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**“PURTURE” AND “HOLSOM STORIES”:
JOHN LYDGATE’S ACCOMMODATION OF
IMAGE AND TEXT
IN THREE RELIGIOUS LYRICS**

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John Lydgate’s interest in the visual arts is apparent both in his frequent references to painting and illumination and in those poems he composed to accompany paintings or other visual arts. The latter poems are more than simply narrative or descriptive; Lydgate shows a definite appreciation for the potential effectiveness of visual images. In poems such as “On The Image of Pity,” “The Dolerous Pyte of Crystes Passioun,” and “Cristes Passioun,” Lydgate increases or curtails the complexity of the poetic description and decoration, according to the purpose of the particular work of art. In a strictly meditative lyric, for example, he combines visual images and text to create a focus for meditation that impresses itself on the memory and surpasses the impact of either medium on its own.

Derek Pearsall, in *John Lydgate*, notes this relationship between visual images and Lydgate’s text, but suggests that the relationship is accidental: “Lydgate was particularly active in exploring this borderland of word and picture, though he did so quite unconsciously and would not have been aware of a borderland” (179). The evidence of the poems, however, demonstrates

that Lydgate was fully aware of the power of combining illustration and text.

Lydgate's religious lyrics become more accessible to the reader who first attempts to discard expectations based on the personal, even autobiographical, lyrics of a later age. As J.A.W. Bennett reminds us, "it is possible to distinguish two constant elements in the religious lyrics. They are practical, and meant to be used. They do not (typically) record the agonies of an individual soul, or grapple with problems of disillusionment or of faith" (371). Further clues for the reader are provided by Rosemary Woolf's discussion of meditation in *The English Religious Lyric in the Middle Ages*: first, "affective prayer" is meant to influence the emotions not the intellect and will consequently use little imagery (11); secondly, mediaeval meditation concentrates on sight and tends to exclude the other senses (11-12). This concentrated visual impression is often created by the painting or carving rather than by the lyric itself, and Woolf argues that this dependency weakens the effectiveness of the lyrics (184).

Surely this apparent weakness must indicate that we are now dealing with a fully combined art form and not simply two independent forms presented simultaneously. Although we cannot expect complex or profound imagery or a strong visual impression, we can look for the ability of the poetry to combine successfully with the accompanying art form. Does the poem provide additional facets to the meditation which the visual impression cannot? Does the poem aid in the meditative process? Lydgate's poems, we find, are successful spiritual guides. As we look at some of the lyrics, we discover that Lydgate directs our attention inward or outward, supplies images and sensations (especially sounds) not immediately available to the visual representation, and restrains his considerable descriptive skills in order to complement rather than overpower the other art forms.

"On The Image of Pity" (#62), like the other poems we will consider, is no longer associated with its particular visual counterpart; however, the content of the painting may be surmised from stanza four:

Remembre all so this dolorus pytie,
How þat this blyssid ladye thus doth embrace
Her dere son ded, lygyng vpen her kne. (29-31)

The pietà was a popular subject of mediaeval sculpture, painting, and illumination. Figure 1 provides a striking example of mid-fifteenth-century pietà and shows the degree of emotion that these representations often conveyed. In contrast, Lydgate's description of the scene is plain — almost stark — leaving the picture to arouse the emotions. We are asked to see,

The moder of Cryst, whose hert was woo begon
 To se her childe, whiche synne dide nevar non,
 For thyn offence thus wounded & arayd;
 Rewe on that peyne, remembringe here vpon,
 Pray to that quene, that moder is, and mayd. (4-8)

We know what to look for in the painting, but Lydgate does not examine any of the scene in detail, nor does he attempt to evoke the same emotions using the poem.

"On The Image of Pity" depends upon a distinct division of labour. The picture stirs our emotions, and the poem instructs us in the use of these emotions. As a call to penitence, Lydgate's poem creates a strong sense of urgency. The third line of the poem exhorts us to "Turne hidder in hast, knelle doun, behold and se" (3). Once you have asked Mary to intercede for you, the same haste should take you to a priest: "then with hasty pace / Rene to a prest whill this is in thi mynd" (16-17). The poem both encourages and guides the person meditating on the painting. While the first stanza and a half focusses on the image of the painting and the second stanza and a half on the poetic instruction, the fourth stanza combines the power of text and image. The poet commands,

Enprynt thes wordes myndly thy hert within,
 Thynk how thow sest Chryst bledyng on þe tre,
 And yf thow steryd or temptyd be to syne
 It shall sone sese and pase a-way from the. (25-28)

