

Classic Poetry Series

John Lydgate
- poems -

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John Lydgate(1370 - 1450)

John Lydgate of Bury was a monk and poet, born in Lidgate, Suffolk, England.

Lydgate is at once a greater and a lesser poet than [John Gower](http://www.poemhunter.com/john-gower/). He is a greater poet because of his greater range and force; he has a much more powerful machine at his command. The sheer bulk of Lydgate's poetic output is prodigious, amounting, at a conservative count, to about 145,000 lines. Life at the monastery of Bury St. Edmund's, where he spent most of his life, gave him a leisure that many another poet might have envied, and enabled him to explore and establish every major [Chaucerian](http://www.poemhunter.com/geoffrey-chaucer/) genre, except such as were manifestly unsuited to his profession, like the fabliau. In the Troy-book (30,117 lines), an amplified translation of the Trojan history of the thirteenth-century Latin writer Guido delle Colonne, commissioned by Prince Henry (later Henry V), he moved deliberately beyond Chaucer's Knight's Tale and his Troilus, to provide a full-scale epic. The Siege of Thebes (4716 lines) is a shorter excursion in the same field of chivalric epic. The Monk's Tale, a brief catalog of the vicissitudes of Fortune, gives a hint of what is to come in Lydgate's massive Fall of Princes (36,365), which is also derived, though not directly, from Boccaccio's De casibus virorum illustrium. The Man of Law's Tale, with its rhetorical elaboration of apostrophe, invocation, and digression in what is essentially a saint's legend, is the model for Lydgate's legends of St. Edmund (3693) and St. Albon (4734), both local monastic patrons, as well as for many shorter saints' lives, though not for the richer and more genuinely devout Life of Our Lady (5932).

Early Life and Education

He was admitted to the Benedictine monastery of Bury St. Edmunds at fifteen and became a monk there a year later.

Patronage

Having literary ambitions (he was an admirer of Geoffrey Chaucer and a friend to his son, Thomas) he sought and obtained patronage for his literary work at the courts of Henry IV of England, Henry V of England and Henry VI of England. His patrons included, amongst many others, the mayor and aldermen of London, the chapter of St. Paul's Cathedral, Richard de Beauchamp, 13th Earl of Warwick and Henry V and VI, however his main supporter from 1422 was Humphrey, Duke of Gloucester. In 1423 he was made prior of Hatfield Broad Oak, Essex but soon

resigned the office to concentrate on his travels and writing. He was a prolific writer of poems, allegories, fables and romances, yet his most famous works were his longer and more moralistic Troy Book, Siege of Thebes and the Fall of Princes. The Troy Book was a translation of the Latin prose narrative by Guido delle Colonne, *Historia destructionis Troiae*. At one time, the long allegorical poem *The Assembly of Gods* was attributed to him, but the work is now considered anonymous. Lydgate was also believed to have written *London Lickpenny*, a well-known satirical work; however, his authorship of this piece has been thoroughly discredited. He also translated the poems of Guillaume de Deguileville into English. In his later years he lived and probably died at the monastery of Bury St. Edmunds.

Talent

The Oxford English Dictionary cites Lydgate with the earliest record of using the word "talent" in reference to a gifted state of natural ability.

Quotations

"Who lesith his fredam, in soth, he lesith all."

—an old proverb Lydgate included in his moral fable *The Churl and the Bird*
Lydgate wrote that King Arthur was crowned in "the land of the fairy", and taken in his death by four fairy queens, to Avalon where he lies under a "fairy hill", until he is needed again.

Lydgate is also credited with the first known usage of the adage "Needs must" in its fullest form: "He must nedys go that the deuell dryves" in his *The Assembly of Gods*. Shakespeare later uses it in *All's Well That Ends Well*.

Lydgate is a character in a 2003 mystery novel *The Bastard's Tale*, by Margaret Frazer, which takes place in Bury St. Edmunds in 1447.

That Now Is Hay Some-Tyme Was Grase

Who clymbeth hiest gothe ofte base,
Ensample in medowes thow mayst se
That nowe is heye some tyme was grase.

Lenvoye.

Go forth anon, thou short dite,
Bydde folke not trust this worlde at all,
Bydde theme remembre on e cite
Which is a-bove celestiall;
Of precious stones bylt is the wall,
Who clymbeth theder gothe nevar base,
Out of that place may be no fall,
Ther is no heye but all fresh grase.

