

Article

'A Marriage Litigation in the Church Court': Lydgate's Adaptation of Chaucer's Literary Value in *The Temple of Glass*

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Abstract: In this essay, I give an alternative reading of Chaucerian resonances that fill Lydgate's *The Temple of Glass* by analyzing the poem's allusions to the *House of Fame*. I argue that Lydgate, as a poet who was well read in Chaucer and considered as his most prolific imitator, comprehended the experimentations of his 'maister'. Taking into account Meyer-Lee's study on the *House of Fame*, which explores Chaucer's efforts to transform the value of the literary field of late medieval English poetry to better suit his then transitional social position, I assert that by borrowing details of setting, time and place from *House of Fame*, Lydgate implies his use of the framework set up by Chaucer to adopt his alteration of literary value. In doing so, Lydgate emulates Chaucer's idea of the literary as an autonomous discourse, which would fundamentally allow him to write courtly productions even from his rather peculiar position as a monk. An analysis of the relations between Lydgate's poetry and his position as a monk sheds light on his imitation in *The Temple of Glass* of Chaucer's attempt to create a poetry that projected him as an authentic poet in connection with both the literary field of the court and his socioeconomic position.

Keywords: medieval literature; dream visions; marriage litigations; Church court; John Lydgate; Chaucer



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1. Introduction

Scholarship has long maintained that *The Temple of Glass*, though considered among Lydgate's most ambitious poems, nevertheless imitates and draws on Chaucer's works.¹ Yet, due to its numerous Chaucerian allusions, Lydgate's poem has sparked criticism of its superficial imitation of allegory. Thus, it has been claimed that certain ideas and points of analogy between *The Temple of Glass* and Chaucer's works 'illustrate Lydgate's characteristic stripping away of Chaucerian complexity, especially of allegory' (Norton-Smith 1966, p. 177). Indeed, scholars have gone as far as to call Lydgate's work an 'unintelligent imitation of Chaucer' (Spearing 1976, p. 171) in terms of the poem's explicit and implicit references to Chaucer's dream poems. Recollections and other local details of the Chaucerian tradition tend to be overlooked; their significance is undervalued, and they are interpreted as mere depictive details, which Lydgate borrows simply to add to the decorative effect of his poem. A. C. Spearing situates Lydgate in that category of writers who 'imitated only the external forms of [Chaucer's] poems, without responding to their inner spirit' (Spearing 1976, p. 171), as opposed to those writers who, by imitating Chaucer's dream poems and responding to their creative principles, expanded their works in directions that were implicit yet uncompleted in Chaucer's works. Hence, despite more recent scholars' suggestions to acknowledge the value of Lydgate's use of Chaucerian allegory², the preva-

¹ A vast majority of introductions to Lydgate's works and inevitably *The Temple of Glass* repeatedly emphasize Lydgate's borrowings from Chaucer's poems (see, for example, Schick 1891, pp. cxxiii–cxxvi; Norton-Smith 1966, p. 177; Pearsall 1970, pp. 104–7; Spearing 1976, pp. 171–73).

² Larry Scanlon, for instance, asserts that in *The Temple of Glass*, Lydgate uses Griselda, from Chaucer's *The Clerk's Tale*, to rewrite the erotic and ultimately domesticate the poetic. By doing so, Lydgate affirms and attempts to respond to Chaucer's magisterial complexity by extending and preserving it (see Scanlon 2006).

lent observation remains that Lydgate belonged to the category of writers who did not understand what Chaucer was doing in his work.

In an attempt to resist this line of thought, I give an alternative reading of the allegorical elements in *The Temple of Glass* by analyzing the poem's allusions to Chaucer's *House of Fame*. I argue that Lydgate, as a poet who was well read in Chaucer and considered as his most prolific imitator, comprehended the experimentations of his 'maister'. Taking into account Meyer-Lee's study (Meyer-Lee 2014) of the *House of Fame*, which explores Chaucer's efforts to transform the value of the literary field of late medieval English poetry to better suit his then transitional social position, I assert that by borrowing details of setting, time and place from the *House of Fame*, Lydgate implies his use of the framework set up by Chaucer to adopt his alteration of literary value. In doing so, Lydgate emulates Chaucer's idea of the literary as an autonomous discourse, which would fundamentally allow him to write courtly productions even from his rather peculiar position as a monk. As I shall later try to demonstrate, an analysis of the relations between Lydgate's poetry and his day job, so to speak, sheds light on his imitation in *The Temple of Glass* of Chaucer's attempt to create poetry that projected him as an authentic poet in connection with both the literary field of the court and his socioeconomic position.

Although *The Temple of Glass* is filled with traditional allegorical images that appear in many of Chaucer's works, I suggest that we give particular importance to Lydgate's borrowings from the *House of Fame*. As much as certain ideas that remind us of Chaucer's other compositions³ may be considered as insignificant details used simply for their decorative effect⁴, borrowings of time and place from the *House of Fame* form the setting of *The Temple of Glass* in its entirety. Firstly, the title of Lydgate's poem is presumed to have been borrowed from the *House of Fame*⁵, 'a temple ymad of glas' (120) (Schick 1891, p. cxx). This same temple, which is also a Temple of Venus, constitutes the place where Lydgate sets his vision (Scanlon 2006, p. 72). Moreover, *The Temple of Glass* is set, just like the *House of Fame*, in mid-December, 'Of Decembre the tenthe day / Whan hit was night, to slepe I lay' (111–12) (Norton-Smith 1966, p. 180). Finally, while scholars have alluded that the most obvious reason Lydgate puts the events into a dream at all is simply because Chaucer had done so (Spearing 1976, p. 175), I argue that Lydgate's use of the dream vision is explicitly because Chaucer had done so in the *House of Fame*. From the outset of the poem, all these details are intended to associate the poem with Chaucer's *House of Fame*. As we will later see, by tracing the analogies between the two poems' allusions to the poet's nonliterary labor, it will become clear that this association registers Lydgate's attempt to emulate Chaucer's experimentation with literary value.

