

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 entertaining¹ and highly representative² 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.³ Specifically, the *Mumming at Hertford* acts as a bridge between two eras: it looks back to Walter Map and Chaucer,⁴ and forward to *Gammer Gurton's Needle*.⁵ It was among the very first English dramatic works to make use of classical allegory,⁶ and perhaps the first to import the technique of the French *débat*.⁷

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,⁸ and Francis Lee Utley's statement, that »certainly the poem is before 1448-9, when Lydgate died,«⁹ is perforce as useless as it is authori-

¹ For a brief critical discussion of the *Mumming at Hertford*, see my »The Binding Knot: three Uses of One Image in Lydgate's Poetry,« *Neophilologus*, 1957, p. 202 ff.

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*.

³ See E.K. Chambers, *The Mediaeval Stage* (Oxford, 1903), I, 397 and 400; Robert Withington, *English Pageantry* (Cambridge, Mass., 1918), I, 106 ff; and Walter F. Schirmer, *John Lydgate: ein Kulturbild aus dem 15. Jahrhundert* (Tübingen, 1952), p. 84 ff.

⁴ See Rudolph Brotanek, *Die englischen Maskenspiele* (Vienna, 1902), pp. 9 and 13; Caroline Spurgeon, *Five Hundred Years of Chaucer Criticism and Allusion* (London, 1914), I, 35; and Fred N. Robinson, ed., *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer* (Boston, 1933).

⁵ See P. Reyher, *Les Masques Anglais* (Paris, 1909), p. 113.

⁶ See Withington, *op. cit.*, I, 107.

⁷ See *ibid.*, I, 111, and Schirmer, *op. cit.*, p. 89.

⁸ Eleanor P. Hammond, »Lydgate's *Mumming at Hertford*,« *Anglia*, XXII, 364 ff.

⁹ Francis Lee Utley, *The Crooked Rib* (Columbus, 1944), p. 196.

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 supplicacion putte to the kyng holding his noble feest of *Cristmasse in the Castel of Hertford* as in a disguysing of the Rude upplandisshē people compleynnyng of hir wyves with the boystous aunswere of hir wyves devysed by Lydgate at the *Request of the Countre Roullour Brys slayne at Loviers.*«¹⁰

We do not know the date of Roullour 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 Christmases of his reign in England, and only those of 1414 and 1415 could possibly – though by no means necessarily – have been at Hertford.¹¹ Since he could not have been at Hertford for Christmas, 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 Brotanek 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 Roullour Brys' death.¹² Robert Withington and Walter F. Schirmer have settled for either 1430 or 1431.¹³

So far, all the attempts at dating the *Mumming* seem to have neglected two key facts: (1) although Roullour Brys had to be dead to be referred to as »slayne at Loviers« 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 introduction 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 Roullour Brys' death; but the mechanics 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 Mēnor 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.

¹¹ See Hammond, *op. cit.*, p. 366.

¹² Brotanek, *op. cit.*, p. 306, and Chambers, *op. cit.*, I, 398.

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 Christmass 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.

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U svojoj raspravici Alain Renoir utvrđuje datum prikazanja *Mumming at Hertford* od engleskog pjesnika Johna Lydgatea iz XIV stoljeća.