John Lydgate

The Floure Of Curtesye

In Feverier, whan the frosty moone
Was horned, ful of Phebus firy lyght,
And that she gan to reyse her streames sone,
Saynt Valentyne, upon thy blisful nyght
Of dutie whan glad is every wight,
And foules chese, to voyde her olde sorowe,
Everyche his make, upon the next morowe,

The same tyme, I herde a larke synge
Ful lustely, agayne the morowe gray:
'Awake, ye lovers, out of your slombringe,
This glad morowe, in al the haste ye may!
Some observaunce dothe unto this day,
Your choise agen of herte to renewe,
In confyrmynge forever to be trewe.

'And ye that be, of chosynge, at your large
This lusty day, by custome of nature,
Take upon you the blisful holy charge
To serve love, whyle your lyfe may dure,
With herte, body, and al your besy cure,
Forevermore, as Venus and Cipride
For you disposeth, and the god Cupyde.

'For joye owe we playnly to obey
Unto this lordes mighty ordynaunce,
And, mercylesse, rather forto dye,
Than ever in you be founden varyaunce;
And though your lyfe be medled with grevaunce,
And, at your herte, closed be your wounde,
Beth alway one, there as ye are bounde.'

That whan I had herde and lysted longe,
With devoute herte, the lusty melodye
Of this heavenly comfortable songe,
So agreable as by ermonyne,
I rose anon, and faste gan me hye
Towarde a grove, and the way take,
Foules to sene everyche chose his make.

And yet I was ful thursty in languisshyng;
Myn ague was so fervent in his hete,
Whan Aurora, for drery complaynyng,
Can distyl her chrystal teeres wete
Upon the soyle with sylver dewe so swete;
For she durste, for shame, not apere
Under the lyght of Phebus beames clere.

And so, for anguysshe of my paynes kene,
And for constraynte of my sighes sore,
I set me downe under a laurer grene
Ful pitously; and alway more and more,
As I behelde into the holtes hore,
I gan complayne myn inwarde deedly smerte,
That aye so sore crampished myn herte.

And whyle that I, in my drery payne
Sate and behelde, aboute on every tre
The foules sytte, alway twayne and twayne,
Than thought I thus: 'Alas, what may this be,
That every foule hath his lyberté
Frely to chose, after his desyre,
Everyche his make thus, fro yere to yere?

'The sely wrenne, the tytemose also,
The lytel redbrest, have free election
To flyen yfere and togyther go
Where as hem lyst, aboute envyron,
As they of kynde have inclynacion,
And as Nature, empresse and gyde
Of every thyng, lyst to provyde.

But man alone, alas, the harde stounde!
Ful cruelly, by kyndes ordynaunce,
Constrayned is, and by statute bounde
And debarred, from al suche plesaunce.
What meneth this? What is this purveyaunce
Of God above, agayne al right of kynde,
Without cause, so narowe man to bynde?

'Thus may I sene, and playne, alas!

My woful houre and my disaventure,
That doulfully stonde in the same caas
So ferre behynde from al helth and cure.
My wounde abydeth lyke a sursanure;
For me fortune so felly lyste dispose,
My harme is hyd, that I dare not disclose.

'For I my herte have set in suche a place
Where I am never lykely forto spede,
So ferre I am hyndred from her grace
That, save Daunger, I have none other mede;
And thus, alas, I not who shal me rede,
Ne for myne helpe shape remedye,
For Male Bouche, and for false Envye.

'The whiche twayne aye stondeth in my wey
Maliciously, and false Suspencion
Is very cause also that I dey,
Gynnyng and rote of my distruction,
So that I fele, in conclusyon,
With her traynes that they wol me shende
Of my labour, that dethe mote make an ende.

'Yet or I dye, with herte, wyl, and thought,
To God of Love this avowe I make:
As I best can, howe dere that it be bought,
Where so it be that I slepe or wake,
Whyle Boreas dothe the leaves shake,
As I have heyght plainly, tyl I sterve,
For wel or wo, that I shal her serve.

'And for her sake, nowe this holy tyme,
Saynt Valentyne, somewhat shal I write;
Although so be that I cannot ryme,
Nor curiously by no crafte endyte,
Yet lever I have that she put the wyte
In unconnyng than in neglygence,
Whatever I saye of her excellence.

'Whatever I say, it is of duté,
In sothfastnesse, and no presumpcion;
This I ensure to you that shal it se,

That it is al under correction,
What I reherce in commendacion
Of her, that I shal to you, as blyve,
So as I can, her vertues here discryve.

'Ryght by example as the somer sonne
Passeth the sterre with his beames shene,
And Lucyfer, amonge the skyes donne,
A-morowe sheweth to voyde nyghtes tene,
So verily, withouten any wene,
My lady passeth, whoso taketh hede,
Al tho alyve, to speke of womanhede.