2. Chaucer's Transformation of Literary Value

In his article on the 'axiological logic' of the *House of Fame*, Robert J. Meyer-Lee identifies the circumstances that influenced Chaucer's way of addressing the issue of poetry by locating the author and his poem in their socioeconomic situations (Meyer-Lee 2014, p. 377). Seeking to understand the relations of literary values between poetry and the poet's position of employment, he explores the change in the perception of literary value from the viewpoint of the literary field of the English court of the 1370s and 1380s and that of Chaucer in his movement from the court to the customs house. Chaucer's appointment as controller of the wool customs placed him in a predicament. In his new position, he lacked institutionally approved authority with regard to literary composition for the literary field of the court. Thus, he would be unable to continue writing English dits amoureux, works like the *Book of the Duchess*, which were the standard for this field. Continuing to create these kinds of productions would not raise Chaucer's social position; instead, it would 'call attention to the mismatch between it and the normative authorial position he had lost'

³ On the influence of Chaucer's particular works on *The Temple of Glass* (see Schick 1891, pp. cxxiii–cxxvi; Scanlon 2006, p. 71).

⁴ For such viewpoints, see, for instance, (Pearsall 1970, pp. 106–7; Spearing 1976, pp. 172–75).

⁵ All further citations and line numbers from the *House of Fame* are to *The Riverside Chaucer*, edited by Benson (1986).

(Meyer-Lee 2014, p. 384) and consequently make his movement out of the court appear as a demotion. On the other hand, in his new clerical position, Chaucer would have to write productions with didactic and spiritual compositions, instead of expressive and erotic ones, which would bear resemblance to Latin rather than French models. Yet, producing such works would increase the social separation between Chaucer's old and new positions, and he would risk appearing as though he was effectively announcing his withdrawal from the literary field of the court. Therefore, Chaucer needed a poetry that articulated a literary value, simultaneously recognizable and unique, a poetry that portrayed him as 'an authentic literary producer with respect to both the literary field of the court and the traditionally clerical civil service' (Meyer-Lee 2014, p. 385).

To this end, Chaucer creates the *House of Fame*, a poem that embodies qualities of romance, epic, and sacred vision, and yet does not actually participate in these genres; rather, it observes and takes into account the dependencies and distinctions of their kinds of literary value (Meyer-Lee 2014, p. 391). More importantly, this is the only poem that registers Chaucer's implicit and explicit references to his nonliterary labor. Meyer-Lee correlates the 'tidings/fame complex' with Chaucer's work environment in the customs house. The customs house served as a central site where raw materials (wool) come together from many directions. They then are given a distinct quantity (packed and put on the scales, on the ground floor), a distinct value (taxed on the upper floor) and subsequently are moved outward, in many directions, ultimately to become cloth. Similarly, the 'tidings/fame complex' is the central point where raw materials (sound) come together from many directions. They are given a distinct quantity (incorporated in the House of Tidings), a distinct value (the 'disposicioun' and 'duracioun' presented in the House of Fame) and subsequently are moved outward, in many directions, ultimately to become (among others) poetic productions (Meyer-Lee 2014, p. 390). Another significant element is the way in which Chaucer depicts his narrator at the tidings/fame complex, not as a maker or bearer of fame but 'rather [as] an observer of the process of its creation, valuation, and dissemination' (Meyer-Lee 2014, p. 391). Yet, being the author of the poem, he enables the success of this process. Here again, there are points of analogy with Chaucer's day job at the customs house for, as controller, he was an observer, 'not an integral part of the process but nonetheless essential to its success' (Meyer-Lee 2014, p. 391).

Through these parallels, Meyer-Lee asserts that 'the poem and the poet become central to English literature through their marginal positions in the literary field of the court and in the field of clerical writing' (Meyer-Lee 2014, p. 391). Hence, in his position as a poet, Chaucer, in a similar way to his narrator Geoffrey, is neither situated fully inside nor fully outside the court. Instead, 'he moves among and around all positions, describing and accounting for their structure and value' (Meyer-Lee 2014, p. 391). The socioeconomic framework that these parallels create combines with the poem's self-referential content to form the 'axiological logic' of the *House of Fame*. Literary and socioeconomic metavalues blend and affirm each other and, therefore, the poem and Chaucer's socioeconomic position in the customs house become mutually recognized. The poem 'registers the implication that the literary field of the court has a place for a controller of customs, thereby elevating the social status of the controller' (Meyer-Lee 2014, p. 393). With the *House of Fame*, Chaucer thus attempted to reshape what the literary field of the court acknowledged as literary value to better suit his new social position.

3. Lydgate's Professional Predicament

In order to understand what Lydgate had to gain from emulating Chaucer's experimentation, it is necessary to locate him and *The Temple of Glass* in their socioeconomic circumstances. Scholars, with few exceptions⁶, maintain that Lydgate's *The Temple of Glass*

⁶ Julia Boffey, for example, suggests that the poem may have been written in Lydgate's middle years since this was the period when he was most active writing for secular patrons (see Boffey 2003, p. 16).

was composed early in his writing career⁷. Joseph Schick attempts to give a precise date for the poem by interpreting its astronomical statement about the time of the dream at the opening of the poem. He concludes that the most probable date for the composition of *The Temple of Glass* could be that of 24 December, 1403 (Schick 1891, p. cxiv). Although critics have opposed an astronomical interpretation of the opening setting⁸, Schick's dating of *The Temple of Glass* has nevertheless been influential to scholars⁹, and if anything, has reinforced the observation that the poem is one of Lydgate's earliest works. In this regard, while I disagree with Schick's literal interpretation of Lydgate's astronomical statement, for, as mentioned earlier in this essay, '[t]he December setting is intended to associate this poem with Chaucer's *House of Fame*' (Norton-Smith 1966, p. 180), I nevertheless follow the hypotheses that the poem was written in Lydgate's early period, probably as early as 1403.

