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*THE CRITICAL HERITAGE*

**JOHN SKELTON**

Edited by  
**ANTHONY S.G. EDWARDS**



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## JOHN SKELTON: THE CRITICAL HERITAGE

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JOHN SKELTON  
THE CRITICAL HERITAGE

Edited by

ANTHONY S.G.EDWARDS



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## General Editor's Preface

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The reception given to a writer by his contemporaries and near-contemporaries is evidence of considerable value to the student of literature. On one side we learn a great deal about the state of criticism at large and in particular about the development of critical attitudes towards a single writer; at the same time, through private comments in letters, journals or marginalia, we gain an insight upon the tastes and literary thought of individual readers of the period. Evidence of this kind helps us to understand the writer's historical situation, the nature of his immediate reading-public, and his response to these pressures.

The separate volumes in the *Critical Heritage Series* present a record of this early criticism. Clearly, for many of the highly productive and lengthily reviewed nineteenth- and twentieth-century writers, there exists an enormous body of material; and in these cases the volume editors have made a selection of the most important views, significant for their intrinsic critical worth or for their representative quality— perhaps even registering incomprehension!

For earlier writers, notably pre-eighteenth century, the materials are much scarcer and the historical period has been extended, sometimes far beyond the writer's lifetime, in order to show the inception and growth of critical views which were initially slow to appear.

In each volume the documents are headed by an Introduction, discussing the material assembled and relating the early stages of the author's reception to what we have come to identify as the critical tradition. The volumes will make available much material which would otherwise be difficult of access and it is hoped that the modern reader will be thereby helped towards an informed understanding of the ways in which literature has been read and judged.

B.C.S.



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# Introduction

There are obvious difficulties in any attempt to present John Skelton's critical heritage. As Patricia Thomson has reminded us in the case of another sixteenth-century poet, Sir Thomas Wyatt, there were virtually no 'masters of criticism' before the Restoration. (1) It is not until the publication of the second volume of Warton's 'History of English Literature' in 1778—nearly 250 years after Skelton's death—that we find the first extended evaluation of the poet. Before that, the materials for an understanding of the changing critical appreciation of Skelton are highly fragmentary. One has, in the main, to rely on passing allusions, brief comments, and such inferences as can be adduced from the evidence of Skelton's influence on the literature of his own and subsequent generations.

It is the fragmentary nature of much of Skelton's critical heritage that poses the greatest problem. Indeed, much of the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century material I have been able to assemble can only be termed criticism by the most elastic use of the term. Dispassionate, or even considered, judgments of his work are (at best) very rare. The chief problem is that Skelton's reputation, both during his own lifetime and subsequently, has been inextricably bound up with controversy, personal, political and aesthetic. Comparatively little of the early comment on his work is free from this identification of Skelton with partisan causes of various kinds.

But in some ways it is this very tendency to attract controversy that makes Skelton's reputation such a rewarding subject for study. By focusing on this particular figure it is possible to follow, in a revealing way, fluctuations in literary taste from the sixteenth century through to our own age. When one attempts to trace the vicissitudes of his critical status, Skelton emerges as a valuable representative figure, reflecting changing aesthetic and cultural responses to certain

forms of literary expression, notably satiric and popular verse.

Much of the subsequent controversy about Skelton is mirrored in the contemporary responses to his work. Initially, for his contemporaries he seems to have been a symbol of all that was surpassing in English scholarly achievement and poetic excellence. Caxton, in the earliest recorded comment on Skelton, in the Preface to his translation of the 'Aeneid' (1490), links Skelton's scholarship and his poetic skills and uses them as a way of vindicating the reliability of his translation (No. 1):

For hym I knowe for suffycyent to expowne and englysshe euery dyffyculte that is therein...And also he hath redde the ix. muses and vnderstande theyr musicalle scyences and to whom of them eche scyence is appropred. I suppose he hath dronken of Elycons well.

Even though this passage smacks rather of a publisher's blurb, it none the less affords a revealing insight into Skelton's contemporary reputation. At the age of (probably) little more than thirty his name could be invoked with the apparent expectation that it would provide a guarantee of the merits of Caxton's edition.

Other evidence exists to confirm this contemporary view of the 'scholarly' Skelton. Caxton's Preface touches on some of it. We are told that Skelton has already translated 'the epystlys of Tulle' (now lost) and 'the boke of dyodorus syculus', a weighty universal history. (2) And he had been 'late created poete laureate' at Oxford, a distinction primarily of academic significance. Similar awards were to follow from the universities of Louvain and Cambridge, probably in 1492 and 1493 respectively. And about 1496 he was appointed royal tutor to the future Henry VIII, (3) a position which was to provide new opportunities for didactic and scholarly writing. (4)

Praise for this aspect of Skelton's achievement is reiterated in the comments of Erasmus who met him on his visit to England in 1499, while Skelton was still a member of the royal household. Erasmus acclaims him as 'that incomparable light and ornament of British letters' in his prefatory comments to a poem in honour of Prince Henry (No. 2a).

But from this point Skelton's reputation as a scholar seems to cease to concern his critics. It is not until the nineteenth century, in the comments of James Russell Lowell (No. 46), that we hear any more praise of Skelton as scholar.

For it seems evident that by 1499 Skelton has already begun to acquire a significant reputation as a poet. Few of his poems can be dated with certainty before this year —only his ‘Elegy on the Death of the Earl of Northumberland’ (1489) and his allegorical ‘Bouge of Court’ (1498) — but his poetry was evidently known, at least in some degree, by Erasmus when he visited England in 1499. There survives in a manuscript in the British Library, MS Egerton 1651, a poem headed ‘Carmen Extemporale’ (No. 2b) by Erasmus in praise of Skelton’s verse. Dated Autumn 1499, it lauds Skelton in the most fulsome terms. He is said to surpass Orpheus and is compared to Virgil. His talents are said to come from Calliope, the chief of the muses. The praise is extravagant and wholly disproportionate to what appears to have been Skelton’s poetic achievement at this time. To some extent at least Erasmus’ encomium must be seen as the effusion of a courteous visitor to the court of Henry VII, disinclined to afford any possibility of offence to his powerful hosts.

To some extent—but Erasmus’ acclaim cannot be wholly discounted. For there does seem to be evidence that within the next ten years Skelton had established himself as one of the leading contemporary English poets. Before turning to that evidence it may be helpful to speculate a little on how Skelton came to achieve such popularity.

Only one of his works had been printed by 1500, and no more appear to have been printed until about 1513. And it must be borne in mind that printings of early books were generally extremely small. How then would Skelton have been read by Caxton, Erasmus and those other contemporaries whom we will consider next? There is no simple answer to this question. But it is worth recalling that, in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, the printed book (first brought to England by Caxton) was not yet firmly established as the most potent force for the dissemination of literature. It would, indeed, have been most probable that Caxton had read Skelton’s ‘Tulle’ and ‘dyodorus syculus’ in manuscript. The latter work, in fact, survives now only in that form (in a copy in Trinity College, Cambridge). There are other circumstances tending to support the view that manuscript circulation was probably more influential in the dissemination of Skelton’s earlier works than were printed books. Chief among these is the actual milieu in which he created many of his earlier works. For at this period of his life Skelton was mainly associated with the King’s court and with courtly circles. Within such circles much of his verse was doubtless produced for specific local occasions,

most obviously ones requiring entertainment. For example, the comic lyric ‘Mannerly Margery Mylk and Ale’ survives only in a manuscript (British Library MS Add. 5465) together with its music. And ‘Against Garnesche’ was a ‘flyting’ written at ‘the kynges most noble commaundement’; we gather this from the only surviving contemporary copy which is again a manuscript (British Library MS Harley 367). The work itself is a comic, satiric attack on one of King Henry VIII’s courtiers. Skelton’s place within this courtly milieu may well have defined the manner and extent of the dissemination of a number of his earlier works, serving to restrict them, in the main, to a relatively small audience most of whom encountered his works in manuscript. Such an intimate relationship between poet and audience was in no sense untypical in the early sixteenth century. It is worth recalling that, a generation later, none of Wyatt’s poems and only three of Surrey’s appeared in printed form during their lifetimes.

Such circumstances make the growth of Skelton’s poetic reputation particularly striking. For example, ‘The Great Chronicle of London’ (c. 1510) links him with ‘poettis of such fframe’ as Chaucer and his own contemporaries Thomas More and William Cornish (No. 4). The allusion to Skelton is a brief one. But that in itself seems suggestive of the status of Skelton’s poetic reputation and credentials needed no further documentation. (5)

Others were equally ready to link Skelton with great poets of the past. Henry Bradshaw, in two saints’ lives written around 1513, ‘The Life of St. Radegunde’ and ‘The Life of St. Werburge’, links Skelton with both Chaucer and Lydgate in terms which are designed to suggest an equality amongst them (No. 5). These laudatory references are interesting for several reasons. Although few of Skelton’s works can be confidently dated within the period 1500–13, it would seem on the evidence of Bradshaw’s praise that he was probably writing quite extensively during this time. This is the more noteworthy since between approximately 1503 and 1512 Skelton seems to have left the court for relative exile as rector of Diss in Norfolk. And yet his works seem to have been circulating sufficiently extensively for a monk in the north of England (Bradshaw lived in Chester) to have been familiar with them.

In Skelton’s middle years, when he returned to court c. 1512 after his years of exile at Diss, there seems to be a change in the nature of his audience and in the manner in which his works circulated. It is from this time that Skelton’s works began

to achieve a more general circulation in print as he was called upon to fulfil his newly designated role as 'orator regius' (the King's orator). His 'Ballade of the Scottissh Kynge' (c. 1513) was the second of his works to be printed—after a fifteen year hiatus since 'The Bouge of Court'. This was followed by 'Elynor Ruming' (1521), 'The Garland of Laurel' (1523), 'Dyuers Ballettys Solacious' and 'A Comely Coystroun' (both published c. 1527, but including material written much earlier), and 'A Replycacion against certain scholars' (c. 1528). The decision to print these particular works suggests a desire to give wide dissemination to particular aspects of Skelton's achievement, in particular to those most closely identified with the 'orator regius': that is, those works which stress courtly attitudes or 'establishment' positions. 'The Ballade of the Scottissh Kynge' and 'A Replycacion' are both 'public' works proclaiming orthodox political positions. 'The Garland...' and 'Dyuers Ballettys...' demonstrate a concern with courtly attitudes and values. It is only in 'Elynor Ruming' and 'A Comely Coystroun' that Skelton's distinctive comic/satiric vein achieved print during his lifetime. This was doubtless because their humour and satire were directed at targets of little or no political significance. Skelton's great political satire on Wolsey, 'Colin Cloute' has come down to use in what are probably its earliest forms in two fragmentary manuscripts (British Library MSS Harley 2252 and Lansdowne 762). It seems that such works were felt to be too volatile in subject matter and treatment for a publishers to risk circulating them in print, at least while author and subject were still alive.

There is earlier evidence of contemporary sensitivity to the subject-matter of Skelton's verse. It is ironic that the only one of his contemporaries with whom Skelton is linked by Bradshaw is the poet and translator Alexander Barclay—'religious Barkeley' or 'preignaunt Barkley' as he is called. For it was Barclay who, a few years previously, had struck the first controversial note concerning Skelton's reputation. In his poem 'The Ship of Fools' (1509) he introduces a tersely dismissive comment on Skelton's 'Philip Sparrow'. 'Wyse men loue vertue, wylde people wantones', he claims, placing Skelton's poem firmly on the side of 'wantones' together with the 'Iest... [and] tale of Robyn hode' (No. 3). This is the first criticism of Skelton's 'wantonness' or 'lewdness'. What Barclay means by such terms is not altogether clear. But it is interesting that he should equate Skelton's works with such popular literature as the 'tale of Robyn hode'. Such equations were to recur in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Skelton the scholar all too



quickly became a Skelton synonymous with popular and folk literature, with all the attendant implications of licence and disorder. It is particularly ironic, in the present instance, that such criticism should be levelled at 'Philip Sparrow', the one poem of Skelton's which future generations were to admire with barely a dissenting voice.

The basis for Barclay's disapproval of Skelton is not known, but it seems not to have been limited to his dislike of 'Philip Sparrow'. He wrote a work entitled 'Contra Skeltonum' ('Against Skelton') which has not survived. (6) And there is a passage in one of his 'Eclogues' which may perhaps be an attack on Skelton; it reads in part: (7)

Another thing yet is greatly more damnable,  
Of rascolde poetes yet is a shamfull rable,  
Which voyde of wisdomed presumeth to indite,  
Though they haue scantly the cunning of a snite:  
And to what vices that princes moste intende,  
Those dare these fooles solemnize and commende.  
Then is he decked as Poete laureate,  
When stinking Thais made him her graduate.

A passage in Barclay's 'Life of St. George' (1515) contains a disapproving reference to 'he which is lawreat' which may also refer to Skelton. (8)

Presumably Barclay's gibes are responses to comments of Skelton's own, now unfortunately lost. One can only speculate on their content. Certainly Skelton seems to have been eager to involve himself in controversy with his fellow writers. An indication of this is provided by the verses of William Lily, the grammarian (No. 6). Again, we lack the verses of Skelton's which engendered them, but the virulence of Lily's attack bears testimony to the force of the former's satire. It is unwise to attach too much importance to such an attack in the critical tradition, especially given the lack of any clear context in which to evaluate it. But together with Barclay's comments, Lily provides the first hint of controversy surrounding Skelton's reputation. These are the first intimations of what is to follow in reaction against Skelton's satiric mode later in the century.

But the final known contemporary judgment of Skelton casts no shadows across his reputation. Robert Whittington, another grammarian, wrote, a poem in praise of Skelton which was published in 1519. Whittington was a fellow laureat of Oxford, and possibly also a friend of Skelton's so his praise

must be taken with a pinch of salt. Moreover his poem, whilst lengthy, is too generalized in its response to Skelton's work to be of much assistance in establishing the critical heritage. He is praised elaborately for his rhetorical skill, which is said to surpass that of such stock figures of rhetorical excellence as Demosthenes and Ulysses, and is finally addressed as 'culte poeta' and 'Anglorum vatum gloria' (No. 7).

This note of acclaim seems to exhaust the contemporary judgments of Skelton. Already, however, in the relatively small body of critical comment available from his own lifetime, it is possible to discern something of the diversity of responses that Skelton was subsequently to prove capable of exciting. The polarities of critical discussion, of praise and disapproval, were already firmly established before his death.

One can only speculate on the lack of any critical commentary on Skelton during the final decade of his life. It may well be connected with his involvement in political controversy during the 1520s, particularly with his attacks on Cardinal Wolsey, the King's chief advisor. Although he and Wolsey were subsequently reconciled, it may be that those in a position to comment on Skelton's talents found it safer, both for themselves and for him, to remain silent.

This is speculation, as is so much of our attempt to understand the relationship between poet and audience in Tudor England. But even on the meagre evidence that does exist it seems safe to assert that Skelton's situation as poet contrasts strikingly with that of his late medieval predecessors and of other early sixteenth-century poets. Some of his late medieval predecessors were able personally to supervise the copying and dissemination of their poems. The 'Confessio Amantis' of Chaucer's fourteenth-century contemporary John Gower underwent several revisions in this way. Certain fifteenth-century poets were able to go even further and act as their own 'publishers'. Such writers as Thomas Hoccleve and John Capgrave copied their works themselves and supervised their circulation. There is, in contrast, no evidence of such a developed, or even a particularly organized, manuscript tradition of Skelton's works. Most of those works for which manuscripts survive exist in unique copies, none of which can be directly connected with Skelton himself. This also contrasts with the textual situation of sixteenth-century courtly poets such as Wyatt and Surrey, whose works had a solely manuscript circulation during their lifetimes. Unlike them, Skelton's works did not have an audience restricted to a narrow coterie in which works could be manageably passed from hand to hand

in manuscript without requiring any more permanent or extensive dissemination.

This is partially due to the fact that the growth in Skelton's reputation coincided with the development of printing in England. As I have indicated, there was a steady increase in the demand for his works during the latter part of his life, a demand which could not be adequately met by manuscript copying. This demand was itself doubtless a result of the diversity of Skelton's literary productivity, ranging as it did from courtly verse to low comedy, from orthodox political affirmations to politically volatile satire. Skelton was the first English writer whose works excited interest across a wide social spectrum during his own lifetimes. Interest continued to grow after his death in 1529. This is evidenced by the numerous posthumous sixteenth-century editions of his works.

But even so, there is no significant critical comment on his work between the 1520s and the 1550s. It seems that the evident interest in Skelton was expressed in other forms than direct critical statement. In particular, the biographical or pseudo-biographical tradition of Skelton probably began to emerge even before his death with the publication of the 'Hundred Merry Tales' in 1525; number 41 concerns Skelton. This tradition was both crystallized and given new impetus by the publication of the 'Merry Tales', attributed to Skelton, in 1567. (9) It led to the development in verse and prose of the figure of the libertine eccentric who had married in defiance of the Church and defended his own paternity in the face of his parishioners' disapproval—most of which may not be far from the truth. The influence of this biographical tradition and its remarkable vitality can be seen in the various jest-book accounts of Skelton, such as those in 'Tales, and quicke answers, very mery, and pleasant to rede' (n.d.) (10), as well as in the form of anecdotes in such works as John Parkhurst's 'Ludicra sive Epigrammata' (1573) (11) and John Chamber's 'A Treatise against Judicial Astrologie' (1601). (12) In its most extreme elaboration and degeneration 'Dr Skelton' appears in the jest-biography 'The Life of Long Meg of Westminster' (1620) as the lover of the eponymous heroine to whom he speaks in his 'mad merry vain'. (13) In other forms the biographical tradition saw the linking of Skelton with another jest-figure, Scoggin. I will return to this point.

Another important indication of the esteem in which Skelton was held can be found in the number of imitations his work seems to have inspired. Even before his death his

influence can be detected in Roy and Barlow's 'Rede Me and Be Nat Wrothe' (1528). (14) And in the 1530s and 1540s the playwright John Heywood was clearly influenced by Skelton. (15) Indeed, the distinctive Skeltonic verse seems quickly to have gained popularity, especially for polemic purposes. Several controversial tracts survive in this verse form from the 1540s and 1550s and other works continue to be written in Skeltonics until near the end of the century. As late as 1589 a poem on the Armada appeared entitled 'A Skeltonicall Salutation' and was actually written in Skeltonics. These are not the only indications of Skelton's influence in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. But before discussing such indications it is helpful to look at the actual critical commentary on Skelton's works following his death.

The first writer to offer any such discussion was the scholar, book collector, religious controversialist and playwright, bishop John Bale. Bale, in fact, left several accounts of Skelton in his various biographical and bibliographical compilations. In his first biographical register of English writers, 'Illustrium Maioris Britanniae Scriptorum' (1548), he includes only a brief comment on Skelton among the final additions to his book: 'Skeltonus poeta laureatus sub diuerso genere metri edidit' (Skelton, poet laureat, composed in various kinds of verse'). (16) But in his manuscript work, the 'Index Britanniae Scriptorum', he offers a much more extensive account. (17) This latter account appears with only minor variations in his 'Scriptorum illustrium maioris Brytanniae' (1557). This account (No. 8) provides the first biographical sketch of Skelton and the first posthumous description of the canon of his works. Bale also offers some critical comments, most of them basically sympathetic to Skelton. He is compared favourably with Lucian, Democritus and, most interestingly, with Horace, with whom he is identified by virtue of his capacity to utter criticism from behind a mask of laughter. Indeed, Bale lays particular stress on Skelton's satiric and controversial roles. As a controversialist himself, Bale was perhaps more readily able to offer a sympathetic discussion of Skelton than many of his critics.

For Bale, Skelton was primarily a satirist, attacking reprehensible abuses. This view recurs, albeit in a more vivid and fantastical form, in William Bullein's comments in his 'Dialogue against the Fever Pestilence' (1564). The only satires he singles out for comment are those against 'the cankered Cardinall Wolsey'. But his opinion of Skelton is, by implication, very high. For Skelton is linked in Bullein's grouping once more

with Chaucer and Lydgate, joined now by the third of the triumvirate of famous medieval poets, John Gower (No. 9).

This praise, however, pales in comparison with the elaborate compliments offered by Thomas Churchyard in his poem prefacing the publication of Skelton's 'Pithy, Pleasaunt and Profitable Works' in 1568. This poem (No. 10) places Skelton against a wide-ranging literary tradition. After invoking classical and European traditions through references to Marot, Petrarch, Dante, Homer, Ovid and Virgil, Churchyard goes on to maintain that

But neuer I nor you I troe,  
 In sentence plaine and short  
 Did yet beholde with eye,  
 In any forraine tonge:  
 A higher verse a staetly style  
 That may be read or song  
 Than is this daye in deede  
 Our englishe verse and ryme

English literary history is then recounted: 'Piers Plowman', Chaucer, Surrey, Vaux, Phaer and Edwards are all mentioned before Churchyard turns to Skelton, 'The blossome of my frute'. But his actual comments are disappointingly feeble. Skelton is 'Most pleasant euery way, /As poets ought to be'. The most distinctive feature of his observations is the fact that once again the satiric vein is singled out: 'His terms to taunts did lean'. To some extent Churchyard's poem is merely a blurb, a puff for the edition it precedes. But, it does confirm a sense of Skelton's achievement consistent with the views of Bale and Bullein.

Indeed, others were perfectly ready to sustain Churchyard's view of Skelton as one of the pre-eminent poets of past or present. In his poem 'The Rewarde of Wickedness' (1574) Richard Robinson describes a visit to Helicon where, after seeing Homer, Virgil, Ovid and Chaucer, he comes upon '*Skelton* and *Lydgat*' with Wager, Heywood and Barnaby Googe. A similar encounter takes place in the anonymous poem 'A poore knight his Pallace of private pleasures' (1579). There the narrator visits the 'camp' of Cupid where he encounters many great poets including (once again) Homer, Virgil and Ovid together with Hesiod and Euripides. He also sees Chaucer, 'the cheafest of all English men', and also 'There *Goure* [Gower] did stand, with cap in hand, and *Skelton* did the same'. Both poems link Skelton, as did Churchyard, with the greatest writers of classical and English literary tradition.

This was the high point of sixteenth-century acclaim. Henceforward, the favourable view both of Skelton's satire and of his poetic status was increasingly questioned, either directly or by implication. The comments of John Grange, for example, in his 'Golden Aphroditis' (1577) praise Skelton in a curiously backhanded manner, talking of his 'wryting of toyes and foolish theames' and his 'gibyng sorte' (No. 11). But Grange was, none the less, sufficiently affected by Skelton to echo and even borrow from his works. (18) In the same year, Holinshed in 'The Laste volume of the Chronicles' speaks rather patronizingly of 'John Skelton, a pleasant Poet'. (19) And less than ten years later, in 1586, William Webbe also damns him with faint praise as a 'pleasant conceyted fellowe' (No. 12). Both Grange and Webbe do, however, continue to pay perfunctory tribute to Skelton as a satirist. But in the light of what is to follow it is significant that Grange speaks of Skelton's 'ragged ryme' as appropriate for his satiric mode.

For, in 1589, the first wholesale assault was made on Skelton's reputation, an attack which primarily took issue with just such questions of Skelton's satiric propensity and metrical idiosyncrasy. Puttenham's 'Arte of English Poesie' (No. 13) contains an explicit denigration of these aspects of his poetic achievement. As a satirist he is 'sharpe' but with 'more rayling and scoffery than became a Poet Lawreat'. Indeed, he is linked with those who among the Greeks 'were called *Pantomimi*, with vs buffons'. It may be that in this judgment Puttenham was influenced by the jest-book figure of Skelton, the lively, sometimes coarse buffoon of the 'Merry Tales'. A more obvious factor is Puttenham's preference for more 'courtly' poets such as Surrey, Wyatt, Vaux, Phaer and Edwards. Whereas less than two decades previously Skelton had been compared favourably with several of these figures, now he is contrasted with them to his disadvantage.

Of greater critical interest was Puttenham's denigration of Skeltonic metre as the work of a 'rude rayling rimer & all his doings ridiculous'. Such criticism is an attack on the most distinctive feature of Skelton's verse technique, his use of 'Skeltonics' —short, irregularly stressed lines, characterized by extended rhymes. For Puttenham this was the style of the 'common people' which he rejected in favour of the 'concord' of the 'courtly maker'. The terms of Puttenham's criticism were to affect subsequent views of Skeltonic verse from the 1590s and into the early decades of the seventeenth century. Its effect can be detected, for example, in Gabriel Harvey's various references to Skelton in the 1590s. He tends to present him as

a grotesque figure who, like his own enemy Greene, would 'counterfeitan an hundred dogged Fables... and most currishly snarle...where [he] should most kindly fawne and licke' (No. 14b). Elsewhere, Harvey depicts Skelton as a 'madbrayned knave' (No. 14a) of bizarre predilections, as a melancholy fool and a poet of limited technical skill. (20) Others in this period place similar stress on his alleged metrical infelicities. Hall, in 1598, speaks of his 'breathlesse rhymes' (21) —but does nevertheless seem to have been influenced by Skelton in his own satiric writings. (22) And Francis Meres, in 'Palladis Tamia', also published in 1598, reiterates almost verbatim Puttenham's strictures on Skelton's verse. (23)

Others were even more explicit in stating their disapproval of Skeltonics. For example, William Browne in the first eclogue of 'The Shepherd's Pipe' (1614) complains that '*Skeltons* reed' does 'iarre' (No. 20). Also Nicholas Breton in 1612 'Cornucopiae or Pasquils Night Cap' talks of Skelton's 'ruffling rimes' which are 'emptie quite of marrow', before going on to join the small band of critics who can find something unpleasant to say about 'Philip Sparrow' (No. 18).

This disapproval of 'Philip Sparrow' is the more remarkable since admiration of this poem seems to have endured even during this relatively low ebb in Skelton's critical fortunes. One indication of this regard is the number of poets who appear to have been influenced by it. Both Gascoigne (in 'Weeds', 1575) and Philip Sidney (in 'Astrophel and Stella', 1591) produced imitations of the poem. Its influence can also be found in parts of Sidney's 'Arcadia'. Shakespeare alludes to it in 'King John'. And manifestations of this influence by imitation were to continue into the seventeenth century. John Bartlet in his 'Book of Airs' (1606) produced a version of 'Philip Sparrow' as did such later poets as William Cartwright, Richard Brome and Robert Herrick. (24)

Other works of Skelton's failed either to excite much comment or exert any influence in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. The chief example of such failure is the poem 'Colin Clout', which was, on the evidence of separate editions produced, the single most popular work of Skelton's during the sixteenth century. (25) But it seems to have been rarely singled out for comment or imitation. The most famous indication of its influence is Spenser's introduction of the figure Colin Clout into various poems, notably *The Shepherd's Calendar* (1579). (26) Otherwise there is little apart from a friendly, but qualified, reference by Drayton (No. 16c) to indicate any on-going interest in the poem.



There are, however, some more generalized indications of Skelton's reputation and influence to be detected in the drama of the period. Both Christopher Marlowe, in 'Dr Faustus' (1604), and Ben Jonson, in 'The Devil is an Ass' (c. 1611), introduce passages into their plays which reveal a discernible Skeltonic influence. (27) Jonson includes Skelton as a character in his masque 'The Fortunate Isles' (1625), where he is linked with the jest-book figure of 'Scogan' (otherwise 'Scoggin'). Before this the figure of Skelton had made another dramatic appearance in Anthony Munday's 'The Downfall of Robert Earl of Huntingdon' (1601). Here as on previous occasions Skelton is identified with the Robin Hood of folk literature. Skelton appears initially 'in propria persona' and again later in the play as Friar Tuck. In the latter guise he speaks passages in Skeltonics—until Little John pleads with him: 'Stoppe master *Skelton*: whither will you runne?' (28) Skelton may also have appeared, again linked with Scoggin, elsewhere in the drama of the period. (29)

The general tendency of these appearances is to identify Skelton with a comic, low world of popular culture. This identification takes two distinct forms. First, there is the use of Skeltonics in a way which generally tends to suggest tediousness and clumsiness, and their inappropriateness for serious verse. Secondly, there is the identification between Skelton and Scoggin (also Scogin, Skogan). The origin of the identification between the two figures is obscure, but appears to have begun soon after Skelton's death. (30) The actual figure of Scoggin appears to have been based on a confusion involving the fourteenth-century Henry Scogan, a friend of Chaucer, and the legendary John Scoggan, sometimes claimed to have been Henry VII's fool. Nor is it clear how these two identities first became intertwined one with another and subsequently with that of Skelton. But the equation seems to have been an attractive one for writers and critics of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and it is one that served to further diminish Skelton's claim to consideration as a serious poet.

But the general disparagement of Skelton seems to have attracted special attention to one particular work, 'The Tunnyng of Elynor Rummyng'. This bawdy tale of an ale-wife was viewed as epitomizing the work of the 'low' Skelton and excited a considerable amount of comment in consequence. Some comment was denigrating. Nashe, writing in 1600, speaks rather contemptuously of the 'riffe-raffe of the rumming of Elanor'. (31) Arthur Dent's 'The Plaine Man's Pathway to Heaven' (1601) links 'Ellen of Rummyng' with other 'vaine and friuolous bookes of Tales, Iestes, and lies', equating the poem



with contemporary jest-books and other popular works which are dismissed as 'so much trashe and rubbish' (No. 15). More subtle, but equally critical, on somewhat different grounds, is the use of Skelton's poem in Ben Jonson's masque 'The Fortunate Isles' (1625). (32) In this masque Skelton appears as a character ('skipping Skelton') together with his comic alter ego Scogan and speaks lines adapted from 'Elynor Ruming'. (33) His function as character and as speaker of his own verses is clearly a comic and/or burlesque one. He earns the approval of Merefool, a character who, as his name suggests, represents values which are rejected in the total context of the masque. Skelton and his poem become, for Jonson, representative of certain kinds of literary values which he chooses to dismiss, values which seem to see the poem as synonymous with vulgar and inept versification. (34)

Elsewhere there are some comments which express admiration for the poem, either directly or indirectly, because it is possible to identify it with popular literature. 'Elynor' is echoed in 'The Cobbler of Canterbury' (1590), a collection of droll tales. (35) It is also mentioned with approval in a later adaptation of that work, 'The Tinker of Turvey' (1630). In the Preface to the latter the Tinker encounters an ale-wife: (36)

I asked her who brewed that nectar, whose malt-worm so nibbled at my pericranium, and she said herself, for old Mother Eleanor Ruming was her granddam and Skelton her cousin, who wrote fine rhymes in praise of her high and mighty ale.

Others were even more positive in their praise. Drayton, for example, describes 'Ellen of Ruming' as one of the 'English bookes...that ile not part with', linking it with such other favourite works as (once again) 'Robin Hood' and 'Bevis of Hampton' (No. 16a). (37)

The single most extensive manifestation of the appeal of 'Elynor Ruming' during this period is in the burlesque poem 'Pimlyco, or Runne Red-Cap' (1609), a work which examines both Skelton and his poem. Concerning the latter, the anonymous author finds much to praise. Although he recognizes that 'Elynor' may be 'of so base account', by virtue of its 'low' subject-matter, he can find precedents in Virgil and Ovid to justify the exploration of humble themes (No. 17):

Since then these *Rare-ones* stack'd their strings, From the hie-tuned acts of Kings For notes so low, less is thy *Blame*....

The author is clearly drawn to the 'liuely colours' of Skelton's poem; he goes on to quote most of the first 250 lines of it.

However, affection for Skelton's poem does not appear to extend to Skelton himself. He is seen as belonging to an age 'when few wryt well' and is linked to other (unnamed) contemporary poets who have only 'empty Sculles'. Clearly the response to 'Elynor Ruming' is, in this instance, an ambivalent one. The author seems intrigued by the dichotomy (as he sees it) between Skelton's status in his own time as poet laureate and the nature of the poetic subject-matter that won him his status. Although he finds the subject-matter attractive it seems to him inadequate for such status.

This sense that Skelton is not a poet to be taken seriously emerges elsewhere in the early seventeenth century. Michael Drayton, for example, had an evident affection for Skelton's works. His praise of 'Elynor Ruming' and 'Colin Clout' has already been mentioned. He was sufficiently influenced by Skelton to attempt a 'Skeltoniad' and other poems in Skeltonics. (38) But elsewhere he reveals a defensive attitude towards Skelton's verse. In his 'Ode to Himselfe and the Harpe' he suggests that 'tis possible to clyme...although in SKELTON'S Ryme' (No. 16b). The comment seems to reflect a contemporary doubt about the viability of the Skeltonic verse form as a vehicle for serious poetry. Similar doubts are expressed by Humphrey King in his 'An Halfe-penny-worthe of Wit...' (1613) when Skelton is joined with other 'merry men' whose verses are suitable only for unserious subjects, such as tales of '*Robin Hood*/And little *Iohn*' (No. 19).

The prevailing critical perspective on Skelton during the early seventeenth century offers only a trivialized view of his art. His main claim to interest then was in his depiction of low life. (39) The attitude of 'Elynor Ruming' appears to have been especially influential. It was the last of Skelton's works to be reprinted during the seventeenth century, in the famous edition of 1624, with a picture of Elynor the ale-wife herself and prefatory verses by the ghost of Skelton lamenting the current state of English ale. (40)

This view of Skelton as the irresponsible madcap achieves its fullest and most unsympathetic presentation in 'The Golden Fleece' by 'Orpheus Junior'. (41) The exact nature of this curious work resists summary definition. Published in 1626, it is an odd combination of historical complaint and travel literature. Near the end of the third part, Skelton and Scoggin appear to interrupt a sonnet by St David in praise of Charles I. They are identified as 'the chiefe Advocates for the Dogrel

Rimers by the procurement of *Zoilus*, *Momus* [figures of division and protest] and others of the *Popish Sect*' (p. 83). (42) There follows a three-way exchange in verse between St David, Scoggin and Skelton (pp. 84–92). On the next day, however, the latter confess their faults and are censured by Lady Pallas (p. 93). The burden of her strictures is an attack on the satiric style and mode as embodied in these two figures. She argues that 'a simple course Poeme inriched with liuely matter and iuyce, ought to be preferred before an heroicall swolne verse pust vp with barme or froth of an inconsiderate wit' (p. 94). In other contexts the argument might serve to defend critically such a poem as 'Elynor Rummung'. But here the thrust of the attack is directed at the notion of satiric writing, 'For it is easier to finde faults, then to mend them, to pull downe a house, then to build one vp' (ibid.). And ultimately 'all *scoffing companions*, and base ballet Rimers', including Scoggin and Skelton, are banished from Parnassus (p. 95).

