EARNEST PLAY, COMIC TRIAL: MARRIAGE, AUTHORITY, AND SATIRE IN JOHN LYDGATE'S *DISGUISING AT HERTFORD*

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Abstract: *This paper aims to examine Benedictine monk John Lydgate's secular work,* Disguising at Hertford *(c.1427–30) as a unique example of medieval mumming tradition, one which conceals more serious concerns beneath its ostensibly light-hearted festive and comic tone. The work presents the mock-trial of married couples who exchange their grievances about one another in front of the king. The performance of the players, combined with the humorous language they adopt, sets a distinctly comic tone. However, below its comical surface, the work incorporates broader questions and concerns of gender relations, equality, domestic and legal authority, justice, and even the king's capacity to rule. Lydgate also puts private lives and domestic concerns in a courtroom setting and blurs the lines between public and private spheres. In this context, this paper approaches Lydgate's work not only as an entertaining piece but also as one which dramatizes the gender roles, civic discourse, legal agenda, and community values. Consequently, it both foreshadows later developments in English comedy and reveals the ways satire and humour are weaved into serious social, cultural and political concerns in the fifteenth century.*

Keywords: *John Lydgate; Disguising at Hertford; mumming; disguising; 15th century; medieval literature;*

Introduction

This article claims that Lydgate's *Disguising at Hertford*, one of his seven mummings, should be read as a serious work that subtly deals with medieval representations of civic and royal authority, despite its ostensibly light-hearted and festive tone of a conventional medieval mumming. The central meaning of the play is veiled beneath the guise of comedy to convey a deeper commentary and critique on social, cultural, and political structures during the fifteenth century England. This veiled component elucidates the potential results of the role inversion within the marriage institution and wider consequences such reversals could provoke. Lydgate's employment of this approach could thoroughly be appreciated when the work is situated within the broader scope of Lydgate's literary career.

More extensively recognised for his prominent works including *Troy Book* (1412-1420), *The Siege of Thebes* (1420-1422), or *The Fall of Princes* (1431-1439), John Lydgate (c.1370-1450), monk of the great abbey of Bury St. Edmunds in Suffolk (Sponsler "Introduction" 1), was a significant poet of both secular and devotional poetry during the fifteenth century. He was able to attain fame during his lifetime (Schick xi) by being very prolific in main medieval genres, including lyric, epic, dream poetry, romance, and mumming.

Even though his literary perception tends to refer him as a minor poet from time to time, particularly during the Victorian era, he produced more poetry, as Scanlon and Simpson put it (1), than any other poets in the British tradition.

Following a quiet and modest village life, Lydgate attended the Abbey of St. Edmunds. This allowed him to build a variety of connections with the most prominent figures of his age (Ebin 1-7). After he was able to secure a patron, he began to produce his significant works from 1400 onwards (Schirmer 37). He worked under the patronage of many prominent figures of the period, including Henry V, Duke of Gloucester, the Earl of Salisbury, the Countess of Warwick (Pearsall 24). His involvement with Chaucerian influence is evident in the earliest days of his career. His most significant works were produced during his involvement with both the monastery and the royal palace "as an official poet and rhetorician" (Ebin 2). The production of his major works was initiated with *Temple of Glas* (c.1403), and then followed by *Resoun and Sensuallyte* (1406-1408) and *Life of Our Lady* (1409-1411). Following these major works, Lydgate also composed seven mummings or disguisings, which were performed in front of both royal and civic audiences. These mummings, mostly performed in courtly setting, narrow the division between society and politics by explicitly and/or implicitly incorporating domestic concerns within the confines of political discourse. Lydgate's total oeuvre, in which the recreation of new literary practices was followed by his engagement with Chaucerian rhetoric at the beginning, is mirrored by this integration of public into private concerns.

Even though Lydgate's career began with Chaucer imitations, he translated "the poetic and literary techniques he has learned from Chaucer into new media" and thus created "uniquely hybrid texts, part reassuring moralism or praise, part literary works in search of educated and savvy readers" (Nolan 3). Particularly in his mummings, the strata of cultural, societal, or political concerns in his texts were open to be analysed by these readers. As marked by Ebin, Lydgate generates responses in his poetry,

> to contemporary events with a vision of the poet as a civilizer and orderer of a man. Underlying his major works is a recurrent and thematic emphasis on the importance of peace and stability, the dangers of war, the threat of civil discord and division in the realm, and a recognition of the fragile and transitory nature of earthly order. [. . .], he underscores the stability in the nation and virtue and harmony in man's daily life. (16)

Consequently, through Lydgate's vantage point, the harmony that shapes human existence is a natural and direct outcome of a well-ordered society in which personal virtues and civic stability are bound. As a poet, he embraced this arduous task to lead to this order and truth. In this light, in Lydgate's distinctive mumming, *Disguising at Hertford*, while a unique work that reflects the social, cultural, matrimonial, and political dynamics of early

fifteenth-century England is presented, the reversal of gender and royal roles is also exemplified through a disruption of the established order. Lydgate shows how such an alteration would result in instability in the form of a courtly entertainment.