We have considerable evidence for Lydgate's later literary career and socioeconomic circumstances from approximately 1412 to 1440, during which time he wrote his major works and 'was closely connected with the royal court and a number of important English families' (Ebin 1985, p. 2). For the early years of the century, however, we have less evidence. He entered the monastery at Bury St. Edmunds sometime in 1385 and was ordained a priest in 1397 (Pearsall 1970, p. 23). Shortly after, Lydgate began his literary career in approximately 1400, when he wrote his early poems, which have been characterized as Chaucerian imitations: *The Complaint of the Black Knight*, *The Flour of Curtesie* (1400–1402?) and *The Temple of Glass* (1403?) (Ebin 1985, p. 2). Another record, in the form of a letter addressed to the Abbot of Bury from the Prince of Wales, later Henry V, serves as evidence that Lydgate was a student at Oxford, probably Gloucester College, between 1406 and 1408 (Pearsall 1970, p. 23). Apart from these, unfortunately, we have no further records of Lydgate's activities during the early 1400s.

Yet, if we are to take into consideration the limited critical discourse that constructs a chronology of Lydgate's early years, it appears that, instead of the official poet and rhetorician who would be commissioned to write for various occasions, at the time when he was composing *The Temple of Glass*, Lydgate was simply a priest-monk of Bury St. Edmunds who was well read in Chaucer. At this stage of his career, Lydgate, in all likelihood, did not yet have the powerful connections that he did later, and he was still far from writing for prominent secular patrons¹⁰. Indeed, even scholarly attempts to follow Shirley's statement that *The Temple of Glass* was written 'a la request dun amoureux' and read the poem as being commissioned by contemporary families¹¹ do not prove very convincing¹². Moreover, during this early period of his literary career, Lydgate's life must have been relatively limited to the cloister. While monastic life gave him physical freedom, it was only during his studies at Oxford and in the 1420s that Lydgate made good use of it. Even during these long absences from Bury, 'his life, however much we may stress its "normality", [. . .] was still remote from that of, say, Hoccleve' (Pearsall 1970, p. 31). If at the peak of his literary career, he was still often referred to as 'the monk' or 'the monk of Bury' by his contemporaries, 'as if to them too it were worthy of remark that a monk should have gained acceptance as a professional man of letters' (Pearsall 1970, p. 31), then it is only logical to assume that, at the beginning of the century, monastic life for Lydgate was still, to a greater extent, a career of spiritual dedication, rather than literary production.

⁷ See, for instance, (Pearsall 1970, pp. 83–84; Schick 1891, pp. cxiii–cxv).

⁸ Norton-Smith asserts that the astronomical statement at the opening of the poem must not be interpreted scientifically (see Norton-Smith 1966, p. 180). In addition, Schick himself notes the possibility that Lydgate did not intend for this statement to be understood as the precise date of the poem (see Schick 1891, p. cxiv).

⁹ In her chronology of Lydgate's literary career, Lois A. Ebin seems to follow Schick's hypothesis in dating the poem in ca. 1403 (see Ebin 1985, p. 29).

¹⁰ While most of the half-dozen short love-poems written possibly between 1400 and 1412 may have been written to order, they constitute a diminutive part of Lydgate's literary productions in the form of occasional pieces, and the patrons they were written for held insignificant roles in the court. According to Shirley, *Ballade of her that hath all the Virtues* was written for a servant 'squyer' (see Pearsall 1970, p. 103).

¹¹ Boffey mentions some of the historical figures that have been associated with the poem's lovers (Boffey 2003, p. 16).

¹² Boffey maintains that the lady's situation and the implied obstacles to the desired union with her lover, in the form of an existing partner, make it difficult to interpret *The Temple of Glass* as a poem commissioned to celebrate a love relationship or a marriage (see Boffey 2003, p.16).

Judging from his subsequent literary career, Lydgate was nevertheless reasonably ambitious for his work. This was partly because of his early exposure to the influence of Chaucer; 'It is Chaucer who introduces the element of the unexpected into Lydgate, who raises his ambitions and extends his horizons and leads him out to and beyond the frontiers of his ability' (Pearsall 1970, p. 43). Lydgate's aim was to earn himself a place in the literary field of the court, and although his socioeconomic position as a monk did not debar him from the literary world, it must have nevertheless added to his professional predicament. For, conventionally, all of Lydgate's monastic contemporaries would write 'in Latin, in entirely traditional fields of commentary and chronicle' (Pearsall 1970, pp. 43–44). Thus, Lydgate too might have been expected to produce works, such as the encyclopedic compilations of John Whethamstede, 'in which classical history and mythology are ransacked for edifying exempla of Christian truth' (Pearsall 1970, p. 44).

Here, therefore, much like Chaucer when appointed as controller of wool in the customs house, Lydgate must have found himself in a dilemma. If Lydgate (after having experimented with the genre in his earlier Chaucerian imitations) were to attempt to contribute to the literary field of the court, writing courtly poems with expressive and erotic frameworks, this would risk making him appear as a 'poser'. The position of the monk lacked institutionally bestowed authority in regard to literary composition for this field. In fact, if anything, Lydgate would be jeopardizing his then present socioeconomic position. Indeed, only the assumptions that his early works were written to order provide us with 'something to appease our sense of the preposterousness of a monk writing love-poems' (Pearsall 1970, p. 44). On the other hand, if Lydgate kept the tradition of the cloister and produced works like his monastic contemporaries in Latin and conventional fields of commentary and chronicle, thus maintaining the monastic habit of pillaging antiquity to construct moral exempla of Christian truth, this would not help to reduce the social distinction between his position as a monk and the royal court; 'Lydgate might have been a Whethamstede' (Pearsall 1970, p. 40). Hence, Lydgate needed a poetry that, by fusing the fields of the court and monastic life, articulated a literary value simultaneously recognizable and unique; a poetry that, in a similar way to Chaucer, projected him as an authentic poet in connection with both the literary field of the court and his socioeconomic position. It is under these socioeconomic circumstances that Lydgate finds the *House of Fame* useful for its intervention into the literary field of the court. Undertaking an emulation of its transformation of literary value in *The Temple of Glass* would present the implication that (besides the controller of customs) the literary field of the court has a place for a monk as well.

