting. Tiner’s research has demonstrated that others, if not Lydgate, capitalised on this potential. That such an unlikely work as *Temple of Glas* should find itself transformed into song suggests the pervasiveness of the musicality that may have at one time characterised Lydgate’s works. As the foregoing illustrates, the dichotomy between music and poetry is a modern distinction superimposed inappropriately on works composed during the late medieval period.

Much has been said, but little has been made, of the tendency to praise Lydgate's works in performance. Those reading a discussion of Lydgate's pageants and mumblings might find it difficult to conceive of this talented poet as the same man who, according to Lounsbury, "produced...a good deal of matter which it presumably gratified him to write; though it is inconceivable that there was ever a state of human intellect in which gratification could have come to anyone from its perusal."⁸ Lydgate's proverbial prolixity and dullness seem to fade from view in the dramatic realm, and Lydgate becomes not an historic curiosity, whose popularity defies comprehension, but an important figure in the history of dramatic forms, whose creativity and inventiveness imbued with new life the genres with which he worked and left them forever changed.

Withington, in his seminal study on English pageantry, credits Lydgate with introducing to the genre several important innovations, including the use of allegory and the introduction of speech. He also argues that Lydgate's expansion of the genre begins to move the realm of mumming in the direction of masque and into a more literary vein as well. Schirmer concurs with Withington's assessment of the importance of Lydgate's dramatic contributions. He views him as a creative, experimental dramatist, willing to recombine various genres—masques, pictorial poems, "kings' entries," and pageants—into unique and entertaining presentations for kings, mayors, and guild members. Both scholars applaud Lydgate's versatility and creativity and accord him status as an important transitional figure in the history of English pageantry. Thus when working with the materials of display, performance, pageantry, and showmanship, Lydgate reveals himself to be a daring and original master craftsman, able to shape his materials into the proper form to suit each occasion.

Withington argues that Lydgate is the first individual whose name can be connected "with a form of entertainment which, in Elizabethan times and since, has attracted many a well-known writer" (141). Schirmer, too, casts Lydgate's achievement in a literary light and suggests that the pageant owes a generic debt to the mumblings devised by Lydgate. He argues that Lydgate's skilful deployment of allegory and his use of the spoken word privileges speech and language above the elements of spectacle and display; the words become more important than the scene. This new element in royal pageantry continues to evolve after Lydgate's time, so that the dumb-show elements are gradually phased out and replaced by actors who explain their role in the pageants.

Lydgate's management of the subject matter and its presentation demonstrates conclusively that his skills are not those of the rank amateur or of the cloistered monk dabbling in a literary form the complexities of which were far beyond his limited comprehension, but those of a savvy, talented writer able to call upon various traditions and to modify them as needed. In his pageants and mumblings, he demonstrates his ability to harness language in the service of performance art, be it visual, musical, or written. Lydgate's mumblings, far less spectacular in scope and achievement than the royal entries, have nevertheless also fared well with critics. It is in the mumblings, Schirmer suggests, that Lydgate first reveals his talents as "master of the revels" (140). He also credits Lydgate with being the first writer to direct the art of mumming into literary channels. Withington, too, writing many years earlier, expresses his belief in the significance of Lydgate's contributions to this form of pageantry. In the context of his discussion of the mumblings he concludes: "It would not be surprising if future investigators should find that Lydgate, in his contributions to pageantry and masque (or its early ancestor) was a more important figure than is generally supposed" (107). The genre had its roots in the pantomime or dumb-show, but other influences may be traced as well. Lydgate's works fused the pantomime-type pageants in common use for the reception of distinguished guests with some of the characteristics of the scholastic drama (Schirmer 104). His mumblings shared in common with the royal entries, the 'sotelties,' and Lydgate's picture poems the device of an oral reading of a written text as an accompaniment to some sort of visual presentation.

The variety of forms of entertainment which Lydgate encompassed under the title of "mumming" is quickly demonstrated by a brief review of the pageants he devised. The mumblings at London and Windsor may be considered together, since they have a number of features in common. Both may have employed a presenter who recited the "devyses" (Withington 106) and both include a pantomime or *tableau vivant*. *The Mumming at London* concludes with a musical number presented by the four virtues who have enacted the pageant. Schirmer objects that the *Mumming at Windsor* is not a true mumming at all but "a prologue to a pantomimic representation of Clovis' conversion under the influence of St. Clothilda" (106-7).