In 'The Golden Fleece' the current elements of criticism of Skelton tend to converge. Here appears the comic grotesque figure of the 'biographical' tradition, demonstrating his predilection for lewd verse and also functioning as the divisive satirist (recalling the 'Pantomimi' criticism of Puttenham). Whilst the account is in no sense critical, it does indirectly reveal a great deal about contemporary critical thinking.

After this point, comment on Skelton tends largely to disappear. An indication of this lack of interest is provided by 'A Banquet of Jestes' (1639) which talks of Skelton's 'meere rime, once read, but now laid by' (No. 22). (43) But the future trend had already been anticipated in the comments of John Pits in his posthumously published 'Relationum Historicarum de Rebus Anglicis' (1619). Much of his account of Skelton is biographical, probably deriving from Bale. But his value judgments appear to be his own (p. 701):

Lingua enim periculosum loquacibus malum. Sermo salsus saepe vertitur in mordacem, risus in opprobrium, iocus in amaritudinem, et dum tibi videre false submonere, carpis acerbe.

His language had dangerous evil in its utterances. His nimble speech was often turned into jest, laughter into opprobrium, mirth into bitterness, and while he would pretend to be submissive, he spoke cruelly.

Once again Skelton the satirist is dismissed. And the disapproval of some of his works seems to have led to a general disinclination to read any of them. A little later, in 1622, Henry Peacham is more succinctly dismissive of Skelton's claims as a poet. In 'The Compleat Gentleman' (No. 21) Skelton is treated in the course of a survey of English poetry as 'a Poet Laureate, for what desert I could neuer heare'.

Henceforward, criticism of Skelton becomes primarily biographical. This tendency in the critical tradition is exemplified by the works of Fuller and Anthony à Wood. Admittedly both were writing what were primarily biographical reference works, but, even allowing for that fact, their choosing not to discuss Skelton as a creative artist is striking. Fuller's 'Worthies', published in 1662 (No. 24), is not altogether unsympathetic to Skelton, but he is seen solely in biographical terms. His life is presented in dramatic contours—the satirist with 'wit too much' fighting against larger forces than he is capable of resisting. In this drama there is no sense of Skelton's verse. None of his works is mentioned. Skelton the man is the sole figure of interest.

In à Wood's 'Athenae Oxonienses' (1691–2) there is not even that dimension of interest. A Wood lists references to various John Skeltons and gives an account of the canon (which is probably not based on any first-hand knowledge). But the only comment on the verse is sharply disapproving: '...yet the generality said, that his witty discourses were biting, his laughter opprobrious and scornful, and his jokes commonly sharp and reflecting' (p. 21). The terms of à Wood's criticism strikingly recall Pits's earlier comments. It seems doubtful whether à Wood had actually read Skelton.

Elsewhere there is abundant evidence of a more general neglect. No editions of Skelton's works were published between 1624 and 1718. Hence it is not surprising that the only copy of his poems that James Howell could find in 1655 was an extremely battered one 'skulking in *Duck-Lane*, pitifully totter'd and torn'. Nor is it surprising that Howell should have found little merit in Skelton's poems, apart from a few lines of 'quaint sense', for (as he notes) 'the Genius of the Age is quite another thing' (No. 23). And Samuel Holland in 'Wit and Fancy in a Maze' (1656) felt it necessary to gloss the mere mention of Skelton's name—and to do so in highly inaccurate terms. After observing that '*Skelton, Gower, and the Monk of Bury* [Lydgate] were at Daggers-drawing for *Chawcer*' (p. 102), he adds a marginal note to Skelton's name: 'Henry 4. his Poet Lawreat, who wrote disguises for the young Princes'.

What infrequent discussions there are damn the works with faint praise. Edward Phillips in 1675 presents Skelton as ‘accounted a notable Poet...when doubtless good Poets were scarce’. He then proceeds to attack Skelton’s style (‘miserable loos, rambling’) and his ‘galloping measure of Verse’. Like Howell, Phillips can only discover Skelton ‘in an old printed Book, but imperfect’ and can only give a very selective account of the canon (No. 25). His comments demonstrate the absence of serious critical interest in Skelton during the late seventeenth century. Such faint influence as can be perceived manifests itself in the odd attempts at Skeltonic imitation as those in ‘The Old Gill’ (1687) (44) and by John Bunyan in his ‘Booke for Boys and Girls’ (1686). (45)

Various other references to Skelton during the latter part of the seventeenth century confirm the evidence of critical neglect. William Winstanley’s account in ‘Lives of the Most Famous English Poets’ (1687), pp. 42–3, is merely a conflation of the accounts of Phillips and Fuller, and has no independent value. There is slightly more interest in a brief passage in Thomas Rymer’s ‘Short View of Tragedy’ (1693), since Rymer makes there the earliest comment on Skelton the dramatist, contrasting his work unfavourably with the devotional drama of Europe. But, as with other seventeenth-century critics, it is doubtful whether Rymer had read much Skelton, since his only Skelton citation is from the poem ‘Why Come Ye Not to Court?’, which he refers to as a drama. (46)

From this point there follows a lengthy period of silence broken only by two reprints, that of ‘Elynor Rummung’ in 1718 (to which I will return) and the 1736 reprint of the 1568 edition, the first collected edition of Skelton’s works for over 150 years. This collected edition seems to have prompted the most famous of all critical denigrations of Skelton. Alexander Pope in his ‘Imitations of Horace’ (1737) made his dismissal of ‘bestly Skelton’ (No. 27a). Elsewhere Pope is equally dismissive: ‘there’s nothing in them [Skelton’s poems] that’s worth reading’ (No. 27b). Pope’s responses to Skelton climax the contempt and neglect that constitute this phase of Skelton’s critical heritage. Even Dr Johnson’s subsequent dismissive criticism of Skelton’s lack of ‘great elegance of language’ appears quite positive by comparison (No. 29).

Yet even before Pope the tide had begun to turn. Almost the first sign of renewed interest was the reprinting in 1718 of ‘Elynor Rummung’, (47) the first edition of any of Skelton’s works since 1624. The Preface to this edition has been justly described by its discoverer as ‘of some importance in the history

not merely of Skelton's reputation but even of eighteenth century critical tastes'. (48) Skelton is praised for his 'just and natural Description'. Those who would wish to object to the lowness of the poem's subject-matter or its antiquity are met by the affirmation that it merits the attention of 'Persons of an extensive Fancy and just Relish' who may appreciate 'a Moment's Amusement' (No. 26). Once again, 'Elynor Ruming' becomes a critical touchstone. But here an unusual degree of critical independence is apparent in the evaluation of the work, a willingness to articulate criteria for admiration amid the general atmosphere of distaste and neglect.

Other approving voices, of equally independent spirit, were to follow. The reprinting of the poems in 1736 appears to have brought Skelton to the notice of Mrs Elizabeth Cooper. In 'The Muses Library' (1737) she hails him unequivocally as 'The Restorer of Invention in *English* Poetry!'. Her acclaim is subsequently somewhat qualified by her feeling that he was 'much debas'd by the Rust of the Age He liv'd in', particularly in his verse forms—thus harking back to a preoccupation of much pre-Restora-Restoration criticism. But elsewhere she shows further evidence of her highly individual judgment. She is the first critic to single out for particular praise 'The Bouge of Court', 'a Poem of great Merit' which is worthy of comparison with 'the inimitable *Spencer* [sic]'. Mrs Cooper had clearly read at least some of Skelton's poems with a measure of care and a freshness of insight which evidently had some influence on her own age (No. 28). For, a little later, Theophilus Cibber in his 'Lives of the Poets' (1753) (49) reprints her comments with only minor additions—although without any acknowledgment of his source.

However, such a spirit of admiration as that displayed by the 1718 editor and Mrs Cooper is not evident in the first extensive critical appraisal. In 1778 Thomas Warton, critic and poet, published the second volume of his monumental 'History of English Poetry', a work which marks the beginning of modern Skelton criticism (No. 30). It cannot be said that Warton is particularly sympathetic to Skelton. In his introductory biographical sketch he notes Skelton's 'ludicrous disposition' and further announces at the outset of his discussion that 'It is in vain to apologise for the coarseness, obscenity, and scurrility of Skelton, by saying that his poetry is tinctured with the manners of his age. Skelton would have been a writer without decorum at any period.' Warton goes on to compare him unfavourably with Chaucer and to note some of the disapproving comments of the late sixteenth century.

His essential conclusion is also disapproving in accord with the critical temper of his own age: '[Skelton's] genius seems better suited to low burlesque, than to liberal and manly satire.'

Elsewhere, Warton does find particular passages he can single out for praise, including (once again) the 'Bouge of Court' where Skelton shows himself 'not always incapable of exhibiting allegorical imagery with spirit and dignity'. But the main stress in Warton's discussion falls on the variable quality of the verse: 'No writer is more unequal than Skelton.' The lack of sympathy with Skelton's achievement is evident. Warton is temperamentally an antiquarian, always ready to be deflected from his discussion into by-ways of curious knowledge—the biography of the earl of Northumberland, medieval tapestries, macaronic verse (omitted in No. 30). But his work, for all its limited sympathy and understanding of Skelton's verse, is of genuine importance. It forms the first extended criticism of Skelton's poetry buttressed by any analysis and illustration. Even Warton's antiquarian tendencies have their value; he is able to provide the only account of Skelton's play 'The Nigromansir', now lost. (50) With Warton there is, for the first time in the critical heritage, an attempt at a reasoned analytical approach to Skelton's work which also endeavours to look at the totality of his oeuvre. Whilst the results of this approach do not lead to any more favourable response to Skelton, there is at least an attempt to control and limit instinctive prejudice by reason and scholarship.

Warton's example did not make itself quickly felt. The continued willingness to disparage Skelton is reflected in a review of his 'History', which, commenting on Skelton, observes: 'Yet even in [his own] age Skelton's manner was deemed gross, illiberal and obscene; and now all will agree with Pope in styling it *bestly*.' (51) Little more than a decade later Philip Neve dismisses Skelton as a 'rude and scurrilous rhymers'. The only merit in Skelton Neve is prepared to acknowledge is the 'justness of his satire' in his attacks on Wolsey (No. 31). The shadow of earlier critical postures still lay long over current attitudes. Just as the review of Warton is influenced by Pope, so Neve recalls the biographical accounts, particularly that of Fuller, of the previous century.

In the early nineteenth century, the tempo of critical interest began to quicken a little. In 1810 Chalmers reissued the 1736 edition of Skelton as part of his collected edition of the English poets. This edition formed the subject of an unsigned review by Robert Southey in the 'Quarterly Review' for 1814 (No. 32),



which deals in part with Skelton. After criticizing Chalmers's choice of copy text and his editorial procedures generally, Southey proceeds to a brief but forcefully argued defence of Skelton as satirist. He is compared to Rabelais, and Southey concludes that Skelton was 'one of the most extraordinary writers of any age or country'. Some years later, 1831, Southey reiterated his critical support for Skelton in the introduction to the texts of 'Colin Clout' and 'Philip Sparrow' included in his 'Select Works of the British Poets'. There he argues that the poems are 'worthy of presentation, as illustrating in no common degree, the state and progress of our language, and the history of a most important age, and for their intrinsic merit also' (p. 61). In both comments Southey offers a broader critical response to Skelton than hitherto, encompassing editorial and philological concerns (particular problems in relation to Skelton) and also offering a widened historical sympathy. His comparison between Skelton and Rabelais (also reiterated in the 'Select Works') was to prove particularly influential, and was made again and again during the nineteenth century.

But in the shorter term Southey's review of Chalmers seems to have had the effect of stirring up renewed interest in Skelton. This interest is evidenced in part by the comments of William Gifford, editor of the 'Quarterly Review' and a friend of Southey's, who included an approving comment on Skelton in his edition of 'The Works of Ben Jonson' in 1816 (No. 33). Gifford showed himself familiar with at least some earlier criticism and with the 'stupid' 1736 edition. Himself a scholar and satirist, he praises Skelton's scholarship and defends him against the charge that his satire is vulgar.

A less whole-hearted spirit of admiration can be found in the comments of another poet, Thomas Campbell, in his 'Specimens of the British Poets' (1819). Campbell takes particular issue with the views of Southey: 'it is surely a poor apology for the satirist of any age to say that he stooped to humour its vilest taste, and could not ridicule vice and folly without degrading himself to buffoonery' (No. 34). The continuity of earlier attitudes can also be found in the first North American edition of Skelton's works in the same year. Ezekiel Sanford in his 'Life of Skelton' prefaced to this edition is willing to praise his 'originality', but his Skeltonics are denied the title of poetry, being seen as making his poetry 'excessively monotonous and dull' (No. 35).

But in other quarters there were continuing indications of a renewed interest. The first edition of his play 'Magnificence' to



appear since the sixteenth century appeared in 1821, published by the aristocratic bibliophiles of the Roxburghe Club. The following year saw the publication of what was, in effect, an anthology of Skelton in the 'Retrospective Review'. The conclusion of this article presents a response to his work which is remarkably sympathetic:

In judging of this old poet, we must always recollect the state of poetry in his time and the taste of the age, which being taken into the account, we cannot help considering Skelton as an ornament of his own time, and a benefactor to those which came after him.

Yet in such a response the note of patronage is still very apparent; when all has been said, Skelton is still, to the author, chiefly 'a fit subject for the reverence and the researches of the antiquarian' (No. 36).

Even so, the appreciation of Skelton as a vital, important poet was continuing to grow in the early part of the nineteenth century, particularly among his fellow poets. Within a year of the appearance of the 'Retrospective Review' article Wordsworth characterized him as 'a demon in point of genius' (No. 37a). This may be taken as a considered judgment. For Wordsworth left evidence of his own study of Skelton in a sonnet which echoes part of 'The Garland of Laurel'. (52) And in the 1830s he lent encouragement to Dyce in the preparation of his edition, discussing with him at some length such questions as Skelton's genealogy and bibliography. (53)

In the 1820s comes Coleridge's enthusiastic (albeit inaccurate) praise of 'Richard Sparrow' in his 'Table Talk' (No. 38a). Such praise is reiterated in his posthumously published notes on Shakespeare's 'King John' where the work (now correctly titled) is admired as 'an exquisite and original poem' (No. 38b).

It is tempting to speculate on the role of Robert Southey in this renewed appreciation of Skelton, particularly by nineteenth-century poets. Southey was, of course, course, associated with Wordsworth, Coleridge and Gifford, all of whom praised Skelton after he had written on him. Campbell's comments were an explicit response to Southey's praise. It was Southey's 1814 review of Chalmers's edition which prompted Dyce to undertake his monumental edition of Skelton's poems. (54) And, as will become apparent, traces of his influence can be discerned in later nineteenth-century criticism. All in all, Southey's work towards the

critical rehabilitation of Skelton seems to have been an important but largely unremarked feature in the history of Skelton criticism.

Southey's pioneering work of reclamation foreshadowed the more extensive and more favourable critical examinations of the 1840s. The first of these was by Isaac D'Israeli in his 'Amenities of Literature' (1840). This was the most extensive attempt yet made to vindicate Skelton from the harsh criticisms of posterity (No. 40). The often vilified Skeltonic is hailed as 'airy but pungent'. Skelton himself is seen as 'too original for some of his critics', particularly Puttenham and Pope. And D'Israeli seeks to justify Skelton's 'personal satires and libels' as worthy of modern study on the grounds that they transcend their occasion: 'for posterity there are no satires nor libels. We are concerned only with human nature'. D'Israeli comes closer than any previous critic to perceiving the fact (if not the exact nature) of the satiric persona in Skelton: 'He acts the character of a buffoon; he talks the language of drollery.... But his hand conceals a poniard; his rapid gestures only strike the deeper into his victim.'

D'Israeli's judgments were independent and forcefully argued. He formulates the extensive grounds for the appreciation of Skelton that had hitherto been adumbrated. Other equally independent minded critics shared his enthusiasm. Two years later, Skelton won the support of Elizabeth Barrett Browning. In an article in the 'Athenaeum' she found herself attracted by his 'strength' and his 'wonderful dominion over language' which is 'the very *sans-culottism* of eloquence'. Those qualities of his satire which had previously earned critical disapproval are singled out by Mrs Browning for admiration. Skelton is, for her, 'the Juvenal of satyrs!' whose eccentric metrics are justified by their subject-matter. In a different vein, the 'Bouge of Court' earns admiration. And (pace Dr Johnson) Skelton is presented as an 'influence for good upon our language' (No. 41). Thus with breathless compression does Mrs Browning present her fresh and vigorously expressed opinions, opinions which challenge much of received thinking about Skelton.

But amid the signs of an excited rediscovery of Skelton's poetry there were those critics who still adhered to earlier critical views. Henry Hallam's 'Introduction to the Literature of Europe...' published in 1837 speaks of his 'original vigour' but dismisses his 'attempts at serious poetry' as 'utterly contemptible' (No. 39). Agnes Strickland interpolated a biographical judgment of Skelton into her life of Katharine of

Aragon (1842): he is adjudged a 'ribald and ill-living wretch'. No mention is made of his poetry (No. 42).

Entrenched habits of response died hard. But any justification for such casually dismissive criticism was undercut by the appearance in 1843 of Alexander Dyce's two-volume edition of 'The Poetical Works of John Skelton'. This edition was a remarkable achievement which has still not been superseded. It includes complete texts of all works which there seemed grounds for attributing to Skelton, with editorial apparatus and extensive annotation —the latter providing the first serious effort to lift the veil covering the many obscurities of Skelton's verse. The work was prefaced by authoritative surveys of Skelton's life, reputation and early influence. Dyce's 'Skelton' is a tour de force of nineteenth-century scholarship, the foundation upon which all modern study of Skelton rests. As the 'Gentleman's Magazine' put it in reviewing his edition in 1844: 'In the whole catalogue of English poets there was not one whose work called more loudly for an editor than Skelton, nor could they have fallen into abler or more careful hands.' (55)

Contemporary reviewers were not slow to perceive the value of Dyce's pioneering work. His edition provided the occasion for a lengthy article in the 'Quarterly Review' in 1844 (No. 43) which was, in effect, the first attempt at an overall systematic and sympathetic critical survey of Skelton's works. Most of the major works are discussed including the 'Elegy on the Duke of Northumberland', 'Philip Sparrow', 'Elynor Ruming', 'The Bouge of Court', 'Magnificence', 'Colin Clout' and 'Why Come Ye Not to Court?'. Serious attempts are made to deal with some of the major critical problems concerning Skelton. He is vindicated from the attack of Pope through a comparison between his own satiric role and that of Swift. And, as for Mrs Browning, Skelton's vitality proves attractive. He is 'the only English verse-writer between Chaucer and the days of Elizabeth who is alive'. Qualities which had previously earned disapproval are now praised as necessary functions of his poetic *raison d'être*: 'His whole value is, as a vulgar vernacular poet, addressing the people in the language of the people'. Indeed, considerable stress is placed on the role in his verse of 'the popular expression of a strong popular feeling' possessing a fundamental 'truth'. In acclaiming Skelton as 'the father of English doggerel' the 'Quarterly Review' is not offering a pejorative judgment, but is rather responding to his oeuvre with sympathy and a constructive historical sense. The 'Quarterly Review' article provides a fitting accompaniment to Dyce's

edition, presenting a detailed demonstration of the essential interest and importance of Skelton's verse.

This article is the more remarkable since in general the response to Dyce's enormous labour of scholarship was not great. In critical terms the results were negligible. But his edition may have had some effect in extending awareness of Skelton's work to North America. It may not be coincidental that shortly after his edition appeared it is possible to detect the first signs of Skelton's influence there. Melville, for example, may conceivably have been affected by 'Philip Sparrow' in the course of the composition of his novel 'Mardi' (written in 1847-8). (56) And around 1855, James Russell Lowell produced an American edition of Skelton based on Dyce. (57) Lowell has left the earliest testimonials to Skelton's excellence by a major American critic. He described Skelton at one point as the one 'genuine English poet [of] the early years years of the sixteenth century' (No. 46a). On another occasion, he joins the line of critics who had found 'Philip Sparrow' worthy of admiration (No. 46b). But these are, admittedly, faint signs. There are few indications of serious American interest in Skelton before the twentieth century.

The situation was not significantly different in other parts of the world. Some foreign critics were conspicuously unsympathetic. A virulent response came from the French critic and historian, Hippolyte Taine. Taine seems to follow the 'Quarterly Review' writer in stressing Skelton's commitment to 'life', but aligns himself fundamentally with those, like Hallan and Strickland, who were repelled by the nature of that life and its alleged failure to achieve a meaningful formulation in art: 'beneath the vain parade of official style there is only a heap of rubbish' (No. 44).

It is rare, in fact, to find a nineteenth-century critic who had studied Dyce's edition with profit and could approach Skelton with the requisite historical and critical sympathy. An attempt that is particularly striking in its efforts to meet these demands is an unsigned article in the 'Dublin University Magazine' for 1866 (No. 45). It attempts to see Skelton in the context of his age, against the contemporary social, religious and political background. Seen in such a context Skelton's satires become profoundly and significantly serious. 'Elynor Ruming', for example, 'is the saddest of Skelton's works; there is no relenting, no hope in it.... Like Hogarth's "Progress," it pictures infatuated man under the sway of passion, recklessly sacrificing his all to morbid propensities'. But not all of Skelton's achievement is distorted by such didactic

solemnity. He is compared intelligently with Butler, Swift and (ironically) Pope, as well as at length with Rabelais. And there is a perception of the link between Skelton's satire intention and the aesthetic of his verse. It is observed of 'Colin Clout' that

Skelton's metre is all his own; the words spring from line to line like so many monkeys, pointing, grinning, chattering, howling, biting. The similes have that pitiless pungency which Butler afterwards evinced. The whole is breathless and fierce as a panther's attack.

Beneath the rhetoric there is demonstrated a sense of the energy and force of Skelton's satire, justifying the contention that 'In Skelton the satire of the age reached its acme, and after his disappears. He raised it to intense poetry, melting and modelling it with the fire of his original genius'.

Such a detailed defence and sustained enthusiasm for Skelton is unusual, especially when linked to an attempt to place him in an historical perspective which explains and justifies his satiric activity. Indeed, the very vigour with which it prosecutes its critical concerns places it apart from the general trend of commentary on Skelton in the later nineteenth century. Elsewhere, if he was no longer denigrated, he was not afforded such extended attention.

The prevailing attitudes are represented in the comments of John Churton Collins (No. 47). In 1880 he included a brief selection of Skelton's works in T.H. Ward's anthology 'The English Poets'. In his Introduction to this selection Collins reflects current critical orthodoxy concerning Skelton. He compares him (yet again) with Rabelais, praises 'Philip Sparrow' and 'Elynor Rummung', the latter for its 'sordid and disgusting delineation of humble life' in the manner of Swift and Hogarth. Also singled out for comment are 'the complete originality of his style...the variety of his powers... the peculiar character of his satire...the ductility of his expression'. The chief value of such remarks (unsupported as they are by any analysis) is that they distil what were then felt to be the distinctive features of Skelton's achievement. Collins presents Skelton as a figure who is acceptable and explicable largely in terms of his relationship to a tradition of satiric realism, particularly identifiable with the eighteenth century.

Critical discussion seems to have been satisfied to accept Skelton in such terms during the rest of the century. Critical comments are few. Augustine Birrell, the critic and essayist, commented in an aside in his essay on Poets Laureate that

Skelton 'was a man of original genius'. (58) In 1897, James Hooper offered a survey of Skelton's critical reputation in the 'Gentleman's Magazine'. (59) But the main activity had become scholarly, rather than critical, and was taking place in Europe, particularly Germany, rather than in the English-speaking world. Beginning in 1881 with H. von Krumpholz's study of 'Magnificence', there followed a series of literary, linguistic and textual studies that provided the first serious attempts at a scholarly examination since Dyce's edition. (60)

This trend towards scholarly study continued into the early years of the twentieth century. A number of studies were undertaken by the American professor, J.M.Berdan. (61) A few German and English scholars also made contributions, the most notable being R.L.Ramsay's edition of 'Magnificence', published by the Early English text Society in 1908. But there are scant traces of any critical interest.

This apparent lack of interest was ended by an upsurge of critical concern for Skelton from the 1920s, not expressed by professional critics or scholars but by a generation of young poets who perceived the relevance of Skelton to their own craft. Chief among these was Robert Graves, who spearheaded the revival of interest. Graves seems to have first read Skelton in 1915 or 1916 (he has left conflicting accounts). (62) The earliest clear evidence of his response is his poem 'John Skelton' included in 'Fairies and Fusiliers', published in late 1917. (63) The poem concludes on this note of affectionate admiration:

But angrily, wittily,  
Tenderly, prettily,  
Laughingly, learnedly,  
Sadly, madly,  
Helter-skelter John  
Rhymes serenely on,  
As English poets should.  
Old John, you do me good!

'Old John' seems to have become Graves's particular poetic mentor during the 1920s and 1930s. One indication of this is that between 1921 and 1938 ten of Graves's books are prefaced by quotations from Skelton. (64) And Skeltonic influence can be found in a number of his poems, most notable in his longest single poetic work 'The Marmosite's Miscellany' where the indebtedness to Skelton has been made explicit. (65)

This is not the place, however, to attempt to assess Skelton's influence on Graves's poetic oeuvre. It is sufficient to note that it has been pervasive. But few literary critics have reiterated their feelings about Skelton's achievement with such frequency and eloquence. In this regard he enjoys an important role in Skelton's twentieth-century critical heritage. For over forty years he has vigorously championed the claims of Skelton's genius and encouraged others to do likewise.

The earliest of his critical comments that I have been able to discover occurs in an article on *Neglected and Recently Rescued Poets* in 1920. There he observes that Skelton 'is, I suppose, the most submerged of the poets who held the undisputed laurels of their day'. (66) Subsequently, Graves strove to bring Skelton to the surface. Scattered through his works from the 1920s to the 1960s are various comments and analysis of Skelton's work. In 1925 Graves published an enthusiastic review of Richard Hughes's edition. (67) In the same year he included an analysis of 'Speak Parrot' in 'Poetic Unreason' (pp. 171-3). He returned to Skelton in the following year in his essay on *The Future of Poetry* where, with Shakespeare, he is proclaimed as 'one of the three or four outstanding English poets'. (68) The next year, 1927, saw the publication of Graves's own little selection with a combative preface announcing it as 'the first popular pamphlet of [Skelton's] verse since Elizabethan times, and is intended to call attention to the astonishing power and range of the truest of our neglected poets'. (69) And in 1931 he published the review article of Philip Henderson's edition (No. 51).

Graves's interest in Skelton seems to have declined during the 1930s and 1940s. (70) But from the late 1940s he shows a renewed concern with Skelton's poetic status. There is an admiring passage in 'The White Goddess' (1948). (76) 'The Common Asphodel' in the following year praises Skelton as 'the last of the classically educated English poets who could forget his Classics when looking at the countryside and not see Margery Milke-Ducke as Phyllis and Jolly Jacke as Corydon' (p. 255). In 'The Crowning Privilege' (1955) Graves asserts that Skelton 'showed a stronger sense of poetic calling than almost any of his successors' (p. 12). This is a theme to which he returns in his most extensive critical discussion in his 'Oxford Addresses on Poetry', where he maintains that 'the earliest and clearest example of the dedicated poet is John Skelton', who forms the subject of the first of his addresses.

Graves speaks at the beginning of this Oxford address of his first discovery of Skelton: 'What heightened my shock of

delight was that nobody else, it seemed, had felt as I did about him during the past four centuries.' This echoes the earlier, almost proprietorial concern for Skelton's reputation which informs his 'Adelphi' review:

The first and most enthusiastic modern rediscoverer [of Skelton] was, let me say at once, myself; and if I had not done so much to create a demand for a Complete Skelton this book would not be here for me to review.

Here we see Graves bringing to bear his own distinctive understanding of the complexities of technique involved in an adequate appreciation of this neglected poet:

Why has Skelton been forgotten so long? It has not been merely because of his reputation for beastliness—Urquhart's translation of Rabelais has always been deservedly popular among the educated class. It is that he has always been too difficult, not only in his language, so full of obsolete words, but in his metres, which became unintelligible as soon as the iambic metre and syllable counting overcame the native English style of writing musically in stresses.

It is primarily on the grounds of their failure to comprehend the complexities of Skelton's metrics that Graves attacks the work of the other editors, Richard Hughes ('the sort of book that needed only an intelligent scribe') and more especially Philip Henderson. Henderson is severely handled for his treatment of scansion, his inconsistent modernization and his imperfect scholarship. Graves's treatment of Henderson's edition is harsh and even unfair. The questions he raises in his review about a modern understanding of Skelton's text are not ones for which a dogmatic dismissal of Henderson are appropriate—as Henderson himself was quick to point out. (72) But the importance of Graves's essay is that it does raise such questions, albeit in an unduly ad hominem manner, questions which are fundamental to an informed appreciation of Skelton's art.

Graves's excited rediscovery of Skelton is found not only in his own often expressed admiration. His influence also served to direct other young poets towards Skelton. Chief among these was Richard Hughes, Graves's former schoolboy protégé. One manifestation of Hughes's own admiration for Skelton was his select edition of his poems which was (as we have seen) to earn Graves's disapproval. But Hughes's Introduction (No. 48), like



Graves's own work, is marked by a new technical appreciation of Skelton's verse. Indeed, he argues that 'simply as a rhythmical technician [Skelton] is one of the most accomplished the language has even known'. Both Graves and Hughes implicitly challenge earlier views of Skelton as interesting primarily on historical grounds, as a satirist and commentator on his age. Instead, Skelton is now presented as intrinsically important; his satiric function is de-emphasized. Hughes argues that 'Skelton is a poor satirist compared with his powers as a poet' and contends that his chief achievement lies in 'the value of his original work'.

Evidence of this new critical perspective can be found elsewhere. Louis Golding, the American poet and critic, urged the value of his prosodic achievement: 'This poet is significant almost entirely in virtue of such of his poetry as is written in his own inalienable metre, written...in the "Skeltonic doggerel".' (73) The 'historical' Skelton of earlier criticism was being replaced by Skelton the technician. The admiration for Skelton's doggerel was again taken up by another poet, Humbert Wolfe, in 1929. Using Churton Collins as his whipping boy, Wolfe is prepared to make enthusiastic claims for Skelton as versifier: 'Doggerel! I wish that we had more English poets capable of writing it' (No. 50).

This re-evaluation of Skelton's achievement continued to gain impetus. In June 1929, Edmund Blunden published a long article in the 'Times Literary Supplement' to mark the 400th anniversary of his death (No. 49). Blunden was another friend of Graves. Indeed, he links himself explicitly to the earlier work of critical 'recovery' undertaken by Graves and Hughes. He is prepared to confront the problem of earlier hostility to Skelton shown particularly in Pope, Warton and Strickland, as well as the technical and historical difficulties facing a modern reader of his verse. Blunden also raises the question of Skelton's character, which has, he asserts, 'been scribbled upon with an indolent vaingloriousness'. His defence against all these criticisms and problems is to insist on the essential accessibility of Skelton's verse to a modern reader: 'for our part we observe that a great deal of his writings is as natural in style and as clear in significance as could be wished'. And he proceeds to develop this defence through an examination of several of the major works including 'The Garland of Laurel', 'Colin Clout', 'Philip Sparrow' and 'Magnificence'.

Blunden's other main concern is to continue the work of his fellow poets in vindicating Skelton as metrist. He praises Skelton's 'metrical independence', his 'volleying succession of

rapid rhythms' and the fact that his verse is 'founded on a decisive feeling for accent'. And his campaign against the 'philosophical and cloistered iambic' leads to comparisons with Butler and Byron in his 'audacity and urgency'.

The importance of Blunden's essay in the rehabilitation of Skelton is readily apparent. It was published as a front-page article in a major literary weekly, offering both a wide-ranging vindication of the man and a detailed discussion of some of his major works. Such sympathetic exposure in a leading journal of wide circulation and influence was a sign of the more friendly critical temper of the times.

There were also further indications that Skelton was beginning to emerge from the admiration of a small but discriminating coterie to gain a more general interest. In 1931 Dent brought out a commercial edition of Skelton's poems—the first complete edition since Dyce's. It was edited by yet another young poet, Philip Henderson, and although his work, as we have seen, was criticized by Graves it is still in print and remains the text in which most readers now encounter Skelton. With modernized orthography and moderate annotation, Henderson places Skelton within the compass of the general reader of poetry.

Specialist scholarly activity had not been idle either, the 1930s saw a steady stream of significant Skelton research led by the work of L.J.Lloyd, William Nelson, I.A.Gordon and H.L.R.Edwards, which collectively constituted the first major attempt at clarification of the life and works since Dyce's edition. (74)

But in terms of the critical tradition one piece of work written during the 1930s stands out. W.H.Auden's essay John Skelton was written for inclusion in the anthology 'The Great Tudors', first published in 1935. It is clear the views he expresses there are the product of an extended interest in Skelton; his earlier prose and verse both suggest that Auden had studied him with some care. (75) But the fruits of this study achieve their fullest, and best, critical expression in the essay reprinted here (No. 52), abounding in fresh and stimulating insights focused into a balanced assessment.

Predictably, as with the other twentieth-century poets who have studied Skelton, Auden is especially concerned with his metrical techniques. He seizes on such features as the 'tempo' which is 'consistently quicker than that of any other English poet'. Skeltonics are praised for their 'natural ease of speech rhythm'. But Auden's perceptions are not restricted to an appreciation of aspects of Skelton's technique. He goes on to challenge received critical

views on the nature of Skelton's achievement: 'Skelton's work is abuse or flying, not satire', he argues, linked to a 'capacity for caricature'. The effect of such factors is to enhance the 'physical appeal' of his poetry. Skelton becomes, in Auden's terms, 'an entertainer' rather than a 'visionary'. Auden is evidently concerned to balance sympathy and admiration for Skelton against a sense of the nature of great poetry. Such careful discriminations provide an invaluable corrective to contemporary excesses of enthusiasm as well as to earlier excesses of denigration. If by the highest standards of poetic excellence Skelton is found wanting, the nature of his achievement is none the less warmly acclaimed. Auden's essay represents the most judicious and balanced assessment of Skelton's poetic status so far.