Lydgate's Mummings

Of all Lydgate's works, it is his mummings that represent his most distinctive innovation in medieval literature. They appear to have been composed between 1424 and 1430, albeit there are no official records to this effect. They are composed of seven texts in total and are compiled in two different manuscripts by John Shirley, one in Bodleian Library Ms. Ashmole 59, Part 1, and six in Cambridge, Trinity College Manuscript R.3.20 (Epstein 338). Shirley himself named them mummings, which are characterised as "the devyse of a momyng," or "in wyse of mommers desguysed" (Nolan 71). As a separate genre with its own discernible features, a mumming can be defined as "a dumb-show, a performance by nonspeaking actors" (Epstein 338), an ancient form that could be observed in English Christmas performances. They are presented in "a complex and often obscure history of shifting boundaries" (Epstein 338). Considered to be "not quite 'poetry,' nor yet 'drama'", (Nolan 71), these works seem to belong to a tradition of poetry written in the common, everyday language in the form of a dramatic disguising performance. Conventionally, hence, mummings rely on silence, miming, and exhibitions of low physical comedy to entertain audience during festive times. However, in *Disguising at Hertford*, Lydgate deliberately and unconventionally deviates from this rendition of the mummings. He innovatively transforms the mumming genre into a vehicle to convey social and political commentary by integrating spoken dialogue, all while keeping the mimetic and festive form of the genre. With this conflation of the comic and the serious concerns into the mumming form, Lydgate's contribution turns out to be not merely entertainment but a critical engagement of the everyday dynamics of domestic life with the political and judicial systems during the fifteenth century.

In addition, Lydgate's innovation of mummings anticipates and finds further expression in the forthcoming works of the Renaissance drama. As Ebin marks, in creating mummings, Lydgate creates "an interesting combination of speech and visual representation which had an impact on later drama" (86). Echoing his words, Schrimer also incorporates the origins of drama into the mummings as he states that these are "primitive forms of stage play, and are of importance for the later history of English drama" (Shrimer 100). Therefore, all while presenting a connection between the roots of drama and the Middle Ages, Lydgate's mummings also foreshadow the later English drama with texts "nearly unprecedented in English writing, but that would

become standard in Renaissance civic display" (Nolan 9). Moreover, W. A. Davenport contends that the only mumming among seven works that has a dramatic quality, and effect is *Disguising at Hertford* (103). Hence, among the critics, there is a consensus on that *Disguising at Hertford* is an innovation in the literary history not merely on the grounds of departing from conventions of medieval mumming but also of introducing new elements of comic interaction, dialogue, subject matter and characterization foreshadowing the dramatic practices of the Renaissance drama. This may be the reason why Lawrence Clopper refers to Lydgate as a presenter rather than a playwright (165). In this context, rather than being merely entertaining texts, Lydgate's mummings also seem to serve as transitional material for the future English drama with their interplay of dramatic instruments, such as speech and dialogue or interaction with audience and civic setting.

Two of these seven works are identified as disguisings rather than mummings: *Disguising at London* and *Disguising at Hertford*. In addition to being significantly longer than the other mummings, *Disguising at London* and *Disguising at Hertford* are composed in rhyming couples rather than rhyme royal and address distinct subjects matters than the other five mummings (Nolan 122). With an aim to instruct and entertain, Lydgate appealed to both city elites and the court (Sponsler "Lydgate" 21) within a feature in which classical and Biblical components are conflated. However, as David Lawton argues in his article "Dullness and the Fifteenth Century", the fifteenth century poetry marked the lack of individualism and the birth of a "public sphere parallel to and connected with the structures of power" (793). Consequently, the poets of the era, such as Lydgate, were involved in the political agenda of this public sphere. The political age of this public sphere is comprised of civic identity and loyalty in a masquerading form that addresses order, harmony, and social unity in a moral symbolism, as incorporated in *Disguising at London* and *Disguising at Hertford*.