'And as the ruby hath the soveraynté
Of ryche stones and the regalye,
And the rose of swetenesse and beauté
Of fresshe floures, without any lye,
Ryght so, in sothe, with her goodly eye,
She passeth al in bountie and fayrenesse,
Of maner eke, and of gentylnesse.

'For she is bothe the fayrest and the beste,
To reken al, in very sothfastnesse,
For every vertue is in her at reste;
And furthermore, to speke of stedfastnesse,
She is the rote, and of semelynesse
The very myrrour, and of governaunce,
To al example, withouten varyaunce.

'Of porte benygne, and wonder glad of chere,
Havyng evermore her trewe advertence
Always to reason, so that her desyre
Is bridede aye by wytte and provydence;
Thereto of wytte and of hie prudence
She is the welle, aye devoyde of pride,
That unto vertue her selven is the gyde.

'And over this, in her dalyaunce
Lowly she is, discrete and secree,
And goodly gladde by attemperaunce,
That every wight, of hygh and lowe degré,
Are glad in herte with her forto be;

So that, shortly, if I shal not lye,
She named is The Floure of Curtesye.

'And there to speke of femynyte,
The leste mannysshe in comparyson,
Goodly abasshed, havynge aye pyté
Of hem that ben in trybulacion;
For she alone is consolacion
To al that arne in mischefe and in nede,
To comforte hem of her womanhede.

'And aye in vertue is her besy charge,
Sadde and demure, and but of wordes fewe;
Dredful also of tonges that ben large,
Eschewynge aye hem that lysten to hewe
Above her heed, her wordes for to shewe;
Dishonestly to speke of any wight -
She deedly hateth of hem to have a syght.

'The herte of whom so honest is and clene,
And her entent so faythful and entere
That she ne may, for al the worlde, sustene
To suffre her eeres any worde to here
Of frende nor foe, neyther ferre ne nere,
Amysse resowning that hynder shulde his name;¹
And if she do, she wexeth reed for shame.

'So trewely in menyng she is in-sette,
Without chaungynge or any doublenesse,
For bountie and beautie are together knette
In her persone, under faythfulnesse;
For voyde she is of newfanglenesse,
In herte aye one, forever to persever
There she is sette, and never to dissever.

'I am to rude her vertues everychone
Connyngly to discryve and write;
For wel ye wote, colour have I none,
Lyke her discrecion craftely to endyte,
For what I say, al it is to lyte;
Wherfore to you thus I me excuse,
That I aqueynted am not with no muse.

'By rethorike my style to governe
In her preise and commendacion,
I am to blynde so hylde to discerne
Of her goodnesse to make discrypcion,
Save thus I say, in conclusyon,
If that I shal shortly her commende,
In her is naught that Nature can amende.

'For good she is, lyke to Polycene,
And in fayrenesse to the quene Helayne,
Stedfast of herte, as was Dorigene,
And wyfely trouthe, if I shal not fayne,
In constaunce eke and faythe, she may attayne
To Cleopatre, and therto as secree
As was of Troye the whyte Antygoné.

'As Hester meke, lyke Judith of prudence,
Kynde as Alcest or Marcia Catoun,
And to Grisylde lyke in pacience,
And Ariadné of discrecioun,
And to Lucrece, that was of Rome toun,
She may be lykened as for honesté,
And for her faythe, unto Penelopé.

'To fayre Phyllis and to Hipsyphilee,
For innocence and for womanhede,
For semelynesse unto Canacé;
And over this, to speke of goodlyhede,
She passeth al that I can of rede,
For worde and dede, that she naught ne fal,
Acorde in vertue, and her werkes al.

'For though that Dydo with wytte sage
Was in her tyme stedfast to Enee,
Of hastynesse yet she dyd outrage,
And so for Jason dyd also Medee;
But my lady is so avyse
That, bountie and beautie bothe in her demeyne,
She maketh bountie alway soverayne.

'This is to meane, bountie gothe afore,

Lad by prudence, and hath the soveraynté,
And beautie foloweth, ruled by her lore,
That she ne fende her in no degré;
So that, in one, this goodly fresshe fre,
Surmountyng al, withouten any were,
Is good and fayre in one persone yfere.