His essay also marks the beginning of a movement towards a more qualified and discriminating evaluation of Skelton, a movement which was to continue into the 1950s. Thus, G.S.Fraser, writing in 1936 for 'Adelphi' (No. 53), develops the view that Skelton was a comic yet fundamentally serious artist:

But the scenes he chooses are often not intrinsically funny. It is rather that he deliberately makes them funny, that he sustains the reader's amusement with his own energy of vision. On a much greater scale, of course Rabelais did the same sort of thing.

His final judgment, following on generally unfavourable comparisons with Rowlandson and Butler, is another carefully measured evaluation:

He created no tradition.... He is quite unique in his kind. The great stream of English literature would have taken much the same course if he had never written. But...Skelton will always remain an example for poets caught up in the coils of a tradition, a decent way of writing, which they feel to be constricting their lives. It is better, always, to be a buffoon than a bore.

In some respects the notion of Skelton as 'buffoon poet' is not a new one. It is foreshadowed in Warton's criticism of Skelton over 150 years previously. And it can, of course, be found earlier than that, in the sixteenth-century biographies and pseudo-biographies of the poet.

But here it is erected into an aesthetic appreciation of the postures and qualities of Skelton's verse, for which it is possible to have genuine, if circumscribed, admiration.

The same sympathetic, restrained admiration can be found in the last two articles in this collection, those by E.M.Forster and C.S.Lewis. Forster's essay (No. 54) was originally given as a lecture to the Aldeburgh Festival in Suffolk in 1950, and is particularly entertaining in its discussion of Skelton's East Anglian poems, notably 'Philip Sparrow', 'the pleasantest [poem] Skelton ever wrote'. Forster's general thesis is that Skelton 'belongs to an age of transition' or 'an age of break up'. This makes him, for Forster, 'difficult' or (as he characterizes Skelton at the outset) 'extremely strange'. Such comments may suggest an unhelpful generality superficiality to Forster's view of Skelton. But, in fact, writing as a non-specialist for a popular occasion he offers a deft account of Skelton's oeuvre from the perspective of a discriminating, independent critical intelligence. Yet his ultimate conclusions accord with those of other mid-twentieth-century critics, such as Auden and Fraser: 'On the whole he's a comic—a proper comic, with a love for improper fun, and a talent for abuse.' The judgment is perhaps distorting. The stress on the comic aspects of Skelton's art fails to account satisfactorily for large portions of his poetic corpus. But Forster's observations do help to provide a view of Skelton which reveals him as both accessible and alive to the intelligent general reader. As such, his lecture has a real, albeit restricted, value.

C.S.Lewis, writing in 1954 for the Oxford History of English Literature (No. 55), is more concerned to confront the larger critical problems of Skelton's achievements. He examines first the question of the nature of the aesthetic success of the Skeltonic, particularly in relation to Skelton's most praised poems, 'Philip Sparrow' and 'Elynor Rumming'. Lewis's conclusion here anticipates his more basic reservations about Skelton's art. The Skeltonic, he argues, is validated aesthetically 'because-and when—this helter-skelter, artlessness symbolizes something in the theme. [E.g.] Childishness, dipsomania, and a bird.... When it attempts something fully human and adult...it fails.' Indeed, for Lewis, Skelton's poetic success is often a fortuitous affair:

Skelton does not know the peculiar powers and limitations of his own manner, and does not reserve it, as an artist would have done, for treating immature or disorganized states of consciousness. When he happens to apply it to such states, we may get delightful poetry: when to others, verbiage. There is no building in his work, no planning, no reason why any piece should stop just where it does...and

no kind of assurance that any of his poems is exactly the poem he intended to write.

Such then it is urged, is the charm of Skelton— 'he is always in undress...the gifted amateur'. The judgment is offered as an explicit disagreement with Graves's earlier praise during his 'rediscovery' of Skelton. In fact, Lewis's assessment marks the extreme point in the swing of the critical pendulum so far during the twentieth century. Skelton ceases to be even a comic or a clown, for Lewis; instead he becomes an unwitting versifier whose achievements are effected as much through inadvertence as through design.

Surprisingly, there have been no significant attempts to rebut the critical position assumed by Lewis. Rather, since 1954 such attention as Skelton has received has tended to be scholarly rather than critical. (76) Much significant work has been done to elucidate the many historical and textual problems which still surround Skelton's poetry. In particular, Robert Kinsman, in a series of studies beginning in the early 1950s, has done much to sharpen our sense of the historical perspectives through which Skelton must be understood. (77) He has also compiled a fine selection of Skelton's verse and a study of the canon. (78) There have been several book-length studies, including works by Italian, French and American scholars. (79) But it will probably not be until the appearance of the projected new editions of Skelton by the Penguin and Clarendon presses that there will be any fresh stimulus towards major new critical re-evaluation.

It would be fruitless to speculate on the form such a re-evaluation will take. But if it is at all influenced by the past it will doubtless be marked by either an emphatic affirmation or a rejection of the values identified in Skelton's poetry. For Skelton has always been a controversial figure, capable of attracting vehement supporters and detractors in equal measure. Most often such vehemence has been aroused in literary figures of authority and distinction whose opinions cannot be lightly dismissed. The direction of Skelton criticism has been crucially affected by the views of such men as Puttenham, Pope, Southey and Graves. But even more poets and men of letters have felt inspired by Skelton to judgments of genuine independence. Caxton, Barclay, Drayton, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Wordsworth and W.H.Auden are only the most obvious examples. Not all such judgments are favourable; but they testify to a engagement and concern, which is, even at its most negative, an oblique tribute to Skelton's verse.

Skelton has always been a difficult writer for critics to place. Few professionals from Warton to C.S.Lewis have felt altogether comfortable with him. He disconcerts by the nature of his innovative genius, particularly in his blending of new verse techniques with complex modes of satire, and by the remarkable forms these elements are given. Such a fusion is particularly challenging in the demands it places on the readers of Skelton's poetry. All that can be said with any certainty is that Skelton will continue to challenge future generations as effectively as he has the past.

## Notes

- 1 'Wyatt: The Critical Heritage', ed. P.Thomson (London, 1974), p. 1.
- 2 This work has been edited for the Early English Text Society by F.M.Salter and H.L.R.Edwards (London, 1956).
- 3 The best sources for Skelton's biography are the studies by H.L.R.Edwards, 'Skelton' (London, 1949) and M.Pollet, 'John Skelton, Poet of Tudor England' (London, 1971).
- 4 He produced at least one didactic prose treatise for the prince. This has been edited by F.M.Salter in 'Speculum', IX (1934), pp. 25-37.
- 5 For discussion of this allusion see R.S.Kinsman, A Skelton Reference, c. 1510, 'Notes & Queries', CCV (1960), pp. 210-11.
- 6 It is listed among Barclay's works in Bale's 'Scriptorium illustrium Maioris Brytanniae (Basle, 1557), p. 723.
- 7 'The Eclogues of Alexander Barclay', ed. B.White (London, 1928), p. 165:4th Eclogue, lines 679-86.
- 8 Ed. William Nelson (London, 1955), vv. 113-19.
- 9 Both the 'Hundred Merry Tales' and the 'Merry Tales' are reprinted in Dyce's edition of 'The Poetical Works of John Skelton' (London, 1843), I, pp. lvii- lxxv.
- 10 The relevant extract from this work is conveniently printed in Dyce, I, pp. lxxv-vi.
- 11 'Short Title Catalogue' (hereafter STC) 19299, p. 103.
- 12 STC 4941, pp. 99, 113.
- 13 The 'Life' is conveniently reprinted in C.C.Mish, ed., 'Short Fiction of the Seventeenth Century' (New York, 1968), pp. 84-113.
- 14 See William Nelson, 'John Skelton, Laureate' (New York, 1939), p. 232.

- 15 Cf. J.W.McCain, Heywood's 'The Foure PP': A Debt to Skelton, 'Notes & Queries', CLXXIV (1938), p. 205, and also the references to Heywood's 'Play of Love' cited there.
- 16 The comment occurs among the latest 'Additio' (Sig. Sss iiv).
- 17 Bodleian Library MS Selden supra 64; this has been edited by R.L.Poole and M.Bateson (Oxford, 1902), pp. 253–5.
- 18 See Nelson, pp. 230–1, for details.
- 19 STC 13568, p. 1612.
- 20 See Harvey's 'Pierce's Superogation' (1593), p. 75 (STC 12903), for the reference to Skelton as a 'Malancholy foole'. Concerning Skelton's limited technical skills, Harvey records his father's facility in imitating an 'owld Ryme, of sum Skeltons, or Skoggins making as he pretended' and offers a sample of the imitation; see 'Gabriel Harvey's Maginalia', ed. G.C.Moore Smith (Stratford-upon-Avon, 1913), p. 154.
- 21 See 'The Collected Poems of Joseph Hall', ed. A.Davenport (Liverpool, 1949), p. 89, line 76.
- 22 Cf. Davenport, p. 252, n. 76, and the evidence of Skelton's influence cited there.
- 23 Meres's comments are conveniently reprinted in G.G. Smith, ed., 'Elizabethan Critical Essays' (Oxford, 1904), II, p. 314.
- 24 Cf. J.A.S.McPeck, 'Catullus in Strange and Distant Britain', *Harvard Studies in Comparative Literature*, XV (Cambridge, Mass., 1939), pp. 61–9, for fuller details of the influences discussed in this paragraph.
- 25 The 'Revised Short Title Catalogue' (London, 1976) lists seven separate editions between 1531 and 1558. There were six separate editions of 'Philip Sparrow' and six of 'Why Come Ye Nat to Court' during the sixteenth century.
- 26 Nelson, p. 233, draws attention to the earlier appearance of Colin Clout as a character in 'The treatyse answerynge the boke of Berdes, Compyled by Collyn clowte' (1543).
- 27 See A.D.Deyermond, Skelton and the Epilogue to Marlowe's 'Dr. Faustus', 'Notes & Queries', CCVIII (1963), pp. 410–11, where the influence of 'The Garland of Laurel' is detected, and C.C.Seronsy, A Skeltonic Passage in Ben Jonson, 'Notes & Queries', CXCVIII (1953), p. 24, where the influence of 'Elynor Rumming' is suggested.
- 28 STC 18271, Sigs D 2–3 passim.
- 29 There are a number of allusions to a play entitled 'Scoggin and Skelton' (now apparently lost) during the period 1600–1601; see 'Henslowe's Diary', ed. R.A. Foakes and R.J.Rickert (Cambridge, 1961), pp. 138, 166, 167, 169.
- 30 See further on this point M.Pollet, 'John Skelton, Poet of Tudor England' (London, 1971), pp. 152–4, to which the rest

of this paragraph is indebted.

- 31 'Summers Last Will and Testament' in 'The Works of Thomas Nashe', ed. R.B.McKerrow (Oxford, reprinted 1958), III, p. 252. Nashe seems here to be echoing the Prologue to Chaucer's 'Parson's Tale' where the Parson talks disapprovingly of the 'rum, ram, ruf' of northern alliterative writing.
- 32 I have followed the text in C.H.Herford and P. and E.Simpson, eds, 'Ben Jonson', VII (Oxford, 1941), pp. 707–29.
- 33 Cf., for example, lines 369–80, 404–6.
- 34 Jonson also speaks of the poem in 'A Tale of a Tub' (first published in 1640) (V, vii, 23–5):

The Worke-man Sir! the Artificer! I grant you. So Skelton-  
Lawreat; was of *Elynour Rummig* But she the subject of  
the Rout, and Tunning.

See 'Ben Jonson', III, ed. C.H.Herford and P.Simpson (Oxford, 1927), p. 85.

- 35 STC 4579; see the reprint edited with an introduction by H.Neville Davies (Cambridge, 1976).
- 36 STC 4581; the work is reprinted in Mish, 'Short Fiction of the Seventeenth Century', pp. 118–91 (the Skelton reference is on p. 120 of this edition).
- 37 Mention may also be made here of two works which appear to be imitations of 'Elynour Rummig': 'Doctor Double Ale' (n.d., STC 7071) and Richard West's 'News from Bartholomew Fair' (1606), STC 25264).
- 38 Cf. 'The Poems of Michael Drayton', ed. J.W.Hebel (Oxford, 1932), II, 360–1, 370.
- 39 For an attempt (in my view very unconvincing) to see Skelton as a more serious influence in seventeenth-century poetry, see S.Kandaswami, Skelton and the Metaphysicals, in 'Critical Essays on English Literature Presented to Professor M.S.Duraiswami...' ed. V.S.Seturaman (Madras, 1965), pp. 157–69. One possible minor indication of Skeltonic influence (not noted by Kandaswami) is on Herrick; see, further, Robert Graves, English Epigrams, 'Times Literary Supplement', 19 July 1934, p. 511.
- 40 STC 22614; the picture and the verses are reproduced in Dyce's edition, II, pp. 153–7.
- 41 The author was William Vaughan (1577–1641).
- 42 Page references in parentheses in the text are to the 'Third Part of The Golden Fleece' (1626), STC 24609.



- 43 These lines do not appear in the first edition (1630).  
 44 See 'The Works of John Cleveland' (1687), pp. 306–7.  
 45 This contains two attempts at Skeltonics: 'The Awakened Child's Lamentation' (pp. 2–7) and 'Of Non by Nature' (p. 67).  
 46 ...we may gather that *the Old Testament*, *Christs Passion*, and the *Acts of the Apostles*, were the ordinary entertainment on the Stage, all *Europe* over, for an hundred year or two, of our greatest ignorance and darkness. But that in *England* we had been used to another sort of Plays in the beginnings of *H. VIII*. Reign may be seen from that of the *Laureat* on Cardinal woolsey:

Like Mahound in a Play: No man dare him with say [*'Why Come Ye Nat to Court?'*, lines 594–5]

(*'The Critical Works of Thomas Rymer'*, ed. C.A. Zimansky (New Haven, 1956), pp. 129–30)

- 47 Before this, mention might be made of Swift's Skeltonic imitation 'Musa Clonsaghiana' written in 1717; see 'The Poems of Jonathan Swift', ed. H. Williams, 2nd ed. (Oxford, 1958), III, p. 966. Swift wrote another Skeltonic in 1721, 'Copy of a Copy of Verses from Thomas Sheridan, Clerk, to George Nim-Dan-Dean' (*ibid.*, III, pp. 1019–20).  
 48 I.A. Gordon, 'John Skelton, Poet Laureate' (Melbourne, 1943), p. 200.  
 49 The work was, in fact, written largely by Robert Shiels; the account of Skelton occurs in I, pp. 27–30.  
 50 See further on this point R.M. Baine, Warton, Collins and Skelton's 'Necromancer', 'Philological Quarterly', XLIX (1970), pp. 245–8.  
 51 'Gentleman's Magazine', XLVIII (1778), p. 270.  
 52 See 'The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth', ed. E. de Selincourt, 2nd ed. (Oxford, 1954), III, p. 18, sonnet xxii; this was first noted by Dyce in his edition of Skelton, II, pp. 105–6.  
 53 See, for example, his letters to Dyce of 23 July 1831, 21 July 1832, 4 December 1833 and his letter of thanks of 5 January 1844 to Dyce for a copy of his edition; 'The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth', ed. E. de Selincourt (Oxford, 1939), pp. 554, 630, 678, 1196.  
 54 See the Preface to Dyce's 1843 edition, I, pp. *v–vi*; Southey urges that 'an editor...could not more worthily employ himself than by giving a good and complete edition of [Skelton's] works'.

- 55 'Gentleman's Magazine', n.s. XXII (1844), p. 227.
- 56 See R.A.Davison, Melville's 'Mardi' and John Skelton, 'Emerson Society Quarterly', XLIII (1966), pp. 86-7.
- 57 This edition was published c. 1855 by Houghton Mifflin of Boston, together with an edition of Donne; for details of this edition and its attribution to Lowell see G.L.Keynes, 'A Bibliography of Dr. John Donne', 4th ed. (Oxford, 1973), p. 211.
- 58 'Essays About Men, Women and Books' (1894), p. 158.
- 59 Skelton Laureate, 'Gentleman's Magazine', CCLXXXIII (1897), pp. 297-309.
- 60 Krumpholz's study was entitled 'Skelton und sein Morality play Magnyfycence' (Prosnitz, 1881). This was followed by other scholarly studies including: G.Schonenburg, 'Die Sprache Skeltons in seinem kleineren Werken' (Marburg, 1888); J.Zupitza, Handschriftliche Bruchstücke von Skeltons 'Why Come Ye Not to Courte?', 'Archiv', LXXXV (1890), pp. 429-36; A.Rey, 'Skelton's satirical poems...' (Stuttgart, 1899); A.Koelbing, 'Zur Charakteristik Skeltons' (Berne, 1904); A.Thummel, 'Studien über Skelton' (Leipzig, 1905); and F.Brie, Skelton Studien, 'Englische Studien', XXXVII (1907), pp. 1-86.
- 61 The Dating of Skelton's Satires, 'PMLA', 29 (1914), pp. 499-516; The Poetry of Skelton, 'Romanic Review', 6 (1915), pp. 364-77; 'Speke Parrot': An Interpretation of Skelton's Satire, 'Modern Language Notes', 30 (1915), pp. 140-4; 'Early Tudor Poetry' (New York, 1920), *passim*.
- 62 In the 'Adelphi' article included in this collection he states that he first read Skelton 'in 1915'. But in 'Oxford Addresses on Poetry' (1962), p. 5, he claims to have discovered Skelton 'by accident in 1916, while on short leave from the Somme trenches, and on long leave from St. John's College'.
- 63 The poem occurs on pp. 6-8. Graves may have been affected earlier in his poem 'Free Verse' included in 'Over the Brazier' (1916), pp. 14-15, where Skeltonic influence has been detected by D. Day; see 'Swifter than Reason' (Chapel Hill, NC, 1963), p. 6.
- 64 For details see F.Higginson, 'A Bibliography of Robert Graves' (Hamden, Conn., 1966), nos A 6, 7, 12, 14, 16, 23, 24, 25, 31, 48.
- 65 Cf. Graves's comments in the reprint of 'The Marmosite's Miscellany' issued by the Pharos Press (Victoria, BC, 1975).
- 66 'Woman's Leader', 18 June 1920, pp. 462-3; this article is signed 'FUZE'.

- 67 'Beastly' Skelton, 'Nation and Athenaeum', XXXVI (1925), pp. 614–15.
- 68 'Fortnightly Review', 125 (1926), p. 295. This comment was deleted when this essay was reprinted in 'The Common Asphodel' (1949); see p. 53.
- 69 'John Skelton Laureate' (Augustan Books of English Poetry, 2nd series, no. 12).
- 70 I am only aware of two letters in the 'Times Literary Supplement': 19 July 1934, p. 511 (on Skelton and Herrick), and 28 May 1938, p. 368 (on the neglect of Skelton), between the early 1930s and late 1940s.
- 71 3rd ed. (1951), p. 451: 'The only two English poets who had the necessary learning, poetic talent, humanity, dignity and independence of mind to be Chief Poets were John Skelton and Ben Jonson; both were worthy of the laurel that they wore.'
- 72 See his reply to Graves's review in 'Adelphi', n.s. III (1933–4), pp. 239–41.
- 73 Merie Skelton, 'Saturday Review', 14 January 1922, pp. 30–1.
- 74 The various studies by these scholars are most conveniently collected in their subsequent books; see L.J.Lloyd, 'John Skelton' (Oxford, 1938); W.Nelson 'John Skelton, Laureate' (New York, 1939); I.A. Gordon, 'John Skelton, Poet Laureate' (Melbourne, 1943); and H.L.R.Edwards, 'Skelton' (London, 1949).
- 75 For example, he reviewed Henderson's edition of Skelton in 'Criterion', XI (1932), pp. 316–19; and a number of his early poems in 'Poems' (1928) and 'Poems' (1930) seem to reflect Auden's study of Skelton's verse.
- 76 One possible exception is Stanley E. Fish's book (see below, n. 79).
- 77 See, for example: 'Phyllyp Sparowe': Titulus, 'Studies in Philology', XLVII (1950), pp. 473–84; The 'Buck' and the 'Fox' in Skelton's 'Why Come Ye Nat to Court?', 'Philological Quarterly', XXIX (1952), pp. 61–4; Skelton's 'Colin Cloute': The Mask of 'Vox Populi', 'University of California Publications, English Studies', I (1950), pp. 17–26; Skelton's 'Uppon a Deedmans Hed': New Light on the Origin of the Skeltonic, 'Studies in Philology', L (1953), pp. 101–9; The Voices of Dissonance: Patterns in Skelton's 'Colyne Cloute', 'Huntington Library Quarterly', XXVI (1963), pp. 291–313; and Skelton's 'Magnyfycence': The Strategy of the 'Olde Sayde Sawe', 'Studies in Philology', LXIII (1966), pp. 99–125.

- 78 'John Skelton Poems', ed. R.S.Kinsman (Oxford, 1969), and R.S.Kinsman and T.Yonge, 'John Skelton: Canon and Census' (New York, 1967).
- 79 See M.Pollet, 'John Skelton' (Paris, 1962); Edvige Schulte, 'La Poesia di John Skelton' (Naples, 1963); and Stanley E. Fish, 'John Skelton's Poetry' (Cambridge, Mass., 1965).

# Note on the Text

The materials in this volume follow the original texts in most important respects. Occasionally, light punctuation has been added and contractions have been silently expanded. Antiquated footnotes in the original have generally been deleted; when this has been done it is indicated in the headnote to the particular selection. Obvious typographical errors have been silently corrected. All references to Skelton's text are to 'The Poetical Works of John Skelton', ed. Alexander Dyce (1843; reprinted New York, AMS Press, 1965). It is a matter of continuing regret that this edition has not yet been superseded; but it is still the only available complete, lineated edition. The prose translations from the Latin are as literal as possible, with no claims to literary style. For the translation of Whittinton (No. 7) I am indebted to Mr William Fitzgerald of Princeton University. Notes I have added have been given arabic numerals. The authority for dates is generally the 'Dictionary of National Biography'.

## 1. WILLIAM CAXTON ON SKELTON

c. 1490

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William Caxton (1422?-91), from the prologue to the 'Eneydos' (STC 24796), his translation of Virgil's 'Aeneid', published c. 1490, A ii r-v. Caxton was the first English printer and publisher, as well as a prolific editor and translator.

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Thenne I praye alle theym that shall rede in this lytyl treatys to holde me for excused for the translatynge of hit. For I knowleche my selfe ignorant of connyng to enpryse on me so hie and noble a werke/But I praye mayster Iohn Skelton late created poete laureate in the vnyuersite of oxenforde to ouersee and correcte this sayd booke. And taddresse and expowne where as shalle be founde faulte to theym that shall requyre it. For hym I knowe for suffycient to expowne and englysshe euery dyffyculte that is therein/For he hath late translated the epystlys of Tulle/and the boke of dyodorus syculus, and diuerse other werkes oute of latyn in to englysshe not in rude and olde language, but in polysshed and ornate termes craftely. as he that hath redde vyrgyle/ouyde. tullye. and all the other noble poetes and oratours/to me vnknown: And also he hath redde the ix. muses and vnderstande theyr musicalle scyences and to whom of theym eche scyence is appropred. I suppose he hath dronken of Elycons well.

## 2. ERASMUS ON SKELTON, 'THAT INCOMPARABLE LIGHT AND ORNAMENT OF BRITISH LETTERS'

c. 1499

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(a) From 'Opus Epistolarum Des. Erasmi Roterodami', edited by P.S.Allen (Oxford, 1906), I, p. 241, letter 104. This letter is to Prince Henry, the future Henry VIII, to whom Skelton was tutor at the time of writing. The letter can be assigned to autumn 1499.

The translation is by F.M.Nichols, 'The Epistles of Erasmus' (1901), I, p. 202.

Erasmus (d. 1536) was perhaps the most notable European humanist of the early sixteenth century.

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Et hec quidem interea tanquam ludicra munuscula tue puericie dicauimus, vberiora largituri vbi tua virtus vna cum etate accrescens vberiore carminum materiam suppeditabit. Ad quod equidem te adhortarer, nisi et ipse iamdudum sponte tua velis remisque (vt aiunt) eotenderes et domi haberes Skeltonum, vnum Britannicarum litterarum lumen ac decus, qui tua studia possit non solum accendere sed etiam consummare.

(We have for the present dedicated these verses, like a gift of playthings, to your childhood, and shall be ready with more abundant offerings, when your virtues, growing with your age, shall supply more abundant material for poetry. I would add my exhortation to that end, were it not that you are of your own accord already, as they say, under way with all sails set, and have with you Skelton, that incomparable light and ornament of British letters, not only to kindle your studies, but bring them to a happy conclusion.)

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(b) From British Library MS Egerton 1651, ff. 6v-7r. Headed 'Carmen Extemporale' ('Extemporary Song'), these verses were presumably composed in the autumn of 1499 during Erasmus' visit to England.

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Quid tibi facundum nostra in praeconia fontem  
 Soluere collibuit,  
 Aeterna vates Skelton dignissime lauro  
 Castalidumque decus?  
 Nos neque Pieridum celebrauimus antra sororum,  
 Fonte nec Aonio  
 Ebibimus vatium ditantes ora liquores.  
 At tibi Apollo chelyn  
 Auratam dedit, et vocalia plectra sorores;  
 Inque tuis labiis

Dulcior Hyblaeo residet suadela liquore.  
 Se tibi Calliope  
 Infudit totam; tu carmine vincis olorem;  
 Cedit et ipse tibi  
 Vitro porrecta cithara Rhodopeius Orpheus.  
 Tu modulante lyra  
 Et mulcere feras et duras ducere quercus,  
 Tu potes et rapidos  
 Flexanimis fidibus fluuiorum sistere cursus,  
 Flectere saxa potes.  
 Graecia Maeonio quantum debedat Homero,  
 Mantua Virgilio,  
 Tantum Skeltoni iam se debere fatetur  
 Terra Britannia suo.  
 Primus in hanc Latio deduxit ab orbe Camoenas,  
 Primus hic edocuit  
 Exculte pureque loqui. Te principe Skelton  
 Anglia nil metuat  
 Vel cum Romanis versu certare poetis.  
 Viue valeque diu.

O eternal poet Skelton, most deserving of the laurel crown and worthy of the Muses' favour, why does it please you to pour out your charming fountain of eloquence for sister Muses, nor do we drink rich liquors from the lips of poets by the Aonian fountain. (1) But Apollo gave you his golden lyre, and the sisters (2) gave the words for your songs. And sweet persuasion dwells on your lips with sweet liquor. (3) Calliope (4) poured all her talents upon you; you vanquish sense by your song; and Orpheus of Thrace spontaneously yields up to you his preferred lute. By the melody of your lyre you both soothe wild beasts and bend sturdy oaks; you can cause the swift torrent of rivers to stand still by your moving words; you can make stones weep. As much as Greece owes Lydian Homer, as much as Mantua owes to Virgil, so much should the land of Britain now confess that it owes to its Skelton. He first led away the Muses from their Italian dwelling place into this country. Here he first taught how to speak freely and purely. While you are its principal poet, O Skelton, England need fear nothing, for you are worthy to vie in versifying with Roman poets. Long may you live in health.

#### Notes

- 1 Near mount Helicon, where the Muses were traditionally held to dwell.



- 2 I.e. the Muses.
- 3 'Hyblaeo...liquore': Hybla was a mountain in Sicily noted for its honey.
- 4 The chief of the Muses.

3. ALEXANDER BARCLAY ON 'PHILIP SPARROW'

1509

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From 'The Ship of Fools' (STC 3545), printed by Pynson in 1509, Y iii'. This is a translation by Alexander Barclay (1475? –1552) of Sebastian Brandt's 'Narrenschiff', an elaborate classification of fools and their various kinds of folly. Barclay is the author of a number of other verse works, including the first eclogues in English and a 'Life of St. George'. This passage is from the section of his work entitled 'A brefe addicion of the syngularyte of some new Folys'.

Holde me excusyd: for why my wyll is gode  
Men to induce vnto vertue and goodnes  
I wryte no Iest ne tale of Robyn hode  
Nor sawe no sparcles ne sede of vyciousnes  
Wyse men loue vertue, wylde people wantones  
It longeth nat to my scyence nor cunnyng  
For Phylyp the Sparowe the Dirige to synge.

4. 'THE GREAT CHRONICLE' ON SKELTON AND HIS CONTEMPORARIES

c. 1510

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From 'The Great Chronicle of London' (Guildhall Library MS 3313), a history of London in verse and prose from 1189 to 1512, generally held to be the work of Robert Fabian (d. 1513); as edited by A.H.Thomas and I.D. Thornley (London, 1938), p. 361. The passage was probably written c. 1510. The 'Cornyshe'

mentioned is the poet William Cornish (d. 1524); ‘mastyr moor’ is St Thomas More (1478–1535). The passage is an attack on John Baptist de Grimaldis (the ‘cursid Caytyff’), a henchman of Henry VII’s advisors, Empson and Dudley.

---

O most cursid Caytyff, what shuld I of the wryte  
 Or telle the particulers, of thy cursid lyffe  
 I trow If Skelton, or Cornysh wold endyte  
 Or mastyr moor, they myght not Inglysh Ryffe  
 Nor yit Chawcers, If he were now in lyffe  
 Cowde not In metyr, half thy shame spelle  
 Nor yit thy ffalshod, half declare or telle

#### 5. HENRY BRADSHAW ON SKELTON AND OTHER SUPERIOR POETS

c. 1513

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(a) From ‘The Life of St. Werburge of Chester’ by Henry Bradshaw (d. 1513?), a Benedictine monk living in Chester and posthumously printed by Richard Pynson in 1521 (STC 3506), S ii<sup>r</sup>. The stanza is a variant of the ‘modesty topos’ whereby the author contrasts his work with that of other superior poets, in this instance Chaucer, John Lydgate, Skelton and Alexander Barclay.

---

To all auncient poetes litell boke submytte the  
 Whilom flouryng in eloquence facundious  
 And to all other/whiche present nowe be  
 Fyrst to maister Chaucer/and Ludgate sentencious  
 Also to preignaunt Barkley/nowe beyng religious  
 To inuentiue Skelton and poet laureate  
 Praye them all of pardon both erly and late

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(b) From Bradshaw’s other posthumously published saint’s life, ‘The Life of St. Radegunde’, published by Pynson c. 1521 (STC

3507), D iv. Once again, Bradshaw employs the modesty topos contrasting his capacities as poet with the same four poets as in No. 5a ('the monk of Bury' is Lydgate).

---

What memory or reason is sufficient  
To remembre the myracles of this lady  
What story can expresse or pen is conuenient  
Playnly to discribe all the noble story  
It were a plesaunt werke for the monk of Bury  
For Chaucer or Skelton fathers of eloquens  
Or for religious Barkeley to shewe theyr diligens

6. WILLIAM LILY ON SKELTON: 'NEITHER LEARNED, NOR A POET'

c. 1519

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The text of these lines by the grammarian William Lily (1468? – 1522) comes from British Library MS Harley 540, f. 57v. The translation is that made by bishop Thomas Fuller in 1662 (see below, No. 24).

---

Quid me Scheltone fronte sic aperta  
Carnis vipereo potens veneno  
Quid versus trutina meos iniqua  
Libras. Dicere vera num licebit  
Doctrina tibi dum parari famam  
Et doctus fieri studes poeta:  
Doctrinam nec habes nec es poeta

(With face so bold, and teeth so sharp  
Of Viper's venome, why dost carp?  
Why are my verses by thee weigh'd  
In a false scale? May truth be said?  
Whilst thou, to get the more esteem,  
A learned Poet fain wouldst seem;  
Skelton, thou art, let all men know it,  
Neither learned, nor a poet.)

## 7. ROBERT WHITTINTON IN PRAISE OF SKELTON, THE 'LEARNED POET'

1519

From Whittinton's poem 'In clarissimi Scheltonis Louaniensis poeta: laudes epigramma' ('On the most famous John Skelton, poet of Louvain: laudatory epigrams') included in his 'Opusculum Roberti Whittintoni in florentissima Oxoniensi achademia Laureati' (1519), Sigs c iiiiv–viii, STC 25540.5. The work is a series of laudatory poems addressed to such contemporary figures as Henry VIII, Thomas More and Cardinal Wolsey.

I have adopted Dyce's emendation of *Tum* for *Cum* in line 75. Whittinton's astrological preamble (lines 1–34) has been omitted.

Whittinton (fl. 1519) was the author of a number of grammatical treatises.