In the final stanza, we see that the lesson of the words and the impression of the painting combine to protect us from evil:

Lerne well this lesson, it is bothe short and lyght,
 For with this same the wekest creature
 That ys on lyffe may putte þe fend to flight
 And saffe hym-selfe in sole and body sure;
 To suche entent was ordeynt purtreture
 And ymages of dyverse resemblaunce,
 That holsom storyes thus shewyd in fygur
 May rest with ws with dewe remembraunce. (33-40)

As Woolf observed, there is little description, detail, or imagery in this poem. Lydgate delights in description, but he recognizes that it does not belong in this combined art form. Despite this curtailment of his usual poetic interests, Lydgate manages to enliven this primarily instructive piece of poetry by injecting a sense of urgency into a meditative form. Most interesting for our purposes is the complete sense of compatibility between the two art forms; despite Pearsall's assertion that Lydgate is unconscious of

the "borderland" between text and image, this poem demonstrates that Lydgate alters his style considerably in order to accommodate the partnership of poetry and visual representation.

"The Dolerous Pyte of Crystes Passioun (#47)," like "On The Image of Pity," is intended to accompany a painting; however, "The Dolerous Pyte" is distinguished by its different purpose. Walter F. Schirmer, in *John Lydgate: A Study in the Culture of the XVth Century*, explains this purpose:

This [poem] was designed to serve as text to a picture of the Crucifixion, and was written — presumably at the request of . . . [Lydgate's] abbot — in praise of an indulgence which could be purchased at the monastery. In the Middle Ages such circumstances of composition do not necessarily preclude the theme from being treated in an artistic manner, and these seven ballad stanzas . . . were indeed worked upon with care . . . , but the result is nevertheless unsatisfactory from an aesthetic point of view. (185)

Schirmer goes on to argue that the heroic elements of this poem do not work particularly well, and although Woolf finds value in the imagery of the poem, she also finds the Christ-knight image unsuccessful.

As Woolf begins to discuss the central image of the poem, she observes, "[t]he main content of this poem . . . is not a Passion narrative, but a learned unwinding of the traditional image of the grapes and winepress of the Passion" (199). Woolf demonstrates that Lydgate skillfully combines these images:

The poem begins . . . with an exhortation to meditate upon 'this dolerous pyte', but imperceptibly the *imago pietatis* acquires the role of the treader of the grapes, 'In Bosra steyned of purpil al my [weede]', and this figure in turn changes into the Christ of the winepress of the Passion. (201)

Woolf examines these images in stanza five of "The Dolerous Pyte" and finds Lydgate's use of the images quite effective: "In this stanza there is a very subtle progression in which one image fades into another, the progression being both logically and imaginatively fitting" (201). The complex use of imagery in this poem seems to contradict the usual plainness of the religious lyrics; however, unlike "On The Image of Pity," this picture and text combination is not meant to work primarily as a focus for meditation. The final stanza of "The Dolerous Pyte" explains the nature of the indulgence associated with the picture:

From yow avoideth slouthe & necclygence,
 With contrit herte seith, meekly knelyng doun,
 O Pater-noster and Auees in sentence,
 A crede folwyng, seyde with devossioun,
 xxxvi thousand yeeris of pardoun,

Over xxx dayes, ye may the lettre see,
 In remembraunce of Crystys passioun
 Knelying be-fore this dolorous pite. (49–56)

Unlike the more meditative poems, this poem allows Lydgate the freedom to develop a full-fledged lyric because here reason will not interfere with the meditative process. In this poem, we see the complexity of imagery which he must usually hold in check. Part of this different focus centres around the Christ-knight imagery which Schirmer did not find successful. Woolf is equally skeptical about the appropriateness of the image:

The Christ-knight and his armour were . . . a persuasive image that could not be visualized: therefore to bring it into sharp association with the *imago pietatis* was not happy: so irrelevant a conjunction can only diminish the poetic power of each part. (202)

This critical discomfort indicates that this is another poem which is severely weakened by the lack of its visual counterpart. If we arbitrarily substitute a representation of the crucifixion as found in a c. 1430 English Book of Hours for the original painting, I think we can begin to see how the painting and the poem might have worked together (see Figure 2.) This illumination, like many of the visual representations, presents a passive, still, and suffering Christ at the centre of a scene that often creates the impression of a bustling crowd — weeping women, officiating guards and officials, and, in many versions, the dicing soldiers. Lengthy narrative descriptions of so familiar a scene would be redundant. Lydgate employs the Christ-knight image to evoke the side of the narrative or imagery that cannot be depicted in the painting. The grapetreader and winepress imagery is our clue. With one image Christ is the active harvester; with the other Christ is the passive victim, and the poem works on the alternation of the active and passive roles.