4. The Church Court and Marriage Litigations

Such an emulation agrees very well with the substantial number of references from the *House of Fame*, which, as already mentioned earlier in this essay, are intended to associate *The Temple of Glass* with its precursor. From the outset of his poem, Lydgate implies his undertaking by constructing a setting for *The Temple of Glass*, which incorporates borrowings not only of time and place but also of famous traditional figures. Thus, along with the poem's title, location of events, use of the dream vision and its time, Lydgate additionally evokes from the *House of Fame* the image of Dido, 'a favourite exemplary figure' (Norton-Smith 1966, p. 177), accompanied by other famous lovers. Much has been said about the order in which the narrator describes the lovers, painted on the walls of the temple (44). It has been suggested that Lydgate arranges the lovers according to their age (Schick 1891, p. 72). Another argument has been that the lovers have been painted as if they were at the prime of their life and arranged in order, according to the degree of their fidelity (Norton-Smith 1966, p. 181). There have also been scholars who have minimized the importance of the broad catalog of lovers, relating Lydgate's compulsive accumulation with the traditional medieval passion for a kind of encyclopedism (Pearsall 1970, p. 40). While these hypotheses may bear some truth in them, I propose to avoid a reading of the order of the lovers painted on the walls of the temple as meaningful. Yet, while I agree that

Lydgate did share a medieval passion for a certain kind of encyclopedism, I suggest that his excessive expansion of the catalog of lovers in *The Temple of Glass* is nonetheless deliberate. The meaningfulness of the catalog lies in the excessive number of lovers enrolled in it, not in their order.

In the *House of Fame*, Chaucer's narrator Geoffrey finds himself in a temple of glass (120), where he notices a brass tablet (142), recounting the *Aeneid*. Here, he spends the longest part of Book One deliberating on the Dido story, which 'falls in line, in several ways, with the long tradition of romance adaptations of the *Aeneid*' (Meyer-Lee 2014, p. 385). The narrator afterward mentions a few examples of the stories of wronged women¹³ to then move out of the temple. According to Meyer-Lee, by starting with the Dido story, Chaucer raises the concern of love to then present the conflict between love and fame, which becomes apparent in Lady Fame's court in the third book (Meyer-Lee 2014, pp. 385–86). This conflict constitutes Chaucer's attempt to position the *House of Fame* between romance, epic and sacred vision (Meyer-Lee 2014, p. 391). On the other hand, in *The Temple of Glass*, Lydgate's narrator, like Chaucer's narrator, enters a temple of glass (16), where he sees a wall-painting depicting lovers (44). His description, likewise, starts with the figure of Dido but then expands with a long catalog of lovers (42–142), and during the entire poem, the narrator remains situated in the same temple. Therefore, in light of Meyer-Lee's argument, if Chaucer produced with the *House of Fame* a poem that embodies qualities of romance, epic, and sacred vision, I suggest that Lydgate, by excessively expanding the catalog of lovers that follow Dido and maintaining the same setting of the temple of glass, is implying that his emulation of the *House of Fame* partakes exclusively of romance. This also falls in line with Lydgate's interest in love-complaints in his early period.

More importantly, while this catalog of famous lovers has been considered as a commonplace of the courtly complaint genre, 'occur[ring] in many poems of Chaucer and his school' (Schick 1891, p. 72), I argue that in *The Temple of Glass* it marks the starting point of Lydgate's allusion to his nonliterary labor. Apart from the famous lovers depicted in the wall-paintings, Lydgate adds to the catalog thousands of unnamed lovers who are situated within the temple (143–246). Mostly 'depicted as petitioners with formal documents, *billes* and *compleyntes*, to present to Venus as if in a court hearing of some kind' (Boffey 2003, p. 27), these lovers complain about many frustrations of love. Absence, disdain, poverty and falsehood anticipate the general problem raised in the poem: a loveless, forced marriage (Pearsall 1970, pp. 104–5). Following Chaucer, who references his nonliterary day job as a customs controller, by constructing the tidings/fame complex, Lydgate alludes to his nonliterary labor by 'tak[ing] as its "story" a literal human situation' (Pearsall 1970, p. 107) and locating it in a court hearing. He, thus, constructs a set of events that constitute an important aspect of his working environment; one that granted him a perspective on the complex issue of love: a marriage litigation in the Church court.

From the late thirteenth century, in England existed a large number of courts of ecclesiastical jurisdiction, which just as throughout western Christendom, were a normal and omnipresent part of English life. These courts were part of an extensive, ordered system, which comprised the archdeacon, the bishop, the archbishop and even the pope, each 'having a recognised sphere of authority and appellate jurisdiction' (Helmholz 1974, p. 1). Each of the archbishops, who presided over the two provinces of England, York and Canterbury, had his provincial court of courts, which exercised jurisdiction over the entire province (Briggs et al. 1996, p. 33). Each province comprised dioceses, which were presided over by a bishop. The bishop of every diocese had a consistory court, headed by a judge, who was known as his official, along with a court of audience that had 'concurrent, and occasionally appellate, jurisdiction' (Helmholz 1974, p. 1). Below the bishop, each archdeacon held his archdeacon's court, and in turn below the archdeacon, many subordinate clerics, such as rural deans, monastic houses and cathedral canons, all

¹³ Chaucer adds to Dido's complaint a short catalog of seven other classical betrayals: Phyllis by Demophon, Briseida by Achilles, Oenone by Paris, Isiphile and Medea by Jason, Hercules by Deianira and Ariadne by Theseus (397–426).

had courts of varying authority. Appeals from the lower courts went to superior courts, to the bishop's court, to the archbishop's court, and from there, they could go to the Papal court (Helmholz 1974, p. 1). Among the many jurisdictions that the Church courts had, such as dealing with the proving of wills, disputes between parties and other disciplinary matters¹⁴, one of the most important parts of the law that they administered 'dealt with the matrimonial disputes of the laity' (Helmholz 1974, p. 1). The Church courts had exclusive competence in everything related to marriage¹⁵, including proving and enforcing marriage contracts, annulling invalid marriages and punishing adultery.