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Nubifer assurgit mons Pierus atque Cithaeron,	35
Gryneumque nemus dehinc Heliconque sacer;	
Inde et Parnasi bifidi secreta subimus,	
Tota ubi Mnemosynes sancta propago manet.	
Turba pudica novem dulce hic cecinere sororum;	
Delius in medio plectra chelynque sonat:	40
Aurifluis laudat modulis monumenta suorum	
Vatum, quos dignos censet honore poli:	
De quo certarunt Salamin, Cumae, vel Athenae,	
Smyrna, Chios, Colophon, primus Homerus erat;	
Laudat et Orpheum, domuit qui voce leones,	45
Eurydicen Stygiis qui rapuitque rogis;	
Antiquum meminit Musaeum Eumolpide natum,	
Te nec Aristophanes Euripidesque tacet;	
Vel canit illustrem genuit quem Teia tellus,	
Quemque fovit dulci Coa camena sinu;	50
Deinde cothurnatum celebrem dat laude Sophoclem,	
Et quam Lesbides pavit amore Phaon;	
Aeschylus, Amphion, Thespis nec honore carebant,	
Pindarus, Alcaeus, quem tuleratque Paros;	
Suat alii plures genuit quos terra Pelasga,	55
Daphnaeum cecinit quos meruisse decus:	
Tersa Latinorum dehinc multa poemata textit,	
Laude nec Argivis inferiora probat;	
Insignem tollit ter vatem, cui dedit Andes	
Cunas urbs, clarum Parthenopaea taphum;	60

Blanda Corinna, tui Ponto religatus amore,  
 Sulmoni natus Naso secundus erat;  
 Inde nitore fluens lyricus genere Appulus ille  
 Qui Latiis primus mordica metra tulit;  
 Staius Aeacidem sequitur Thebaida pingens, 65  
 Emathio hinc scribens praelia gesta solo;  
 Cui Verona parens hinc mollis scriptor amorum,  
 Tu nec in obscuro, culte Tibulle, lates;  
 Haud reticendus erat cui patria Bilbilis, atque  
 Persius hinc mordax crimina spurca notans; 70  
 Eximius pollet vel Seneca luce tragoedus,  
 Comicus et Latii bellica praeda ducis;  
 Laudat et hinc alios quos saecula prisca fovebant;  
 Hos omnes longum jam meminisse foret.  
 Tum Smintheus, paulo spirans, ait, ecce, sorores, 75  
 Quae clausa oceano terra Britannia nitet!  
 Oxoniam claram Pataraea ut regna videtis,  
 Aut Tenedos, Delos, qua mea fama viret:  
 Nonne fluunt istic nitidae ut Permessidos undae,  
 Istic et Aoniae sunt juga visa mihi? 80  
 Alma fovet vates nobis haec terra ministros,  
 Inter quos Schelton jure canendus adest:  
 Numina nostra colit; canit hic vel carmina cedro  
 Digna, Palatinis et socianda sacris;  
 Grande decus nobis addunt sua scripta, linenda 85  
 Auratis, digna ut posteritate, notis;  
 Laudiflua excurrit serie sua culta poesis,  
 Certatim palmam lectaque verba petunt;  
 Ora lepore fluunt, sicuti dives fagus auro,  
 Aut pressa Hyblaeis dulcia mella favis; 90  
 Rhetoricus sermo riguo fecundior horto,  
 Pulchrior est multo puniceisque rosis,  
 Unda limpidior, Parioque politior albo,  
 Splendidior vitro, candidorque nive,  
 Mitior Alcinois pomis, fragrantior ipso 95  
 Thureque Pantheo, gratior et violis;  
 Vincit te, suavi Demonsthene, vincit Ulyxim  
 Eloquio, atque senem quem tulit ipse Pylos;  
 Ad fera bella trahat verbis, nequii quod Atrides  
 Aut Brisis, rigidum te licet, Aeacides; 100  
 Tantum ejus verbis tribuit Suadela Venusque  
 Et Charites, animos quolibet ille ut agat,  
 Vel Lacedaemonios quo Tyrtaeus pede claudo  
 Pieriis vincens martia tela modis,  
 Magnus Alexander quo belliger actus ab illa 105

Maeonii vatis grandisonante tuba;  
 Gratia tanta suis virtusque est diva camenis,  
 Ut revocet manes ex Acheronte citos;  
 Leniat hic plectro vel pectora saeva leonum,  
 Hic strepitu condat moenia vasta lyrae; 110  
 Omnimodos animi possit depellere morbos,  
 Vel Niobes luctus Heliadamque truces;  
 Reprimat hic rabidi Saulis sedetque furores,  
 Inter delphinas alter Arion erit;  
 Ire Cupidineos quovis hic cogat amores, 115  
 Atque diu assuetos hic abolere queat;  
 Auspice me tripodas sentit, me inflante  
 calores Concipit aethereos, mystica diva canit;  
 Stellarum cursus, naturam vasti et Olympi,  
 Aeris et vires hic aperire potest, 120  
 Vel quid cunctiparens gremio tellus fovet almo,  
 Gurgite quid teneat velivolumque mare;  
 Monstratur digito phoenice ut rarior uno,  
 Ecce virum de quo splendida fama volat!  
 Ergo decus nostrum quo fulget honorque, sorores, 125  
 Heroas laudes accumulate viro;  
 Laudes accumulunt Satyri, juga densa Lycaei,  
 Pindi, vel Rhodopes, Maenala quique colunt;  
 Ingeminent plausus Dryades facilesque Napaeae,  
 Oreadum celebris turba et amadryadum; 130  
 Blandisonum vatem, vos Oceanitidesque atque  
 Naiades, innumeris tollite praeconiis;  
 Aeterno vireat quo vos celebravit honore,  
 Illius ac astris fama perennis eat:  
 Nunc maduere satis vestro, nunc prata liquore 135  
 Flumina, Pierides, sistite, Phoebus ait.  
 Sat cecinisse tuum sit, mi Schelton, tibi laudi  
 Haec Whitintonum: culte poeta, vale.

(From here we approach also the retreats of cleft Parnassus, where all the holy progeny of Mnemosyne lives. Here the chaste band of nine sisters sang and the Delian (1) in their midst plays with plectrum and lyre. With golden-flowing measures he praises the monuments of his poets, those he thinks worthy of the honour of the heavens. First was Homer, whose birthplace was contested by Salamis, Cumae, Athens, Smyrna, Chias and Colophon. And he praises Orpheus who with his voice tamed lions and who snatched Eurydice from the pyres of the Styx. And he calls to mind ancient Musaeus, son of Eumolpis, and is not silent about you, Aristophanes, nor Euripides. Then he sings of the famous poet born of Teian soil (2) and the one whom the Coan

Muse fondled in her lovely lap; (3) and then buskined Sophocles is celebrated with praise and the Lesbian whom Phaon fed with love. (4) Aeschylus, Amphion and Thespis had their honour and Pindar, Alcaeus and the poet born of Paros. (5) Several others born in Pelasga he sang, that had observed the honour of Daphne's laurel. Then he glorifies many neat poems of the Latins and judges them to be not inferior to the Argives. Three times he praises the poet to whom the city Andes was a cradle and Parthenope a famous grave. (6) Naso, (7) born in Sulmo was the second, bound by love of you, charming Corinna, in Pontus. Then that brilliantly flowing lyric poet, (8) Apulian by birth, who first brought the biting metre to the Latins. Statius follows the Aeacid (9) picturing the Thebais, then the one who writes of the battles fought on Emathian soil. (10) And you, elegant Tibullus, do not lie in obscurity, smooth writer of love poetry whose birthplace was Verona. The one whose country was Bilbilis (11) was not passed over; and then came biting Persius marking dirty crimes. The excellent Seneca is brilliant as tragedian, as the battle spoil of a Latin general is as comedian. (12) After this he praises others whom former ages cherished, but to call to mind all these now would be tedious.

Then Apollo, with deeper breath, said, 'Behold sisters, the land which shines surrounded by the ocean, Britain! Famous Oxford you see, like the Pataraean kingdom, or Tenedos, or Delos where my fame is strong. Do not the waters there flow bright as those of Peressus, and do I not see there the Aonian mountains? This land gently nourishes the poets who are my attendants, among whom Skelton is rightly to be celebrated. He cultivates my godhead; he sings songs worthy of the cedar even, songs to be added to the Palatine rites. His songs give us great glory and should be overlaid with gold, as worthy of posterity. His polished poetry runs in a chain flowing with praise and the selected words seek the palm in rivalry. His mouth flows with charm as the holy beech does with gold, or the sweet honey pressed from Hyblaeen honeycombs. His rhetorical speech is more bountiful than a watered garden, and much more beautiful even than purple roses, more clear than a wave, more smooth than the white of Parian marble, more brilliant than crystal and whiter than snow, riper than the apples of Alcinous, more fragrant than Thurean and Pantheon perfume, and more pleasing than violets. He conquers you, smooth Demosthenes, and you, Ulysses, in eloquence, as well as that old man that Pylos bore. (13) He could persuade you to war, stubborn Achilles, with his words, which Agamemnon or Brisis could not; so much force has Persuasion and Venus and the Graces given to his words, that he might lead minds wherever he wants, either in the limping metre in which Tyrtaeus led the Spartans (14) overcoming the weapons of Mars with Pierian rhythms, or that in which great

Alexander, the warlike, was spurred on by that great-sounding trumpet of the Maeonian poet. (15) There is such charm and divine power in his Muses that he might recall the shades, summoning them from Acheron. He could calm with his plectrum even the savage breasts of lions, or with the sound of his lyre build vast walls. He could chase away all diseases of the mind, even the violent griefs of Niobe or of the sisters of Phaethon. He could check and calm the furies of raging Saul; among the dolphins he will be another Arion. He could compel the desires caused by Cupid to go anywhere, and he could destroy those long ingrained. With me as interpreter, he feels the tripod, with me fanning them he conceives heavenly flames and sings holy mysteries. He can reveal the courses of the stars, the nature of the deep and of Olympus and the powers of the sky, or what the earth, mother of all, nourishes in her gentle lap, or what the sail-flown sea holds in its waters. He is pointed out as one rarer than a single phoenix: behold the man whose brilliant fame flies! Therefore, sisters, wherever our glory and honour shines, heap up a hero's praise on this man. Let the satyrs heap up praise, those who inhabit the thick hills of Lycaeus, of Pindus, and Rhodope and Maenalus. Let the Oryads and the friendly dell-nymphs, the numerous crowd of Oreads and of Hamadryads heap up praise. You, daughter of Oceanus and Naiads praise the smooth-sounding poet with innumerable proclamations. Let him flourish in the eternal honour with which he celebrated you, and let his fame be perennial in the stars. Now the fields have been soaked enough in your water; stop your rivers, Pierides, says Phoebus. Let these praises of you, Skelton, sung by your Whittinton, suffice: learned poet, farewell.)

## Notes

- 1 Apollo.
- 2 Anacreon.
- 3 Possibly Simonides or Bacchylides.
- 4 Sappho.
- 5 Archllochus.
- 6 Virgil.
- 7 Ovid.
- 8 Horace.
- 9 I.e. Achilles in the 'Achilleis'.
- 10 Lucan.
- 11 Martial.
- 12 Terence.
- 13 Nestor.
- 14 I.e. elegiac.
- 15 Homer.



## 8. JOHN BALE ON THE LIFE OF SKELTON

1557

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From the ‘*Scriptorum illustrium maioris Brytanniae*’ of bishop John Bale (1495–1563). The text is from the Basle edition of 1557, p. 651. Bale was a dramatist, controversialist and the author in this instance of a biographical and bibliographical reference work containing the fullest early biography and bibliography of Skelton. It supplements the accounts of Skelton in Bale’s two earlier works, his ‘*Illustrium Maioris Britanniae Scriptorum*’ (1548) and his ‘*Index Britanniae Scriptorum*’ (post 1548). Bale bases his account on the collections of the antiquary Edward Braynewode, who is otherwise unknown.

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Ioannes Skeltonus, poeta laureatus, ac theologie professor, parochus de Dyssa in Nordoulgiae comitatu, clarus & facundus in utroque scribendi genere, prosa atque metro, habebatur. facetijs in quotidiana inuentione plurimum deditus fuit: non tamen omisit sub persona ridentis, ut in Horatio Flacco, ueritatem fateri. Tam apte, amoene, ac false, mordaciter tamen, quorundam facta in amoena carpere nouit, ut alter uideretur Lucianus aut Democritus, ut ex opusculis liquet. Sed neque in scripturis facris absque omni iudicio erat, quamuis illud egregie dissimulauit. In clero non ferenda mala uidebat, & magna & multa: quae nonnunquam uiuis perstrinxit coloribus, ac scommatibus non obscoenis. Cum quibusdam blateronibus fraterculis, praecipue Dominicanis, bellum gerebat continuum. Sub pseudopontifice Nordouicensi Ricardo Nixo, mulierem illam, quam sibi secreto ob Antichristi metum desponsauerat, sub concubinae titulo custodiebat. In ultimo tamen vitae articulo super ea re interrogatus, respondit, se nusquam illam in conscientia coram Deo, nisi pro uxore legitima tenuisse. Ob literas quasdam in Cardinalem Vuolsium inuectiuas, ad Vuestmonasteriense tandem asylum confugere, pro uita seruanda coactus fuit: ubi nihilominus sub abbate Islepo fauorem inuenit. De illo Erasmus in quadam epistola, ad Henricum octauum regem, sic scribit: Skeltonum, Brytannicarum literarum lumen ac decus, qui tua studia possit non solum accendere, sed etiam consummare: hunc domi habes &c iste uero edidit, partim Anglice, partim Latine,

[A list of Skelton's works follows.]

(John Skelton, poet laureate and professor of theology, was priest of Diss in the county of Norfolk and skilled in both kinds of writing, verse and prose. He was much given to the daily invention of satires. Nevertheless, under the mask of laughter, he did not omit to utter truth, as did Horatius Flaccus. (1) He knew how to speak about various matters in a pleasant manner, so skilfully, pleasantly, deceitfully, albeit biting, that he seemed another Lucian (2) or Democritus, (3) as is clear from his works. But he was not in full accord with Holy Scripture, although he concealed the fact deftly. He saw many great evil deeds being carried out among the clergy, which he sometimes attacked with lively rhetoric and judicious sneers. He continuously waged war on certain babbling friars, especially the Dominicans. Under the false bishop of Norwich, Richard Nix, he kept that woman (whom he had secretly married for fear of Antichrist) under the title of concubine. When, as he was dying, he was asked about her, he replied that he had nothing on his conscience before God concerning her, since she had been kept as a true wife. Because of certain satiric verses against cardinal Wolsey he was at last compelled to seek sanctuary at Westminster to save his life; where, notwithstanding he found favour with abbot Islep.)

#### Notes

- 1 Horace (65–8 BC), the Roman poet and satirist.
- 2 A Greek rhetorician and satirist.
- 3 The Greek philosopher (c. 460–370 BC).

#### 9. WILLIAM BULLEIN ON SKELTON'S SATIRES ON WOLSEY

1564

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From 'A Dialogue against the Fever Pestilence' by William Bullein (d. 1576), printed by John Kingston in 1564 (STC 4036), Bvi r–v. Bullein was a physician who wrote a number of medical tracts and who also had, as will be apparent, distinctive and idiosyncratic views on literature. The work from which this

extract comes also includes observations on such poets as Chaucer, Gower, Lydgate and Barclay.

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Skelton satte in the corner of a Piller, with a Frostie bitten face, frownyng, and is scant yet cleane cooled of the hotte burnyng Cholour, kindeled against the cankered Cardinall Wolsey; wrytyng many sharpe Disticons, with bloudie penne against him, and sent them by the infernall riuers *Styx*, *Flegiton*, and *Acheron* by the Feriman of hell called *Charon*, to the saied Cardinall.

#### 10. THOMAS CHURCHYARD IN PRAISE OF SKELTON

1568

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This poem by the soldier and poet Thomas Churchyard (1520?–1604) appears as a preface (A ii<sup>v</sup>-A iii<sup>v</sup>) to the edition of the ‘Pithy, Pleasaunt and Profitable Works of Maister Skelton, Poete Laureate’, published in 1568 (STC 22608). The punctuation has been somewhat modernized.

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If slouth and tract of time  
 (That wears eche thing away)  
 Should rust and canker worthy artes,  
 Good works would soen decay.  
 If suche as present are  
 For goeth the people past,  
 Our selus should soen in silence slepe,  
 And loes renom at last.  
 No soyll nor land so rude  
 But some odd men can shoe:  
 Than should the learned pas vnknowe,  
 Whoes pen & skill did floe?  
 God sheeld our slouth wear sutch,  
 Or world so simple nowe,  
 That knowledge scaept without reward,  
 Who sercheth vertue throwe,  
 And paints forth vyce a right,  
 And blames abues of men,  
 And shoes what lief desarues rebuke,

And who the prayes of pen.  
 You see howe forrayn realms  
   Aduance their Poets all;  
 And ours are drowned in the dust,  
   Or flong against the wall.  
 In Fraunce did Marrot (1) raigne;  
   And neighbour thear vnto  
 Was Petrark, marching full with Dantte,  
   Who erst did wonders do;  
 Among the noble Grekes  
   Was Homere full of skill;  
 And where that Ouid norisht was  
   The soyll did florish still  
 With letters hie of style;  
   But Virgill wan the fraes,  
 And past them all for deep engyen,  
   And made them all to gaes  
 Vpon the bookes he made:  
   Thus eche of them, you see,  
 Wan prayse and fame, and honor had,  
   Eche one in their degree.  
 I pray you, then, my friendes,  
   Disdaine not for to vewe  
 The workes and sugred verses fine  
   Of our raer poetes newe;  
 Whoes barborus language rued  
   Perhaps ye may mislike;  
 But blame them not that ruedly playes  
   If they the ball do strike,  
 Nor skorne not mother tunge,  
   O babes of Englishe breed!  
 I haue of other language seen,  
   And you at full may reed  
 Fine verses trimly wrought,  
   And coutcht in comly sort;  
 But neuer I nor you I troe,  
   In sentence plaine and short  
 Did yet beholde with eye,  
   In any forraine tonge:  
 A higher verse a staetly[er] style,  
   That may be read or song,  
 Than is this daye in deede  
   Our englishe verse and ryme,  
 The grace wherof doth touch ye gods,  
   And reach the cloudes somtime.

Thorow earth and waters deepe  
 The pen by skill doth passe,  
 And featly nyps the worldes abuse,  
 And shoes vs in a glasse  
 The vertu and the vice  
 Of eury wyght alyue:  
 The hony combe that bee doth make  
 Is not so sweete in hyue  
 As are the golden leues  
 That drops from poets head,  
 Which doth surmount our common talke  
 As farre as dros doth lead:  
 The flowre is sifted cleane,  
 The bran is cast aside,  
 And so good corne is knowen from chaffe,  
 And each fine graine is spide.  
 Peers Plowman was full plaine,  
 And Chausers spreet was great;  
 Earle Surry had a goodly vayne;  
 Lord Vaus (2) the marke did beat,  
 And Phaer did hit the pricke  
 In thinges he did translate,  
 And Edwards had a special gift;  
 And diuers men of late  
 Hath helpt our Englishe toung,  
 That first was baes and brute: —  
 Ohe, shall I leaue out Skeltons name,  
 The blossome of my frute,  
 The tree wheron indeed  
 My branchis all might groe?  
 Nay, Skelton wore the Lawrell wreath,  
 And past in schoels, ye know;  
 A poet for his arte,  
 Whoes iudgment suer was hie,  
 And had great practies of the pen,  
 His works they will not lie;  
 His terms to taunts did lean,  
 His talke was as he wraet,  
 Full quick of witte,  
 right sharp of words,  
 And skilfull of the staet;  
 Of reason riep and good,  
 And to the haetfull mynd,  
 That did disdain his doings still,  
 A skornar of his kynd;

Most pleasant euery way,  
 As poets ought to be,  
 And seldom out of Princis grace,  
 And great with eche degre.  
 Thus haue you heard at full  
 What Skelton was in deed;  
 A further knowledge shall you haue,  
 If you his bookes do reed.  
 I haue of meer good will  
 Theas verses written heer,  
 To honour vertue as I ought,  
 And make his fame apeer,  
 That whan the Garland gay  
 Of lawrel leaues but laet:  
 Small is my pain, great is his prayes,  
 That thus sutch honour gaet.

#### Notes

- 1 Clement Marot (1496–1544), a French sonneteer and pastoral poet.
- 2 Thomas Vaux (1510–56), poet.

#### 11. JOHN GRANGE ON SKELTON'S 'RAGGED RYME'

1577

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The 'Golden Aphroditis' of John Grange, a euphuistic work in verse and prose dedicated to noble ladies, was published in 1577 (STC 12174). This extract occurs on N 4<sup>r</sup>. Little is known about Grange himself.

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For by what meanes could *Skelton* that Laureat poet, or *Erasmus* that great and learned clarke have uttered their mindes so well at large, as thorowe their clokes of mery conceytes in wryting of toyes and foolish theames? as *Skelton* did by 'Speake Parrot', 'Ware the hauke', 'The Tunning of Elynour rumming', 'Why come ye not to the Courte?' 'Phillip Sparrowe', and such like, yet what greater sense of better matter can be, that is in this ragged ryme contayned? or who would haue hearde his fault so playnely tolde him if not in such a gibyng sorte?

12. WILLIAMS WEBBE ON SKELTON: 'A PLEASANT CONCEYTED FELLOWE'

1586

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From 'A Discourse of English Poetry' by William Webbe (fl. 1586–91), published by John Charlewood in 1586 (STC 25172), C iii<sup>v</sup>. Webbe was a friend of Spenser. His comments on Skelton occur during a survey of the history of English poetry, in which it becomes clear that his sympathies lie with more recent sixteenth-century poetry rather than with Skelton's.

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Since these I knowe none other tyll the time of Skelton, who writ in the time of kyng *Henry* the eyght, who as indeede he obtayned the Lawrell Garland, so may I wyth good ryght yelde him the title of a Poet: hee was doubtles a pleasant conceyted fellowe, and of a very sharpe wytte, exceeding bolde, and would nyppe to the very quicke where he once sette holde.

13. GEORGE PUTTENHAM ON SKELTON'S METRE

1589

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Extracts from 'The Arte of English Poesie' by George Puttenham (1529?–90), published in 1589 (STC 20519). This was one of the most important Elizabethan treatises on the history and practise of poetry.

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(a) Book I, Chapter xxxi: 'Who in any age haue bene the most commended writers in our English Poesie, and the Authors censure vpon them', V I i<sup>v</sup>.

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*Skelton* a sharpe Satirist, but with more rayling and scoffery then became a Poet Lawreat, such among the Greekes were called

*Pantomimi*, with vs Buffons, altogether applying their wits to Scurrillities & other ridiculous matters.

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(b) From Book II, Chapter ix: ‘Of Concorde in long and short measures, and by neare or farre distaunces, and which of them is most commendable’, L iiiiv-M i<sup>r</sup>. Here Puttenham launches his attack on Skelton’s verse. The works of the ‘tauerne minstrels’ with whom Skelton is compared are Chaucer’s ‘Tale of Sir Thopas’, the romances ‘Bevis of Hampton’ (STC 1987–96) and ‘Guy of Warwick’ (STC 12540–42) and the popular tale of ‘Clymme of the Clough and Adam Bell’ (STC 1806–13).

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Note also that rime or concorde is not commendably vsed both in the end and middle of a verse, vnlesse it be in toyes and trifling Poesies, for it sheweth a certaine lightnesse either of the matter or of the makers head, albeit these common rimers vse it much, for as I sayd before, like as the Symphonie in a verse of great length, is (as it were) lost by looking after him, and yet may the meetre be very graue and stately: so on the other side doth the ouer busie and too speedy returne of one maner of tune, too much annoy & as it were glut the eare, vnlesse it be in small & popular Musickes song by these *Cantabanqui* vpon benches and barrels heads where they haue none other audience then boys or countrey fellowes that passe by them in the streete, or else by blind harpers or such like tauerne minstrels that giue a fit of mirth for a groat, & their matters being for the most part stories of old time, as the tale of ‘Sir Topas’, the reportes of ‘Beuis of Southampton’, ‘Guy of Warwicke’, ‘Adam Bell, and Clymme of the Clough’ & such other old Romances or historicall rimes, made purposely for recreation of the comon people at Christmasse diners & brideales, and in tauernes & alehouses and such other places of base resort, also they be vsed in Carols and rounds and such light or lasciuious Poemes, which are commonly more commodiously vttered by these buffons or vices in playes then by any other person. Such were the rimes of *Skelton* (vsurping the name of a Poet Laureat) being in deede but a rude rayling rimer & all his doings ridiculous, he vsed both short distaunces and short



measures pleasing onely the popular eare: in our courtly maker we banish them vtterly. Now also haue ye in euery song or ditty Concorde by compasse & concorde entangled and a mixt of both, what that is and how they be vsed shalbe declared in the chapter of proportion by *scituation*.

## 14. GABRIEL HARVEY ON SKELTON, THE 'MADBRAYNED KNAVE'

c. 1573–80, 1592

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(a) From an incomplete elegy on the poet George Gascoigne, which Gascoigne meets various English poets in Hades. Taken from 'The Letter-Book of Gabriel Harvey, A.D. 1573–80', edited by E.J.L.Scott (1884), p. 57.

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...Acquayntaunce take of Chaucer first  
And then wuth Gower and Lydgate dine.

And cause thou art a merry mate  
Lo Scoggin where he lawghes aloane  
And Skelton that same madbrayned knave  
Looke how he knawes a deade horse boane

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(b) From Gabriel Harvey's 'Four Letters and Certaine Sonnets' (1592), p. 7 (STC 12900). The work is primarily an attack on Robert Greene and his followers, with whom Skelton and his alter ego Scoggin are linked. They appear later in the same work (pp. 12–13).

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*Salust*, and *Clodius* learned of *Tully* to frame artificial Declamations, and partheticall Inuectives against *Tully* himself, and other worthy members of that State: if mother Hubbard in the vaine of Chawcer, happened to tell one Canicular (1) tale;

father *Elderton*, (2) and his sonne *Greene*, in the vaine of *Skelton*, or *Scoggin*, will counterfeitan an hundred dogged Fables, Libles, Calumnies, Slaunders, Lies for the whetstone, what not, and most currishly snarle and bite where they should most kindly fawne and licke.

## Notes

- 1 Literally ‘to do with a dog’; cf. the punning reference to ‘an hundred dogged Fables...’.
- 2 William Elderton (d. 1592?), an Elizabethan actor and ballad writer.

## 15. ARTHUR DENT ON SKELTON'S IMMORAL WORKS

c. 1590

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From ‘The Plaine Man’s Pathway to Heaven’, first published in 1601 (STC 6626), a didactic work written earlier (c. 1590) by the puritan Arthur Dent (d. 1607). The extract is taken from pp. 408–9. ‘Elynor Rumming’ is linked here with a number of popular and (by Dent’s standards) immoral works: ‘The Court of Venus’, first published c. 1538 (STC 24650); William Painter’s ‘The Palace of Pleasure’, which appeared in at least five editions from 1565 (STC 19121–5); the enormously popular ‘Bevis of Hampton’, of which there are at least ten pre-1640 editions (STC 1987–96); ‘The Merry Jest of the Friar and the Boy’, first published c. 1580 and surviving in five editions (STC 14522–4.3); ‘Clem of the Clough, Adam Bell...’, extant in at least eight edition (STC 1806–13); and ‘The Pretie Conceit of John Splinters last will and Testament’ (STC 23102), published c. 1520. (I have been unable to identify ‘The odd tale of William, Richard and Homfrey’.) All these works are condemned in the course of the following dialogue, together with Skelton’s poem, as Catholic ploys to divert men from the proper study of the Bible. For comparable lists of popular works involving Skelton see the extracts from Puttenham (No. 13b) and Drayton (No. 16).

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*Antile:* ...If you will goe home with me, I can giue you a speedy remedy: for I haue many pleasant and merry bookes, which if you should heare them read, would soone remedy you of this melancholy. I haue the Court of Venus, the Pallace of pleasure, Beuis of Southampton, Ellen of Ruming, The mery Jest of the Friar and the Boy: The pleasaunt story of Clem of the Clough, Adam Bell, and William of Cloudesley. The Odde Tale of William, Richard, and Homfrey. The pretie Conceit of John Splinters last will, and Testament: which al are excellent and singular bookes against hartquames: and to remove such dumpishnesse, as I see you are now fallen into.

*Asune:* Youre vaine and friuolous bookes of Tales, Iests and lies, would more increase my grieffe, & strike the print of sorrow deeper into my heart.

*Phila:* ...How came you by all these good bookes? I should haue saide, so much trashe, and rubbish.... They be goodly geare, trimme stuffe. They are good to kindle a fire, or to scoure a hotte Oven withall. And shal I tel you mine opinion of them? I doo thus thinke, that they were deuised by the diuel: seene, and allowed by the Pope: Printed in hel: bound vp by Hobgoblin: and first published and dispersed in Rome, Italy and Spaine. And all to this ende, that thereby men might be kept from the reading of the Scriptures.

#### 16. MICHAEL DRAYTON IN PRAISE OF SKELTON

c. 1600, 1606, 1619

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(a) From the play ‘The first part of the True Honorable Historic of the life of Sir John Oldcastle’ (1600) by Michael Drayton (1563–1631), H 2r (STC 18795). All the works alluded to were highly popular works: there were at least ten editions of ‘Bevis of Hampton’ up to 1640 (STC 1987–96), two of ‘Owleglasse’ (STC 10563–4), three of ‘The Friar and the Boy’ (STC 14522–4.3), and seven of ‘Robin Hood’ in its various forms (STC 13687–93). For comparable lists of popular works including Skelton see the extracts from Arthur Dent (No. 15) and Puttenham (No. 13b).

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*Enter the Sumner with bookes.*

*Bish.* What bringst thou there? what? bookes of heresie.

*Som.* Yea my lord, heres not a latine booke, No not so much as our ladies Psalter, Heres the Bible, the testament, the Psalmes in meter, The sickemans salve, the treasure of gladnesse, And al in English, not so much but the Almanack's English.

*Bish.* Away with them, to 'th fire with them Clun, Now fie upon these upstart heretikes, Al English, burne them, burne them quickly Clun.

*Harp.* But doe not Sumner as youle answere it, for I have there English bookes my lord, that ile not part with for your Bishoppricke, Bevis of Hampton, Owleglasse, the Frier and the Boy, Ellen of Rumming, Robin hood, and other such godly stories, which if ye burne, by this flesh ile make ye drink their ashes in S.Margets ale.

exeunt.

(b) From Drayton's 'Poems Lyrick and Pastorall' (1606?), B 2<sup>v</sup> (STC 7217). The passage is essentially a defence of the ode form and the various metrical forms which can be employed in it.

To those that with despight  
shall terme these Numbers slight,  
tell them their iudgements blind,  
much erring from the right,  
tis a Noble kind.

Nor ist the verse doth make,  
that giueth or doth take,  
tis possible to clyme  
to kindle or to slake,  
although in *Skelton's* Ryme.

(c) From 'Poems by Michael Drayton Esquyer' (1619), Iii 4<sup>v</sup> (STC 7222), 'To the Reader of his Pastorals',

Master EDMUND SPENSER had done enough for the immortalitie of his Name, had he only giuen vs his ‘Shepheards Kalender’, a Master-piece if any. The ‘Colin Clout’ of SKOGGAN, vnder King HENRY the Seuenth, is prettie; but BARKLEY’s ‘Ship of Fooles’ hath twentie wiser in it.

## 17. PIMLYCO, OR RUNNE RED-CAP’ IN PRAISE OF ‘ELYNOR RUMMING’

1609

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From ‘Pimlyco, or Runne Red-Cap’ (1609) (STC 19936), B 2–2<sup>v</sup>. This curious work is part Skeltonic imitation, part direct quotation from ‘Elynor Rumming’ and part a burlesque dream vision.

---

...By chance I found a Booke in *Ryme*,  
 Writ in an age when few wryt well,  
 (*Pans Pipe* (where none is) does excell.)  
 O learned *Gower*! It was not thine,  
 Nor *Chaucer*, (thou are more *Diuine*.)  
 To *Lydgates* graue I should do wrong,  
 To call him vp by such a Song.  
 No, It was *One*, that (boue his *Fate*,)  
 Would be Styl’d *Poet Laureate*;  
 Much like to *Some* in these our daies,  
 That (as bold *Prologues* do to *Playes*,)  
 With *Garlonds* haue their *Fore-heads* bound,  
 Yet onely empty *Sculles* are crownde:  
 Or like to these (seeing others bye)  
 Will sit so, tho their *Seate* they buy,  
 And fill it vp with loathed *Scorne*,  
 Fit *burdens* being by them not borne,  
 But seeing their *Trappings* rich and gay,  
 The *Sumpter-Horses* trudge away,  
 Sweating themselves to death to beare them,  
 When poore *Iades* (drawing the *Plough*) outweare them.

But all this while we haue forgot  
 Our *Poet*: tho I nam'de him not,  
 But only should his *Rymes* recite,  
 These (all would cry) did *Skelton* write.  
 I tournde some leaues and red them o're  
 And at last spyed his *Elynor*,  
 His *Elynor* whose fame spred saile,  
 All *England* through for Nappy Ale  
*Elynour Rumming* warmde his wit  
 With Ale, and his *Rimes* paide for it.

But seeing thou takst the Laureats name  
 (*Skelton*) I iustly thee may blame,  
 Because thou leau'st the *Sacred Fount*,  
 For *Liquor* of so base account.  
 Yet (I remember) euen the *Prince*  
 Of Poesie, with his pen (long since)  
 Ledde to a fielde, the *Mice* and *Frogges*;  
 Others haue ball'd out bookes of *Dogges*:  
 Our diuine *Maro* (1) spent much oyle  
 About a *Gnat*. One keeps a coyle  
 With a poore *Flea* (*Naso*, (2) whose wit  
 Brought him by *Phoebus* side to wit.)  
 Since then these *Rare-ones* stack'd their strings,  
 From the hie-tuned acts of Kings  
 For notes so low, lesse is thy *Blame*,  
 For in their pardon stands thy *Name*.  
 Let's therefore lead our eyes astray,  
 And from our owne intended may,  
 Go backe to view thine *Hostesse* picture  
 Whome thus thou draw'st in liuely colour

[Goes on to quote (B3-B4<sup>v</sup>), lines 1–100 of 'Elynour Rumming'; subsequently C1<sup>v</sup>-C4 quotes lines 101–234, 243–50.]

#### Notes

- 1 A reference to the poem 'Culex' sometimes attributed to Virgil.
- 2 A reference to the late medieval 'Carmen de Pulice' ascribed to Ovid.

## 18. NICHOLAS BRETON ON SKELTON'S 'RUFFLING RIMES'

1612

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This passage occurs in 'Cornu-copiae or Pasquils Night Cap' (STC 3639), 0 2<sup>r</sup>, published in 1612 and attributed to the poet Nicholas Breton (1545?–1626?). This work is a comic poem, the chief theme of which is cuckoldry. There is a later brief allusion to Skelton on Q 3<sup>r</sup>.

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But as for Skelton with his Lawrel Crowne,  
 Whose ruffling rimes are emptie quite of marrow:  
 Or fond *Catullus*, which set grossely downe  
 The commendation of a sillie Sparrow:  
     Because their lines are void of estimation,  
     I passe them ouer without confutation.  
 Much would the Cuckoe thinke herselfe impared,  
 If shee with Philip Sparrow were compared

## 19. HUMPHREY KING ON SKELTON AND OTHER 'MERRY MEN'

1613

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From Humphrey King's 'An Halfe-penny-worthe of Wit, in a Penny-worth of Paper. Or, the Hermit's Tale', published in 1613, p. 21 (STC 14973). The work is a homiletic dialogue in verse, part of which (pp. 16–21) is written in what is characterized as 'Skeltons rime'. The comparison between Skelton and Robin Hood was a frequent one in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, cf., for example, Nos 3, 16.