In a similar vein, as a secular comedy, *Disguising at Hertford* posits a group of "rude upplandisshe people" (Lydgate 15) complaining about their wives and marriage institution itself before the king in the court "in the vigyle of this nuwe yeere" (Lydgate 15) within a mock-trial tone. One by one the husbands pass their grievances by referring to the Holy Bible and the significance of the natural order of life where men have the upper hand. Next, the women take the stage to defend themselves through intertextual strategies- which are significantly more literary and rhetorically sophisticated than what is typically anticipated from a festive comedic performance- by drawing upon authoritative literary sources such as Chaucer's works. Through all these testimonies, the king becomes responsible for listening, evaluating, and ultimately issuing a verdict. Along with the wives' defence and the king's verdict, the text ultimately gets engaged with a political and juridical agenda

in trying to resolve what seems to be merely a domestic issue. Not only the performative nature of the women's rhetorical defence adds a layer of textual complexity, positioning the play as more than a festive entertainment but also the king's issuing a judgment frames the episode as a judicial proceeding. Therefore, while the domestic conflict between the spouses seems to be the central theme of the play, it inevitably deals more broadly with political and legal discourse in featuring a mock-trial to dive into more serious concerns within both civic and royal contexts.

Disguising at Hertford: Discourses of Authority, Justice, and Civic Order in the late Medieval Society

Through John Shirley's compilation of the seven mummings, it is revealed that *Disguising at Hertford* was commissioned by John Brice, controller of the royal household, and performed at Gertford Castle during Christmas for Henry VI, possibly in 1427 (Epstein 340). Comprising 254 lines in heroic couplets, *Disguising at Hertford* is highly allusive, and makes use of a variety of Middle English traditions. In discussing the genre(s) of the work, Maura Nolan lists that it bears components of medieval debate, a performance of marital conflict, and satire. Taken as a debate, it resembles to the debate poems of the time like "Wynnere and Wastoure", which is also a conflict between two groups who wait for the verdict of the king. As a text of marital conflict, it resembles to Noah plays or *The Second Shepherds' Play*, and it is comparable to *Piers Plowman* in terms of satire (Nolan 157). As Sidhu puts it, it is also a medieval gender comedy, the old French fabliaux tradition of the late twelfth and thirteenth centuries, in which the marital topics and disobedient wives are the central employments. Sidhu further analyses that the gender comedy Lydgate employs in *Disguising at Hertford* serves in two ways in the text:

> [T]he first is an innovative attempt to establish the unruly woman as an historical problem rather than simply a figure of comedy, and to assert the importance of subjecting her to legal regulation; the second is an equally novel attempt to exploit this new "problem" of the unruly woman as a way of reaffirming the deferential hierarchies of medieval society. (432)

Yet, above all, it is highly Chaucerian in its intertextual attributes. As a result, it is generally acknowledged that the disguising is both traditional and a synthesis of these medieval elements. Thus, *Disguising at Hertford* transforms the interaction of different medieval components into a reflection on power relations in marriage whilst exposing serious domestic and legal concerns.

In its most refined form, *Disguising at Hertford* is a comical and satirical argument about the exploration of matrimonial authority between wives and husbands in the medieval setting. Most of the comical effect derives

from the work's deliberate reversal of conventional social and gender roles: The husbands are depicted as tormented and powerless while the wives assume the role of assertive, abusive, and dominant figures. The husbands call themselves "hynes" (25)[1] giving a rustic simplicity to their condition. Given that the work was ordered for festive purposes during Christmas, it could be assumed that there is little political intent. Nevertheless, Lydgate's decision to incorporate a social argument, with all its economic and judicial components, into the courtly stage and delegate the legal decision to the king renders it unavoidably political. At the outset of the poem, the husbands introduce themselves and their domestic struggle to the king to lay their great concern:

> Moost noble Prynce, with support of your Grace
> Ther beon entred into youre royal place,
> And late ecomen into youre castell,
> Youre poure lieges, wheche lyke nothing weel; (1-4)
> ---
> Upon the mescheef of gret adversytee,
> Upon the trouble and the cruweltee
> Which that they have endured in theyre lyves
> By the felnesse of theyre fierce wyves; (9-12)

This introduction marked by the husbands sets the central comical conflict of the play. Through the representation of different husbands of similar concerns, a social panorama is introduced. Each husband is depicted as representatives of different medieval trades, with their characterization explicitly tied to their names and occupational identities: Obbe the Reeve, Colyn Cobeller, Berthilmewe the Butcher, among others. However, all these husbands are suffering from the same "bonde of sorowe, a knott unremuwable" (14), criticising their abusive wives and the very nature of the marriage.