Within the territory of the dioceses, there were also some parishes, which lay outside the direct control of the bishop and archdeacon. Among these exempt jurisdictions, which were known as peculiars (Briggs et al. 1996, p. 33), was Bury St. Edmunds. The first confirmation of the absolute exemption of the town and the convent from the episcopal jurisdiction of the diocesan was obtained in 1071 by abbot Baldwin from Pope Alexander (Yates 1843, p. 89). Since then, although many zealous diocesans, aware of the wealth and prosperity of the monastery, had tried to place the seat of episcopal authority in Bury¹⁶, the monks of St. Edmunds managed to obtain, from every succeeding monarch, grants or charters confirming the liberties and privileges granted to the abbey and convent. In addition, they obtained, from almost every pope, a similar repetition of Papal bulls that sanctioned and confirmed Bury St. Edmund's ecclesiastical exemption (Yates 1843, p. 95). The only rites performed by various bishops were 'the consecration of altars, churches, tables [and] the ordination of monks, and other episcopal duties' (Yates 1843, p. 89). This justifies Lydgate's ordination as a priest by John Fordham, Bishop of Ely (Pearsall 1970, p. 23). Apart from these rites, however, the abbey of St. Edmunds remained exempted from episcopal visitation and the usual designation of subordination and submission.

During Lydgate's lifetime, the town of Bury was exclusively within the abbey's jurisdiction, and the abbot exercised full authority not only over the franchise but also over the laity. Thus, apart from its power over 'gates and tolls, and over appointment of towns' (Pearsall 1970, p. 24), the abbey had the power of trying causes that arose 'in the town, and one mile round it' (Yates 1843, p. 92). That Bury St. Edmunds had its own court of justice is evident from the accounts of Thomas Arnold in his *Memorials of St. Edmunds Abbey*, where he claims that within the premises of the cellarer was also a court of justice (Arnold 1967, p. lxi). Here, 'he solemnly held his court for the trial of robbers and all pleas (*placitis*) and complaints' (Yates 1843, p. 189). Whether the cellarer had the authority or whether this particular court was used to try marriage litigations is not documented. However, it seems safe to assume that, in a time when the abbot of St. Edmunds enjoyed the power and authority of bishops (Yates 1843, p. 87), of the magistrate and of inflicting capital punishment and exercised absolute jurisdiction over all the trials that arose in Bury (Yates 1843, p. 92), the people who lived there went before the court of the abbey for their marriage litigations. In addition, it is probable that Lydgate's position as a priest-monk granted him access to such trials, even if simply as part of the court of audience. As we will see, the thoroughness of the depiction of the complainants in the temple in different and specific marital disputes will shed light on Lydgate's knowledge of canon law. This would in part reinforce the idea that Lydgate went on to study canon law at Oxford in 1406¹⁷.

It is in this regard that I suggest we interpret the catalog of lovers in *The Temple of Glass* as litigants in the Church court. From the outset of the poem, Lydgate depicts the lovers as petitioners holding formal documents:

Right as me thought I sawe some sit and stande,

¹⁴ For a brief introduction of the Ecclesiastical courts' three basic jurisdictions, see (Briggs et al. 1996, pp. 33–34).

¹⁵ The only exceptions here were questions of inheritance and settlement of property (see Helmholz 1974, p. 2).

¹⁶ Richard Yates gives accounts of the many bishops who tried to put Bury St. Edmunds within their sphere of ecclesiastical authority (see Yates 1843, pp. 97, 100, 104, 107, 112, 114).

¹⁷ A hint that Lydgate may have studied canon law at Oxford is given in a letter from the Prince of Wales, later Henry V, addressed to the abbot of Bury (see Pearsall 1970, pp. 29–30).

And some kneling with billes in hir hande,
 And some with compleyntes woful and pytous,
 With deolful cher to putten to Venus,
 So as she sat fleting in the see,
 Upon theyre wo for to have pite. (49–54)

What Lydgate refers to as ‘billes’ and ‘compleyntes’ bring to mind a particular document from the procedure of marriage litigation: *the libel*. The libel, as described by canonist Guillelmus Durantis, was a small sheet that contained the plaintiff’s petition, its cause and action¹⁸. Among the first documents introduced to the court, ‘the libel gave, in general terms, the allegations on which the suit was based’ (Helmholz 1974, p. 13), and it ended with an appeal for a specific order by the court. Similarly, the lovers who are situated within the temple of glass are addressing Venus, holding sheets, presenting their petitions, with requests for a particular order.

This interpretation would explain the reason why Lydgate adds to his catalog of lovers a group of ladies, whose complaints of having been forced to marry for wealth or as children express ‘a bitterness which is rare in the genre’ (Pearsall 1970, p. 104). Such complaints were common cases in marriage litigations. Thus, Lydgate’s lines on the petitioners lamenting marriage for wealth,

And other eke compleyned on Rychese:
 Howe he with tresour dothe his besynesse
 To wynnen al, ageyns kynde and right,
 Wher truwe lovers have no forse ne might. (175–178)

depict cases of marriage litigation, which were known as the impediment of *force and fear*. Under medieval canon law, if a marriage was contracted under force and fear, it could be subsequently dissolved (Helmholz 1974, p. 90). In the records of divorce cases or used as a defense in suits to enforce marriage contracts, we find, among other claims (such as the use of physical violence), evidence that parents often used threats to make their unwilling children agree to a particular match. It is, therefore, easy to imagine parents favoring a rich match for their children. Such cases often include threats of leaving reluctant sons and daughters out of a will (Helmholz 1974, p. 92).

