
The Purposes And Themes Of John Lydgate's Poetry

John Lydgate was a 14th and 15th century English poet who inherited the legacy of Chaucer, his work spanned from religious, private, public/performative, and didactic. His poetry has been largely forgotten but at his time, and years after it, he was incredibly popular and wrote an enormous amount. I will argue that Lydgate was able to disseminate his poetry to a wider and more public audience, by manipulating the position of craft/artisanal labor in poetry. By doing this he reshaped the boundary between the public and the cloistered poets and the elite, which allowed the public to participate in poetry and thus shape public culture.

To understand the purpose and theme of Lydgate's poetry, it is essential to understand the time period that he lived and wrote in. The majority of Lydgate's most popular and expansive poems, barring *The Troy Book*, were written between the mid-1420s and early 1430s. This time period was quite tense and had a look of foreboding, not without grounds of course. Henry, as the boy king, did not lend stability to the nation, and gave way to fragmentation of power, most notably in France. So, this environment certainly colored Lydgate's perspective and thus his poems, which led to his conservative themes. This is especially apparent in his translation of *Degueville*, *The Pilgrimage of Human Life*, and those that appealed to the public.

The audience, both fictional and historic, for Lydgate is an important area to consider because it is a markedly different approach compared to his predecessors, most notably Chaucer. Maura Nolan in her *John Lydgate and the Making of Public Culture* situates Chaucer and Lydgate as having almost opposing conceptions of the public and the audience. The difference between Lydgate and his predecessors is how he portrays the audience he is writing to, this is the fictional audience, and who is actually reading these poems and seeing them performed, which is the historical audience.

Chaucer's fictional audience is "variegated, multiple and inclusive", it does not have a top down, hierarchical system. This fictional system was open, people could come and go and the common were in contact with the elite. However, the historical audience for Chaucer's poems was consisted of the courts and other elites, the poor were not likely to be in the audience for a performance of Chaucer. So, during this period the commoners were both insiders and outsiders, they were getting pushed inside by poetic discourse and they were getting pushed outside by the nobility and elite.

For Lydgate the historical and fictional audience was basically flipped. His historical audience was quite small, he was usually a poet for the courts and elites, but frequently he was commissioned by various guilds. He had the fictional audience of his poetry quite narrow and much more hierarchical than Chaucer, people could not move around freely nor could they enter into discourse with the elite. However, his historical audience was much more plastic, as mentioned above, he, unlike Chaucer, was not only writing for royalty.

However, throughout this time period, both Chaucer's and Lydgate's, England was suffering from some serious instability. Whether this was due to impotent kings (Henry VI), an angry and disenfranchised public, or problems abroad, whatever it was one thing was for certain, they needed to sort these issues out. So, the Lancastrians decided to implement a few regime

changes, and no they were not entirely predicated on force. The Lancasters decided to manipulate ideological structures, and reorient what public life was and how one should participate in it. This also meant that the idea of what a king, his purpose and how he should be seen has changed as well. So, the Lancastrian regime was balancing the issue of the public, because this is where the king is represented, seen, and always embodying. And they still wanted to retain the hierarchical and exclusive nature of the king.

This is the medium that Lydgate was working with, he needed to, as the poet to the elite, provide representation of both the exclusive and inclusive. He needed to reach back into the past for Henry V, for the Romans and Caesar, for other poets dead. This union of the past and the present as a way to structure, or at least provide stability, in poetry and thus the public became very common for Lydgate and the Lancastrians. It also marked the emergence, around the 1420s, of John Lydgate as the poet laureate of England, which displaced poetic agency. Lydgate as the poet of nobles and elites, also represented, like the king, a part of the kingdom, a part of the public.

Medieval cities are “random, unplanned, clogged, complicit in their own filth-choked self-strangulation”. At least this is how these cities are depicted in movies, books, popular culture etc. Careless citizens threw waste wherever they pleased, constructed buildings where the ball landed, pissed wherever they pleased.

However, this was not exactly the case. City dwellers, London in this case, valued cleanliness, they did not think urinating and defecating arbitrarily was okay. However, their systems/machines of cleanliness were not organized or constructed entirely by the state. While they did have a sheriff that was tasked with enforcing city ordinances on cleaning. And constables known as “scavengers”, whose job it was to visibly enforce and oversee the cleaning of the streets, and punish those who flouted or abuse the ordinances. They were established by cultural and historical traditions, and were not written down until the seventeenth century, they were mostly enforced by the community and local aldermen.

Lydgate addresses this issue of purity, both physical and spiritual, to play a central role in many of his poems, though the Troy Book is most notable. For Lydgate the city of cleaned streets, clean people and organized and convenient trade are the requirements for protection against disease and death for the physical but for the spiritual as well. Without a functioning and pure city how will one expect the political body to run? Very poorly Lydgate believes. This issue of the political body also introduces the relationship between the monarch and their role and desire for purity of its city and citizens.

As mentioned previously, the monarch is both the representative of the state, embodying every part of it and he is also the executor of the state. He has control over both the body of the state and its political body, also allowing access to the body of its citizens. And he certainly realizes that a healthy body and a healthy city contribute to the prosperity of the realm.