

2015

Book Review: The Queen's Dumbshows: John Lydgate and the Making of Early Theater by Claire Sponsler

Robert Epstein Dr.
Fairfield University, repstein@fairfield.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.fairfield.edu/english-facultypubs>
Copyright © The Author 2014. Published by Oxford University Press 2014; all rights reserved
Robert Epstein. CLAIRE SPONSLER. The Queen's Dumbshows: John Lydgate and the Making of Early Theater. *The Review of English Studies* (2015) 66 (275): 572-573. Published by Oxford University Press, available online at: <https://academic.oup.com/res/article/66/275/572/1606169>. For permissions, please contact journals.permissions@oup.com

Repository Citation

Epstein, Robert Dr., "Book Review: The Queen's Dumbshows: John Lydgate and the Making of Early Theater by Claire Sponsler" (2015). *English Faculty Publications*. 120.
<https://digitalcommons.fairfield.edu/english-facultypubs/120>

Published Citation

Epstein, Robert. Book Review: The Queen's Dumbshows: John Lydgate and the Making of Early Theater by Claire Sponsler, (University of Pennsylvania Press), in *The Review of English Studies*, Volume 66, Issue 275, 1 June 2015, Pages 572–573. <https://doi.org/10.1093/res/hgu099>.

This item has been accepted for inclusion in DigitalCommons@Fairfield by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@Fairfield. It is brought to you by DigitalCommons@Fairfield with permission from the rights-holder(s) and is protected by copyright and/or related rights. **You are free to use this item in any way that is permitted by the copyright and related rights legislation that applies to your use. For other uses, you need to obtain permission from the rights-holder(s) directly, unless additional rights are indicated by a Creative Commons license in the record and/or on the work itself.** For more information, please contact digitalcommons@fairfield.edu.

CLAIRE SPONSLE. **The Queen's Dumbshows: John Lydgate and the Making of Early Theater.** Pp. vii + 308 (The Middle Ages Series). Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014. Hardback, £42.50.

Claire Sponsler has written theoretically informed books on medieval drama, edited John Lydgate's *Mummings and Entertainments*, and published on several of Lydgate's texts for spectacles and performances. Here she provides the essential next step, a full-length study of Lydgate's performance texts. Sponsler's stated purpose is to expand our understanding of what constitutes theatre in the late Middle Ages. In a historical narrative that usually focuses on anonymous, provincial, religious, popular drama, Sponsler seeks to make room for the secular performances that Lydgate composed for the royal and civic occasions. Above all, this deeply researched and illuminating book reveals the astonishing richness and variety of the textual environment of Lancastrian England, 'the overlap between the private reading of written texts and the public viewing of spectacles and performances' (p. 6).

In her first chapter, Sponsler considers the manuscript conditions of the Lydgate texts themselves. Virtually all of them appear, many singularly, in three anthologies compiled by John Shirley. Shirley's role was so central in preserving these texts, and so much of what we know about the historical and social contexts of the performances derives from his voluble introductions, that he is nearly as important to Sponsler's study as is Lydgate himself. Shirley's motivations and intentions for his manuscript productions remain much debated, but Sponsler, following Margaret Connolly, stresses the likelihood that they were intended for a readership of mixed rank associated with the household of Richard Beauchamp, Earl of Warwick, Shirley's general purpose having been 'to preserve Lydgate's performance pieces for literary culture' (p. 32).

In her subsequent chapters, Sponsler analyses small groups of texts according to their genre and audience. She is not primarily interested in close readings, though she generously cites other critics; instead, she is concerned with the interplay of spectacle, audience, text, and readership. Chapter 2 studies the performances Lydgate composed for London audiences: the *Mumming for the Mercers*; the *Mumming for the Goldsmiths*; the *Mumming at Bishopswood*; and the *Disguising at London*. Building on Andrew Galloway's argument for Lydgate's 'vernacular humanism,' Sponsler finds in Lydgate's London performances the makings of a 'vernacular cosmopolitanism,' which employed the geography, the demographics, and the idea of the city to generate an accessible sense of Continental sophistication. Chapter 3, 'Performing Pictures,' looks at Lydgate's diverse and eclectic poetry for visual display, including *Bycorne and Chychevache*, the *Legend of St. George*, and the *Danse macabre*. Such works, Sponsler says, 'remind us that written words, the visual arts, and performances were not mutually exclusive representational forms but instead were mutually supporting' (p. 96).

