

Text and context: author and audience in John Lydgate's *Life of St Edmund*

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Ostensibly John Lydgate's verse *Life of St Edmund* is a characteristic, if lengthy, example of late-medieval hagiography. The *Life* was commissioned by Abbot Curteys of Bury St Edmunds, where Lydgate was a monk, to mark King Henry VI's lengthy sojourn at the abbey between Christmas 1433 until Easter 1434. However, in addition to praising Edmund's sanctity, Lydgate places considerable emphasis upon the temporal elements of his identity. It has been suggested that this emphasis upon Edmund's exemplary kingship is due to Lydgate's intention that the *Life* should function as a 'mirror for princes' for the young king Henry. This distinction is particularly apparent when the accompanying picture cycle is read alongside the text: the images form a unique visual parallel to the text and it is likely that Lydgate was involved in their design. This article will therefore illustrate how the notion of 'devotional literature' can be complicated by circumstances: in this case the audience for whom it was intended. By writing the reader into the text Lydgate transforms the *Life* from simply a devotional object into one that is simultaneously sacred and secular. It also demonstrates the importance of the context in which a text is read and received. In a poem intended to instruct the young king and influence him in both his temporal and devotional activities, Henry VI as anticipated audience exercises considerable influence over the text, demonstrating the subtle interplay between circumstance, author and audience.