Another important fragment of marriage litigation is represented by the group of ladies who are married as children:

And other next I saw ether in gret rage
 That they were maryede in hir tendre age,
 Withouten fredam of eleccyoun,
 Wher love hathe seelde domynacioun:
 For love at large and at libertee
 Wolde frely and not with such trettee. (209–214)

These kinds of complaints bear significant resemblance to particular cases appearing in the court records, against marriages, known as *infra annos nubiles*. Marriages in the Middle Ages were often contracted by children or from parents for their children. Under canon law, marriages contracted by a child below the age of seven were invalid. If marriages were contracted between the age of seven and puberty, they were not void, but ‘had rather a suspended quality’ (Helmholz 1974, p. 98). Upon reaching the age of puberty, which was fixed at fourteen for boys and twelve for girls, the child had the right to either give formal consent to the contract or reclaim against it. Reclamation against marriage contracts had to be made before the Church court (Helmholz 1974, pp. 98–99).

¹⁸ Helmholz quotes the thirteenth-century canonist to construct a definition of libel (see Helmholz 1974, p. 13).

In addition, there are other groups of complainants in the temple, who, portrayed explicitly as married petitioners or referred to simply as lovers, are depicted in manners that call to mind other kinds of marriage litigations. For instance, when Lydgate describes the complaints of young lovers, bemoaning their unions with men of old age,

And some ther were, as maydyns yonge of age,
That pleynd sore with weping and with rage
That thei wer compelled, ageyns al nature,
With croke eelde that mai not longe endure
For to perfourne the lust of loves pley. (179–183)

I suggest we pay close attention to the specifics of these complaints. According to Boffey, in lines (182–183), the lovers lament having '[t]o carry out the pleasure of the game of love with bent and short-lived old age' (Boffey 2003, p. 34). I would propose a different interpretation of these lines. It may well be that, instead of 'live', the verb 'endure' means 'bear' (as in endure difficulty)¹⁹, and instead of 'game of love', the phrase 'loves pley' may have the meaning 'act of sexual love'²⁰, so that in these two lines, the complainants protest against their marriages with men of old age, who may not bear to carry out the pleasure of sexual intercourse. Therefore, these complaints are similar to claims in marriage litigations to secure a divorce because of the impediment of *impotence*. Although under canon law, a marriage was made valid by consent and not by sexual intercourse, a union that either of the parties was incapable of consummating could be dissolved. In these cases, litigants could go before the Church court and state their spouse's inability to satisfy their desire to have a child. Consequently, they asserted that the marriage could not stand and asked for a divorce for impotence (Helmholz 1974, pp. 87–89).

Furthermore, an instance of marriage litigation is eloquently illustrated in the complaints of lovers who had endured bloody wounds in distant regions, whilst another possessed their lady:

And some there were, as hit is offt efound,
That for hir lady haden meny a wounde
Endured, and in many regyoun,
Whyles that another hath possessyoun
Al of his ladi, and berethe away the fruyt
Of his labour and of al his suyt. (169–174)

These cases, known in medieval canonical practice as *subtraction uxoris*, were similar to what in modern legal action is called alienation of affections. It was possible to sue someone who had abducted or took part in the 'diversion' of one's spouse, and although most such claims were made in the royal courts, there is evidence that the Church courts dealt with similar cases (Helmholz 1974, pp. 109–10). Such situations could be similarly solved in suits to dissolve a marriage for a pre-existing contract. These cases, involving precontract, were brought before the Church court in the form of a multiparty *causa matrimonialis et divorcii* (Helmholz 1974, p. 76). In multiparty litigations, a plaintiff could break up a newer union by alleging a pre-existing contract and enforcing his own marital rights. Under medieval canon law, 'a prior marriage always prevailed over a later one' (Helmholz 1974, p. 57).

Other groups of lovers in the temple may additionally bring to mind instances of marriage litigations before the Church court, an example being the way in which the

¹⁹ In the Middle English Dictionary, the third definition of the verb *endure* is 'to bear up under or stand (danger, pain, hardship, emotional stress)'. Middle English Dictionary. n.d.a. Enduren. Available online: https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/middle-english-dictionary/dictionary/MED13728/track?counter=1&search_id=4210822 (accessed on 6 September 2020).

²⁰ In the Middle English Dictionary, the fifth definition of the noun *plei* is '[s]exual play, sexual intercourse; an act of sexual intercourse'. Among the examples given, we have 'the plei of love, pleie's of paramoures, act's of sexual love'. Middle English Dictionary. n.d.b. Plei. Available online: https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/middle-english-dictionary/dictionary/MED33653/track?counter=1&search_id=4210822 (accessed on 6 September 2020).

depiction of faithful lovers, complaining of being hindered by false and ‘double lovers that loven thinges newe’ (167), bears resemblance to the general outcry against adultery, a crime ‘within the exclusive competence of the Church’ (Helmholz 1974, p. 2). Yet, the one element that distinguishes Lydgate’s list of petitioners from those of other courtly complaints is the presence of a group of ladies in the temple of glass who complain of having been dedicated to monastic life too young (196–208). Scholars have encountered difficulty in explaining why this group of complainants is situated in the temple, and ‘the lines have often been taken to be personal on Lydgate’s part, a belated *cri de coeur* for what he has missed’ (Pearsall 1970, p. 104). The presence of this group in the temple is quite in accordance with the argument that the catalog of lovers in *The Temple of Glass* represents litigants in the Church court. As stated earlier in the essay, while marriage litigations constituted a significant part of the law administered in the Church courts, another important function of these tribunals was the trying of disciplinary matters that arose within the convent. To this end, I suggest we interpret the petitioners’ complaints against their dedication to the cloister when too young to know love as a depiction of the everlasting struggle against the breaking of the vows of celibacy. Although there is to my knowledge no evidence of trials against violation of chastity in St. Edmunds Bury, the increasing numbers during this period of both male and female communities, which struggled to maintain the strict monastic standards of the past and ‘experienced increasing accusations of sexual misconduct’ (Knudsen 2012, p. 77), prompt the supposition that Lydgate may have witnessed such proceedings in the abbey’s court of justice. If sexual misconduct were tried at the court of Bury St. Edmunds, these would have involved suits against monks, not nuns. Yet, Lydgate deliberately avoids depicting the lamenters as monks since ‘that might have appeared too personal’ (Pearsall 2001, p. 19).