Schirmer also suggests that the *Mumming at Eltham* fails to constitute a true theatrical performance since it consists only of a short text of twelve Chaucerian stanzas. However, P.H. Parry's conclusion that the majority of the text has been lost and that only the "ballade" survives seems much more likely to point to the true state of

affairs.⁹ Schirmer surmises that Lydgate himself may have read the verses aloud, since no mention is made of the entry or arrival of a herald or some specific presenter whose role it would have been to read aloud the verses that accompanied the masque. Again, in the absence of the complete text, it is difficult to establish such a point with any degree of certainty, but different commentators have suggested that Lydgate himself may have taken the role of presenter at some of the pageants he devised. Parry comes to a similar conclusion and suggests that Lydgate may have read the text aloud while the mummers, costumed as gods, presented themselves and their gifts in dumb-show.

The Mumming at Bishopswood was commissioned by the sheriffs of London and was performed at a May Day banquet held by circuit judges and high-ranking officials. The action was inaugurated by a page, who then either read the prepared text himself or handed the text over to a narrator who then described the drama as it unfolded. At the narrator's signal, the Goddess of Spring stepped forward and accompanied the text with appropriate movements, dance steps, and gestures.

Two of the mummings were presented before the Mayor of London early in the year 1429. The first, *The Mumming for Mercers of London*, was written in the form of a letter delivered by a messenger from Jupiter. The letter was then presented to a narrator, whom Schirmer speculates may have been Lydgate himself (107). The narrator, reading the text aloud, pointed to the various characters as each one was presented and explained their place and purpose in the pageant. *The Mumming for the Goldsmiths of London* offered an even more inventive device, for "Fortune, in the capacity of a messenger, arrives on Candlemas Eve and hands a letter to the Lord Mayor, who is sitting at table after his meal" (Schirmer 109). Schirmer suggests that Fortune, rather than relying on a narrator as had been the custom in some of the other mummings, apparently recites her message herself. The pageant also includes a performance by Levites who are summoned to sing a hymn of praise to God.

Lydgate moves the practice of mumming from beyond the strict confines of the dumb show to an interpreted and mediated performance that stands midway between pantomime and drama. As in his pageants, he combines various art forms—literature, drama, music, and dance—into an entertaining and didactic whole. Rather than suggesting the paucity of Lydgate's poetic reach, the mummings and pageants instead point to the broad scope of his skills and his talent for innovation. Lydgate shines when spectacle is the object.

The foregoing survey of the presentation of Lydgate's texts in performance, whether through oral reading, music, or pageantry, is intended to demonstrate the extent to which these texts were construed as performative objects rather than as purely literary texts. The terms in which Lydgate expresses his conceptions of the poetic—"enlumyne," "adourne," "enbelissche," "aureate," "goldyn," "sugrid," "rethorik," and "elloquence"¹⁰—provide a clear indication that Lydgate drew not only upon the terms and techniques of rhetoric but upon the conceptual framework of the visual arts as well. As a multimedia or multi-modal artist, he did not feel the need to confine himself within a single genre or art form. His innovations in pageantry further underscore his commitment to the art of the poetic as an art that encompasses drama, music, dance, and the spoken word.

These considerations would seem to provide one of the most plausible answers to the question of how Lydgate's reputation could have undergone such a radical change in fortunes. It was not, as Lounsbury has charged, the lack of sophistication on the part of Lydgate's royal and aristocratic audience, influenced as the English court was by the literary tastes of France, nor was it due solely to changes in the social and political climate. Lydgate's poetry gradually lost its accessibility because in the intervening years, as print culture continued to foster the practice of individual, silent readership, the performative nature of Lydgate's works was forgotten. The solitary reader could not experience Lydgate's texts in a manner consistent with the style of their composition.

A number of scholars have alluded to the importance of approaching these medieval texts with an awareness of their performative context, but none has gone on to consider the implications of the medieval text as a script for performance. Walter Schirmer has declared, in a rather broad generalisation, that "fifteenth-century poetry is largely incomprehensible if it is regarded in isolation, divorced from the ostentatious ceremonial which formed an integral part of the age" (242). While his observation overgeneralises the situation, it nevertheless points up the need for recognising the broader social and ceremonial elements that would have inhered in the reading or performance of a late medieval text. Schirmer sees in the medieval love of pageantry a pleasure in the didactic and a delight in instruction that do not, except perhaps in very rare cases, characterise modern literary interests. He thus sees pageantry as a suitable vehicle for the transmission of these culturally sanctioned values: "The whole pageant corresponded to the fifteenth century's inexhaustible desire for instruction" (104). His most important observation on the role and function of pag-

eantry, however, is worded in the form of a surmise. Schirmer suggests, quite rightly, that “the material of instruction, which seems so dry to us, may have gained in vigour by the performance” (104).