The first and lead complaint is Obbe the Reeve (whose wife Beautryce Bittersweete -a comic oxymoron- is a drunkard) who describes the miserable domestic lives of the husbands. Obbe the Reeve defines marriage as an inescapable irreversible "knott" (14) of pain. He states that it is a burden both for the old and the young. According to him, marriage promotes aging and mental decline. Intensifying his argument, Obbe also asserts that philosophers refer marriage as madness. The wives are drunkards "bolling at the nale" (37) and they feed their husbands with "leene growell and souphetge colde potage" (46). The gender roles expected of a woman is reversed in his speech and he uses this as a tool to defend himself. In his defense, domestic tasks of a traditional medieval housewife are neglected. The good medieval wife, who is expected to be obedient, naïve, caring, and good is totally inversed here. Bittersweete is the total antithesis of this representation of a medieval good

[1] References to the primary source are cited by line numbers.

wife. The reversal of female gender roles is accompanied by an emphasis on conventional masculine responsibilities, illustrated through the outcomes of their inversion. Emphasizing his manual hard work during the day and finding nothing to eat in the evening, Obbe represents a typical peasant in medieval civic life. Although a conventional reeve has authority in the agrarian life, he lacks this power in his domestic sphere, which creates a humorous irony in the play. The wives also beat the men with kitchen or domestic equipment, mostly with the distaff. As is the case here, the comic effect of their argument also derives from the employment of domestic metaphors in the way the women's ills and vices are described. In representing gender roles, the humour here is intensified as the language to criticise the wives is restricted within domestic sphere.

One by one, the husbands show and tell the abuses of their wives and then desire the king to bestow them with a "sauf-conduyt" (140) to have some liberty under king's protection. As each participant takes the stage in turn, they engage in a performative pantomime that represents their occupational identity. The next husband is another reeve, Robyn. Depriving of the absolute authority in his domestic life just like his colleague Obbe, he demands service from his wife but is unsuccessful of obtaining it. He is also subject to the physical abuse of his wife despite his objections: "Yif he ought spake whanne he felt peyne, /Ageyne oon worde, alweys he hade tweyne" (63-64). Following Robyn, Colyn Cobeller takes the stage. As his fellow rustic friends, he "[h]athe hade his part of the same lawe" (56). Humorously, there is a wordplay on the word "law" here. It refers to an established pattern, which has almost become a rule among the husbands and tyrannical wives. It also anticipates the forthcoming judicial process that the monarch will maintain in the shape of a genuine legal court. Adding more to the effect of domestic metaphors and concerns, issues related to the home economics are included in Colyn's speech. His wife, Cecely Soure-Chere is not violent with a staff (like Beautryce), but her power lays in her verbal hegemony. She dominates her husband through harsh speech and scorn, damaging the male ego. She spends all his hard-earned income from mending old shoes on alcohol: "Whatever he wan, clowting olde shoone earned, / The wykday, pleynly this is no tale, / Sheo wolde on Sondayes drynk it at the nale" (68-70). He endeavours to elicit the attention of the audience by not only through his portrait of himself as a humble man deserving respect but also suggests that his wife drinks on Sundays, a day traditionally devoted to prayer. Sunday is the day of Church praying, yet the wife spends it in taverns. Thus, through Colyn, while presenting a mock-portrait of a low-class family life, the societal norms are reminded. By illustrating the accepted standards of the time, the play concurrently reaffirms these norms. Unlike the social and cultural norms, Colyn is both physically and economically exploited. After the depiction of

Colyn's wife's disproportionate tyranny, husbands begin to speak as a group and state that regardless of their ages, all women are fierce and the men are innocent (almost saint-like) beings under their tyranny: "Blessed thoo men that cane in suche offence those/ Meekly souffre, take al in pacyence, suffer/ Tendure suche wyfly purgatorye" (85-87).