Stanza two of “The Dolerous Pyte” concentrates on Christ’s wounds, while stanza three introduces the Christ-knight image. Christ tells us he will be our protection:

Your coote armure, brest plate & habirioun,
 Yow to dyffende in al adversyte,
 And I schal be your Trusty champion. (21–23)

Stanzas four and five combine the grape-treader and winepress images (both actor and victim) and conclude with Christ’s suffering: “I suffred gret damage, / I was maad thral for manhis lyberte” (37–38). Stanza six returns to the Christ-knight image, but now the image moves from the triumphant champion to a defeated knight:

My deth of deth hadde þe victorye,
 Fauht with Sathan a myhty strong batayl,
 Grave this triumphe depe in your memorie,
 Lik þe pellican perced myn Engrayl,
 Myn herte blood maad abrood to rayl,
 Best restoratif geyn old Inyquyte,
 My platys seuered, to-torn myn aventail,
 Lik as witnesseth this dolorous pite. (41-48)

If the use of this alternating imagery seems unbalanced, it is because Lydgate could depend on the painting to depict the suffering Christ and on the allusive nature of the imagery to add greater depth to his description. The text, then, can emphasize Christ's active participation in his own suffering. The degree of sacrifice is magnified by balancing the two roles. As with "On The Image of Pity," there are numerous clues in "The Dolerous Pyte of Crystes Passioun" to suggest that Lydgate fully exploits the combination of his poetry with a visual representation. His poems do not simply translate the details of the paintings; instead, Lydgate uses the opportunity of the combined art form to concentrate on certain areas not represented by the visual aspect.

"On The Image of Pity" is primarily instructive, and "The Dolerous Pyte of Crystes Passioun" explains an indulgence; however, even in a simple meditative poem, Lydgate continues to work co-operatively with the visual element "Cristes Passioun" (#42), as the envoy explains, is a poem intended to accompany a crucifix:

Go, lytel bylle, with al humylyte
 Hang affore Iesu, that list for man to bleede,
 To-fore his cros pray folk that shal the see,
 Onys aday this compleynt ffor to reede. (113-16)

Here, as in "The Dolerous Pyte," there is minimal description of the Passion. Pearsall, for example, finds the details of the Passion too thin: "[t]here is a good deal of detail of the agonies of the Cross in these poems, but so laboriously accumulated and unimaginatively used as to be completely without affective power" (265). We must ask how affective Lydgate is trying to be and how much depends on the visual representation?

Lydgate's own poetry suggests he attributes such representations with the ability to have a considerable impact on the viewer. In "The Testament of Dan John Lydgate" (#68), the poet describes the central role of a crucifix in the turning point of his life:

Which now remembryng in my later age,
 Tyme of my childhode, as I reherse shall,
 Wythinne .xv. holdyng my passage,
 Myd of a cloyster, depicte vpon a wall,
 I savgh a crucifyx, whos woundes were not smalle,
 With this [word] "vide," wrete there besyde,
 "Behold my mekenesse, O child, and leve thy pryde." (740-46)

Lydgate goes on to explain how he is inspired to write the next section of the "Testament," "vide," as a result of his experience. Although there is no reason to assume any autobiographical connection with this story, it does demonstrate the power Lydgate believed images to have. This conviction may well account for the lack of emotive and detailed description in "Cristes Passioun."

As with "On The Image of Pity" and "The Dolerous Pyte of Crystes Passioun," "Cristes Passioun" (#42) moves toward things not provided in the visual representation. From stanza one to stanza three, the refrain "Looke on my woundis, thynk on my passioun" (lines 8, 16, 24) constantly refers readers to the crucifix hanging in front of them. The last line of stanza four, however, changes the refrain and begins to direct us inward: "Remembre among vpon my passioun" (32). This turning inward is verified by the next stanza. Stanza five lists numerous details which would not be depicted by the crucifix itself:

Cressettys born vp with many gret lanterne
 Swerdis, stavis, scoorges Inportable,
 Creyng terryble, hydous to Dyscerne,
 Fals accusacyouns verray Innumerable,
 Knyves, pynsouns, hard hameris nat plicable,
 Craunpished with deth, accused of tresoun;
 And sith my deth was to the profytable,
 Man thynk among upon my passioun. (33-38)

Here we see that Lydgate even introduces another sense which, as Woolf noted, is unusual for mediaeval meditation. The "creyng terryble" and "fals accusacyouns" evoked in lines 35 and 36 make it clear that the reader is now looking inward, and the repetition of the hard "c" through the stanza adds emphasis to these sounds. Line 45 makes the redirection explicit as the viewer is asked to look with "Inward sight."