Performance is, by its very essence, a social experience. Unlike private readership, the presence of at least two persons is required so as to constitute actor and audience. The experience of a performed text differs greatly from the experience of a text that is only read. Coleman has considered some of the consequences arising from the differing experiences of text as performance and text as written document. She observes that the “consequences of writtenness are familiar from many theoretical explications....Less familiar are the consequences that follow from the written text being read aloud. What distinguishes public from private reading...is that the former defines literature as a social event” (27).

An awareness of the fact that many of Lydgate’s texts were written for performance can do much to enhance our approach to and our understanding of them, and it can go far toward enabling us to experience them in a new—and very positive—light. First, a knowledge of the performative underpinnings of Lydgate’s compositional strategies provides an essential ingredient for enabling the scholar to make an appropriate determination regarding genre. Although genre is in many ways an artificial construct, oftentimes more a concern of the interpreter than the author, an understanding of the characteristics and conventions of a given genre can do much to explain the work. A reader unfamiliar with epic form, for example, might complain of the writer’s high style and the disorienting effect of extended similes, while a more experienced reader might find these sticking points the very stuff of praise. We could equally posit a naive reader who did not recognise that plays (closet dramas excepted) were meant to be dramatised and who thus wondered at their overwhelming emphasis on dialogue and their exclusion of descriptive passages.

Thus critics who try to read Lydgate as a modern author, as the writer of a literary text, have come away understandably disappointed. Derek Pearsall observes pointedly that the very elements about which critics have complained in Lydgate’s verse, the “amplification, tautology, diffuseness of sense and looseness of syntax, are not only acceptable but desirable to the listening audience, which has no opportunity to linger over close-packed lines, and which will welcome as well as recognize the familiar phrase” (9). Failure to grasp the performance-based orientation of Lydgate’s work has led critics to misread Lydgate by applying to his poems an inappropriate aesthetic and critical standard. The failure to recognise the centrality of these concep-

tions in shaping Lydgate's work must inevitably lead the reader to misconstrue the genre and function of the texts, and any reading undertaken under such circumstances must constitute a form of misreading.

Second, a re-evaluation of the genre of the Lydgate canon provides a better idea of how the works were received in his day. Coleman notes that literature written for oral performance gives an increased status to the author and an enhanced experience for the listening audience. She offers a consideration of the interplay of author and audience:

Although writing for performance, the author had time to compose the text at his own pace and alone, knowing that it would be preserved in written form and that this written form would visibly dominate the group experience, in a way that no oral or memorial author's text could do. The audience's awareness of the book before them entailed an increased awareness of the fixity and authority of the text, and of the author's role as mediator of the traditions that text represented. (27)

Whether we wish to think of Lydgate himself as reading the text on such occasions, or whether we imagine the reader to be a patron or a member of the patron's household or literary circle, the mediating presence of a reader's voice nevertheless provides an interpretative focus for the author's work and lends a sense of occasion to the reading.

A text that is read aloud or otherwise performed is unlike a text read privately, for it has as its audience not an individual in isolation but a social, political, or public setting, and it is shaped by the aura of shared experience. The presence of these others can greatly condition the text as its listeners experience it. The marked preference for such shared experience in late medieval England has been documented by a number of scholars. Ebin, commenting on the function of literature in Lydgate's England, finds that the

literary and social concerns that were increasingly important in the fifteenth century [were] the use of literature as an instrument of social display and play, a repository of stances and statements to be embellished for specific patrons and occasions, the poem as a continuing refinement of social interaction on the one hand and as a celebration or statement of topical or political relevance on the other. (9)

Coleman argues that late medieval England exhibits “a consistent attraction to publicly mediated forms of experience,” and she observes that authors of the period “portray public reading...as an emotionally and intellectually engaging, multisensory, sociable, satisfying, and productive focus of human interaction” (108). Oral reading is conditioned by what folklorist Richard Bauman calls “the emergent quality of performance,” which derives from “the interplay between communicative resources, individual competence, and the goals of the participants, within the context of particular situations” (qtd in Coleman 27).