In view of all these groups of complainants, accurately depicted as petitioners in suits before the Church court, it is correspondingly feasible to interpret in a similar manner the complaint of the lady and the subsequent verdict given by Venus as procedural practices in a marriage litigation. Although scholars have recently questioned whether the lady is married²¹, the general observation has remained that the circumstances used to describe the situation make it difficult to imagine otherwise²². Therefore, in her complaint to Venus of ‘being bound to one she does not love’ (Pearsall 1970, p. 105), the lady is most likely referring to a forced, loveless marriage. Much like in the procedures of marriage litigations before the Church court, the lady presents her libel, ‘in hir hande she had a lytel bille’ (317), containing her petition against a forced marriage²³, ‘I am bounde to thing that I nold;/Freli to chese there lak I liberte’ (335–336). In manuscripts G and S, the lady’s complaint includes duress, such as wicked tongues and their cruelty, ‘Goodly to sen and shapen remedye/Of wikked tunge, and of the crueltee’ (336–337), and jealousy, ‘I pleyne also upon jalousye,/The wylde serpent, the snake tortuous’ (342–343). Giving the allegations that she is oppressed with torment, ‘Thus ever in tourment and yre furyous/We ben oppressed (allas that harde stounde!)’ (356–357), she also laments being a victim of curses, ‘But hem waryen—wymmen ben ful sore’ (355). In the manuscript T (and implicitly in G and S), the lady also claims that she is in love with someone with whom she cannot be, ‘I have no space with him forto be’ (366). Subsequently, the lady’s complaint ends with a request for a specific order²⁴, ‘O ladi Venus, consider nov & se/Vnto the effecte and complaint of my bil’ (367–368). Under canon law and in common practices of the Church court, the lady’s situation, being forced into marriage, oppressed with torment and a sufferer of curses, wicked tongues and jealousy, would be tried as a case of a divorce

²¹ Scanlon questions the lady’s marital status, suggesting that line (336) applies more closely to an unmarried woman. He maintains that the lady is seeking a marriage, which Venus eventually promises (see Scanlon 2006, p. 87).

²² This point of view is shared by (Pearsall 1970, p. 105; Norton-Smith 1966, p. 183).

²³ Although this allegation is implicit also in manuscripts G and S, my quotation is from T.

²⁴ In G and S, this request comes at the beginning of the lady’s complaint: ‘So that my bille your grace may atteyne/Redresse to fynde of that I nowe compleyne’ (333–334).

because of *force and fear*. As partly shown in this essay, a marriage that was contracted under coercion could be dissolved. Hence, it would seem appropriate for the lady to receive a just trial and a separation from her current spouse.

Yet, in the Middle Ages, not every argument or threat brought before the Church court was enough to warrant a successful divorce, and while such cases were influenced by many factors, they were very often at the discretion of the judge (Helmholz 1974, p. 94). Generally, in marriage litigations, '[t]he judges attempted to restore marital harmony if it was possible [and] to make the best settlement if it was not' (Helmholz 1974, p. 111). Thus, even with the presence in this case of another lover, which makes explicit the lady's resentment of her current union, Venus does not grant a separation. Instead, the goddess asks for patience and time, 'And thenkith this: withinne a litell while/Hit schal aswage and ovepassen sone' (384–385), and although she promises to unite the lady with her lover, 'ye schulle have fulle possession/Of hym that ye cherisshe nowe so wele' (420–421), and eventually fulfills this promise, 'Eternally be bounde of assuraunce/The knott is knitte which may not been unbounde' (1249–1250), her request remains that the lovers be subjected to delay in order to prove themselves. Just as gold is refined by fire, so the lovers will be purified by delay,

And thenk in fyre howe men ben wont to fyne

This pured golde to put hit at assaye:

So the to preve thou art put in delaye. (1211–1213)

and when time comes, their endurance will be paid with their life's joy,

But tyme shal come thou shalt for thi suffraunce

Be wel apayed and thanked for thy meede,

Thy lyves joye and al thy sufficeaunce, (1214–1216)

for, when love is bought with woe, it will be more, 'Shal love be more sith hit is bought with wo,' (1276).

Scholars have been bewildered by the supposition that Venus' promise to the lady 'is in effect that her lawful husband will be disposed of, presumably by death, so that she can marry someone else' (Spearing 1976, p. 176). This in part because conventionally in the Middle Ages, the Church strictly enforced and defended marriage. However, records from Church courts show that, during these years, another concern for canonists was adultery. The Church felt revulsion toward people who lived in adultery with others and subsequently went on to marry them after the death of their first spouse (Helmholz 1974, p. 94). Under canon law, it was forbidden to contract a marriage after the death of the first spouse if the offenders had known of the existing marriage, had sworn promise of marriage during the first spouse's life and had committed adultery; 'Only if all three elements were present were the two adulterers disqualified from contracting after [the first spouse's] death' (Helmholz 1974, p. 94). In this regard, the lover is aware of the lady's existing marriage²⁵, and, with Venus' blessing, the couple swear promises of marriage in spite of the fact that the lady's husband is still alive. Yet, under the law of the Church, their union is still legally permitted as long as they do not commit adultery. Therefore, Venus' call for patience and time, promising that the lovers' endurance will be paid with joy, is in effect a call against sexual intercourse. Thus, from a legal perspective, we can determine that the sentence of this case is as follows: Venus does not grant a divorce; nevertheless, she holds in favor of contracting a marriage between the two lovers after the death of the first husband, provided that they refrain from sexual relation. This elucidates the ballade dedicated to Venus, celebrating the way in which she has 'withouten sinne/This man fortun'd his lady for to wyne' (1366–1367). This reading of the context and imagery used to represent the lovers in the temple, as petitioners before the Church court and the lady's situation as a

