

The Queen's Dumbshows: John Lydgate and the Making of Early Theater.

Claire Sponsler.

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Claire Sponsler's study of John Lydgate's contribution to English performance culture in the early fifteenth century has a wider significance than its title might suggest. It situates itself very clearly in relation to recent trends in Middle English studies more generally, on which a useful orientation, in the course of the book, is provided. Their impact is reflected in Sponsler's own alertness to literary theory, and in a context orientation whose flipside is a reluctance to quote from the texts studied. But there is a sustained interest in their other-than-verbal form, which engages with the latest research on the works concerned as artifacts and performances.

All medieval wordcraft survives as artifact, and Sponsler's discussion of individual items includes an exploration of the manuscript texts they became, while her first chapter ("Shirley's Hand") provides a thorough exposition of the factors involved in their making. But there is also proper emphasis on the more vital materiality of those items expressly designed as part of an artifact. Three short poetic items figured as "subtleties" served during the coronation banquet of Henry VI in 1429, while three sets of verses accompanied narrative depictions on an outdoor wall (a dance of death for St. Paul's Churchyard) and indoor wall hangings (the legend of Saint George; the tale of Bycorne and Chychevache).

These verbal-visual artifacts may also have had a performance dimension, with the words read aloud, and in the case of the pictures perhaps even with mimetic action. Performance aspects dominate the remaining works, if sometimes only indirectly, as with Lydgate's verses describing the pageants for Henry VI's ceremonial entry into London in 1432. Like most students of late medieval pageantry, Sponsler examines the themes invoked in the pageantry, but is more alert than most to the implications of a distinct performance mode in which a mobile audience encounters a sequence of stationary pageants located at significant points along an established route with considerable symbolic resonance. The same treatment is accorded to Lydgate's explication of the symbolic figures in a London Corpus Christi procession, on whose auspices some plausible suggestions are offered. Here as elsewhere, Sponsler insists that while such texts can be a resource for reconstructing the performances, the latter, conversely, acquire a second, literary life through the texts.

There remain the works designated, from the earliest manuscripts onward, "mummings" or "disguisings," and which have considerable importance for the development of the court masque. Lydgate's words are evidently spoken in performance — exactly how is a recurrent feature of discussion. Usually conglomerated, they are here usefully grouped on the basis of contextual factors. One cluster of mummings share court auspices, distinguished by the royal residences at

which they were performed: Hereford, Eltham, and Windsor. In the course of discussing their themes and production, Sponsler undertakes a spirited campaign to demonstrate a connection with the king's mother, dowager queen Catherine. In the audience in each instance, she is in one case addressed directly, and may have influenced its content. No other canonical Lydgate text qualifies as a "queen's dumbshow," but Sponsler make a case for adding to their number the unattributed *Mumming of the Seven Philosophers*, whose themes and contextual signals are compatible with performance before the boy king.

Chapter 2, "Vernacular Cosmopolitanism: London Mummings and Disguisings," covers similar texts with different auspices. Two, performed in honor of the mayor, were produced by livery companies, the Mercers and Goldsmiths. The *Disguising at London* was probably performed for a parliamentary gathering, the *Mumming at Bishopswood* for a May Day celebration of the London sheriffs. Here too Sponsler balances analysis of the themes (in the context of contemporary ideas and issues) with discussion of performance auspices.

This is an excellent start to the project, formulated in Sponsler's forceful introduction, of deploying "Theater History as a Challenge to Literary History," but its fulfillment will require placing these shows, and the other forms of pageantry discussed, within the contemporary matrix of nonliterary, customary performance genres. Extending its gaze beyond London and Lydgate to other fields and folk, the project might ultimately achieve the more radical appreciation that premodern literary history is actually a segment of theater history.

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