Next on stage, Berthilmewe the Butcher takes the lead in the showing. He is portrayed with his strong physical appearance. Yet, in spite of his strength and his possession of sharp knives, he cannot disobey his wife, Pernelle. The butcher's civic identity as a masculine figure is juxtaposed with his private identity at home as a fearful and vulnerable husband. His wife, Pernelle is also presented with both her physically and domestically abusive personality. Her femininie duties are not completed as she "[w]olde leve hir puddinges in a gret cawd" (102), leaving the entire household hungry. Another domestic tool "skumour" (104) is manipulated here by Pernelle for the physical violence on the husband. Next husband is Thome Tynker whose wife is Tybot Tapister. Thome is presented as a modest tradesman. He is one of the victims of the domestic weapon distaff and shields himself with his bare hands to defend himself. After the last individual performer, Colle Tyler who complains about his wife's not making life sweet, all the men put themselves in the position of spiritual martyrs and ask for the mercy of the king. They simply ask the king to "graunte hem fraunchyse and also liberté" (138) and give them "the hyegher hande" (144). They protest that the wives have the control over everything, and they use the Holy Bible to disagree with that. Their argument is based on the fact that such liberty and control that women have is totally against religion:

> But if you list, of youre regallye, power
> The Olde Testament for to modefye (145-146)
> ---
> For it came never of nature ne raysoun,
> A lyonesse t'oppresse the lyoun,
> Ner a wolfesse, for al hir thyraunye,
> Over the wolf to haven the maystrye (151-154)

Along with the mention of the Old Testament, this serves as a reminder not only to the king but also to the audience surprised by the inversion of the roles that "the interpretation of old texts is integral to the practice of law" (Lipton 359). The heavy duty falling upon the king is expected to be in line with not only judicial but also religious conduct.

After husbands' statements and allegations that they are basically "holy martirs" (135) and both reason and nature are on their sides, the wives take the stage. The husbands imply that if women were to rule over the men, it would be a violation against nature. The second part commences with a

single wife standing in front of the king in the name of all six wives: "We six wives beon ful of oon acorde" (164). Asserting that they "clayme it but of right" (199), they provide a counter- argument by giving Chaucerian references. As a response to the husbands' references to the Holy Bible to defend themselves, the wives use valuable literary texts as their own references. In their opening speech, they mention "the worthy Wyf of Bathe" (168) and "Gresyldes story" (176) from "The Clerk's Tale" in *Canterbury Tales*. Through both references, the wives imply that patience died long ago with Griselda and they are more like the wife of Bath, invoking connotations of a strong, assertive female voice. The legal, literary, and religious authority of the era are parodied in this opening speech to verify the idea of female dominance in marriage:

> And for oure partye the worthy Wyf of Bathe
> Cane shewe statutes moo than six or seven,
> Howe wyves make hir housbandes wynne heven,
> Maugré the feonde and al his vyolence;
> For theyre vertu of parfyte pacyence perfect
> Partenethe not to wyves nowe-adayes,
> Sauf on theyre housbandes for to make assayes
> Ther pacyence was buryed long agoo,
> Gresyldes story recordethe pleinly soo. (168-176)

When the Hertford wives cite and list Chaucerian women, they stress upon the female sovereignty, shifting models of female authority and patience. The basic of their argument rests on the idea that female patience with their husbands and domestic tasks belongs to the past. They basically say that they will not be silenced anymore and "Jackys bowe" (198) has already been bent. They have been tired of housework and their roles in the long heritage of female history resembling to a "long tytle of successyoun" (204). Thereby, as the husbands show the Bible as their valid reference, the wives consult upon Chaucer's text. It is uncertain whether Lydgate critiques the heavy burden placed on women in the Middle Ages.; however, it is evident that his attention to the issues faced by the wives provides a glimpse into their lives. From here, the play moves toward its conclusion, where the king is expected to have a final verdict. One of the prominent satirical and humorous parts takes place during this sequence where legal rulings are incorporated:

> Peysing also, in his regallye,
> The lawe that wymmen allegge for theyre partye,
> Custume, nature, and eeke prescripcyoun,
> Statuyt used by confirmacyoun,
> Processe and daate of tyme oute of mynde, (233-236)

Using royal and legal rhetorics, this part summarizes gender power struggles during the Middle Ages in the disguise of a legal battle in a courtly setting. The wives demand dominance on the grounds of a long-established tradition, an unwritten legal system just like the authority of the monarch. They also reject any gendered stereotype: "We wil us grounde not upon wommanhede" (201). Of all these representations, the king's verdict is a particularly remarkable move as it not only closes the mock-trial circle of the play but also embodies the humour and satire that the play has kept from the very beginning. The final verdict particularly elevates the humorous approach as it signifies to the inescapability and the permanency of the marriage. Conveyed through a spokesman of the king, which acknowledges his presence as the representation of the divine justice, the last section mimics the form of a legal verdict and by attempting to be impartial the king infers that the women are right and decides that they should rule their husbands for one year, during which a legal solution would be sought for the men:

> Wherfore the Kyng wol al this nexste yeere
> That wyves fraunchyse stonde hoole and entier,
> And that no man withstonde it, ne withdrawe,
> Til man may fynde some processe oute by lawe,
> That they shoulde by nature in theyre lyves
>
> Have soverayntee on theyre prudent wyves. (239–44)

Lydgate points to the fact that the king is bound to the law. Afraid to make a "haste" (119) decision, the king makes "raysoun his guyde" (227). Taking council is also very significant for him since it will make him impartial in coming to a verdict. Nevertheless, the ending shows that the king is not completely capable of completing what law entails. The year's delay, for instance, could well be read as an insufficiency of authority. The limits of the king who has this one-year gap in the verdict is hence subtly satirized. Thus, all together, the ending shows the way some grotesque effects are produced through the comic and exaggerated realism of everyday life (Wickham 195). The play's veiled serious tone is also disclosed here even though it is presented in a festive manner. The ending does not offer an absolute legal resolution for the husbands, yet, according to Sidhu, it includes a misogynistic nature which "characterizes marriage as a structurally corrupt institution that can never be altered by *any* man, no matter how forceful or physically powerful" (italic original, 439):

> Let men beware therfore or they beo bounde.
> The bonde is harde, who-soo that lookethe weel;
> Some man were lever fetterd beon in steel,
> Raunsoun might help his peyne to aswaage,

> But whoo is wedded lyvethe ever in servage. (246–50)

In the same vein, the king recognises that the grievances of both parties lay on the marriage institution itself. In the meantime, he implies that the wives are the ones accountable for this unfortunate wrongdoing. This misogynistic ending suggests that the dominance of the wives does not abide by the justice and the king fails in adhering to justice. However, through the husbands' point of view, the ending with the one-year gap presents "a failure of male sovereign authority over wives in the domestic sphere" (Lipton 355). In this manner, the ending does not only reveal the imbalances within marriage but also reflects the weakness of the monarch in protecting both the civic and royal order. In the end, the king is portrayed "as an ordinary husband like the others who bring the bill of complaint and struggle ineffectively with the tyranny of wives" (Lipton 355) instead of a royal power who has the responsibility to hold the justice. By bringing a marital conflict into the king's court and requiring the participation of the king to find a solution, Lydgate introduces the notion that this may be the matter of public and royal authority, and this is emphasized by the rustics' recurrent use of legal language (Sidhu 437). These readings illustrate that Lydgate conflates public and private spheres of the conflict within a royal context. The most noteworthy point here is that the king is subtly satirized with his inability to assert authority for a domestic trial. Therefore, in the conclusion it could be interpreted that there is not only a disorder in the domestic sphere but also in the royal justice system. It appears that Lydgate consciously used the domestic conflict between the spouses as an apparatus to question the justice system of the time as regards to civic and royal authority.

Conclusion

While contemplating on his miserable life during his turn on the stage, Colyn Cobeller states, "[h]it is no game but an hernest play" (72)- a statement encapsulating and subtly disclosing Lydgate's utilisation of parody to address more serious concerns. In reflecting these concerns of the era, the play touches upon serious issues under the disguise of a mock-trial mumming performance. The audience at the court reflect on the legal, moral, or emotional complexities of the marriage institution while they are served a festive comedy. The courtly audience of the time most certainly understood the dynamics of these parodies much better than today's world. While they are enjoying the absurdity of the far-fetched examples of the rustics and their wives, I believe, they also question the subtle irony of the play which shows how the reversal of roles would result in. Moreover, the king's portrait as a powerless ruler who cannot

decide hastily reinforces the comical element and surfaces another misogynistic tone decided by a ruler.

Ultimately, *Disguising at Hertford* is distinctive in its approach of blending humour and satire into the serious matters of marriage, genre, legal battle, and authority. Under the disguise of a mock-legal comedy, the play reflects the complexities of everyday life in the Middle Ages by bringing a public matter into court and reveals how these realities were reimagined and staged in the court. Considering that Lydgate was a Benedictine monk and produced under patronage, it could be asserted that he edified a text through a refined style, open to a number of interpretations in a rhetorical manner.

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