In the next two chapters, Sponsler finds resonant similarities and differences between two forms of public procession. In the *Procession of Corpus Christi*, the object of Chapter 4, Lydgate's verses textualize an urban religious ritual; his verses for Henry VI's Royal Entry into London in 1432, the focus of Chapter 5, perform a similar function for a secular, political procession. The goal of the latter is 'to preserve details of a past performance so as to increase the honor of the group that sponsored it', while the former is intended 'to offer a commentary on the performance and thus enhance meditative devotion' (p. 114). But, in both processions, Sponsler emphasizes the role of the city as a political force and as a locus for inscription; she goes so far as to credit Lydgate with 'championing a civic perspective' (p. 135). The sixth chapter takes up Lydgate's verses for the subtleties at the banquet for Henry VI's 1429 London coronation. These subtleties, Sponsler explains, were 'edible

theater', incorporating text into a spectacular feast, and then translating the royal performance into a text to be preserved in the chronicle record. It is a lesson in 'how eating, watching, and reading are all aspects of theater history' (p. 166).

Returning to the mummings, Sponsler offers in Chapter 7, 'The Queen's Dumbshows', her most original and arresting argument. The *Disguising at Hertford*, the *Mumming at Eltham*, and the *Mumming at Windsor* are informed, in Sponsler's readings, by the political and personal roles of Catherine of Valois. As widow of Henry V and mother of Henry VI, Catherine held a symbolically central position in legitimizing two predominant Lancastrian concerns, the dynastic succession and the claims to France. But as Sponsler notes, any claims of the queen to authority in her own right might have been perceived as threatening or destabilizing by the influential Lancastrian authorities. Sponsler sees these tensions being played out in the three mummings, each of them devised as Christmastime entertainments for the royal court. In *Hertford*, which is directed explicitly to Henry VI but at which his mother must have been present, the comic struggles of rustic husbands and wives both dramatize and attempt to contain female aspirations to power and autonomy. *Eltham*, on the other hand, consists of seven rhyme-royal stanzas directed to the king, followed by five directed to Queen Catherine herself. Noting that a number of Lydgate's poems are known to have been commissioned by women, and that women also commissioned other late-medieval courtly performances, Sponsler argues that Catherine may well have commissioned the *Mumming at Eltham*, and in fact that she may have helped to shape its contents, with their emphasis on gifts bestowed to honour the queen. If so, then *Windsor* is, in Sponsler's view, a re-assertion of masculine authority, as Catherine is once again absent, and the mumming dramatizes the story of St. Clotilda, 'a supporter of male rule' (p. 186). All of these royal dramas, then, are in Sponsler's reading negotiating complementary and competing pressures of dynastic authority and female aspirations to power.

Finally, in her eighth chapter, Sponsler makes a strong case for a neglected text, *A Mumming of the Seven Philosophers*, as the work of Lydgate, and presents a plausible argument that it, too, was composed as a royal performance for Henry VI. Sponsler titles this last chapter 'On Drama's Trail,' and it is clear from the title of the book that she sees these last two chapters as central to her claims for the study as a whole. Exciting as Sponsler's hypotheses regarding Queen Catherine may be, there is little evidence in the rest of the study for the participation of aristocratic women in the production of theatre, nor does the book really make a case for a major role by Lydgate in shaping the form or the legacy of medieval drama. But if by 'the making of early theater' we take Sponsler to mean the complex, collaborative processes by which public spaces were made theatrical in the fifteenth century, and the role of text in preserving a manuscript legacy for that spectacular culture, then this study more than fulfills its promise.

Until relatively recently, the study of Lydgate focused on the very large poems that dominate his corpus; as Lydgate studies have taken off in recent years, attention has shifted to the long-neglected shorter works, including the performance pieces and occasional poems highlighted here. One of the questions that arises from this book is whether the long poems are also connected to the culture of theatrical textuality and public performance that Sponsler describes. But as Sponsler notes in her Afterword, one feature of a good scholarly book is that it raises as many questions as it answers—and this is indeed a good book.

ROBERT EPSTEIN *Fairfield University*

doi:10.1093/res/hgu099

Advance Access published on 25 November 2014