²⁵ An existing marriage is implied by Venus in lines (882–895): she advises the lover not to be hasty and to bide his time, for the lady's love shall be grounded in honesty and she shall never outstep the bounds of womanhood. Furthermore, the lady also seems to imply this in lines (1085–1091): she cannot grant more than Venus will allow, for she is bound to what the goddess ordains.

marriage litigation, sheds light on Lydgate's implicit references to his nonliterary position as a monk.

Moreover, an important aspect that corroborates Lydgate's emulation of Chaucer's allusions to his nonliterary socioeconomic position is the way in which Lydgate depicts his narrator in *The Temple of Glass* not as a petitioner, nor as a judge, but as an observer of the lawsuits brought before Venus. Yet, as author of the poem, he is nevertheless the individual who gives an account of the sufferings of the lovers. Here, therefore, we find other points of analogy with Lydgate's nonliterary occupation as a monk. In a similar way, Lydgate, moving '[w]ithinne the estyrs' (569) of Bury St. Edmunds abbey, observes marriage litigations brought before the abbey's court, and even from his peculiar position as a monk, he is capable of recounting all the frustrations of love. At the same time, he praises Venus (the Church court) for her just trials of these lovers. Therefore, the poem is not only 'concerned with the problem of female agency and female erotic choice' (Scanlon 2006, p. 70) but also with 'a moralistic view of life' (Pearsall 1970, p. 109). Indeed, although Lydgate portrays the lovers in the temple as bitter petitioners whose true love is thwarted by various impediments, the solution comes only in the form of an 'insistence on the priority of the earthly contract and its inviolability' (Pearsall 1970, p. 107). To this end, in *The Temple of Glass*, the love complaint genre, which was a standard for the literary field of the court, merges with the didactic, a common genre in monastic writings. Thus, literary and socioeconomic metavalues blend and affirm each other, prompting *The Temple of Glass* and Lydgate's position as a priest-monk of Bury St. Edmunds to become mutually recognized. Lydgate creates poetry that, by incorporating romance with didacticism, fuses the literary fields of the court and monastic life and articulates a literary value, simultaneously recognizable and unique; poetry that, in a similar way to Chaucer, projects him as an authentic poet in connection with both the literary field of the court and his position as a monk. By emulating Chaucer's transformation of literary value in *The Temple of Glass*, Lydgate implies that, just like the controller of customs, the literary field of the court has a place for a monk as well.

5. Conclusions

Perhaps the main reason why *The Temple of Glass* has been regarded as a work that is different from the *House of Fame*, '[d]espite its self-conscious emulation of aspects of [its forerunner]' (Meyer-Lee 2007, p. 53), is the fact that Lydgate's poem is not a work aimed at a courtly audience with whom he was in intimate contact. This was in part because, unlike Chaucer, Lydgate, at the time of his composing of *The Temple of Glass*, was not yet acquainted with members of the court. More importantly, this was a time when the control of patronage, which until then was concentrated in a small court circle, began to shift to a broader group of nobles and important members of the ascending burgher class (Ebin 1985, p. 7). In the fifteenth century, the 'reading public was broader and more pragmatic in its tastes' (Ebin 1985, p. 8). Thus, Lydgate, despite his ambitions for the literary field of the court, in order to promote his literary career, would have to seek patronage among these prominent readers of the rising bourgeoisie. In this sense, the vows of Lydgate's narrator that for the sake of the lady he will compose a little treatise in praise of women (1380–1381), which unsurprisingly remind us of a commissioned work such as *The Legend of Good Women*, are in effect a call for patronage. Indeed, as we know, Sir John Paston, for instance, uses *The Temple of Glass* for his own purpose (Pearsall 1970, p. 84). Nevertheless, Lydgate's need for promotion did not necessarily prevent him from emulating Chaucer's transformation of what the field of court recognized as literary value. An emulation that enabled Lydgate to compose major productions, such as the *Troy Book* and *Siege of Thebes*, and paved the way for him to become the Laureate poet we know of today.

By locating *The Temple of Glass* and its poet in their socioeconomic circumstances, we come to the conclusion that Lydgate faced a similar professional predicament to his 'maister'. In his position as a monk, he lacked institutionally approved authority with

regard to literary production for the literary field of the court. To this end, Lydgate found the *House of Fame* useful for its intervention into the literary field of the court and its articulation in fusing the fields of the court and traditionally clerical civil service of a literary value, simultaneously recognizable and unique. Thus, reminiscences from the *House of Fame* that fill Lydgate's poem are more than mere depictive details borrowed simply for their decorative effect. Instead, they are intended to associate *The Temple of Glass* with its precursor. By constructing a setting for *The Temple of Glass*, which incorporates borrowings from the *House of Fame*, Lydgate implies his use of the framework set up by Chaucer to adopt his alteration of literary value. Following Chaucer's references to his nonliterary labor, Lydgate alludes to his nonliterary position as a priest-monk by accurately depicting the lovers and the lady in the temple as petitioners in marriage litigations before the Church court. Through these instances of matrimonial disputes, *The Temple of Glass* is concerned with both the female erotic choice and the moralistic view of life. Lydgate merges the love complaint and didactic genres, which, along with the socioeconomic metavalues, blend and make both the poem and the poet's position as a monk mutually recognized. Fusing the literary fields of the court and monastic life, *The Temple of Glass* articulates a literary value that was at once recognizable and unique.

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