---

But what meane I to runne so farre?  
 My foolish words may breed a skarre,  
 Let vs talke of *Robin Hoode*,  
 And little *Iohn* in merry Shirewood,  
 Of Poet *Skelton* with his pen,

And many other merry men,  
 Of May-game Lords, and Sommer Queenes,  
 With Milke-maides, dancing o're the Greenes....

#### 20. WILLIAM BROWNE ON SKELTON

1614

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'The Shepherd's Pipe', published in 1614 (STC 3917), is a series of eclogues by William Browne (1591–1643?) and various other poets. This passage is from the end of the first eclogue, C 7<sup>r</sup>, after Browne's modernization of Thomas Hoccleve's 'Tale of Jonathas'. After the tale proper there follows a pastoral dialogue between Willie and Roget in which Willie compares Skelton unfavourably with Browne's version of Hoccleve.

---

Happy surely was that swaine!  
 And he was not taught in vaine:  
 Many a one that prouder is,  
 Has not such a song as this;  
 And have garlands for their meed,  
 That but iarre as *Skeltons* reed.

#### 21. HENRY PEACHAM ON SKELTON'S UNMERITED REPUTATION

1622

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'The Compleat Gentleman' by Henry Peacham (1576? –1643?) was published in 1622 (STC 19502). It is a treatise on manners and gentlemanly conduct and includes a chapter 'Of poetrie' from which (p. 95) the following extract comes.

---

Then followed *Harding*, and after him *Skelton*, a Poet *Laureate*, for what desert I could neuer heare. If you *Skelton* desire to see



his vaine and learning, an Epitaph vpon King *Henry* the seauenth at *Westminster* will discover it.

22. 'A BANQUET OF JESTS' ON THE NEGLECT OF SKELTON

1639

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From 'A Banquet of Jestes', '5th impression' (1639) (STC 1370). This work is a collection of prose jests. The lines below come from the prefatory Printer to the Reader, A 5<sup>v</sup>. They do not occur in the first edition of the work in 1630.

---

The coarser Cates, that might the feast disgrace,  
Left out: And better serv'd in, in their place  
*Pasquel's* conceits are poore, and *Scoggins* (1) dry.  
*Skeltons* meere rime, once read, but now laid by.

Note

- 1 'Pasquil' and 'Scogan' were by this time names typifying vulgar, satiric verse.

23. JAMES HOWELL ON THE NEGLECT OF SKELTON

1655

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From 'Epistolae Ho-Eliaanae', 3rd ed. (1655), by James Howell. The work is a collection of Howell's letters on various subjects. Howell (1594? -1666) was historiographer to Charles II.

---

Touching your Poet Laureat *Skelton*, I found him (at last, as I told you before) skulking in *Duck-lane*, pitifully totter'd and

torn, and as the times are, I do not think it worth the labour and cost to put him in better clothes, for the Genius of the Age is quite another thing: yet ther be som Lines of his, which I think will never be out of date for their quaint sense; and with these I will close this Letter, and salute you, as he did his friend with these options:

Salve plus decies quam sunt momenta dierum,  
 Quot species generum, quot pes, quot nomina perurn,  
 Quot pratis flores, quot sunt et in orbe colores,  
 Quot pisces, quot aves, quot sunt et in aequore naves,  
 Quot volucrum Pennae, quot sunt tormenta Gebennae,  
 Quot coeli stellae, Quot sunt miracula Thomae,  
 Quot sunt virtutes, tantas tibi mitto salutes. (1)

These were the wishes in times of yore of Jo. Skelton, but now they are of Your J.H.

Note

1 This Latin poem is attributed to Skelton, see Dyce, I, p. 177.

#### 24. THOMAS FULLER'S BIOGRAPHY ON SKELTON

1662

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From the 'Worthies of England' (1662), pp. 257–8, by Thomas Fuller (1608–61), bishop and chaplain in extraordinary to Charles II. The 'Worthies' is a series of lives of eminent Englishmen.

---

John Skelton is placed in this County, on a double probability. First, because an ancient family of his *name* is eminently known long fixed therein. Secondly, because he was beneficed at *Dis*, a Market-town in *Norfolk*. He usually styles himself (and that *Nemine contradicente* [without contradiction], for ought I find) *the King's Orator and Poet Laureat*. We need go no further for a *testimony* of his *learning* than to *Erasmus*, styling him in his

letter to King Henry the eight, *Britannicarum Literarum Lumen et Decus* [see No. 2a above].

Indeed he had *scholarship* enough, and *wit* too much; seeing one saith truly of him, *Ejus sermo salsus in mordacem, risus in opprobrium, jocus in amaritudinem*. (1) Yet was his Satyrical wit unhappy to light on *three Noli me tangere's* (2) *viz.*, the *rod* of a *Schoolmaster*, the *Couls* of *Friars*, and the *Cap* of a *Cardinal*. The *first* gave him a *lash*, the *second* deprived him of his *livelyhood*, the *third* almost outed him of his life.

*William Lilly* was the *School-master*, whom he fell foul with, though gaining nothing thereby, as may appear by his return. And this I will do for *W.Lilly* (though often beaten for his sake) endeavour to translate his answer; [For text and translations see No. 6 above].

The *Dominican Friars* were the next he contested with, whose viciousness lay pat enough for his hand; but such foul *Lubbers* fell heavy on all which found fault with them. These instigated *Nix* Bishop of *Norwich* to call him to account for keeping a *Concubine*, which cost him (as it seems) a suspension from his benefice.

But *Cardinal Wolsey* (*impar congressus* [unequal contest] betwixt a *poor Poet* and so *potent a Prelate*) being inveighed against by his pen, and charged with *too much truth*, so persecuted him that he was forced to take Sanctuary at *Westminster*, where *Abbot Islip* used him with much respect. In this restraint he died, *June 21, 1529*; and is buried in *Saint Margaret's* chapel with this *Epitaph*:

J.Skeltonus Vates Pierius hic situs est.

[J.Skelton, poet of the Muses, is buried here.]

The word *Vates* being *Poet* or *Prophet*, minds me of this dying *Skelton's prediction*, foretelling the ruin of *Cardinal Wolsey*. Surely, one unskilled in *prophecies*, if well versed in *Solomon's Proverbs*, might have prognosticated as much, that, *Pride goeth before a fall*.

We must not forget, how being charged by some on his *death-bed*, for begetting many children on the aforesaid *Concubine*, he protested that in his Conscience he kept her in the notion of a wife, though such his *cowardliness*, that he would rather confess adultery (then accounted but a *venial* (than own *marriage*, esteemed a *capital crime* in that age.

## Notes

- 1 A misquotation from John Pits, 'Relationum Historiarum de Rebus Anglicis' (1619); the correct translation reads, 'his nimble speech was often turned into jest, his laughter into opprobrium, his mirth into bitterness.'
- 2 Literally 'do not touch me', i.e. prohibited topics.

## 25. EDWARD PHILLIPS ON SKELTON'S CURRENT OBSCURITY

1675

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From Edward Phillips's 'Theatrum Poetarum' (1675), pp. 115–16, a biographical list of English poets. Phillips (1630–96?) was a prose writer and a cousin of John Milton.

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*John Skelton*, a jolly English Rimer, and I warrant ye accounted a notable Poet, as Poetry went in those daies, namely King *Edward* the fourth's Reign, when doubtless good Poets were scarce; for however he had the good fortune to be chosen Poet Laureat methinks he hath a miserable loos, rambling style, and galloping measure of Verse; so that no wonder he is so utterly forgotten at this present, when so many better Poets of not much later a date, are wholly laid aside. His chief Works, as many as I could collect out of an old printed Book, but imperfect are his 'Philip Sparrow', 'Speak Parrot', 'The death of Edward the fourth', 'A Treatise of the Scots', 'Ware the Hawk', 'The tunning of Eleanor Rumpkin'; in many of which following the humor of the ancientest of our modern Poets, he takes a Poetical libertie of Satyrically gibing at the vices and corruptions of the Clergy.

## 26. AN EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY CRITIC IN PRAISE OF 'ELYNOR RUMMYNG'

1718

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'To the Reader' in a reprint of 'The Tunning of Elynor Rummyng' (1718). The authorship of these prefatory remarks is unknown.

---

A View of past Times is the most agreeable Study of humane Life. To unveil the former Ages, call back Time in his Course, and with a contracted View prie thro' the Clouds of Oblivion, and see Things that were before our Being, is certainly the most Amusement, if as Martial tells us,

----- hoc est  
*Vivere bis, vita posse priore frui.* (1)

how additional a Happiness is it to enlarge and draw it into the Ages that were before?

This, Reader, is the Editor's Reason for publishing this very antient Sketch of a Drinking Piece; and tho' some of the Lines seem to be a little defac'd by Time, yet the Strokes are so just and true, that an experienc'd Painter might from hence form the most agreeable Variety requisite in a Picture, to represent the mirth of those Times. Here is a just and natural Description of those merry Wassail Dayes, and of the Humours of our great Grandames, which our Poet hath drawn with that Exactness, that, as Mr. *Dryden* says of *Chaucer's* Characters, he thought, when he read them himself, *to have seen them as distinctly as if he had sup'd with them at the Tabard Inn in Southwark*, so I may truly say, I see before me this Variety of Gossips, as plainly as if I had dropt into the Alehouse at *Leatherhead* and sate upon the Settle to view their Gamball's.

It may seem a Trifle to some to revive a Thing of this Nature: The Subject, they say, is so low, and the Time so long since, that it would be throwing away more to peruse it. What have we to do to puzzle our Brains with old out-of fashion'd Trumpery, when we have since had ingenious Poets in our own Times easily to be understood, and much more diverting too.

As for Those nice Curiosoes, who can tast nothing but Deserts; whose chief Perfection is to discover the fine Turn in a new Epilogue, and have so much Work upon their Hands to

damn moderns, that they have none to read them; it is not to be expected, that they will either read or can understand the Antients; neither was it for such Sparks that this piece of Antiquity was reviv'd. But Persons of an extensive Fancy and just Relish, who can discover Nature in the lowest Scene of life, and receive pleasure from the meanest Views; who prie into all the Variety of Places and Humours at present, and think nothing unworthy their Notice; and not only so, but with a contracting Eye, survey the Times past, and live over those Ages which were before their Birth; it is in Respect to them, and for a Moment's Amusement that this merry old Tale is reviv'd. The Subject is low, it's true; and so is *Chaucer's Old Widow*; yet the Description of her Hovel pleases as much in it's Way, as a more lofty Theme.

#### Note

- 1 From Martial's 'Epigrams', Book X, xxiii, 7–8: 'He lives twice who can find pleasure in bygone life.'

#### 27. ALEXANDER POPE ON 'BEASTLY SKELTON'

1737

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(a) From 'Imitations of Horace' by Alexander Pope (1688–1744), originally published in 1737. The present text is that of the Twickenham Edition, edited by John Butt, 2nd ed. (London, 1953), pp. 196–7.

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Authors, like Coins, grow dear as they grow old;  
 It is the rust we value, not the gold.  
 Chaucer's worst ribaldry is learn'd by rote,  
 And beastly Skelton Heads of Houses quote:

[Pope adds the following note on the phrase 'beastly Skelton':]

Poet Laureat to Hen. 8. a Volume of whose Verses has been Lately reprinted, consisting almost wholly of Ribaldry, Obscenity, and Billingsgate Language.

(b) From Joseph Spence's 'Observations, Anecdotes and Characters of Books and Men', edited by J.M.Osborn (Oxford, 1966), I, p. 180, no. 414. Spence's work was first published in 1820. Spence himself (1699–1768) was a famous anecdotist. He records this comment by Pope.

Skelton's poems are all low and bad; there's nothing in them that's worth reading.

## 28. ELIZABETH COOPER IN PRAISE OF SKELTON

1737

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From Elizabeth Cooper, 'The Muses Library' (1737), pp. 48–9. Mrs Cooper was a dramatist as well as a critic.

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The Restorer of Invention in *English* Poetry! was born of an ancient Family in *Cumberland*, received his Education at *Oxford*, and, afterwards, entring into Holy Orders, was made Rector of *Dysse* in *Norfolk*, in the reign of *Henry* the Eighth; tho', in my Opinion, He appear'd first in that of *Henry* the Seventh, and may be said, to be the Growth of that Time. Some bitter Satires on the Clergy, and particularly, his keen Reflections on Cardinal *Wolsey*, drew on him so severe Prosecutions, that he was oblig'd to fly for Sanctuary to *Westminster*, under the Protection of *Islip* the Abbot; where He dy'd in the Year 1529. It appears, by his Poem, intituled, 'The Crown of Laurel', that his Performances were very numerous, tho' so few of Them remain: In these is a very rich Vein of Wit, Humour, and Poetry, tho' much debas'd by the Rust of the Age He liv'd in. —His Satirs are remarkably broad, open, and ill-bred; the Verse cramp'd by a very short Measure, and incumber'd with such a Profusion of Rhimes, as makes the Poet almost as ridiculous, as Those he endeavours to expose. —In his more serious Pieces, He is not guilty of this Absurdity; and confines himself to a regular Stanza, according to the then reigning Mode. His 'Bouge of Court', is, in my Opinion, a Poem of great Merit: it abounds with Wit, and Imagination, and argues

him well vers'd in Human Nature, and the Manners of that insinuating Place. The Allegorical Characters are finely describ'd, and as well sustain'd; The Fabrick of the Whole, I believe, entirely his own, and, not improbably, may have the Honour to be a Hint, even to the inimitable Spencer; But, as his Poems have been lately reprinted, I shall only annex the Prologue and submit this Conjecture to the Correction of better Judges.

How, or by whose Interest He was made Laureat, or whether 'twas a Title He assum'd himself, I cannot learn. — Neither is his Principal Patron any where nam'd; but, if his Poem of the 'Crown of Lawrell', before mention'd, has any Covert-meaning, He had the Honour to have the Ladies for his Friends, and the Countess of Surrey, the Lady *Elizabeth Howard*, and many others united their Services in his Favour.

[Quotes first 126 lines of 'Bouge of Court'.]

#### 29. SAMUEL JOHNSON ON SKELTON

1755

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From *A History of the Language* included in 'A Dictionary of the English Language' (1755), I, p. 9, by Samuel Johnson (1709–84), the poet, critic and lexicographer.

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At the same time with Sir *Thomas More* lived *Skelton*, the poet laureate of *Henry VIII*. from whose works it seems proper to insert a few stanzas, though he cannot be said to have attained great elegance of language.

[Quotes lines 1–34 of the 'Bouge of Court'.]



## 30. THOMAS WARTON ON SKELTON

1778

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From Thomas Warton, 'The History of English Poetry' (1778), II, pp. 336–63. Warton (1728–90) was a poet and critic. In reprinting his essay his original footnotes have been deleted as have various excurses.

---

Most of the poems of John Skelton were written in the reign of king Henry the eighth. But as he was laureated at Oxford about the year 1489, I consider him as belonging to the fifteenth century.

Skelton, having studied in both our universities, was promoted to the rectory of Diss in Norfolk. But for his buffooneries in the pulpit, and his satirical ballads against the mendicants, he was severely censured, and perhaps suspended by Nykke his diocesan, a rigid bishop of Norwich, from exercising the duties of the sacerdotal function. Wood says, he was also punished by the bishop for 'having been guilty of *certain crimes*, AS MOST POETS are.' But these persecutions only served to quicken his ludicrous disposition, and to exasperate the acrimony of his satire. As his sermons could be no longer a vehicle for his abuse, he vented his ridicule in rhyming libels. At length, daring to attack the dignity of cardinal Wolsey, he was closely pursued by the officers of that powerful minister; and, taking shelter in the sanctuary of Westminster abbey, was kindly entertained and protected by abbot Islip, to the day of his death. He died, and was buried in the neighbouring church of saint Margaret, in the year 1529.

Skelton was patronised by Henry Algernon Percy, the fifth earl of Northumberland, who deserves particular notice here; as he loved literature at a time when many of the nobility of England could hardly read or write their names, and was the general patron of such genius as his age produced. He encouraged Skelton, almost the only professed poet of the reign of Henry the seventh, to write an elegy on the death of his father, which is yet extant.... But Skelton hardly deserved such a patronage.

It is in vain to apologise for the coarseness, obscenity, and scurrility of Skelton, by saying that his poetry is tinged with the manners of his age. Skelton would have been a writer

without decorum at any period. The manners of Chaucer's age were undoubtedly more rough and unpolished than those of the reign of Henry the seventh. Yet Chaucer, a poet abounding in humour, and often employed in describing the vices and follies of the world, writes with a degree of delicacy, when compared with Skelton. That Skelton's manner is gross and illiberal, was the opinion of his contemporaries; at least of those critics who lived but a few years afterwards, and while his poems yet continued in vogue. Puttenham, the author of the 'Arte of English Poesie', published in the year 1589, speaking of the species of short metre used in the minstrel-romances, for the convenience of being sung to the harp at feasts, and in CAROLS and ROUNDS, 'and such other light or lascivious poems which are commonly more commodiously uttered by those buffoons or Vices in playes than by any other person,' and in which the sudden return of the rhyme fatigues the ear, immediately subjoins: 'Such were the rimes of Skelton, being indeed but a rude rayling rimer, and all his doings ridiculous; he used both short distaunces and short measures, pleasing only the popular care.' And Meres, in his 'Palladis Tamia', or 'Wit's Treasury', published in 1598. 'Skelton applied his wit to skurilities and ridiculous matters: such among the Greekes were called *pantomimi*, with us buffoons.'

Skelton's characteristic vein of humour is capricious and grotesque. If his whimsical extravagancies ever move our laughter, at the same time they shock our sensibility. His festive levities are not only vulgar and indelicate, but frequently want truth and propriety. His subjects are often as ridiculous as his metre; but he sometimes debases his matter by his versification. On the whole, his genius seems better suited to low burlesque, than to liberal and manly satire. It is supposed by Caxton, that he improved our language; but he sometimes affects obscurity, and sometimes adopts the most familiar phraseology of the common people.

He thus describes, in the 'Boke of Colin Cloute', the pompous houses of the clergy.

[Quotes lines 936–58, 962–70, 974–81.]

These lines are in the best manner of his petty measure: which is made still more disgusting by the repetition of the rhymes....

In the poem 'Why Come Ye Not to the Court', he thus satirises cardinal Wolsey, not without some tincture of humour.

[Quotes lines 181–194, 200–4, 210–19, 222–3.]

The poem called the ‘Bouge of Court’, or the ‘Rewards of a Court’, is in the manner of a pageant, consisting of seven personifications. Here our author, in adopting the more grave and stately movement of the seven lined stanza, has shewn himself not always incapable of exhibiting allegorical imagery with spirit and dignity. But his comic vein predominates. RYOTT is thus forcibly and humorously pictured.

[Quotes lines 344–64.]

There is also merit in the delineation of DISSIMULATION, in the same poem, : and it is not unlike Ariosto’s manner in imagining these allegorical personages.

[Quotes lines 428–37.] ...

In the ‘Crowne of Lawrell’ our author attempts the higher poetry: but he cannot long support the tone of solemn description. These are some of the most ornamented and poetical stanzas. He is describing a garden belonging to the superb palace of FAME.

[Quotes lines 652–63, 665–72, 674–90.]

Our author supposes, that in the wall surrounding the palace of FAME were a thousand gates, new and old, for the entrance and egress of all nations. One of the gates is called ANGLIA, on which stood a leopard. There is some boldness and animation in the figure and attitude of this ferocious animal.

[Quotes lines 589–95.]

Skelton, in the course of his allegory, supposes that the *poets laureate*, or learned men, of all nations, were assembled before Pallas. This groupe shews the authors, both antient and modern, then in vogue. Some of them are quaintly characterised. They are, first, —Olde Quintilian, not with his Institutes of eloquence, but with his Declamations: Theocritus, with his *bucolicall relations*: Hesiod, the *Icononucar*: Homer, the *freshe historiar*: The *prince of eloquence*, Cicero: Sallust, who wrote both the *history* of Catiline and Jugurth: Ovid, *enshryned with the Musys nyne*: Lucan: Statius, writer of *Achilleidos*: Persius, with *problems diffuse*: Virgil, Juvenal, Livy: Ennius, *who wrote of marciall warre*: Aulus Gellius,

that *noble historiar*: Horace, with his *New Poetry*: Maister Terence, *the famous comicar*, with Plautus: Seneca, the tragedian: Boethius: Maximian, *with his madde ditie bow dotyng age wolde jape with young foly*: Boccacio, *with his volumes grete*: Quintus Curtius: Macrobius, who treated of *Scipion's dreame*: Poggius Florentinus, with many a *mad tale*: a friar of France *syr Gaguine*, who frowned on me *full angrily*: Plutarch and Petrarch, two *famous clarkes*: Lucilius, Valerius Maximus, Propertius, Pisander, and Vincentius Bellovacensis, who wrote the 'Speculum Historiale'. The catalogue is closed by Gower, Chaucer, and Lydgate, who first adorned the English language: in allusion to which part of their characters, their apparel is said to shine beyond the power of description, and their tabards to be studded with diamonds and rubies. That only these three English poets are here mentioned, may be considered as a proof, that only these three were yet thought to deserve the name.

No writer is more unequal than Skelton. In the midst of a page of the most wretched ribaldry, we sometimes are surprized with three or four nervous and manly lines, like these.

[Quotes 'Garland of Laurel', lines 192–4.]

Skelton's modulation in the octave stanza is rough and inharmonious. The following are the smoothest lines in the poem before us; which yet do not equal the liquid melody of Lydgate, whom he here manifestly attempts to imitate.

[Quotes 'Garland of Laurel', lines 533–36.]

The following little ode deserves notice; at least as a specimen of the structure and phraseology of a love-sonnet about the close of the fifteenth century.

[Quotes 'Garland of Laurel', 906–25: 'To Maistress Margary Wentworth'.]

For the same reason this stanza in a sonnet to *Maistress Margaret Hussey* deserves notice.

[Quotes 'Garland of Laurel', lines 1004–7.]

As do the following flowery lyrics, in a sonnet addressed to *Maistress Isabell Pennel*.

[Quotes 'Garland of Laurel', lines 985–92.]

But Skelton most commonly appears to have mistaken his genius, and to write in a forced character, except when he is indulging his native vein of satire and jocularly, in the short minstrel-metre abovementioned: which he mars by a multiplied repetition of rhymes, arbitrary abbreviations of the verse, cant expressions, hard and founding words newly-coined, and patches of Latin and French. This anomalous and motley code of versification is, I believe, supposed to be peculiar to our author. I am not, however, quite certain that it originated with Skelton....

We must, however, acknowledge, that Skelton, notwithstanding his scurrility, was a classical scholar; and in that capacity, he was tutor to prince Henry, afterwards king Henry the eighth: at whose accession to the throne, he was appointed the royal orator. He is styled by Erasmus, 'Britannicarum literarum decus et lumen.' His Latin elegiacs are pure, and often unmixed with the monastic phraseology; and they prove, that if his natural propensity to the ridiculous had not more frequently seduced him to follow the whimsies of Walter Mapes (1) and Goliath, (2) than to copy the elegancies of Ovid, he would have appeared among the first writers of Latin poetry in England at the general restoration of literature. Skelton could not avoid acting as a buffoon in any language, or any character.

I cannot quit Skelton, of whom I yet fear too much has been already said, without restoring to the public notice a play, or MORALITY, written by him, not recited in any catalogue of his works, or annals of English typography; and, I believe, at present totally unknown to the anti-quarians in this sort of literature. It is, 'The NIGRAMANSIR, a morall ENTERLUDE and a pithie written by Maister SKELTON laureate and plaid before the king and other estatys at Woodstoke on Palme Sunday'. It was printed by Wynkin de Worde in a thin quarto, in the year 1504. It must have been presented before king Henry the seventh, at the royal manor or palace, at Woodstock in Oxfordshire, now destroyed. The characters are a Necromancer, or conjurer, the devil, a notary public, Simonie, and Philargyria, or Avarice. It is partly a satire on some abuses in the church; yet not without a due regard to decency, and an apparent respect for the dignity of the audience. The story, or plot, is the tryal of SIMONY and AVARICE: the devil is the judge, and the notary public acts as an assessor or scribe. The prisoners, as we may suppose, are found guilty, and ordered into hell immediately. There is no sort of propriety in calling this play the Necromancer: for the only business and use of this

character, is to open the subject in a long prologue, to evoke the devil, and summon the court. The devil kicks the necromancer, for waking him so soon in the morning; a proof, that this drama was performed in the morning, perhaps in the chapel of the palace. A variety of measures, with shreds of Latin and French, is used: but the devil speaks in the octave stanza. One of the stage-directions is, *Enter Balsebub with a Berde*. To make him both frightful and ridiculous, the devil was most commonly introduced on the stage, wearing a visard with an immense beard. Philargyria quotes Seneca and saint Austin: and Simony offers the devil a bribe. The devil rejects her offer with much indignation: and swears by the *foule Eumenides*, and the hoary beard of Charon, that she shall be well fried and roasted in the unfathomable sulphur of Cocytus, together with Mahomet, Pontius Pilate, the traitor Judas, and king Herod. The last scene is closed with a view of hell and a dance between the devil and the necromancer. The dance ended, the devil trips up the necromancer's heels, and disappears in fire and smoke. Great must have been the edification and entertainment which king Henry the seventh and his court derived from the exhibition of so elegant and rational a drama! The royal taste for dramatic representation seems to have suffered a very rapid transition: for in the year 1520, *a goodlie comedie of Plautus* was played before king Henry the eighth at Greenwich....

## Notes

- 1 A medieval English satiric poet.
- 2 A general name for medieval Latin satiric verse.

31. PHILIP NEVE ON SKELTON: 'A RUDE AND SCURRILOUS RHYMER'

1789

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From 'Cursory Remarks on Some of the Ancient English Poets...' (1789), p. 10.

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*John Skelton*, a rude and scurrilous rhymmer of the reign of Henry VIII. is mentioned here, only as his gross style and measures

reflect back some honor to *Chaucer*, by a comparison: and he seems further remarkable, as he had sufficient confidence to satirize Wolsey, in the plenitude of his power. *Puttenham*...calls him 'a rude rayling rhymer and all his doings ridiculous.' Yet he was this for want of taste, not learning; as his scholarship excited a high encomium from *Erasmus*.

Though neither the manner, nor versification of *Skelton*, could recommend his poems, the justness of his satire rendered them popular. *Wolsey's* profligacy, arrogance, and oppressions were so excessive, that it required a very ingenious poet to invent a charge against him, that would not have application: and the generality of the court, constrained through fear, to flatter a man they secretly detested, were gratified in the boldness of one, who, without hesitation or reserve, dared utter their common sentiment.

### 32. ROBERT SOUTHEY ON SKELTON'S GENIUS

1814

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From an unsigned review by Southey in the 'Quarterly Review', XI (1814), pp. 484–5, of Chalmers's 1810 reprint of the 1736 edition of *Skelton*. Southey (1774–1843) was a prolific poet and man of letters.

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Mr. Chalmers has done well in including *Skelton*, but he has merely reprinted the imperfect and careless edition of 1736. 'It yet remains,' he says, 'to explain his obscurities, translate his vulgarisms, and point his verses. The task would require much time and labour, with perhaps no very inviting promise of recompense.' Let the reader judge whether this be a sufficient excuse for an editor who makes *Skelton* speak

Of Tristem and King Marke  
 And all the whole warke  
*Of bele I sold his wife!* (p. 294) ['Philip Sparrow',  
 lines 641–3]

and who, rather than venture upon any emendation of a grossly corrupted text, has printed all the comic and satirical poems, and most of the others, without any punctuation whatever! Considering the manner in which works of this kind are *got up* in England, it would certainly have been too much to expect that the writings of so difficult an author should be elaborately elucidated; yet surely some kind of glossary ought to have been annexed, and those pieces should have been added which Ritson indicated, and which have come to light since Ritson's death. Mr. Chalmers has some sense of Skelton's power, but when he ventures upon delivering a critical opinion, he produces only a tissue of inconsistencies, one sentence contradicting another. He tells us that there is occasionally much sound sense and much just satire on the conduct of the clergy, and presently adds, that if his vein of humour had been directed to subjects of legitimate satire, he might have been more worthy of a place in this collection. Did it never occur to him that Skelton's buffooneries, like the ribaldry of Rabelais, (1) were thrown out as a tub for the whale, and that unless he had thus written for the coarsest palates, he could not possibly have poured forth such bitter and undaunted satire in such perilous times? Well did he say of himself—

Though my rime be ragged,  
Tattered and jagged,  
Rudely rain-beaten  
Rusty and moth-eaten,  
If ye take well therewith  
It hath in it some pith. ['Colin Clout', lines 53–8]

So much pith indeed, that an editor who should be competent to the task, could not more worthily himself than by giving a good and complete edition of his works. The power, the strangeness, the volubility of his language, the audacity of his satire, and the perfect originality of his manner, render Skelton one of the most extraordinary writers of any age or country.

#### Note

- 1 François Rabelais (1494? –1554), author of the satires 'Gargantua' and 'Pontagruel'.



## 33. WILLIAM GIFFORD IN PRAISE OF SKELTON

1816

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From 'The Works of Ben Jonson', edited by William Gifford (1816), VIII, p. 77. Gifford (1756–1826) was a satirist, editor and scholar. This passage is from his annotation of Jonson's masque 'The Fortunate Isles'.

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Jonson was evidently fond of Skelton, and frequently imitates his short titupping style, which is not his best. I know Skelton only by the modern edition of his works, dated 1736. But from this stupid publication I can easily discover that he was no ordinary man. Why Warton and the writers of his school rail at him so vehemently, I know not; he was perhaps the best scholar of his day, and displays, on many occasions, strong powers of description, and a vein of poetry that shines through all the rubbish which ignorance has spread over it. He flew at high game, and therefore occasionally called in the aid of vulgar ribaldry to mask the direct attack of his satire. This was seen centuries ago, and yet we are now instituting a process against him for rudeness and indelicacy!

[Goes on to quote Grange—see above No. 11.]

## 34. THOMAS CAMPBELL ON SKELTON'S BUFFOONERY

1819

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From Thomas Campbell's 'Specimens of the British Poets' (1819), I, pp. 101–3. Campbell (1777–1844) is best known as a poet. The original footnotes have been deleted.

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John Skelton, who was the rival and contemporary of Barklay, was laureate to the University of Oxford, and tutor to the prince, afterwards Henry VIII. Erasmus must have been a bad

judge of English poetry, or must have alluded only to the learning of Skelton, when in one of his letters he pronounces him ‘Britannicarum literarum lumen et decus.’ There is certainly a vehemence and vivacity in Skelton which was worthy of being guided by a better taste; and the objects of his satire bespeak some degree of public spirit. But his eccentricity in attempts at humour is at once vulgar and flippant; and his style is almost a texture of slang phrases, patched with shreds of French and Latin. We are told, indeed, in a periodical work of the present day, (1) that his manner is to be excused, because it was assumed for ‘the nonce,’ and was suited to the taste of his contemporaries. But it is surely a poor apology for the satirist of any age to say that he stooped to humour its vilest taste, and could not ridicule vice and folly without degrading himself to buffoonery.

#### Note

- 1 A reference to Southey’s ‘Quarterly Review’ article— see No. 32 above.

#### 35. EZEKIEL SANFORD ON SKELTON’S LIFE AND WORKS

1819

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From Ezekiel Sanford’s ‘The Works of the British Poets’ (Philadelphia, 1819), I, pp. 259–61).

Sanford (1796–1822) was an American historian. The selection from Skelton which accompanies this introduction appears to be the first American publication of any of Skelton’s works.

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JOHN SKELTON, an eccentric satyrist, was born towards the close of the fifteenth century. The two universities dispute the honour of his education; but neither seems to have established a very strong title. The poet-laureateship was then a degree of the universities. Caxton says, our author was made laureate at Oxford; and Mr. Malone tells us, that he wore the laurel publicly at Cambridge.

In 1507, we find him curate of Trompington, and rector of Diss in Norfolk. But he is supposed to have added little dignity to his calling. His pulpit, it is said, became a theatre, and he, a buffoon. It was the business of his life to lampoon Lilly, the grammarian, cardinal Wolsey, the Scots, and the mendicant friars. There is no doubt, that the clergy were then sufficiently corrupt; but it was not for a man, who kept a concubine, to accuse the immorality of others; and the whole tenor of Skelton's life shows him to have been ignorant of the wholesome doctrine, that reform, like charity, should begin at home.

Wolsey, at last, thought his satires worthy of notice, and ordered him to be apprehended. He took refuge in Westminster abbey; and was protected by Islip, the abbot, till his death in June, 1529. He was buried in St. Margaret's church-yard; and the inscription in his tomb is: —

J.SCELTONUS Vates Pierius hic setus est.  
Animam egit 21 Juno An. Dom. MDXXXIX.

Erasmus, in a letter to Henry VIII., called Skelton *Britannicarum literarum decus et lumen*. The praise may have been just in his own day; but, at present, Skelton is far from being considered as the light, or the ornament, of British literature. He is, however, the father of English *Macaronics*; a species of poetry, which consists chiefly in interweaving Latin phrases with his native language. It was his ambition to be grotesque and droll; and the devices, to which he resorted for this purpose, gained him the epithet of the 'inventive Skelton.' His inventions are, indeed, entitled to the praise of originality. He first hunts up all the words, in Latin and English, which will chime with each other; and, having then set them down in a string, or tacked them to the end of as many short phrases, imagines that he has been writing poetry. Sense and prosody are entirely abandoned; and he has sometimes even given us lines which consist altogether of the nine digits. His poems are generally long; and, as all his fire goes out, while he is in search of rhymes, they are excessively monotonous and dull. For a specimen of his best manner, we extract the exordium to the 'Boke of Colin Clout'. The reader will see how one rhyme after another seduces him from the sense, till at last he loses sight of it altogether.

[Quotes lines 1–37.]

## 36. THE 'RETROSPECTIVE REVIEW' IN PRAISE OF SKELTON

1822

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From the 'Retrospective Review', VI (1822), p. 353. These anonymous comments follow a selection of Skelton's works included in this journal.