Stanza seven begins to introduce the Christ-knight image which then is fully developed in stanza eight:

I floght for the a fful greet batayll,
 Ageyn Sathan the tort[u]ous serpent,

Nakyd on the cros withoute plate or mayll,
 Bood in the ffeld tyll al my blood was spent;
 To wyne thy love this was myn Entent,
 On to that ende I was thy Champioun. (57-62)

Woolf demonstrates the appropriateness of the image in this poem by explaining:

In the present context it may at first sight seem to be no more than another example of Lydgate's indiscriminate drawing upon the traditional themes of the Passion in order to fill out his complaints. The idea of the lover-knight, however, acquired in the fifteenth century an accretion. . . . This accretion was the new iconographic form of a shield with the five wounds upon it arranged as an heraldic device. (209)

This emblem, then, continues the contact with the visual representation without disturbing the inward focus.

The final section of the poem returns the reader to his or her setting. The references to the sacraments and the Church may well be clues to the placing of this crucifix. Stanza ten refers to baptism and stanza eleven begins, "Of thes two lycours kam al þe sacrementis, / In noumbre sevene, by Computacyoun" (81-82). Stanzas twelve and thirteen encapsulate and summarize the Passion.

Stanza thirteen might seem like the appropriate place to conclude because stanza fourteen suddenly describes Mary's grief at the Cross:

Man, calle to minde, and meekly do aduerte,
 How Symeon seide in his prophesye,
 A swerd of sorwe sholde perce to the herte,
 Of my moodir, that Callyd is Marye,
 Stood with Seyn Iohn, swowned at Calvarie,
 Vnder my cros for febilnesse fyl down. (105-10)

As we have seen in the envoy, it is clear that the poem would normally have been read by someone kneeling and praying in front of a crucifix. The juxtaposition of Mary's position with that of the reader's creates a sense of immediacy and concludes the poem back where the reader started. An illumination for Cardinal Bernardino de Carvajal from a Missal dated 1520-21 provides us with a visual example of this juxtaposition of the Crucifixion and a later worshipper (Figure 3). The major portion of this illumination depicts the Crucifixion with a number of figures around the cross. The bottom margin contains a much smaller miniature which shows the cardinal himself kneeling and praying in his chapel. His upward gaze appears to be directed at the Crucifixion, and his position resembles that of a female figure kneeling at the foot of the cross. Lydgate's concluding stanza, like

the illumination, helps the viewer to identify with those present at the Crucifixion.

If we assume, based on the evidence from "The Testament of Dan John Lydgate," that the crucifix provided the affective portion of this meditation, then the poem was once again free to provide other elements. In "Cristes Passioun," Lydgate uses the poem to turn our attention gradually inward, as he introduces objects, senses, and images not visually represented. The desired impact on our memory is strengthened by the use of repeated sounds within the poetry. Again the poem and the visual art form work in harmony.

"On The Image of Pity," "The Dolerous Pyte of Crystes Passioun," and "Cristes Passioun" all seem to have missing elements that could only have been provided by their visual accompaniment. If the poems seem unsuccessful, it is because we are in the position of someone hearing a play but missing the action. These poems clearly demonstrate that Lydgate consciously adapted his poetry to the combined art form. Although the lack of detail and description may bother us, we can appreciate the active sense of direction Lydgate creates: "On The Image of Pity" impresses us with a sense of urgency; "The Dolerous Pyte of Crystes Passioun" uses complex imagery to inspire our awe; and "Cristes Passioun" assists with the process of meditation.

Lydgate's ability to exploit the variety of visual art forms his poetry accompanied demonstrates his flexibility in his own medium and his sensitivity to the power and suggestiveness of the visual arts. He works with the visual representations, rather than simply translates them. His results may not entirely satisfy literary critics, but with a little effort we can better appreciate his poetic efforts within the hybrid art forms.

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Fig. 1. Pietà from Villeneuve-lès-Avignon. c. 1460. Panel, 63 3/4 x 85 7/8". Louvre, Paris.



Fig. 2. The Hours of Margaret, Duchess of Clarence, London, c. 1430. London, Estate of the late Major J.R. Abbey, JA. 7398, f. 43v.



Fig. 3. An illumination depicting Cardinal Bernardino de Carvajal (1456-1522) from Missal, Rome, c. 1520-21 (London, Sotheby's, 11 December 1984, lot 44) fol. 45v.