'And though that I, for very ignoraunce,
Ne may discryve her vertues by and by,
Yet on this day, for a remembraunce,
Onely supported under her mercy,
With quakyng honde, I shal ful humbly
To her hynesse, my rudenesse forto quyte,
A lytel balade here byneth endyte,

'Ever as I can supprise in myn herte,
Alway with feare, betwyxt drede and shame,
Leste out of lose any worde asterte
In this metre, to make it seme lame;
Chaucer is deed, that had suche a name
Of fayre makyng, that was, without wene,
Fayrest in our tonge, as the laurer grene.

'We may assay forto countrefete
His gay style, but it wyl not be!
The welle is drie with the lycoure swete,
Bothe of Clye and of Caliopé;
And, first of al, I wol excuse me
To her that is grounde of goodlyhede,
And thus I say untyl her womanhede:

Balade Symple

"With al my might and my best entent,
With al the faythe that mighty God of kynde
Me gave syth he me soule and knowyng sent,
I chese, and to this bonde ever I me bynde,
To love you best whyle I have lyfe and mynde.
Thus herde I foules in the daunyng
Upon the day of Saynte Valentyne synge.

"Yet chese I, at the begynnyng, in this entent,

To love you, though I no mercy fynde,
And if you lyste I dyed, I wolde assent,
As ever twynne I quicke out of this lynde;
Suffyseth me to sene your fethers ynde.
Thus herde I foules in the mornynge
Upon the daye of Saynte Valentyne synge.

"And over this, myne hertes luste to bente,
In honour onely of the wodde-bynde,
Holy I geve, never to repente
In joye or wo, where so that I wynde
Tofore Cupyde, with his eyen blynde.
The foules al, whan Tytan dyd springe,
With devoute hert, me thought I herde synge."

Lenvoye

Princesse of beautie, to you I represent
This symple dyté, rude as in makynge,
Of herte and wyl faythful in myn entent,
Lyke as this day foules herde I synge.

Here endeth the Floure of Curtesy.

John Lydgate

The London Lackpenny

To London once my steps I bent,
Where truth in no wise should be faint;
To Westminster-ward I forthwith went,
To a man of Law to make complaint.
I said, 'For Mary's love, that holy saint,
Pity the poor that would proceed!'
But for lack of money, I could not speed.

And, as I thrust the press among,
By froward chance my hood was gone;
Yet for all that I stayed not long
Till to the King's Bench I was come.
Before the Judge I kneeled anon
And prayed him for God's sake take heed.
But for lack of money, I might not speed.

Beneath them sat clerks a great rout,
Which fast did write by one assent;
There stood up one and cried about
'Richard, Robert, and John of Kent!'
I wist not well what this man meant,
He cried so thickly there indeed.
But he that lacked money might not speed.

To the Common Pleas I yode tho,
There sat one with a silken hood:
I 'gan him reverence for to do,
And told my case as well as I could;
How my goods were defrauded me by falsehood;
I got not a mum of his mouth for my meed,
And for lack of money I might not speed.

Unto the Rolls I gat me from thence,
Before the clerks of the Chancery;
Where many I found earning of pence;
But none at all once regarded me.
I gave them my plaint upon my knee;
They liked it well when they had it read;
But, lacking money, I could not be sped.

In Westminster Hall I found out one,
Which went in a long gown of ray;
I crouched and knelt before him; anon,
For Mary's love, for help I him pray.
'I wot not what thou mean'st', 'gan he say;
To get me thence he did me bid,
For lack of money I could not speed.

Within this Hall, neither rich nor yet poor
Would do for me aught although I should die;
Which seing, I gat me out of the door;
Where Flemings began on me for to cry,--
'Master, what will you copen or buy?
Fine felt hats, or spectacles to read?
Lay down your silver, and here you may speed.'

To Westminster Gate I presently went,
When the sun was at high prime;
Cooks to me they took good intent,
And proffered me bread, with ale and wine,
Ribs of beef, both fat and full fine;
A faire cloth they 'gan for to spread,
But, wanting money, I might not then speed.

Then unto London I did me hie,
Of all the land it beareth the prize;
'Hot peascodes!' one began to cry;
'Strawberries ripe!' and 'Cherries in the rise!'
One bade me come near and buy some spice;
Pepper and saffrone they 'gan me bede;
But, for lack of money, I might not speed.

Then to the Cheap I 'gan me drawn,
Where much people I saw for to stand;
One offered me velvet, silk, and lawn;
Another he taketh me by the hand,
'Here is Paris thread, the finest in the land';
I never was used to such things indeed;
And, wanting money, I might not speed.

Then went I forth by London stone,

Throughout all the Canwick Street;
Drapers much cloth me offered anon;
Then comes me one cried, 'Hot sheep's feet!'
One cried, 'Mackarel!' 'Rushes green!' another 'gan greet;
One bade me buy a hood to cover my head;
But for want of money I might not be sped.