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This is certainly a sufficient specimen of this extraordinary versifier—both as to matter and manner. The talents of John Skelton are easily estimated. With strong sense, a vein of humour, and some imagination, he had a wonderful command of the English language. His rhymes are interminable, and often spun out beyond the sense in the wantonness of power. In judging of this old poet, we must always recollect the state of poetry in his time and the taste of the age, which being taken into the account, we cannot help considering Skelton as an ornament of his own time, and a benefactor to those which came after him. Let him be compared to a fine old building, which once glittered in a wanton lavishment of ornament, and revelled in the profusion of its apartments, and in the number of its winding passages, is now grown unfit for habitation, and only remains as a model of the architecture of past times and a fit subject for the reverence and the researches of the antiquarian.

## 37. WILLIAM WORDSWORTH ON SKELTON: 'A DEMON IN POINT OF GENIUS'

1823, 1833

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From 'The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth', edited by E.de Selincourt (Oxford, 1939), pp. 129, 638.

Wordsworth (1770–1850) appears to have had a high regard for Skelton.

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(a) Wordsworth to Allan Cunningham, the Scottish poet,

23 November 1823. He is discussing northern English poet poets.

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The list of English border poets is not so distinguished, but Langhorne (1) was a native of Westmoreland, and Brown the author of the 'Estimate of Manners and Principles', etc., —a poet as his letter on the vale of Keswick, with the accompanying verses, shows—was born in Cumberland. (2) So also was Skelton, a demon in point of genius; and Tickell (3) in later times, whose style is superior in chastity to Pope's, his contemporary.

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(b) Wordsworth to Alexander Dyce, the editor of Skelton, 7 January 1833, referring to his then projected edition.

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Sincerely do I congratulate you upon having made such progress with Skelton, a Writer deserving of far greater attention than his works have hitherto received. Your Edition will be very serviceable, and may be the occasion of calling out illustrations perhaps of particular passages from others, beyond what your own Reading, though so extensive, has supplied.

#### Notes

- 1 John Langhorne (1735–79), an eighteenth-century minor poet.
- 2 John Brown (1715–66); his 'Estimate of Manners and Principles of the Times' was published in 1757.
- 3 Thomas Tickell (1686–1740), a minor poet.

## 38. SAMUEL TAYLOR COLERIDGE ON 'PHILIP SPARROW'

1827, 1836

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(a) From 'Specimens of the Table Talk of the late Samuel Taylor Coleridge' (1835), I, pp. 59–60. The entry is dated 12 March 1827.

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For an instance of Shakespeare's power *in minimis*, I generally quote James Gurney's character in *King John*. How individual and comical he is with the four words allowed to his dramatic life! And pray look at Skelton's 'Richard [sic] Sparrow' also!

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(b) From 'The Literary Remains of Samuel Taylor Coleridge', edited by Henry N. Coleridge (1836), II, p. 163.

Coleridge is commenting on a proposed emendation to Shakespeare's 'King John' (I, i, 232) by the editor of Shakespeare, William Warburton (1698–1779).

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Theobald (1) adopts Warburton's conjecture of 'spare me'.

O true Warburton! and the *sancta simplicitas* of honest dull Theobald's faith in him! Nothing can be more lively or characteristic than 'Philip? Sparrow!' Had Warburton read old Skelton's 'Philip Sparrow', an exquisite and original poem, and, no doubt popular in Shakespeare's time, even Warburton would, scarcely have made so deep a plunge into the *bathetic* as to have deathified 'sparrow' into 'spare me'!

## Note

1 Lewis Theobald (1688–1744), editor of Shakespeare.

1837

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From Henry Hallam's 'Introduction to the Literature of Europe in the Fifteenth, Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries' (1837), I, p. 313.

Hallam (1777–1859) was chiefly notable as an historian. His footnotes have been deleted from this selection.

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The strange writer, whom we have just mentioned, seems to fall well enough within this decad; though his poetical life was long, if it be true that he received the laureate crown at Oxford in 1483, and was also the author of a libel on Sir Thomas More, ascribed to him by Ellis, which alluding to the Nun of Kent, could hardly be written before 1533. (1) But though this piece is somewhat in Skelton's manner, we find it said that he died in 1529, and it is probably the work of an imitator. Skelton is certainly not a poet, unless some degree of comic humour, and a torrent-like volubility of words in doggerel rhyme, can make one; but this uncommon fertility, in a language so little copious as ours was at that time, bespeaks a mind of some original vigour. Few English writers come nearer in this respect to Rabelais, whom Skelton preceded. His attempts in serious poetry are utterly contemptible, but the satirical lines on Cardinal Wolsey were probably not ineffective. It is impossible to determine whether they were written before 1520. Though these are better known than any poem of Skelton's, his dirge on Philip Sparrow is the most comic and imaginative.

#### Note

- 1 See George Ellis, 'Specimens of the Early English Poets' (1790), II; the poem there credited to Skelton is not by him.

## 40. ISAAC D'ISRAELI ON SKELTON'S GENIUS

1840

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From Isaac D'Israeli's essay Skelton, in his 'Amenities of Literature', 2nd ed. (1842), pp. 69–82. D'Israeli (1766– 1848) was a noted scholar and critic. A few of his excurses and most of his footnotes have been deleted in the present selection.

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At a period when satire had not yet assumed any legitimate form, a singular genius appeared in Skelton. His satire is peculiar, but it is stamped by vigorous originality. The fertility of his conceptions in his satirical or his humorous vein is thrown out in a style created by himself. The Skeltonical short verse, contracted into five or six, and even four syllables, is wild and airy. In the quick-returning rhymes, the playfulness of the diction, and the pungency of new words, usually ludicrous, often expressive, and sometimes felicitous, there is a stirring spirit which will be best felt in an audible reading. The velocity of his verse has a carol of its own. The chimes ring in the ear, and the thoughts are flung about like coruscations. But the magic of the poet is confined to his spell; at his first step out of it he falls to the earth never to recover himself. Skelton is a great creator only when he writes what baffles imitation, for it is his fate, when touching more solemn strains, to betray no quality of a poet—inert in imagination and naked in diction. Whenever his muse plunges into the long measure of heroic verse, she is drowned in no Heliconian stream. Skelton seems himself aware of his miserable fate, and repeatedly, with great truth, if not with some modesty, complains of

Mine homely rudeness and dryness. [‘Upon the death...  
of Northumberland,  
line 13]

But when he returns to his own manner and his own rhyme, when he riots in the wantonness of his prodigal genius, irresistible and daring, the poet was not unconscious of his faculty; and truly he tells, —

Though my rime be ragged,  
Tattered and jagged,



Rudely rain-beaten,  
 Rusty, moth-eaten,  
 If ye take well therewith,  
 It hath in it some pith. ['Colin Clout', lines 53–8]

Whether Skelton really adopted the measures of the old tavern-minstrelsy used by harpers, who gave 'a fit of mirth for a groat,' or 'carols for Christmas,' or 'lascivious poems for bride-ales,' as Puttenham, the arch-critic of Elizabeth's reign, supposes; or whether in Skelton's introduction of alternate Latin lines among his verses he caught the Macaronic caprice of the Italians, as Warton suggests; the Skeltonical style remains his own undisputed possession. He is a poet who has left his name to his own verse—a verse, airy but pungent, so admirably adapted for the popular ear that it has been frequently copied and has led some eminent critics into singular misconceptions. The minstrel tune of the Skeltonical rhyme is easily caught, but the invention of style and 'the pith' mock these imitators. The facility of doggrel merely of itself could not have yielded the exuberance of his humour and the mordacity of his satire.

This singular writer has suffered the mischance of being too original for some of his critics; they looked on the surface, and did not always suspect the depths they glided over: the legitimate taste of others has revolted against the mixture of the ludicrous and the invective. A taste for humour is a rarer faculty than most persons imagine; where it is not indigepous, not art of man can plant it. There is no substitute for such a volatile existence, and where even it exists in a limited degree, we cannot enlarge its capacity for reception....

Puttenham was the first critic who prized Skelton cheaply; the artificial and courtly critic of Elizabeth's reign could not rightly estimate such a wild and irregular genius. The critic's fastidious ear listens to nothing but the jar of rude rhymes, while the courtier's delicacy shrinks from the nerve of appalling satire 'Such,' says this critic, 'are the rhymes of Skelton, usurping the name of a Poet Laureat, being indeed but a rude rayling rhimer, and all his doings ridiculous—pleasing only the popular ear.' This affected critic never suspected 'the pith' of 'the ridiculous;' the grotesque humour covering the dread invective which shook a Wolsey under his canopy. Another Elizabethan critic, the obsequious Meres, reechoes the dictum. These opinions perhaps prejudiced the historian of our poetry, who seems to have appreciated them as the echoes of the poet's contemporaries. Yet we know how highly his contemporaries prized him, notwithstanding the host whom he provoked. One

poetical brother\* distinguishes him as ‘the Inventive Skelton,’ and we find the following full-length portrait of him by another\*\*:-

A poet for his art,  
 Whose judgment sure was high,  
 And had great practise of the pen,  
 His works they will not lie’  
 His termes to taunts did leane,  
 His talk was as he wrate,  
 Full quick of wit, right sharpe of wordes,  
 And skilful of the state;

And to the hateful minde,  
 That did disdain his doings still,  
 A scorner of his kinde.

When Dr. Johnson observed that ‘Skelton cannot be said to have attained great elegance of language,’ he tried Skelton by a test of criticism at which Skelton would have laughed, and ‘jangled and wrangled.’ Warton has also censured him for adopting ‘the familiar phraseology of the common people.’ The learned editor of Johnson’s Dictionary corrects both our critics. ‘If Skelton did not attain great elegance of language, he however possessed great knowledge of it. From his works may be drawn an abundance of terms which were then in use among the vulgar as well as the learned, and which no other writer of his time so obviously (and often so wittily) illustrated.’(1) Skelton seems to have been fully aware of the condition of our vernacular idiom when he wrote, for he has thus described it:

[Quotes ‘Philip Sparrow’, lines 774–83.]

It was obviously his design to be as great a creator of words as he was of ideas. Many of his mintage would have given strength to our idiom. Caxton, as a contemporary, is some authority that Skelton improved the language.

Let not the reader imagine that Skelton was only ‘a rude rayling rhimer.’ Skelton was the tutor of Henry the Eighth; and one who knew him well describes him, as—

Seldom out of prince’s grace.

\* Henry Bradshaw [see No. 5 above].

\*\* Thomas Churchyard [see No. 10 above].

Erasmus distinguished him 'as the light and ornament of British letters;' and one, he addresses the royal pupil, 'who can not only excite your studies, but complete them.' Warton attests his classical attainments: 'Had not his propensity to the ridiculous induced him to follow the whimsies of Walter Mapes, Skelton would have appeared among the first writers of Latin poetry in England.' Skelton chose to be himself; and this is what the generality of his critics have not taken in their view.

Skelton was an ecclesiastic who was evidently among those who had adopted the principles of reformation before the Reformation. With equal levity and scorn he struck at the friars from his pulpit or in his ballad, he ridiculed the Romish ritual, and he took unto himself that wife who was to be called a concubine. To the same feelings we may also ascribe the declamatory invective against Cardinal Wolsey, from whose terrible arm he flew into the sanctuary of Westminster, where he remained protected by Abbot Islip until his death, which took place in 1529, but a few short months before the fall of Wolsey. It is supposed that the king did not wholly dislike the levelling of the greatness of his overgrown minister; and it is remarkable that one of the charges subsequently brought by the council in 1529 against Wolsey—his imperious carriage at the council-board—is precisely one of the accusations of our poet, only divested of rhyme; whence perhaps we may infer that Skelton was an organ of the rising party.

'Why come you not to Court?'—that daring state-picture of an omnipotent minister—and 'The Boke of Colin Clout,' where the poet pretends only to relate what the people talk about the luxurious clergy, and seems to be half the reformer, are the most original satires in the language....

In 'The Crown of Lawrell' Skelton has himself furnished a catalogue of his numerous writings, the greater number of which have not come down to us. Literary productions were at that day printed on loose sheets, or in small pamphlets, which the winds seem to have scattered. We learn there of his graver labours. He composed the 'Speculum Principis' for his royal pupil—

To bear in hand, therein to read, [lines 1229–30]

and he translated Diodorus Siculus—

Six volumes engrossed, it doth contain. [line 1502]

To have composed a manual for the education of a prince, and to have persevered through a laborious version, are sufficient evidence that the learned Skelton had his studious days as well as his hours of caustic jocularly. He appears to have written various pieces for the court entertainment; but for us exists only an account of the interlude of the 'Nigraminsir,' in the pages of Warton, and a single copy of the goodly interlude of 'Magnificence,' in the Garrick collection. If we accept his abstract personations merely as the names, and not the qualities of the dramatic personages, 'Magnificence' approaches to the true vein of comedy.

Skelton was, however, probably more gratified by his own Skeltonical style, moulding it with the wantonness of power on whatever theme, comic or serious. In a poem remarkable for its elegant playfulness, a very graceful maiden, whose loveliness the poet has touched with the most vivid colouring, grieving over the fate of her sparrow from its feline foe, chants a dirige, a pater-noster, and an Ave Maria for its soul, and the souls of all sparrows. In this discursive poem, which glides from object to object, in the vast abundance of fancy, a general mourning of all the birds in the air, and many allusions to the old romances, 'Philip Sparrow,' for its elegance, may be placed by the side of Lesbia's Bird, and, for its playfulness, by the Ver Vert of Gresset.

But Skelton was never more vivid than in his Alewife, and all

The mad mummyng  
Of Elynour Rummyng, —

[lines 620–1]

a piece which has been more frequently reprinted than any of his works. It remains a morsel of poignant relish for the antiquary, still enamoured of the portrait of this grisly dame of Leatherhead, where her name and her domicile still exist. Such is the immortality a poet can bestow. 'The Tunning of Elynoure Rummyng' is a remarkable production of the GROTESQUE, or the low burlesque; the humour as low as you please, but as strong as you can imagine....

The latest edition of Skelton was published in the days of Pope, which occasioned some strictures in conversation from the great poet. The laureated poet of Henry the Eighth is styled 'beastly;' probably Pope alluded to this minute portrait of 'Elynoure Rummynge' and her crowd of customers. Beastliness should have been a delicate subject for censure from Pope. But surely Pope had never read Skelton; for could that great poet

have passed by the playful graces of 'Philip Sparrow' only to remember the broad gossips of 'Elynoure Rummyng?'

The amazing contrast of these two poems is the most certain evidence of the extent of the genius of the poet; he who with copious fondness dwelt on a picture which rivals the gracefulness of Albano, could with equal completeness give us the drunken gossipers of an Ostade. It is true that in the one we are more than delighted, but in the impartiality of philosophical criticism, we mist award that none but the most original genius could produce both. It is this which entitles our bard to be styled the 'Inventive Skelton.'

But are personal satires and libels of the day deserving the attention of posterity? I answer, that for posterity there are no satires nor libels. We are concerned only with human nature. When the satirical is placed by the side of the historical character, they reflect a mutual light. We become more intimately acquainted with the great Cardinal, by laying together the satire of the mendacious Skelton with the domestic eulogy of the gentle Cavendish. The interest which posterity takes is different from that of contemporaries; our vision is more complete; they witnessed the beginnings, but we behold the ends. We are no longer deceived by hyperbolic exaggeration, or inflamed by unsparing invective; the ideal personage of the satirist is compared with the real one of the historian, and we touch only delicate truths. What Wolsey was we know, but how he was known to his own times, and to the people, we can only gather from the private satirist; corrected by the passionless arbiter of another age, the satirist becomes the useful historian of the man.

The extraordinary combination in the genius of Skelton was that of two most opposite and potent faculties—the hyperbolic ludicrous masking the invective. He acts the character of a buffoon; he talks the language of drollery; he even mints a coinage of his own, to deepen the colours of his extravagance—and all this was for the people! But his hand conceals a poniard; his rapid gestures only strike the deeper into his victim, and we find that the Tragedy of the State has been acted while we were only lookers-on before a stage erected for the popular *gaze*.

#### Note

- 1 The passage occurs in 'A Dictionary of the English Language' ... [edited by] H.J.Todd (London, 1818), I, pp. cv-cvi.

## 41. ELIZABETH BARRETT BROWNING IN PRAISE OF SKELTON

1842

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From *The Book of the Poets*, in the 'Athenaeum', 11 June 1842, p. 521, by Elizabeth Barrett Browning (1806–61), the poetess.

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Skelton 'floats double, swan and shadow,' as poet laureate of the University of Oxford, and 'royal orator' of Henry VII. He presents a strange specimen of a court-poet, and if, as Erasmus says, 'Britannicarum literarum lumen' at the same time, —the light is a pitchy torchlight, wild and rough. Yet we do not despise Skelton: despise him? it were easier to hate. The man is very strong; he triumphs, foams, is rabid, in the sense of strength; he mesmerizes our souls with the sense of strength—it is easy to despise a wild beast in a forest, as John Skelton, poet laureate. He is as like a wild beast, as a poet laureate can be. In his wonderful dominion over language, he tears it, as with teeth and paws, ravenously, savagely: devastating rather than creating, dominant rather for liberty than for dignity. It is the very *sans-culottism* of eloquence; the oratory of a Silenus drunk with anger only. Mark him as the satyr of poets! fear him as the Juvenal of satyrs! and watch him with his rugged, rapid, picturesque savageness, his 'breathless rhymes,' to use the fit phrase of the satirist Hall, (1) or—

His rhymes all ragged,  
Tattered, and jagged,

['Colin Clout', lines 53–4]

to use his own, climbing the high trees of Delphi, and pelting from thence his victim underneath, whether priest or cardinal, with rough-rinded apples! And then ask, could he write otherwise than so? The answer is this opening to his poem of the 'Bouge of Court,' and the impression inevitable, of the serious sense of beauty and harmony to which it gives evidence

[Quotes lines 1–6.];

but our last word of Skelton must be, that we do not doubt his influence for good upon our language. He was a writer singularly fitted for beating out the knots of the cordage, and straining the

lengths to extension; a rough worker at rough work. Strong, rough Skelton! We can no more deride him than my good lord cardinal could.

#### Note

1 Joseph Hall in 'Virgidemiarium' (1598), VI, i, line 76.

42. AGNES STRICKLAND ON SKELTON: 'THIS RIBALD AND ILL-LIVING WRETCH'

1842

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From 'The Lives of the Queens of England' (1842), IV, pp. 103–4, by the historian Agnes Strickland (1796–1874). This extract is from her life of Katharine of Aragon.

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Skelton the poet laureate of Henry VIII.'s court, composed verses of the fall of the Scottish monarch. (1)

In part of this poem he thus addresses the deceased king in allusion to the absence of Henry.

[Quotes lines 143–50.]

He then breaks into the most vulgar taunts on the unconscious hero, 'who laid cold in his clay' abusing him as 'Jemmy the Scot' with a degree of virulence which would have disgusted any mind less coarse than that of his master. The beautiful lyric, called the 'Flowers of the Forest,' in which Scotland bewailed her loss of Flodden, forms a noble contrast to this lampoon. But the laureated bard of Henry knew well his sovereign's taste, for it is affirmed that Skelton had been tutor to Henry in some department of his education. How probable it is that the corruption imparted by this ribald and ill-living wretch laid the foundation for his royal pupil's gravest crimes.

#### Note

1 King James, killed at Flodden in 1513; the poem is Skelton's 'Against the Scottes' (printed in Dyce, I, pp. 182–8).

## 43. THE 'QUARTERLY REVIEW' on DYCE'S EDITION OF SKELTON

1844

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This review of Dyce's edition of Skelton appeared in the 'Quarterly Review', LXXIII (March 1844), pp. 510–36. The review is unsigned and its authorship cannot be determined. All the original footnotes have been deleted, as well as small portions of the text.

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We opened these volumes with the fear of Pope's well-known couplet before our eyes—

Chaucer's worst ribaldry is learned by rote,  
And beastly Skelton Heads of Houses quote.

But on such subjects our much-loved Pope was not always just, and sometimes extremely rash. His own purity is not unexceptionable. The worst passages in Chaucer's bold impersonation of the manners of his time are decent in comparison with a certain shameless imitation of his style; and modest under-graduates might be as much perplexed by some lines of Pope, from the lips of those models of dignified propriety, the Heads of Houses, as by the worst parts of Skelton. Skelton, especially in his gay and frolicsome mood, is no doubt occasionally indelicate, but with none of that deep-seated licentiousness which taints some periods of our literature: and the Laureate of those days may fairly be allowed some indulgence for the manners of his time, when, to judge from the letters of Henry VIII, to Anne Boleyn, there was no very fine sense of propriety even among the highest of the land. Skelton is frequently coarse, as satirists usually are, who, in assailing the coarse vices of a corrupt court and a corrupt clergy, take the privilege of plain-speaking; his invective, especially against his personal enemies, is utterly unscrupulous; he discharges at their unfortunate heads any weapon which may come to hand. When he gets among alewives and their crew, his language is that of the ale-house bench: and his wit is not very reverent of sacred things, and mingles them up with the strangest buffoonery. Still as to the gross epithet which Pope has associated with his name, he deserves it far less than Pope's dear bosom-friend. There is more 'beastliness' in a



page of Swift than in these two volumes of Skelton. The most offensive allusions are in his libel against Wolsey. But even these, disgusting as they are, are of perpetual recurrence in the writer of Queen Anne's court. There is, in truth, a very whimsical analogy between these two clerical personages. Skelton's resemblance to Swift is not, it must be owned, in the best and strongest of the Dean's points. His prose is insufferable; a mass of pedantic affectation: and altogether he is as far below the inimitable humour, the exquisite pleasantry, the grave, and apparently unconscious, satire of Swift, as incapable of his unrivalled idiomatic English. Still— though Skelton throughout is not less immeasurably inferior to Swift in wit than in uncleanness—in his verse there is the same inexhaustible command of doggerel, the same profusion of quaint and incongruous imagery; the same utter want of self-respect or of regard for his station or order; the same rude and at times rabid satire; the same delight in abusing the vices of the court, within the precincts of which he was only solicitous to find a comfortable post; the same propensity to flatter great men, and, when disappointed of their favour, to turn upon them with the fiercest bitterness of invective. Finally, Skelton, like Swift, notwithstanding his contempt in many respects not merely for professional dignity, but even for decency, was an acceptable guest in the houses of the great, and, it should seem, even of the virtuous. It is an odd further coincidence that Islip, abbot of Westminster, should have been the protector of Skelton against the wrath of Wolsey, and that Atterbury, the dean of that church, should have been among Swift's most intimate friends.

Skelton must fill a very considerable place in every history of our literature. As a poet, he cannot, in our judgment, be ranked high; yet, with the exception of the love-sonnets of Surrey and Wyatt, he is the only English verse-writer between Chaucer and the days of Elizabeth who is *alive*. Students of early poetry may find passages worthy of quotation in the long and weary allegories of Gower; and we cannot refuse our admiration to those powerful stanzas which the fine and discriminating eye of Gray discovered in the vast epics of Lydgate; Barclay's 'Ship of Fools' contains much well worthy of preservation: yet Skelton, however deficient in the higher qualifications of a poet, is the link which connects the genuine English vernacular poetry, that of Chaucer's more humorous vein, and *Piers Ploughman*, with the Elizabethan dramatists. The racy humour, the living description of English manners, the idiomatic language, which is only obscure from its perpetual allusions to obsolete customs and forgotten circumstances, from

its frequent cant phrases, its snatches and burthens of popular songs, the very *vulgar* tongue of the times, abound far more in Skelton than in any of the intermediate race of poets. We are thankful, therefore, to Mr. Dyce for this new and complete edition of his works; which as the single pieces were extremely rare, even the earlier bad and imperfect edition by no means of common occurrence, was wanting to fill up the cycle of our earlier poets. For though Skelton has been interred in that vast cemetery of English poets, Chalmers's Collection, the disagreeable form of that book, to say nothing of its inaccuracy, was not likely to awaken the notice of ordinary readers. Mr. Dyce, to whom our older literature owes a great debt of gratitude, has brought to his task those best qualifications of an editor, industry, accuracy, and good sense. Nor does he injure his author by that excessive demand on the admiration of the reader, which is so apt to excite disappointment and distaste. We shall hope to preserve the same equable and impartial tone; for in our opinion Skelton has not been very happily defended by his admirers, and admirers he has had of no inconsiderable name; nor do we think him to deserve that contemptuous censure which he has met from others. In his serious vein he is in general very bad, laboured, pedantic, and dull; and the spirit, we must admit, is often very offensive where—we must not say the poetry—the verse is the best. But, besides this, these volumes are so full of curious matter relating to the popular manners, habits, feelings, and even the historic events of his time, that even his broadest and most railing rhymes are both amusing and instructive.

John Skelton's birth is fixed about 1460 (we should incline to a somewhat later date), the year before the accession of Edward IV. The place of his birth is not certain; but there is some reason for believing him a native of Norwich. Cambridge and Oxford contend for his education. Antony Wood assumes that he was of Oxford because he attained the dignity of laureateship there:-

At Oxforthe the unversyte  
 Avaunsid I was to that degree;  
 By hole consent of theyr senate  
 I was made Poete laureate.

['Against Garnesche',  
 lines 81-4]

But elsewhere Skelton himself distinctly owns Cambridge as his 'Gentle Parent;' and Warton cites two entries from the university registers at Cambridge, by which Skelton is admitted to his *ad*

*eundem* laureateship in his own university. This double dignity was enhanced by the royal permission to wear some decoration, of which Skelton was obviously very proud; he says, 'a king to me mine habit gave;' and in another passage he speaks of 'the kyng's colours, white and grene,' which he had the permission to wear. This appears to have been a court-dress, probably not an ordinary one, on which, as is clear from a third poem, the name of the Muse Calliope was embroidered in gold letters. Though not, we presume, by this decoration actually recognised as laureate of the court, it is clear that the crown recognised the privilege of the universities to create laureates, and ratified by royal favour this solemn academical judgment. We know not whether the right to wear the royal livery of white and green, with its embroidered decoration, belongs to the royal laureateship; or whether it was commuted for the more inspiring allowance of the butt of sack; but we recommend our excellent friend Mr. Wordsworth to look to it.

Lest, however, those grave and learned bodies, the universities of the land, should be suspected of having lavished their honours on a poet, whose later strains were far from strictly academical in tone or taste, it must be observed that Skelton, in the earlier part of his life, seems to have been known only as a laborious and accomplished scholar; as a translator of Greek and Latin authors, and of some French writings of a sober and religious cast; and all of his early poetry which survives is grave, serious, and solemn. He speaks of a translation of Cicero's Familiar Epistles, and of the History of Diodorus Siculus. He is entreated by Caxton, in the preface to his Boke of Eneydos (a prose romance founded on Virgil's poem) to revise that work; he is there named as one of the most finished scholars of the time; as having translated not merely the works mentioned above, 'but diverse other works oute of Latyn into Englysshe, not in rude and olde language, but in polished and ornate termes craftely, as he that hath redde Vyrgyle, Ovyde, Tullye, and all the other noble poetes and oratours to me unknoven.' As a man of learning and as a poet Skelton had more than an English reputation. The university of Louvain added her testimony to those of Oxford and Cambridge; and Skelton might boast a triple laureateship, one of which three crowns he received *e transmarinis partibus*. Mr. Dyce has printed a pedantic effusion of the day, in which the author, a certain Robert Whittington, addresses Skelton as the poet of Louvain. After a long enumeration of all the Greek and Latin poets, Whittington recommends Apollo and the Muses to visit

England, to look especially to Oxford, immortalised by Skelton, whose verses would be held worthy by posterity.

But Skelton's merits promoted him to still greater honours; honours which might have been expected to lead to high preferment, especially in the church. He was appointed tutor to Prince Henry, afterwards King Henry VIII., designed, as is well known, during the life-time of his brother Arthur, for an ecclesiastic; and, no doubt, intended by his prudent and wealth-loving father to enjoy the dignity and revenues of the see of Canterbury. It is in this character that Skelton is named by no less authority than Erasmus as a distinguished scholar, as an apt interpreter of the sacred poets, and even an instructor in theology— 'donec haberes Skeltonum, unum Britannicarum literarum lumen et decus,'

Jam puer Henricus, genitoris nomine laetus,  
 Monstrante *fontes* vate Skeltono sacres,  
 Palladius teneris mediatatur ab unguibus artes

[See Dyce, I, xxiii]

All, unquestionably, that is extant of Skelton's early poetry answers to the propriety, if not dignity of character, which might be expected in the Laureate of three Universities, and the instructor of a prince destined for the ecclesiastical order. However of no great merit as poetry, his serious as well as his satirical pieces have an historical value; they chiefly relate to events of the day; and though this interest belongs more to the satires, still in periods of history so eventful, yet so imperfectly known, we cannot read without some curiosity contemporary elegies on such persons as Edward IV. and Margaret, Countess of Richmond. In his earliest poem, on the death of Edward IV. (A.D. 1483, our poet, if born in 1460, was twenty-three years old), Skelton indulges in the habit, in which in his comic pieces he afterwards ran riot, of interspersing Latin among his English verses. No doubt there was some disposition to display his scholarship; but, in fact, as we find in all quarters, even in the popular songs, it was a general custom. It might originate from, or be justified by, the usage of the time, during which, in vernacular religious writings or sermons, the texts were usually in Latin, and the ecclesiastical law, where it condescended to English, quoted its authorities in the original. To us there is something striking in the solemn Latin burthen with which each stanza of his Elegy on Edward IV. closes; and altogether there is, we think, not only more truth and simplicity but more of the deeper feeling of poetry in the language which he makes

Edward utter, than is to be found in the later serious verses of Skelton.

[Quotes lines 61–72.]

The second poem has likewise some curious historical matter. It is an Elegy on the Death of Northumberland, Lord Lieutenant of Yorkshire, who was murdered in an insurrection of the Commons, while engaged in levying a subsidy for Henry VII. Bishop Percy, who reprinted this poem, from hereditary interest, observes that the reader ‘will see a striking picture of the state and magnificence kept up by our ancient nobility during the feudal times.’ The great Earl is described as having among his household retainers knights, squires, and even barons (see v. 32, 183, &c.); but they all seem to have been on the Commons’ side, perhaps being equally impatient of the taxation with the rest of the people. Skelton attributes the death of Northumberland to their treachery.

[Quotes lines 73–7, 92–8.]

So far the Laureate seems to have maintained the sedate tone and bearing which might become his station and his accomplishments as a scholar: a sudden change now comes over his character, his genius, and, it should seem, his fortune. He appears to discover where his real strength lies (for if Skelton had continued a grave and serious poet, we believe Mr. Dyce would scarcely have thought him worth his labour); he breaks out at once in his light, frolicsome, or bitterly satirical vein; he does not entirely abandon his more stately form of verse and his intricate stanza (he reserves that for high and solemn occasions); but runs riot in an easy inimitable doggerel, as it should seem entirely his own, and in which he appears inexhaustible. His jingling rhymes, as far as we know the pronunciation of the day, and admitting an accent on final syllables with us unaccentuated, are in general remarkably correct, and always ready at his command; images the most fantastic and incongruous crowd upon him so fast that he can scarcely set them in their places; his classical lore furnishes him with allusions, mingled up, in the most grotesque manner, with the *slang* of the day. Southey charitably suggested that Skelton’s ‘buffooneries, like those of Rabelais, were thrown out as a tub to the whale; for unless Skelton had written thus for the coarsest palates, he could not have poured forth his bitter and undaunted satire

in such perilous time.' We very much doubt whether the free indulgence of broad and grotesque humour was so secondary, even in Rabelais, to more serious objects; in Skelton we cannot but think that it was the genuine love of fun, the reckless enjoyment of rude, farcical, and bitter merriment, which was the inspiration of his careless rhymes. It is true that in *Wolsey* he flew at high game: but—long before his poetic onslaught on the Cardinal, and even before his more mature and deliberate satire on the clergy—while he could scarcely need concealment for deeper or more dangerous opinions, he had already given loose to this saturnalian lawlessness of language and metre, and to all his joyous scurrility. Though less rancorous, perhaps, his verses against Garnesche and against the Scots are not less full of buffoonery than those against the Bishops or the Cardinal. The truth is, that Skelton's serious language is an acquired, a stiff, and artificial dialect; the vulgar is his mother tongue; he is not at ease till free from all restraint; he is rarely happy except when he is at least light and jovial, if not pouring forth all his unchecked volubility of abuse.

From all that is extant, it would appear that this change came over Skelton when we might least expect it—about the time when he entered into the Church. This took place in 1498; and we find him very soon rector of Diss, in Norfolk. He seems never to have attained any higher preferment. In truth, we cannot much wonder at this. It must have been, we presume, during his residence in his Norfolk parsonage, that he wrote the 'Boke of Phylipp Sparrowe.' This is known to have appeared before 1508, at which time it is scornfully mentioned by a rival poet. Coleridge has called 'Phylipp Sparrowe' an exquisite and original poem; and certainly, for its ease and playfulness, its quaintness, and, in a certain sense, its delicacy, its mirthful and dancing measure, the lightness with which we read it off till we are out of breath, and the amusing variety of strangely-assorted imagery, it is, for its time, a most extraordinary work. Prior is hardly lighter; and, in the fertility of his gaiety, Skelton may almost make up for his want of that grace and elegance, that happy harmony of thought and language which belongs to a more refined period of letters.

But this poem is not less curious as illustrative of clerical and conventual manners. The damsel, of whom the Sparrowe celebrated by our clerical Catullus was the delight, was, we will presume with Mr. Dyce, only a lay boarder, not a professed votary or novice, among the black nuns at Carowe, a small convent near Norwich. We presume that the priestly character

of our poet made the courtier and the laureate to be thought a safe guest in this holy community. We only hope that he was not the father confessor of the fair Joanna Scroope, on whose personal charms, as well as on the doleful loss of her favourite, he indulges in rather ardent raptures; and as Skelton constantly asserts the propriety of his own conduct, and the purity as well as the loveliness of his Norfolk Lesbia, we are bound to believe him.

The poets, and indeed the priests and monks of those days, allowed themselves liberties, which to modern eyes seem strangely irreverent, with the services of the Church. The 'Dirige,' or dirge, over the 'Sparrowe' begins, and is constantly interlarded, with Latin lines and musical notes from the chaunts for the dead: it is, in short, a parody on the whole service.

