ON THE DATE OF JOHN LYDGATE'S
MUMMING AT HERTFORD

John Lydgate's *Mumming at Hertford* is of great importance to students of English literature. Not only is it an entertaining and highly representative piece of work by the most significant poet of immediately post-Chaucerian England, but it is in several respects a landmark in the history of the English drama. In contrast to the morality plays, Lydgate's mummings may be considered the direct ancestors of the Renaissance and later theater. Specifically, the *Mumming at Hertford* acts as a bridge between two eras: it looks back to Walter Map and Chaucer, and forward to *Gammer Gurton's Needle*. It was among the very first English dramatic works to make use of classical allegory, and perhaps the first to import the technique of the French débat.

Despite the obvious importance of the *Mumming*, scholars have thus far failed to assign a specific date to its composition. Eleanor P. Hammond has dismissed any attempt at dating it as almost necessarily futile, and Francis Lee Utley's statement, that »certainly the poem is before 1448-9, when Lydgate died,« is perforce as useless as it is authori-

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2 I have discussed the ideological relationship of the Mumming at Hertford to other works of Lydgate in »Attitudes Toward Women in Lydgate's Poetry,* to appear in a forthcoming issue of English Studies.
7 See ibid., I, 111, and Schirmer, op. cit., p. 89.
tative. The only cue available to us occurs in the prose introduction to the work: »Nowe folowethe here the maner of a bille by wey of suppli­
cacion putte to the kyng holding his noble feest of Cristmasse in the
Castel of Hertford as in a disguysing of the Rude upplandishe people
compleynyng of hir wyves with the boystous aunswere of hir wyves
devysed by Lyddegate at the Request of the Countre Roulour Brys
slayne at Lovies.«

We do not know the date of Roulour Brys' death, but we know that
Henry V stormed Louviers in 1418, that the French retook it in 1430,
and that the English besieged it in 1431. Of these dates, the first may
be safely dismissed. Henry V spent only four Christmasses of his reign
in England, and only those of 1414 and 1415 could possibly – though
by no means necessarily – have been at Hertford. Since he could not
have been at Hertford for Christmass, 1418, and the Mumming
was explicitly meant to be acted there, it logically follows that the date of
composition cannot well be set as 1418. Both Rudolph Broganek and
E. K. Chambers have suggested dates posterior to 1431, that is to say,
after the last siege of Louviers and the latest possible date of Roulour
Brys' death. Robert Withington and Walter F. Schirmer have settled
for either 1430 or 1431.

So far, all the attempts at dating the Mumming seem to have neglec­
ted two key facts: (1) although Roulour Brys had to be dead to be re­
ferred to as »slayne at Lovies« in the prose introduction, he had to be alive
to request the composition of a mumming, so that the work under
consideration may well have been composed before 1430; and (2)
nothing tells us that the prose introduction was written at the same
time with the rest of the text – and, for ought we know, it may not be
Lydgate's work at all. Since there are only two extant manuscripts –
British Museum MS Additional 29729 and Trinity College Cambridge
MS 600 – and both of them are from the second half of the fifteenth
century, we cannot reasonably dismiss the possibility that the introduc­
tion may have been a later addition. The dating of the Mumming and
the dating of the prose introduction are, accordingly, two different,
though clearly related, problems.

Of course, one may wish to suggest the possibility of Lydgate's having
composed the Mumming years after Roulour Brys' death; but the me­
chanics of the patronage system, as well as Lydgate's own practices over
more than fifty years of literary life, argue against the validity of such
an argument. On the contrary, the chances are that he wrote the piece
before Brys' death or at least before he had learned of it, and then
possibly added the introduction. It is still impossible to give an exact

10 The Minor Poems of John Lydgate, ed. Henry Noble MacCracken (London,
EETS, 1934), II, 675. The emphasis is supplied, and archaic symbols have been altered
in accordance with current practice in editing late mediaeval English texts.
13 Withington, op. cit., I, 89.
date for the composition, especially if we consider that the text must of necessity have been composed before – even if immediately before – its first performance on Christmas day. Yet, the foregoing argument makes it possible to determine the probable date of the writing with far greater precision than has hitherto been done: (1) the Mumming at Hertford must have been composed during 1430–1 or immediately before, and (2) the prose introduction was necessarily composed in 1430–1 or later.

Alain Renoir
University of California
Berkeley 4, California, U. S. A.