Lydgate may have intended his works to be accessed—and accessible—through a variety of modalities. They may have been intended for memorisation, oral reading, excerpting, musical performance, and consultation, to mention just a few of the possibilities. However, even an awareness of the centrality of performance as the intended medium for the transmission of Lydgate’s texts can only go so far toward alleviating the deficit from which modern scholarship must approach Lydgate studies. The alterity of the medieval period inscribes the Middle Ages within an “otherness” that can never be wholly penetrated by the twentieth-century scholar. As Robert Edwards has pointed out, in a slightly different context, “However much we recover and come to grasp the techniques of didacticism and allegorical elaboration, the literary values of cultural prestige remain largely alien to the modern age” (xii). Recognition that the texts were intended for oral, aural, and performative access may do much to soften criticism of Lydgate’s style and to clarify his reasons for writing as he did. But no amount of knowledge can enable the late twentieth-century reader to experience his texts as did his original audiences, for the social experience of literature represents a cultural moment that can never be recaptured. Modern society has not cultivated the necessary habits of mind described by Coleman, and we do not live in a world of “skilled listeners, with competence for both oral and aural literature as well as the ability to maintain and focus attention and to grasp matters of detail and structure” (31). The best hope for Lydgate studies, then, is to work to “accommodat[e] the mind to the leisurely processes of Lydgate’s verse,” as Pearsall suggests (9), and to find a friend with whom the social experience of Lydgate’s literature can be enacted as a present-day reality.

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Notes

1 Tiner and Callanan incorporate the second of these quotations into the title of a pair of articles in which they explore the musicality of Lydgate's writings. Working from the hypothesis that some of Lydgate's shorter ballades and roundels may have been meant to be sung, they attempt to revitalise Lydgate's reputation as a poet by demonstrating the propriety of his versification for the medium for which he was composing. While their work forms an important strand of background for the study I am undertaking here, my approach is to provide a broader contextualisation of his works in which musical performance is only one of many modes under which his compositions may be taken up.

2 A suggested starting point for further reading on rhetoric in the Middle Ages is James Jerome Murphy's *Rhetoric in the Middle Ages: A History of Rhetorical Theory from Saint Augustine to the Renaissance* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974).

3 Henry Noble MacCracken's identification of the "friend" of Charles d'Orleans as the earl of Suffolk has been disputed by Julia Boffey, whose opinion on this question is now widely accepted.

4 These findings are reported by Tiner. The research itself was conducted by Hendrik van der Werf and Gerald A. Bond and is published in *Transcriptions and Essays for Performers and Scholars* (Rochester, New York: Hendrik van der Werf, 1984).

5 For more details on these works, see Wilkins' essay.

6 Although Tiner does not refer to it in her article, the Fayrfax MS (fol. 67v) also contains an adaptation in the form of a carol of Lydgate's "Upon a Cross (why artow froward)," composed by one "Sheryngham" in the early sixteenth century. The carol has been published by R.L. Greene (165-66, 408) and, along with the music, by John Stevens (98).

7 The extent of dissimilarity between works composed for silent reading versus oral performance is difficult to grasp unless one is accustomed to working in both modalities. My own experience in developing this essay, which is a much-expanded version of a presentation originally given orally, attests to the fundamental differences in writing for different modes of reception. Despite extensive and arduous revision, this essay does not reflect the verbal complexity of a work designed to be read rather

than heard; the simplified syntax and argumentation of the oral presentation are not easily adapted into the more sophisticated forms of written textuality. Further evidence for the dissimilarity of the two modes of reception may be gathered at any scholarly conference, at which presenters read aloud, often with little concern for pace and for audience capacities for comprehension, texts with a complexity that earmarks them as works designed to be read silently rather than aloud.

8 Quoted in Renoir, p. 10. Although it is outside the scope of Lounsbury's argument, it is instructive to note that he finds the perusal of Lydgate's works an unsatisfactory experience. The question of whether Lydgate wrote to be read, rather than performed, is not considered by Lounsbury.

9 That only the ballade should have survived is in itself an interesting point, suggestive of the possibility that the musical portion may have been preserved and performed independently from the rest of the pageant.

10 Ebin (*Illuminator*) provides a useful and illuminating account of Lydgate's development of these terms as a specific vocabulary descriptive of the work of the poet.

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