Then I hied me into East Cheap:
One cries 'Ribbs of beef and many a pie!'
Pewter pots they clattered on a heap;
There was harpe, pipe, and minstrelsy:
'Yea, by cock!' 'Nay, by cock!' some began cry;
Some sung of 'Jenkin and Julian' for their meed;
But, for lack of money, I might not speed.

Then into Cornhill anon I yode
Where there was much stolen gear among;
I saw where hung my owne hood,
That I had lost among the throng:
To buy my own hood I thought it wrong;
I knew it as well as I did my creed;
But, for lack of money, I could not speed.

The Taverner took me by the sleeve;
'Sir,' saith he, 'will you our wine assay?'
I answered, 'That cannot much me grieve;
A penny can do no more than it may.'
I drank a pint, and for it did pay;
Yet, sore a-hungered from thence I yede;
And, wanting money, I could not speed.

Then hied I me to Billings-gate,
And one cried, 'Ho! go we hence!'
I prayed a bargeman, for God's sake,
That he would spare me my expense.
'Thou 'scap'st not here,' quoth he, 'under twopence;
I list not yet bestow any almsdeed.'
Thus, lacking money, I could not speed.

Then I conveyed me into Kent;
For of the law would I meddle no more.
Because no man to me took intent,

I dight me to do as I did before.
Now Jesus that in Bethlehem was bore,
Save London and send true lawyers their meed!
For whoso wants money with them shall not speed.

John Lydgate

The Testament Of John Lydgate

...

Beholde, o man! lyft up thyn eye and see
What mortall payne I suffre for thi trespace.
With pietous voys I crye and sey to the:
Beholde my woundes, behold my bloody face,
Beholde the rebukes that do me so manace,
Beholde my enemyes that do me so despice,
And how that I, to reforme the to grace,
Was like a lambe offred in sacryfice.

...

And geyn thi pryde behold my gret mekenesse;
Geyn thyn envie behold my charite;
Geyn thi leccherye behold my chast clenness;
Geyn thi covetyse behold my povert;
Atweene too thevys nayl'd to a tree,
Rayled with reed blood, they lyst me so desguise,
Behold, O man! all this I did for the,
Meke as a lambe offred in sacryfice.

Behold my love, and gyf me thyn ageyn;
Behold, I deyde thy raunsom for to paye.
Se howe myn herte is open brode and pleyn,
Thy gostly enemyes onely to affraye.
An hardere batayle no man myght assaye,
Of all tryumphes the grettest hie emprise.
Wher-for, O man! no lenger to dismaye,
I gaf for the my blood in sacryfice.

Turne home ageyn, thy synne do forsake.
Behold and se yf ought be left behynde,
How I to mercy am redy the to take.
Gyf me thyn herte and be no more unkynde;
Thy love and myn, togedyr do hem bynde,
And late hem never departe in any wyse.
Whan thou were lost, thy sowle ageyn to fynde,
My blod I offred for the in sacryfice.

Emprente thes thynges in thyn inward thought,

And grave hem depe in thy remembraunce;
Thynke on hem, and forgete hem nowght.
Al this I suffred to do the allegeaunce,
And with my seyntes to yeve the suffisaunce,
In the hevenly court for the I do devyse
A place eternall, a place of all plesaunce;
For which my blood I gaf in sacryfice.

And more my mercy to putte att a preef,
To every synnere that non ne shal it mysse,
Remembre how I gaf mercy to the theef
Which hadde so longe trespaced and doon amys;
Went he not frely with me to paradise?
Have this in mende, how it is my guyse
All repentaunt to bryng hem to my blysse,
For whom my blood I gaf in sacryfice.

Tarye no lenger toward thyn herytage;
Hast on thy weye and be of ryght good chere.
Go eche day onward on thy pylgrymage;
Thynke howe short tyme thou hast abyden here.
Thy place is bygged above the sterres clere,--
Noon erthly palys wrought in so statly wyse.
Kome on, my frend, my brother most entere!
For the I offered my blood in sacryfice!
Amen.

Explicit testamentum Johanis Lydgate.

John Lydgate

Vox Ultima Crucis

TARYE no lenger; toward thyn heritage
Hast on thy weye, and be of ryght good chere.
Go eche day onward on thy pylgrymage;
Thynke howe short tyme thou hast abyden here.
Thy place is bygged above the sterres clere,
Noon erthly palys wrought in so statly wyse.
Come on, my frend, my brother most entere!
For the I offered my blood in sacryfice.

John Lydgate