[Quotes lines 1–12.]

And so the bereaved mistress goes on, for 1260 lines, to express her sorrow.

[Quotes lines 23–7.]

It is difficult, by a few extracts, to give a notion of a poem, the peculiar character of which is the wild profusion of all sorts of thoughts and images, more like the ribands out of a conjuror's mouth at a fair than anything else. But it is curious how like the idiomatic English of Skelton's day was to that of our own. We give the following lines in modern spelling, merely noting the obsolete words:

It was so pretty a fool,  
It would sit on a stool,  
And learned after my school.

It had a velvet cap,  
And would sit on my lap;  
Sometimes would he gasp  
When he saw a wasp.  
A fly or a gnat,  
He would fly at that;  
And prettily he would pant  
When he saw an ant.  
And seek after small worms,  
And sometimes white-bread crumbs;

And many times and oft,  
 Between my breasts soft,  
 It would lie and rest:  
 It was so prope and prest.  
 Lord, how he would pry  
 After the butterfly!  
 Lord, how he would hop  
 After the grasshop!  
 And when I said Phip, Phip,  
 Then he would leap and skip,  
 And take me by the lip. (1)

A little further on, our poet becomes much too *Priorish*, not without a touch of Swift. The privileged bird was even admitted into the young lady's chamber, and there, among his other amusements—

[Quotes lines 179–82.]

We are to suppose, we presume, that in these were the usual inhabitants of a lady's couch. We must compensate for this impropriety by the following pretty lines, too characteristic to be passed over.

[Quotes 'Philip Sparrow', lines 210–41.]

We are then off to Noah's ark—never was such a sparrow since those days—and by and bye 200 lines of all the birds in the air coming to the funeral, with their various offices.

[Quotes lines 386–402, 550–5, 569–70.]

If Chaucer be the father of English poetry, Skelton is the father of English doggerel; and while we study the wisdom of our ancestors, it is not amiss—at least, not unamusing—to know something of their nonsense. If our readers are not content with this, they will find many hundred more lines, to say nothing of four hundred besides in commendation of the lovely mistress of Philip Sparrow. The poem ends with these Latin lines.

[Quotes lines 1261–7.]

All this Skelton protests (and it seems that Phylipp Sparrowe had excited envy, and given some offence) was



innocent gaiety, a relaxation, as he says above, from his graver toils. But, after all, we fear that the rector of Diss was altogether out of his element as a country parson. ‘Antony Wood,’ (2) says Mr. Dyce, ‘affirms that at Diss and in the diocese Skelton was esteemed more fit for the stage than the pew or pulpit.’ It is at least certain that anecdotes of the irregularity of his life, of his buffoonery as a preacher, &c. &c. were current long after his decease, and gave rise to that amusement of the vulgar and entitled ‘The Merie Tales of Skelton.’ As he spared nobody, he got into a quarrel with the neighbouring Dominican friars, whom he had made the objects of some satire. At their instigation he was charged before his diocesan with living with a concubine, but whom he had secretly married. The fact seems to have been notorious: he had several children by this woman, and is said to have reproached himself on his death-bed for his cowardice in not openly avowing his marriage. The Bishop of Norwich was, in the hard words of Mr. Dyce, ‘the bloody-minded and impure’ Richard Nyke, or Nix. The bishop may have been, according to the strong and, we fear, just language of the Protestant writers, a cruel and not irreproachable man; but, in this case, he could not refuse to take cognizance of such a charge. What excuse Skelton may have found before a higher tribunal, we presume not to say, if, as we will charitably suppose, he was really married; but either way he was guilty of an offence against the discipline of his Church, and suspension from his clerical functions, which appears to have been his punishment, was certainly no harsh sentence. Yet Bishop Nyke cannot have kept a very watchful eye over his diocese, if such proceedings as Skelton remonstrates against in his extraordinary poem, ‘Ware the Hawke,’ went on without ecclesiastical censure. It appears that some neighbouring clergyman was accustomed to amuse himself with flying his hawks *in Skelton’s church*. Why Skelton did not summarily eject, instead of lampooning, the irreverend intruder does not appear. If we remember right, it is in a note to Mr. Hallam’s ‘Middle Ages’ that we find a papal exemption to the clergy of Berks from maintaining the archdeacon’s hawks when he was on his visitation. But we cannot discover from the poem what superior authority this ungentle falconer had over the parson of Diss, unless it might be during Skelton’s suspension. We cannot quote all the circumstances of this disgusting profanation—two stanzas will be quite enough, and these we are obliged to mutilate: Skelton lays it on with more than his usual profusion of Latin, we presume because he was satirizing a clerical adversary.

[Quotes 'Ware the Hawke', lines 278–98.]

Among the graver labours to which Skelton alludes during his residence, we are unable to reckon with certainty any of the more serious or even devotional writings which appear in his works, or are recounted in the long and rather ostentatious list of his compositions in the 'Garlande of Laurel.' How and at what period he became acquainted with Elynour Rummin, the ale-wife of Leatherhead, in Surrey, there is hardly a conjecture. This is the coarsest, but not the least clever, of Skelton's poems. It is a low picture of the lowest life—Dutch in its grotesque minuteness: yet, even in the description of the fat hostess herself, and one or two other passages, we know not that we can justly make any stronger animadversion than that they are very Swiftish. But it will further show how little (of course excepting cant words) the genuine vulgar tongue and, we may add perhaps, vulgar life is altered since the time of Henry VIII. Take the general concourse of her female customers to Elynour Rummin, un-controlled by any temperance societies.

[Quotes 'Elynour Rumming', lines 244–308.]

During all this period Skelton's relations to the court are, unfortunately, rather obscure. He is said by Churchyard to have been 'seldom out of princes' grace.' Mr. Dyce has found a suspicious entry, in which one John Skelton was committed to prison by the Court of Requests; but whether this was our poet (who by that time was certainly in orders), or even of what offence the said John Skelton was guilty, there is nothing to show. But there is one of his poems which appears to us to bear internal evidence of having been written at this period. 'The Bowge of Court'—literally, the Bouche, the allowance of meat and drink for the retainers—which Warton has rendered the 'Rewards of a Court.' The scene of this poem is laid in Harwich Harbour, where Skelton, in his allegoric character, goes on board the stately vessel, bound for the court. Now we apprehend that in those days the easiest, and perhaps the most expeditious, way for the parson of Diss to find his way to London would have been to run down to Harwich, and there embark. During one of these journeys, after the poetic fashion of the day, he may have idealised his ship, and impersonated the false friends and open enemies who may already have crossed his path, and thwarted his hopes of advancement; he may have essayed for once to make his satire take a higher and more serious form. The poet is slumbering at mine host's house

called Power's Key, at Harwich Harbour, when he sees his vision.

[Quotes 'Bouge of Court', lines 36-42.]

The owner of this bark is the Lady Saunce-pere (sans peer): the royal chaffre (merchant), a lady likewise, is Favour; with Daunger, her chief-gentlewoman. Skelton (anticipating M. de Custine) embarks under the modest impersonation of Drede, or Timidity; and is successively accosted by Favel (cajolery), Suspecte (suspicion), Harry Hafter (we cannot interpret this better than by Roguery), Disdayne, Ryotte, Dyssimilar, and Subtylte. 'Mr. Gifford describes this poem as a very severe satire, full of strong painting, and excellent poetry. The courtiers of Harry must have winced at it.' Even if Skelton intended those abstract personages to represent his old friends or foes of the court, we cannot think that the courtiers of that day would be quite so sensitive. If Skelton had contented himself with representing the vices of the clergy in these cold impersonations, or dressing up Wolsey as an allegory of pride, he would not have needed to seek asylum in Westminster Abbey. There is, however, much vigour, and, we should suppose, originality in some of his conceptions. The reader may probably remember the striking picture of *Riot* quoted by Warton: it is, perhaps, the best of the gallery.

This Interlude and the 'Morality of Magnificence' contain no doubt on the whole the best of Skelton's serious poetry; but the best of that only proves more plainly that his strength lies in a lower region: his Pegasus is not equal to the stately amble, or even processional march; it is a wild, rugged colt, full of fire and of vigor, and not a little vicious, as the phrase is; kicking out on all sides, and delighting in splashing up the dirt on every one he passes. His whole value is, as a vulgar vernacular poet, addressing the people in the language of the people.

Notwithstanding his own poetic warning, Skelton was still a hanger-on upon this treacherous and dissembling court; but it is difficult to make out his position or the estimation in which he was held. Mr. Dyce has first published certain poems against Garnesche, full of the most rabid abuse; each of which, Skelton declares, was written by the 'commandment of the king.' Garnesche, however, by the appointments which he held on several occasions of important trust as well as of state ceremony, seems to have stood high in royal favour—he was gentleman usher to Henry VIII., and received the honour of knighthood. It may have been one of Bluff King Hal's coarse

amusements to encourage this poetical fray in which Garnesche, it should seem, was the challenger. Yet, if Skelton had not in a great degree lost his self-respect, even Harry would hardly have shown such little respect to his old tutor (Skelton takes care to boast in these verses of the intimate relation in which he had stood to majesty) as graciously to command him to undertake this war of gross personal abuse. It was but a sorry occupation for a laureate, though one in which Skelton evidently delighted, to keep the field against all comers, and combat *a l'outrance* in good set Billingsgate. Such literary duels were not uncommon even in later and better days of our literature; but we do not know that they were waged, as it were, in the presence and expressly for the amusement of the sovereign. Some kings, it must be acknowledged, have whimsical notions of fun; but when one Martin Luther ventured to Skeltonise even against the sacred person and controversial erudition of the royal polemic, probably, he did not think it quite so diverting.

But there was another piece of Skelton's coarsest abuse, which we trust Henry was not so ungenerous as to approve—though perhaps Skelton might think it no inappropriate nor unacceptable flattery if he should turn those weapons of foul words, which he had wielded so successfully against his own adversaries, and in which royalty had condescended to find amusement, upon the enemies of the king. The laureate, after the battle of Flodden, thought it incumbent upon him to take the field against the Scots. And this is the chivalrous and Christian tone in which he speaks of the gallant king who had died fighting valiantly.

[Quotes 'Against the Scottes', lines 91–3, 146–52, 164–7.]

...During all this time, Skelton, whatever his position at court, was an acceptable guest at the castle-palaces of the great nobles, and even in some of the wealthy religious foundations. His 'Garland of Laurel' was written at Sheriff Hutton Castle; and some of the most gentle and high-born ladies of the land did not disdain his complimentary verses. He mentions in that poem the wealthy college of the Bonhommes of Ashridge, near Berkhamstead, as a place where he was a frequent visitor.

The poems against the Scots belong more properly to that class of Skelton's writings in which lies his main strength, and for which alone he has much claim on the notice of posterity, his political satire. His 'Colin Cloute,' and 'Why come ye not to Court?' — the former a general satire against the clergy, the latter a most vehement libel on the all-powerful Wolsey—are the

cleverest and most remarkable specimens of this peculiar vein. Skelton, indeed, had no great right to throw stones at the clergy, or to pelt them as he does with such sharp and dangerous missiles: and the indignation which, as all satirists pretend, inspired our laureate's verse, even against Wolsey, was not a high, disinterested, and intrepid aversion to his pride, his avarice, or his licentiousness. Unfortunately, there is a dedication to the full-blown Wolsey, crammed with the most fulsome Latin superlatives, expressing the poet's humblest deference for 'the super-illustrious legate—the most magnificent and worthy prince of priests—the most equitable distributor of justice'—and, moreover, the 'most excellent patron' of his work. Still more unfortunately, another of his poems, the 'Garland of Laurel,' closes with an envoy to the king and to the most *honorificate* cardinal—from one line of which we are forced to conclude that the source of Skelton's ultimate ire was neither less nor more than a disappointment touching a fat prebend.

[Quotes 'Garland of Laurel', lines 1589–91.]

The parson of Diss, in short, seems to have much resembled Byron's court Poet,

Who being unpensioned wrote a satire,  
And boasted that he could not flatter.

Nor was Skelton (with all respect for Mr. D'Israeli be it said) in any proper sense a Reformer: his opinions upon doctrine, as far as they appear, were those of his Church. The poem set forth with this adulatory dedication to Wolsey is a furious invective against the new teachers, who were springing up in the University of Cambridge; and the 'horrible heresy of these young heretykes, that stynke unbrent,' is the denial of worship to the Virgin Mary.

[Quotes from 'A Replyacion...', lines 73–91.]

This was the difference between Skelton and Roy, (3) the other celebrated satirist of Wolsey: Roy was a Reformer, an assistant, not altogether it should seem an unexceptionable assistant, of Tyndale in his translation of the Bible; and it was the burning of these Bibles which excited Roy's violent indignation against the Cardinal.

Yet for this very reason Skelton's picture of the clergy, and of the great Cardinal, is the more curious, and, in some respects,

more trustworthy, for, at least, it is not darkened by theological hatred; this Skelton reserved most piously for heretics. Much allowance must in justice be made for the personal character and feelings of Skelton; for the natural scurrility of the man, his envy in the one case, his disappointment in the other; but the libels of one age, fairly considered, become valuable historical evidence to posterity—often, as to manners and the opinions of the time, the best that can be attained. Skelton, in truth, was but the last echo of that voice, which had long been arraigning to the popular ear the inordinate wealth, the pride, the carelessness, the licence, the secular habits and feelings, and some of the more glaring superstitions of the clergy. Since the time of Wickliffe and the Lollards, no doubt this was mingled with much secret repugnance to some, at least, of the doctrines of the Church. But the dogmatic Reformers would have made their way much more slowly without these allies, who by no means shared their religious opinions, but confined themselves to lampooning the vices both of the secular and regular clergy. This politico-religious satire had long been at work, first in Latin, and afterwards in the rude vernacular tongues of Europe. Only occasionally, as we have said, and partially, but by no means generally connected with the Wickliffite or Hussite doctrines, it was a kind of spontaneous remonstrance against frauds and follies too palpable to the common sense of mankind; against the glaring disagreement of the lives of multitudes among both the monks and clergy, not only with the gospel, and the examples of worth and purity which had shone even on the worst ages of the Church, but even with the positive regulations of their own Canon-law. These songs were to the popular mind, what Erasmus was to the more learned world; and in the spirit at least, though neither in the tone nor taste of that scholar's attacks upon the monastic system, and the manners of the clergy, Skelton might shelter himself under his 'great and much injured name,' with whose praise he had been honoured at the commencement of his literary career....

Colyn Cloute is a kind of rustic impersonation of popular discontent. But Skelton himself lurks within the disguise.

[Quotes lines 53–8.]

And so he goes rattling on with his quick-recurring rhymes, all in the plain vernacular idiom; here and there only a word betraying, by its false rhyme when thrown into modern spelling, that the pronunciation was somewhat different from our one.

[Quotes lines 115–41, 147–51.]

One of the most remarkable things to be traced throughout these popular satirical songs, is the veneration for the memory of Thomas-a-Becket. The invasion on the royal power, the spiritual usurpation of this bold ecclesiastic seem entirely forgotten; he is the severe disciplinarian of the clergy, the martyr and the saint of popular reverence. Even in Skelton this traditionary feeling has not died away. Speaking of some of the gentler bishops, he says

[Quotes lines 168–74.]

This sounds like a quotation from some older song—it may be a hymn. Our poet then falls on the bishops' want of care in admitting unlearned persons to holy orders. He might have remembered that learning was no sure guarantee for priestly propriety, or even decency; but it is a curious picture.

[Quotes lines 228–9, 236–9, 272–8, 287–90, 257–61.]

Here Skelton again comes under his own lash. It would require a firm and delicate hand to trace out the evidence we have of the extent to which actual marriage prevailed among the English clergy even after the time of Innocent III....

The pomp, the state, and the dress of the bishops next come under the sarcastic notice of Colyn Cloute.

[Quotes lines 303–14.]

The extortions and oppressions of the poor, by 'sum-mons and citations, and excommunications,' are not forgotten; nor do the regular clergy fare much better in his hands. They are charged with leaving their cloisters, and wandering about the world. The abbesses and prioresses are said to be as little inclined to the total seclusion required by their order; and alas! when abroad they are rather too much disposed 'to cast up their black veils.' The religious houses are accused of great neglect in their services, and with the wanton dilapidation of their buildings.

[Quotes lines 408–17, 419–35.]

And these lines can scarcely refer to the monasteries which were forcibly suppressed by Wolsey before the

Reformation. It is a distinct accusation of culpable negligence.

There is a curious passage on the pride with which the clergy, many of them of the lowest birth, treated the nobility of the land. No doubt the ruin of the old feudal baronage of England during the civil wars, and the depression of the few who held their estates comparatively undiminished under the iron policy of Henry VII., showed the wealth of the higher Churchmen in more disproportionate and invidious grandeur. The Church property, also, no doubt, suffered in these devastating wars, but it must have been more secure against confiscation. If, in the confusion of the times, it was exposed to forcible or fraudulent alienation; it would, on the other hand, from its greater security, the facility of acquisition where so much property was, as it were, cast loose, and from the greater solicitude of men involved in the crimes and miseries of civil war to purchase peace with heaven by lavish donations or bequests to the Church, notwithstanding the statute of Mortmain, accumulate very largely. If we are to believe Skelton, the temporal peers were not disposed to contest this contemptuous superiority asserted by the ecclesiastic.

[Quotes lines 610–28.]

After the clergy and nobility we have the four orders of fryers—and the coarse sequel fits well with this flattering prelude. We must rather, however, make room for the style and furniture of the episcopal palaces. We recommend this passage to Mr. Pugin, for the next edition of his ‘Contrasts between the Episcopal Residences of the Olden Time with those of the Present Day.’ Drawing-rooms with pianofortes, and even work-tables, perhaps even nurseries themselves, may find some excuse.

[Quotes lines 936–81.]

Even in ‘Colin Cloute,’ Skelton ventured to assail, though rather more covertly, the despotic Wolsey. No one, however high his rank, could obtain a hearing of the king without the leave, or without the presence, of the President.

[Quotes lines 1047–50.]

Throughout, however, Skelton protests his attachment to the good clergy and to Holy Church; his design was the amendment of the prevailing vices and irregularities.



[Quotes lines 1097–107, 1119–20, 1123–30.]

We cannot leave ‘Colyn Cloute,’ without the following amusing description of the summary proceedings to which he exposed himself by his rash rhymes, which were only circulated in manuscript he says himself that he could not get them printed.

[Quotes lines 1163–72, 1175–6, 1184–91.]

These were, no doubt, the most popular churches in the City; St. Mary was in Bishopsgate ward; the Austin friars in Broad Street ward; St. Thomas of Acre near the great conduit in Cheape.

But in audacity, in bitterness, in coarseness, and in scurrility, the ‘Colyn Cloute’ is far surpassed by the ‘Why come ye not to Court?’—while in rude cleverness, in volubility of abuse, in the homely but vigorous abundance of images and allusions, the latter poem is in no degree inferior. The whole is a fierce invective against Wolsey; and though the Prime Ministers of England have usually come in for their full share of virulent personal invective, both in prose and verse, yet we question whether in his utmost height of unpopularity any minister was ever more recklessly assailed, or in language more galling, than by this satire against the all-powerful Cardinal. To have written, and, though no doubt unpublished, to have allowed such a poem to transpire even among friends, shows such extraordinary courage as almost to require a higher motive in our laureate than the mere disappointment about his coveted prebend. It is still more extraordinary that Wolsey, armed with such enormous ecclesiastical power, should have allowed a sanctuary to protect so pestilent a libeller; or that an abbot of Westminster, of so high a character as Islip, should either, in the assertion of the privileges of his church, or, as is intimated, from some secret favour towards Skelton, have dared or desired to protect him from prosecution. It might seem as if Wolsey, if he had really seen the poem, knew that it was but the expression of a dangerous but wide-spread popular sentiment; the Cardinal might be struck with some of its terrible truths—his supercilious treatment of the nobility, his usurpation of the royal power, his presumption upon the blind, but perhaps precarious, favour of the King; and he might think it prudent, as he had failed in arresting and crushing him by a sudden act of authority, not to attribute too much importance to the insolent poet, or to give unnecessary publicity to that which was yet lurking in secret.

We may add here that Skelton died in sanctuary, at Westminster, and was buried in the adjoining church of St. Margaret.

As few readers, perhaps, will encounter 1250 lines of antiquated libel against a minister who lived some centuries ago, they may yet be obliged to us for selecting some passages, which may show how such things were written in the time of Henry VIII. Skelton first takes a sort of view of the Cardinal's foreign politics as regards Spain, France, and Scotland; he is charged with receiving bribes from France, with whom England, in alliance with the Emperor, was at war. Our laureate vaunts the prowess of the 'good Erle of Surrey,' who had abated the courage of the French, and made them take to their fortified cities, like 'foxes in their dens, and urchins (hedgehogs) in a stone wall,' and even a more unseemly illustration.

[Quotes 'Why Come Ye Nat to Court?', lines 166–99.]

A great deal more follows (we shall give presently a graphic passage) on his insolent overbearing of the nobility, and likewise of the judges in the courts of law. There is a sort of slyness in the few lines about Hampton Court.

[Quotes lines 398–412.]

He soon, however, gets more personal; there is not a vice, bad passion, or iniquity, which he does not charge upon the Cardinal—ambition, avarice, pride, sloth, incontinence (and on this point we must acknowledge that here and there he deserves Pope's epithet). Of course he does not forget his humble origin.

[Quotes lines 488–91.]

He is contemptuous on the Cardinal's want of learning. A thought may have crossed the mind of Skelton that the gentleman's son of Norwich, whose scholarship had been rewarded by three universities and admired by Erasmus, might have aspired to as high distinction as the butcher's boy of Ipswich. Wolsey, he says, was neither Doctor of Divinity nor of Law, but a poor Master of Arts. He was ignorant of everything—letters, policy, astronomy.

[Quotes lines 517–26.]

If Wolsey was indeed less learned than became his station, he deserved the greater honour for his magnificent

encouragement of learning. Whatever other heads of houses may do, the dean of Christ Church should abstain from quoting Skelton, for better reasons than that assigned by Pope.

[Quotes lines 582–99, 612–35.]

There is great boldness yet some tact in the verses on the influence of the Cardinal over the king; while he exposes the weakness, he respects the royal dignity.

[Quotes lines 654–9, 666–79.]

He attributes this influence to sorcery, and tells the famous old story of the bewitchment of Charlemagne, on which Southey wrote a ballad. He adds very significantly the case of Cardinal Balue (see ‘Quentin Durward’), (4) who, though advanced to the dignity of a cardinal by the influence of Louis XI., according to our poet

[Quotes lines 734–40.]

Skelton is wrong in his history, as the French cardinal only suffered a long imprisonment; but he points his moral in these words.

[Quotes lines 743–6.]

Afterwards, however, he is not quite so merciful in his wishes for the fate of his enemy. After a long passage on the impoverishment of the people by his rapacious extortions

[Quotes lines 966–84, 986–93.]

If our readers’ historic ideal of Wolsey be disturbed by these rude rhymes, which we have thus copiously extracted both for their intrinsic singularity, and for the extraordinary fact that such things were ventured in such days, we would send them to refresh their memory with the Wolsey of Shakespeare; let them take the honest chronicle of Griffith, which extorts the admission of its justice even from the injured Catherine, and they will have, we are persuaded, not merely the noblest poetic impersonation, but the most fair and impartial historic estimate of this great man.

As to Skelton’s more general satire on the church and clergy, we have heard so much lately of the iniquities of the Reformation, the crimes and weaknesses of those who were concerned in it, that it may not be unseasonable to show

something of the other side of the picture. Let us know what it was which was reformed by the Reformation. It must, of course, be remembered that Skelton's is a satire, the satire of a rude, bitter, and disappointed man; still his verse was the popular expression of a strong popular feeling, much darkened and exaggerated, no doubt, as the popular feeling, especially of an ignorant people, usually is—but with much truth—with more truth, we fear, than that poetic view of the past with which young minds are of late years so enamoured. This imaginative retrospect hardly deigns to see anything but stately cathedrals rising, abbeys and cloisters in their holy seclusion; will hear only the fine anthems and choral services; and will take cognizance of only such saintly and apostolic men, as have never been wanting to the Christian Church in its most unenlightened and unchristian days. Nothing can be more delightful than thus to trace out and to hold up for the admiration which is their due these hidden treasures of divine grace, of holiness, humanity, and love; far more so than to rake up obscure and forgotten libels; but even the latter is a service to which the severe lover of truth (of truth at every cost and at every sacrifice, even of personal inclination and poetic enjoyment) must occasionally submit; for it is only by the due imbalance, the impartial comparison of these conflicting materials—by the calm and dispassionate hearing of every testimony that judicial history can sum up its solemn sentence; so only can we obtain, we will not merely say the philosophy, but even the religion, of history.

#### Notes

- 1 'Philip Sparrow', lines 122–7, 134–40.
- 2 Anthony à Wood, 'Athenae Oxonienses' (1691–2), column 20.
- 3 William Roy (fl. 1527), co-author of the satiric poem 'Rede Me and Be Not Wroth', first published in 1526.
- 4 A novel by Sir Walter Scott.

## 44. HIPPOLYTE TAINÉ ON SKELTON THE 'CLOWN'

1863

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From Hippolyte Taine's 'Histoire de la littérature anglaise' (1863), first translated into English in 1871 as 'The History of English Literature'. This extract is from this translation, p. 139.

Taine (1828–93) was a French philosopher, critic and historian. One footnote has been deleted from this selection.

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At the end of all this mouldy talk, and amid the disgust which they have conceived for each other, a clown, a tavern Triboulet, (1) composer of little jeering and macaronic verses, Skelton makes his appearance, a virulent pamphleteer, who, jumbling together French, English, Latin phrases, with slang, and fashionable words, invented words, intermingled with short rhymes, fabricates a sort of literary mud, with which he bespatters Wolsey and the bishops. Style, metre, rhyme, language, art of every kind, is at an end; beneath the vain parade of official style there is only a heap of rubbish. Yet, as he says

[Quotes 'Colin Clout', lines 53–8.]

It is full of political animus, sensual liveliness, English and popular instincts; it lives. It is a coarse life, still elementary, swarming with ignoble vermin, like that which appears in a great decomposing body. It is life, nevertheless, with its two great features which it is destined to display: the hatred of the ecclesiastical hierarchy, which is the Reformation; the return to the senses and to natural life, which is the Renaissance.

Note

1 The court fool in Victor Hugo's drama of 'Le Roi s'amuse'.

## 45. 'DUBLIN UNIVERSITY MAGAZINE' ON SKELTON

1866

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This unsigned article titled *A Satirical Laureate of the Sixteenth Century* appeared in the 'Dublin University Magazine', LXVIII (1866), pp. 601–18. It has not proved possible to determine its authorship. The original footnotes have been deleted.

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Swift sat in Rabelais' easy chair; but there is another English satirist whose pantagruelistic tendencies were still more evident, who was a contemporary of the French humorist, and whose virulent attacks against the corruptions of the Church do not yield in coarseness and energy to Luther's diatribes. John Skelton, Laureate, was the link between Chaucer and Surrey, Wolsey and Cranmer—the representative of the reformatory spirit of the first part of the sixteenth century. He wrote powerful invectives against the Church while Luther was still macerating himself in a convent cell; and he was an important agent in bringing about the English Reformation.

In Germany a monk stood against principalities and powers; but in England the evolution of the great change was still more curious and interesting. As *Piers Ploughman* had prophesied, the Crown alone could conquer the Church. And now was seen a young prince whose chief characteristic was an inexorable will; and it was by coming into collision with that will that the great hierarchy, which had cursed royal kings, was to fall, or to be absorbed by the crown. The King himself, had not in the early part of his reign, discerned the approach of this consumation, which More had foreseen; but he had often been offended by the pride and power of Churchmen, and was, accordingly, not inimical to attacks on the clergy. Without perceiving the results that would accrue from popularising a contempt of the hierarchy, he fostered Skelton's vigorous satire. Monarch and poet were tacitly allied together against Wolsey; and by this action against the common enemy, unconscious and intermittent though it often was, the one built up the Church of England, the other imprinted to England satire the political character which it retained in Butler, Dryden, Swift.

Before Skelton the clergy had not been attacked in England under such stirring circumstances, or in so merciless

a fashion. Like other sublunary things, satire has its periods of evolution. It exists wherever there is a dead body, but, like the eagles, it flies down upon it in circles, the earliest of which are wide and circuitous; the fell swoop, the destroying attack, do not occur suddenly. It was thus with English satire. Directed chiefly against the Church, its attacks were at first timid and indirect. Piers Ploughman veiled his invectives under the mask of allegory. Chaucer is caustic, but courtly and moderate; he seems rather to reflect calmly the general opinion of his times than to attempt raising a tempest of his own. Lyndsay is too general, and his satire is but a feeble echo of Wycklyffe. There is an advance in William Roy's attack on Wolsey, in which invective is directed against the cardinal himself, and not merely the clergy in general; but literary talent is absent from that production, which is the offspring of misanthropical common sense rather than of poetical inspiration. In Skelton the satire of the age reaches its acme, and after him disappears. He raised it to intense poetry, melting and modelling it with the fire of his original genius. Rich with the knowledge of the ancients, zealous for the improvement of his own language, admitted at court, he had all the opportunities required for observing and portraying his age, and his aquafortis has left an indelible caricature of the great priest of the time.

Of himself scarcely any record remains; and his authentic portrait is not to be found. What fate attends inventors and fathers of arts, Homer, Piers Ploughman, Chaucer, Skelton, Shakespeare, that their persons should have this tendency to disappear from history? Is it because these men were too great to foster an egotistical fame; or that there is a law of compensation, a Nemesis in history, which orders that the sublimer a man's work the more indefinite shall his person remain? Skelton's mind may be studied in his writings, but information respecting his private life can only be reconstructed by means of scattered allusions. Born about 1460, educated at Cambridge, where he most probably took his M.A. degree in 1484, he began his poetical career by writing on the death of Edward IV.; a 'Balade of the Mustard Tarte' is also ascribed to that early period of his literary life. He bewailed the death of the Earl of Northumberland, a liberal and lettered nobleman, slain by an infuriated mob, which the poet thus apostrophizes—

[Quotes 'The...Dethe...of the Erie of Northumberland', lines 50–6.]

In 1490 Skelton probably corrected Caxton's version of the *Aeneid*; for the old printer, in the preface to his book, desires the assistance of 'Mayster John Skelton, late created poete laureate in the Vnyversite of Oxen-forde.' In this preface Caxton alludes to Skelton's classical learning, which so much transcended his own; the Laureate had translated 'Tulle' and Diodorus Siculus. Cambridge too made Skelton a laureate; the laureateship was then a university degree, and not a dignity corresponding to that of the modern poet laureate. There exists however, a document declaring Skelton Poet Laureate to Henry VIII.; and it is not improbable that the king should have created a royal laureateship. If so, the distinction was most likely honorary as well as honorable, for there is not a maravedi of evidence to show that a salary was attached to it. Henry was fond of being surrounded with literary men, especially if they humored his jovial character; besides, he must have liked to associated with Skelton, who had been his tutor, and have given him 'drynke of the sugryd well of Elicony's waters crystallyne, aqueintyng hym with the Musys Nyne.' In an ode to Prince Henry, when the boy was nine years old, Erasmus congratulates him on having in his house that 'Skelton, who is the luminary and honour of British literature.' No one was fitter than Erasmus to appreciate Skelton's wit and learning; his testimony is therefore especially valuable to confute the laureate's detractors; but, as Goldsmith has observed, great men generally understand and praise one another, while inferior writers endeavour to bring others down to their own level.

Skelton's appointment as tutor to a prince shows the esteem in which he must have been held by society in general as well as by Erasmus. The pupil himself not a little contributes to the master's credit; for in after-life Henry proved to be imbued with real learning, and a fervent love of literature. He was vividly interested in the efforts made to improve the English language; he assembled artists and learned men around him. That strength of will, which was his characteristic, grasped the sweets of knowledge as eagerly as those of pleasure and power. Before students of history join in the ridicule and hostility which have been directed against that great king, they must investigate his titles to the gratitude of posterity. It must never be forgotten that he made England the arbiter of Europe, and founded the Anglican Church; he also greatly contributed to the edification of English letters. Skelton, whom Henry must have greatly respected as his former teacher, doubtless often conversed with the king on literary subjects and amused the merry monarch



with satirical productions. The laureate's other associates at court, are Thynne, clerk of the royal kitchen, whom the king promised to protect in his attacks against the clergy; Sir Thomas Elyot, whose endeavours were notable in the work of creating a vernacular style; Parker, Surrey, Wyatt, literary favourites of the king; gentle Sir Thomas More, who was not without considerable pantagruelistic tendencies, who perhaps loved staying at home to read and dream, and examine his shells, his minerals, his Indian ape, his fox, and other animals, much better than coming to court, but was as it were compelled to yield to imperious Henry's will; Lily, the grammarian; most likely Dunbar, the Scottish poet, who often visited England; and officious Garnesche, the usher, who carried the Princess Mary through the surf on landing in France, and against whom the malicious monarch directed the shafts of the Laureate's satire. The pompous cardinal himself condescended to patronise Skelton, who probably did not object to be on good terms with the great man, at least while that dignitary was basking in the sunshine of royal favour.

Skelton was therefore a court poet; a man of learning and repute in his day, and not, as some seem to have thought, a poor, obscure priest, envious of Wolsey's splendour. Skelton had indeed taken orders in 1498, and held the title of Rector of Diss in Norfolk; but in those times clerical residence was not very rigidly enforced, and and it is not likely that the poet, generally in favour at court, would willingly have buried himself alive in the Norfolk parsonage. He doubtless preferred residing near the court, where he could observe the ways of the world, become as versed in the knowledge of men as he was in that of the ancient writers, and find materials for his satirical rhymes. Gifted with a sensitive and fervid temperament, he must have liked the excitement of society; and he must have felt that the best manner of improving the language—and this culture seems to have been the chief purpose of his life—was to imprint upon it the tints of that passion which springs from intercourse with the world, as the Geyser from the boiling lake. He knew that pedantry, coldness, affectation, were the defacement and ruin of tongues. From his musings over the decline of Greek and Roman letters, he must have learnt the great lesson that a real sentiment and not cold rhetoric is the vital principle of literature. He accordingly fired his mind with passion from the burning pile of the world, but with the passion of philosophers, which is satire, or rather the complex combination of sentiments of which satire is the effect. From the days of the Hebrew prophets, and the time when Juvenal

thundered forth his invectives, to the bitter accents of Byron, and the mad Circean carnival of Shelley's irony, sublime discontent and satire has been the characteristic of the greatest men; and those who have never played the Quixote have not ascended to the highest degree among the immortal hierarchy.

Not being a stranger to the manners of the days when Henry VII. was king, Skelton must have been interested in observing the changes brought about by a new generation. That love for wealth and apparel which Andrew Borde, some years afterwards so shrewdly noted as being characteristic of the English, was, during the reign of Henry VIII., no longer repressed by the terroristic regimen of collectors. Under the late King, poverty and avarice had spread far and wide throughout the realm. But now a golden age, in the literal sense, had dawned; luxury, as well as learning, was revived, and was displayed with almost oriental profuseness. Gold and silver, pearls of great price came from the coffers where they had been concealed, and sparkled on the breasts of ladies, on the vesture of noblemen. Clothiers, gold-beaters, weavers, had full employment. More bound his Utopian convicts in golden fetters. The adventure of the Field of the Cloth of Gold was but the climax of the pomp and pride of the time. Never were king and queen more brilliant than Henry VIII. and Catherine of Aragon. The festivities of their marriage lasted six months. They were but the royal gems of a parterre in which the white and green of Tudor mingled with the violet and miniver-purpled gowns of the Knights of the Bath, the crimson velvet robes of dukes set with pearls, and the lettuce-edged scarlet trains of courtly beauties. Imagine the King and a dozen other maskers coming to Wolsey's palace disguised as shepherds, with clothes of fine cloth of gold and crimson satin, with beards of fine gold or silver wire, every hair of which sparkled in the glare of torches borne by satin-clothed attendants. Attracted by the lustre of royal splendour, literary men came forth, as, when the sun rises, crabs crawl from their beds of sand. Odes and dedications abounded. Mars, Jupiter, Hercules, were once more pitilessly dragged from their Olympus to do duty as 'properties' in the laudatory compositions of the age. Morus was bold enough to compare the new era with the preceding reign, and to rejoice that a happier time was come, when the people of England no longer stood in dread of spies and tax-gatherers, when the merchant again launched his vessel on the waters, and illiberal strong boxes no longer withheld the riches of the land. As Skelton's position enabled him to enjoy many social privileges, we can fancy him visiting the court, and greeting the

Countess of Surrey, by whom he was patronised, and perhaps even the queen and maids of honour, according to that custom which so delighted Erasmus. He enters the presence-chamber, or is warned by the officer's trumpet to approach a suppertable covered with quaint devices of churches, castles, beasts, birds, fowls, and personages. Turning from the splendour of the court, he casts a somewhat cynical eye on the pomps and vanities of Wolsey, that modern Eutropius who would at the last have no Chrysostom to intercede for him; Skelton satirically marks the gorgeous vestments of the cardinalship, the torches, and the banquets, and the plaudits of the crowd, and the flatteries of courtiers; and what a poem on 'Mutabilitie' the old philosopher might have written had he lived to see what he foretold—the fall of this energetic priest—Wolsey's death in the quiet abbey, when his prestige had departed, and the velvet-clothed gentlemen, and the yeoman of the barge, and the pure wine ever flowing, and the crooks, and the heralds, and the cross-bearers, and the horses, and the pleasures devised for the King's consolation, had vanished away like unsubstantial dreams.

Although Skelton was not to see this consummation, he in the meanwhile contributed to it. His friend William Thynne, clerk of the royal kitchen, and himself not very friendly to the bishops, is said to have prompted the Laureate to attack Wolsey. Such satire was by no means un-uncongenial to Henry. His fiery spirit could not but feel the curb of the Church; like a young horse under a rider, he had a disagreeable sense of restraint. In vain had Wolsey endeavoured to tame him—now by enjoining the prince to read nineteen folios of Aquinas, then by making him go through a course of boisterous pleasure. The King's powerful organization was not to be subdued in either way. Wolsey, whose nose denotes more energy than meditative power, seems not to have understood that Henry's will was to be courted and complied with at all hazards; had he determined to retain Henry's favour at any price, at any risk of alienating the Pope, he probably would not have fallen; but not being satisfied with the height he had reached, he, like so many other great men, was at last conquered by fate. The beginnings of the end were, as in all other matters, slow and gradual. In Skelton's first attack, entitled 'Colin Cloute,' the allusions to Wolsey are few and delicate. That satire is directed against the clergy in general; Skelton's indignation rises against the luxury, pride, and ignorance of priests and monks. He tears the mask away with such violence as almost to flay the faces of his victims. To read this poem is to evoke from the catacombs of the past,

from the vaults of ruined convents and abbeys, a motley multitude of monks, Cistercians, Virginians, Benedictines; to see them burying their sensual faces in cups of hypocras, or discussing the masterpieces of the cooks, or consecrating the decaying bones of macerated saints in shrines radiant with pearls and precious stones, or winding through villages and cities to conciliate the people and arrogate sacerdotal privileges. An ill-concealed spirit of antagonism was diffused among the people; women, butchers, servants, apprentices, carpenters would read forbidden translations of the Scriptures, and scoff at Papistical ordinances. The general discontent converges in 'Colin Cloute;' in which no charge which could be laid on a graceless clerical corporation is forgotten; neither the ignorance which is unable to construe gospel and epistle, nor the neglect of midnight masses, the traffic in mitres, the yoke of citations and excommunications laid on the poor, the wearing singular garments of russet and hair. The satirist inveighs against the disputations, contentions, and heresies that corrode the Church; some members of which are tainted by Lutheran doctrines, or Wyckliffian errors, or Russian, Arian, Pelagean tendencies. Skelton also refers to the political obnoxiousness of the clergy, in a passage which must have reflected the feelings of many a haughty nobleman, and perhaps of the King himself.

[Quotes 'Colin Clout', lines 595–7, 613–14, 629–31.]

All those invectives are hurled in short lines of five or six syllables, rhyming in couplets, triplets, quartets, falling and rattling down like hailstones in a storm; merciless, abrupt, and copious, the words strike and re-bound till they take away the breath; wit flashes like lightning through that storm in which the thunder of indignation booms. Skelton's attempt to translate his passion into a vernacular form involves a struggle with an imperfect language; he fully appreciates the nature of the conflict, and acknowledges that he has not achieved so consummate a triumph as he would have wished.

[Quotes lines 53–8.]

Rugged as his language is, it can reflect the various moods of his valiant mind. Towards the end of the poem he relents, and declares that he decries no good bishop, no good priest, no good canon; and he concludes with a metaphor, in which he expresses his aspiration towards rest—

[Quotes lines 1253–60.]

The somewhat mournful opening of the poem shows that he had a sense of the uselessness of casting too much truth abroad on the world—

[Quotes lines 1–5, 13–14.]

Cockneys who steam down the Thames, and captains who anchor off Erith, will be glad to recollect that Skelton wrote his ‘Colin Cloute’ in that town, while he was on a visit at his friend Thynne’s father’s ‘howse.’

In ‘Why come ye not to court?’ the Laureate threw off all restraint. Wolsey is personally attacked in that virulent satire, in which series of vituperative enumerations succeed one another like the waves of snakes in some serpents’ cave, or after the Ophidian adventure in Pandemonium. Had the old rector—for he must have been nearly sixty when he wrote this—been soured by lack of promotion, or is the virulence of his language to be ascribed to the tone of satire in that age? As it is, the verse flows on like a rill of Tartarus, the fluid of which is molten metal, and evolves clouds of stifling vapours. The images arise like malicious imps attendant on furies; and all this rout of horrors is directed against the hapless Cardinal with the science of a Prospero waving his wand for the punishment of some obscene slave. Feature after feature, Skelton flays and dissects his antagonist’s character; he shows that its primary element is an iron will, on which he insists with emphatic repetition:

[Quotes ‘Why Come Ye Nat to Court?’ lines 102–4.]

That will has brought Wolsey pomp and pride; he keeps himself in luxury and sensuality; he affects to rule the roast, to usurp speech at council, to mar all things in the ‘Chamber of Starres.’ Noblemen and barons cower before before the imperious priest, as sheep before a ‘bocher’s dogge’

[Quotes lines 304–8.]

And it is a fact that in that age many noblemen were unable to sign their name.

Wolsey is also charged with ruling the King by craft and subtlety; laws melt like snow before the Cardinal’s will, bland is his breath of flattery. Probably instituting in his mind a comparison between his own career and that of Wolsey, the Laureate asks what was this upstart? No doctor of divinity, no

doctor of law, but a puny master of arts whom the King thought fit to endow with prelacy; a man who certainly knew the humanities, but was ignorant of the sciences, philology, philosophy, astronomy—

[Quotes lines 517–19.]

Does this reproach intimate that Skelton himself was conversant with those writers? did he suffer from the comparison between his acquirements and the lack of promotion he had to bear? did he remember the days when, more than any other man at court, he influenced the mind of Henry? did he chafe at being supplanted by this upstart Cardinal? To crown his grievances, had Wolsey's credit brought the author of 'Colin Cloute' into disfavour at court? He warns the King respecting the consequences of having so powerful a rival:-

[Quotes lines 582, 584–7.]

A gentle hint is thrown, intimating that the King must be bewitched to have such a favourite as Wolsey. Petrarch tells how Charlemagne was bewitched in a like fashion; but still further extending his researches on this point, the horrified Laureate finds it recorded in Gaguin that King Louis of France elevated a poor man, by name Balua, to splendour, to chancellorship, to cardinalship; until

[Quotes lines 734–7.]

Scarcely, however, has he uttered this significant warning, than he repents of so cruel an allusion:

[Quotes lines 743–6.]

He hints, however, at the existence of some real danger, by comparing the Cardinal to a mouse fearlessly dwelling in a cat's ear; and he indulges in an aspiration to the effect that Henry may retain a sound zoological knowledge:-

[Quotes lines 769–74.]

Again recurring to examples of traitors' deaths, he alludes to the punishment of Master Mewtas, the King's French secretary, who had informed the French king of Henry's designs:-

[Quotes lines 792–3.]

That secretary has, it seems, taken his

pasport to pas  
 To the devyll, Sir Sathanas,  
 To Pluto and Syr Belyall. [lines 800, 802–3]

Notwithstanding the manifold details given respecting the Cardinal, Skelton does not intend to leave that ‘matter mysticall’ completely aside.

[Quotes lines 823–8.]

Towards the end of the poem, he bemoans the sad state of the country:-

[Quotes lines 1021–4, 1027–37.]

He concludes with explaining how he came to write this satire:-

[Quotes lines 1199–202, 1205–8, 1222.]

Such is this extraordinary production, in which the indignation of a fine mind is clothed in such power, invention, and copiousness of diction. There is no better type of satire; Skelton’s metre is all his own; the words spring from line to line like so many monkeys, pointing, grinning, chattering, howling, biting. The similes have that pitiless pungency which Butler afterwards evinced. The whole is breathless and fierce as a panther’s attack. In ‘Colin Cloute’ there were but generalities; here the personality lends piquancy to the poem.

This great satire is a most valuable illustration of that period of Henry VIII.’s reign, which preceded the Reformation; it is the best poetical expression of the sentiments that then pervaded the minds of men—the pride of the Saxon fermenting against the haughty demeanor of Church dignitaries, the rebellion of the northern spirit against the dominion of a foreign hierarchy. Roy, Lindsay, declaim against the corruptions of the clergy; but in these writers the political element is not salient, as it is in Skelton’s invective. The latter echoes the grievances of the court as well as those of the people; he complains that the Cardinal threatens to checkmate the King. The colours of Skelton’s picture show his antagonist’s character with more vividness than any chronicle. Pride and ambition were Wolsey’s chief attributes; and although when viewed apart from other traits, the proportion of them which has been laid

to his charge may appear exaggerated, the relations of other writers can furnish an equilibrium and compensation to the estimate of Wolsey's character; but it is not the less certain that Skelton's portrait of him is indispensable for a correct view of the Cardinal. Skelton's defects are those of reformers—a propensity to half truths, a violent adherence to one side of the question; but with the short-comings of satirists he also had their virtues—the power and justice which differentiate a satire, however harsh, from a libel, the writings of Juvenal from those of Dennis. Good satire is, in earnest natures, the product of a strong sense of justice rather than an overflow of animal spirits; it is therefore essentially practical; and such was Skelton's invective. Before him, Piers Ploughman had cautiously given vent to his feelings in allegorical poems; Chaucer's caustic wit had ridiculed monks without any other purpose than to give the artistic representation of a class and furnish matter for boisterous merriment. Lindsay inveighs against the clergy in a far less vigorous and original manner than the Rector of Diss, his long cadences, more like a lamentation than a scourge, flows like tears which course one another down the cheeks. But in Skelton's writings English satire first bears the new characteristic which it has since presented, without making artistic effect his chief object; he devotes his energies to most powerfully impressing a practical purpose on the reader's mind; in this respect he resembles Luther, who, like him, uses popular invective with a sternly destructive end.

Indignation and loathing against corrupt things are the sentiments which Skeltonic satire fosters; in the same manner did Swift write his withering invectives on mankind, and Pope defend taste against the assaults of Grub-street writers. English satire is a conflagration, and not merely the lambent lightning flashes of a summer evening; it is differentiated by this characteristic from the satire of other countries. Folengo, whose poems have been erroneously considered as having influenced Skelton, ridicules monks without any earnestness, with the bantering indolence of a cook; so varied, unceasing, and purposeless is his laughter, that it very nearly wastes itself, becomes pithless and injures the satirical effect, as too numerous dishes impair, instead of consolidating, the nutritive powers. Rabelais, although presenting a similarity to Cocceius and Skelton, with respect to some characteristics of style, such as copiousness of language and long enumerations, is differentiated from the English satirist by his allegorical method of ridicule; for though his symbolical narratives, which he compares to a 'medullary bone,' convey a pithful and important meaning, he is far from



personally denouncing ecclesiastical dignitaries; he is playful, and not burning with a sombre earnestness of purpose; his laughter, partaking of artistical rather than of practical irony, throws its brilliancy over the whole circle of human affairs. Skelton concentrates the rays of his irony on one point—the clergy and the cardinal are ever before him; he finally takes the latter as the type of the class and pitilessly analyses him, dissects him, as a microscopist some noxious insect. His satire has all the accuracy of a scientific study; he is not, like Rabelais, obliged to disguise himself for fear of being burned; the King is predisposed in his favour, if not exactly on his side. Skelton gives in his writings a reflection of the political wants of the age—the destruction of a power which stood in obnoxious rivalry to the Crown. He appeals to the people, prepares them for the Reformation which Henry was to accomplish; his writings are what Hudibras would have been had that poem been written before the downfall of the Puritans. Hence his denunciations of the grievances of the time— ‘So myche nobyll prechyng, and so lytell amendment’ — ‘so lytell care for the comyn weall, and so myche nede’ — ‘so myche pride of prelattes, so cruell and so kene.’ [‘Speak Parrot’, lines 445, 466, 468.] His indignation strings grievance after grievance together, like the beads on a chaplet; he enumerates the crossings and blessings performed by the clergy, the poverty of the people, the taxes, the wasteful banqueting, the hatred that prevails against the Church, the abundance of beggars, the boldness of vagabonds. He is too earnest for indulging in sceptical or frolicsome laughter. His copiousness of words is not intended to heighten buffoonery, but to strengthen the expression, present it under all its facets, with all available resources; he recruits words as a captain does men, in order to aggravate his attack; his clearness strikes like a sword, while the brilliant polygonal mirror of Rabelais merely reflects surrounding things. Skelton’s similes are not rollicking and sprightly, like those of the French author, but fierce and abusive; he calls Wolsey—

So fatte a maggott, bred of a flesshe flye;  
Was never such a ffylyty gorgon, nor such  
an epicure,  
Syns Dewcalyon’s flodde, I make the feste  
and sure. [‘Speak Parrot’, lines 502–4]

Whenever he uses fable, as when he makes a parrot declaim against the evils of the age, it is to lend more variety to his

denunciations, and not to disguise them. So circumstantial is he, that were it not for the variety of his imagery and the purpose running through his writings, he would have remained as realistic as Lydgate; and it is by this characteristic that he is linked to the middle ages. Like other branches of literature, satire has its periods of growth; it is at first cradled in myths and allegories; it then passes into the minuteness and detail of the chronicle; and at last some powerful idea is implanted into it, pervades it, links it to some great movement, organises it into a living form, which, however, like a hamadryad, may present some traces of the past. This latter stage, which, considered relatively to modern times, is but the first phase, is exhibited in Skelton's verse. As the fabric of civilization becomes more complicated, satirical writing becomes more refined, embraces more relations of social life, is impregnated with subtler thought, reflects more shifting and delicate hues of mind; this aspect it presents in Dryden, Pope, and Addison. But it is with satire as with poetry; although its processes may become more refined and complicated in highly civilized ages, its substratum, its essence is rather clouded than really improved by such refinement, as the highly-polished man of mature age has lost the freshness of youth. Pope's invective is to that of Skelton, what his translation of Homer is to the original. Swift's 'Gulliver,' the most profound work which the eighteenth century has produced, may be considered as a by no means unsuccessful attempt to revive the old pungency of satire; it is a pre-Raphaelite picture; and when Pope compared Swift to Rabelais, he could not more pointedly have hinted how closely Gulliver's coarseness, realism, and allegorical meaning approximate him to the old satirical creations. Skelton, compared with which even Butler is highly artificial, is a well of undefiled English satire in all its freshness. To him invective was an element of opposition and of popular instruction; he strove to rouse the passions of men by curt denunciations in the common dialect; his blows are at once vigorous, trenchant, and embarrassed, like those of a young soldier, still incumbered with armour. Skelton's satire was a most perfect expression of that wild age in which the stern will of the royal Comus presided over a riot of gushing wealth, portly Churchmen, whose fondness for wine was noted by Erasmus; dull barons whose great banquets included such delicacies as peacocks, seals, and porpoises. The people too had their revellings, for in all ages of irony, reformation, destruction, a thirst for the good things of this world pervades the children of men; the higher motives of human action, faith, enthusiasm, or even some noble

superstition, having disappeared, the senses gain the upper hand, whether from a reaction against previous abstinence, or the direct influence of new tendencies, or both causes united. When, in the fifteenth century, irony prevailed in Italy, Pulci expressed, as his great aspiration, a desire to enjoy good game, good wine, and a soft couch; Teofilo Folengo revelled in visions of culinary dainties. At the period of the Reformation, libations were as widely indulged in throughout Germany, as theological discussions; and Piccolomini was aghast at the strenuous potations of the land. The conversaziones of the eighteenth century in France, assumed the forms of suppers, where champagne sparkled as well as wit; and when the crash had come, a liberal distribution of sausages was a prominent characteristic of the Feast of Reason. The roystering tendencies of the sixteenth century in merry England are reflected in Skelton's 'Tunning of Elynoure Rummyng.' Before Rabelais' epic to wine-drinkers, and the creation of Sancho Panza, this curious poem gives a humorous picture of the sensual element of modern times. It presents the portrait of the queen of ale-wives, the idealization of the glories of beer. Redolent with the fumes of hops, and Saxon all over, like the immortal beverage quaffed by the heroes of the Walhalla, it is the epic of pot life; real as a picture of Teniers, it exhibits the forms of existence and scenes of the ale-house, the tapsters, the potboys, the ringing of the metal, and the overflowing of the cups. Here the peasant, if Wolsey's taxes have left him a penny, can have a full quart of ale, can steep his lips in the bitter froth of a sterling and unadulterated beverage, such as that described by a writer who added some lines to the opening of the poem—

Full Winchester gage  
 We had in that age;  
 The Dutchman's strong beere  
 Was not hopt over heere  
 To us 'twas unknowne. (1)

This imitator also declared that there was no smoking in the tavern—Raleigh and his Virginian weed not having yet made their appearance; but notwithstanding this intercalation, there is no doubt that 'Elynoure Rummyng' was written by Skelton. When the court was kept at Nonsuch, Skelton and other courtiers used to come to this ale-house for refreshment after fishing in the Mole; hence his delineation of the celebrated dame, some of whose descendants' names were to be seen in parish registers as late as the first part of the eighteenth century. (Dyce). That

licensed victualler's appearance seems not to have been very inviting—

[Quotes lines 17–19, 27–8, 31–3.]

Her dress consists of a russet gown and mantle of Lincoln green; on Sundays she makes herself fine with 'her kyrtel Bystow red,' and a head-dress composed of a—

Whym wham,  
Knit with a trym tram,  
Upon her brayne pan  
Like an Egyptian. [lines 75–8]

Although her ordinary occupation is that of brewing and dispensing beer; it must be owned that she may not be innocent of witchcraft—

She is a tonnish gyb;  
The dewyll and she be syb. [lines 99–100]

Her more legitimate business, however, is to dispense 'nopy ale,' —

[Quotes lines 104–8.]

Slatternly girls also come to fetch beer

[Quotes lines 123–30.]

Some of the customers have no cash, and bring honey, spoons, shoes, stockings, in exchange for beer. Some timorous people, probably teetotal backsliders, come in at the back door—

Over the hedge and the pale  
And all for the good ale. [lines 264–5]

Some thirsty women bring wedding rings, or a husband's cap, or instruments of labour, hatchets, spinning-wheels, needles, thimbles, which they recklessly pawn for ale.

[Quotes lines 301–6.]

In this manner does Elynour's house become a store of miscellaneous articles—skeins of thread, fitches of bacon, frying-pans, walnuts, apples, pears, puddings, sausages.

The satirist exposes the pathological results of some of the customers' habits—

[Quotes lines 480–5.]

Nor were surgical diseases unknown to the frequenters of the tavern; there was an old lady who—

Had broken her shyn  
At the threshold coming in...  
She yelled like a calfe. [lines 494–5, 500]

But the most comical figure among all these customers is that of the prudish, affected woman—

[Quotes lines 582–5.]

She rises from the table, calls the hostess apart, and explains in a confidential manner that she has not a groat wherewith to pay; but she settles the account by giving up her amber beads. At last the poet exclaims:-

My fingers ytche,  
I have written to mytche  
Of this mad mummynge  
Of Elynoure Rummynge. [lines 618–21]

Notwithstanding its humour, this satire is a bitter exposition of human weakness. It is, in its way, and in a lower sphere, almost as sardonic as the invectives of Swift and Juvenal. There is in it none of the boisterous gaiety of Rabelais. With the French satirist, drinking is associated with reckless jollity, if not with pleasure and knowledge; here it is a vice, productive of squalor and wretchedness, it has no attractive side, and all its sombre colours are displayed. Here again we see the character of English satire—always practical, and moral when not political; severe and straightforward, without any halo of illusive sprightliness around it. Pope ridiculing the poverty and dulness of Grub street writers, Swift hurling burning missiles from the depths of his troubled heart, are as different from Voltaire as Skelton is from Rabelais. Stern, pitiless, almost despairing reproof on one side, inexhaustible levity on the other—concentrated bitterness, diffusive merriment—such are the contrasts presented by the satirists of the two greatest nations in the world; the Germans and Italians respectively present analogous general characteristics,

diversified only by secondary tints. Luther too was earnest and destructive, while Folengo was sceptical and light-hearted. 'Elynoure Ruming' is the saddest of Skelton's works; there is no relenting, no hope in it, as in the poems against the clergy, to the end the scene remains a 'mad mummynge,' the wretched actors of which sacrifice everything to their sensuality. Like Hogarth's 'Progress,' it pictures infatuated man under the sway of passion, recklessly sacrificing his all to morbid propensities. The frailties of human beings have ever been the theme of satirists and cynics, and Skelton was one of the most earnest of these; his view of the world pained him, and made him misanthropical. His invectives against the clergy are not to be ascribed to mere envy and disappointment; it is easy to see they were a natural product of his disposition, for what could disappointed interest have to do with a satire like 'Elynour Ruming'? This poem only shows what cynicism, what sorrowful pity this old laureate's character contained. His frankness of expression well recalls his rich, sturdy, generous nature; his writings well represent the general character of his age. He stands alone in his time, as every great satirist usually does. Is it Swift, or Addison, or Pope, who will tell us most about the eighteenth century? In the same manner we glean more from Skelton than from More, who was a dreamer and ascetic, as well as a humorist; or from the inferior writers of the age, Heywood, Barclay; or from the polished and artificial Wyatt and Surrey.

Even in Skelton's time, began the transitionary period which was to prepare the way for the Shakespearean epoch; Wyatt and Surrey produced polished imitations of Italian poetry. Skelton forms an intermediate figure between those writers and the 'barbaric pearl and gold' of Lydgate, and some of his poems give a foreshadow of that Italian revival, under which the English language was to rise to its first perfection; he could doubtless have borne an important part in this great movement, had he not sacrificed poetry to political irony; like Swift, he was essentially a pamphleteer, and his writings enjoyed a widespread popularity. On the other hand, he incurred the contempt of some Elizabethan critics.

But even Puttenham, Meres, and in our age Hallam, who have depreciated Skelton's rude rhymes, could scarcely have objected to the graceful 'Boke of Philip Sparrow.' In this exquisite poem appears the best side of his character, his love for nature and the beautiful, his delicate sensitiveness, his genial humour. The language of this poem is quite different from that of Skelton's satirical writings; it flows easily, without unnatural contortions, like a brook which mirrors the flowers of a garden.

Nothing can be more graceful than the subject; as birds have ever excited much sympathy among human beings, the death of a bird is one of the most humorsome and melancholy themes which a poet can choose. Catullus wrote a sonnet upon it. The middle ages indulged in graceful imaginings on the relations between birds and men. A legend of the time describes an island tenanted by monks, in which birds joined the pious worshippers in singing the praises of God. St. Guthlac was said to have lived with swallows, who nested in his cell. Assisi was wont to preach the gospel to birds and butterflies, called swallows his sisters, taught a locust to sing hymns, and persuaded birds to fast on Fridays. But the winged tribes were seldom chosen to be the heroes of verse; and in the great Fox Satires of the thirteenth century, the actors were chiefly quadrupeds. The 'Boke of Sparrow' is not then derived from the literature of the middle ages; it is an original work, in which irony and burlesque have given place to humour and gentleness. It is a dirge for the soul of Philip Sparrow, who had been slain by one Gyb, a cat. After wishing the departed soul immunity from the attacks of Pluto, the Furies, and Cerberus, the poet invokes the aid of philosophy as an alleviation of his grief.

[Quotes 'Philip Sparrow', lines 98–107.]

After describing at length the various habits and capabilities of the deceased bird, he apostrophises the murderous cat in this wise—

[Quotes lines 282–91, 309–10.]

He then gives a long enumeration of birds, whom he convokes to the funeral ceremony—

[Quotes lines 387–8, 392–405, 420–1.]

And so on for nearly a hundred lines. Among those summoned to the obsequies is the phoenix—

The byrds of Araby  
That potentially  
May never dye. [lines 513–15]

The funeral ceremonies being concluded, the poet sheds his last tear over the grave—

[Quotes lines 587–93.]

The state of the English language precludes its being used 'to write ornately,' so that the epitaph is composed in Latin—

[Quotes lines 826–9.]

Follows a 'commendacion,' in which Skelton's verse assumes erotic tendencies; he becomes a doughty knight and defender of womankind—

[Quotes lines 977–83.]

He then mentions his 'maistres' with some enthusiasm—

[Quotes lines 998–1001, 1031–2, 1041–58.]

The bird is forgotten in all these gallantries, until the end of the poem, when 'here foloweth an adycion made by Maister Skelton' against his critics. In those verses he complains of the attacks made on the 'Boke,' and argues that the critical 'commendation' is not out of place, inasmuch as it was intended to assuage the grief consequent on the Sparrow's interment; and he conjures the bird—

[Quotes lines 1324–7, 1330–6, 1367–70.]

And he concludes with wishing his detractors—

No worse than is containd.  
 In verses two or thre  
 That followe as ye may se:  
 Luride, cur, livor, volucris pia funera  
     damnas?  
 Talia te rapiant rapiunt quae fata vo—  
     lucrem!  
 Et tamen invidia mors tibi continua.                    [lines 1376–82]

From which it appears that in those times laureates were wont to reply somewhat vigorously to their reviewers.

Coleridge characterizes the 'Boke of Philip Sparrow' as 'an exquisite and original poem.' It evinces Skelton's powers as a humorist; the genial pleasantry of praying for the bird's soul, and summoning all manner of birds to the funeral, had not been equalled in the range of middle-ages poetry, and has perhaps not been surpassed in modern times, even by Sterne's celebrated 'Ass,' and Southey's 'Maggot in a Kernel;' such



delicate flowers of fancy only belong to the most fruitful and genial minds; a special development is required for this humour, which can be produced by those men alone who have gone through the whole range of ideas, have beheld human nature under all its aspects. As, according to the ancient tradition, stags become youthful by feeding on serpents, such minds are led into humour by their habits of moral scepticism; which by acting and reacting on more delicate feelings, give rise to a gentle satire, which will not be found in the early stages of literature, which differs from the Fox Satires by its tenderness and from the early fables by a less glaring simplicity. Gresset and La Fontaine (2) have given examples of this spirit, which also appears in several passages of Shakespeare.

‘Speke Parrot,’ is another poem in which the hero is a bird, but it is a satirical rather than humorous work, as the parrot vehemently declaims against the clergy. In the ‘Bowge of Courte,’ and the ‘Garland of Laurell,’ Skelton displays his talent for serious poetry. The former is an allegorical poem, which he wrote after the example of the ancient poets.

[Quotes ‘Bouge of Court’, lines 8–14.]

His minor poems include a fierce invective against the ‘Scottes,’ an ode ‘On Time,’ and some hymns to the Persons of the Trinity. He also wrote several plays, of which the ‘Magnificence’ alone survives; it is certainly superior to the masques and mysteries of the time, and has been considered as entitling Skelton to rank among the fathers of the English drama.

Skelton had some literary quarrels in his day. He was no doubt the assailant in some of those squabbles, for according to Churchyard, he was inclined to talk as he wrote (Dyce); and Fuller observes that he had too much wit, and that his satirical spirit unfortunately lighted on ‘three *noli me tangere*’s, viz., the rod of a schoolmaster, the cowls of friars, and the cap of a cardinal. The first gave him a lash, the second deprived him of his livelihood, the third almost outed him of his life.’ Henry no doubt encouraged Skelton to attack Garnesche, the poems against whom purport to have been written ‘by the kynges most noble commaundement.’ Garnesche had been the first assailant, as appears from the opening lines of the first poem against Garnesche:-

Sithe ye have me chalyngyd, Master Gar—  
nesche,  
Rudely revilyng me in the kynges noble  
hall.

[lines 1–2]

This Garnesche was a knight, gentleman usher to the king; he attended the Princess Mary to France in 1514, and performed a feat of gallantry when she was wrecked at Boulogne: 'Her shippe with greate difficultie was brought to Bulleyn, and with great jeopardy at the entryng of the haven, for the master ran the shippe hard on shore, but the botes were redy and reseved this noble lady, and at the landyng Sir Christopher Garnysche stode in the water, and toke her in his armes, and so caryed her to land.' In these days vessels who go ashore near Boulogne go to pieces pieces immediately, and no lifeboats are ready.

Other adversaries of Skelton's were Gagwynne or Gaguin, the French ambassador, who was a good historian for the age; William Lily, the grammarian, who charged Skelton with having no knowledge and being no poet; Dunbar, the great Scotch satirist, wrote a 'flyting' against Skelton, to which the Laureate replied; but these compositions seem to have been prompted by rude and boisterous bantering rather than personal hatred. The most celebrated of Skelton's literary quarrels was that between the Laureate and Barclay. This writer, whose most widely known work is a translation of Sebastian Brandt's 'Ship of Fools,' attacked the dirge of 'Philip Sparrow;' but Skelton retorted in no harsher terms than the following allusion—

[Quotes 'Garland of Laurel', lines 1257–60.]

Barclay also left a poem 'Contra Skeltonum,' which has perished. In his fourth Eclogue, however, may be read some of the most scurrilous invectives which envy could devise. He classed Skelton among a 'shamfull rabble' of 'rascolde poets.'

In subsequent ages, Skelton has been depreciated by Meres, Puttenham, Warton, and Hallam; on the other hand, he has been praised by Disraeli, Coleridge, Southey. Every one knows Pope's line, about heads of houses quoting Skelton; from which it would seem that Skelton was as popopular in the eighteenth century as Pope is in our age.

In the 'Garland of Laurell' Skelton gives a complete list of his writings. He wrote that poem in praise of himself, with the egotism of old age. He was at that time sojourning at Sherifhotten Castle, Yorkshire, then in possession of the Duke of Norfolk, the father-in-law of Lady Surrey, mother of the great poet, and patroness of the Laureate. It seems that some ladies had agreed to crown the old poet with a garland of laurel; and it is pleasant to think that he was honoured and befriended in his old age. Skelton seems to have resided for some years at Diss, as some short poems indicate, which he

wrote at the expense of his parishioners. According to Fuller he was suspended from his ecclesiastical office through the influence of the monks, who were bent on retaliating for his attacks. 'Such foul Lubbers,' says Fuller, 'fell heavy on all which found fault with them.' The sly Laureate had run away with a lady, and married her secretly. His diocesan, Nix, Bishop of Norwich, a cruel and licentious man, prompted by the friars, availed himself of this adventure to suspend Skelton; in those days the marriage of a priest was considered a far greater crime than his having a concubine. The poet next succumbed in his unequal struggle with Wolsey, who had not forgotten the 'Why come ye not to court?' This Cardinal sent officers to capture Skelton, who, however, fled to the cloisters of Westminster, where he took sanctuary. There he was protected, and kindly treated by his old friend Abbot Islip; and the old Laureate thus spent the remaining years of his life in repose, amusing himself now and then with writing verses to the memory of Henry VII., his Queen, and other royal personages buried at Westminster. He died June 21, 1529, and was buried in the chancel of St. Margaret's.

His memory shared the fate which always befalls great writers whose satirical character has made a strong impression on their time. A great number of apocryphal pranks and comic writings were ascribed to him, as afterwards to Rabelais. Anthony Wood charges him with having in his living and throughout the diocese, been 'esteemed more fit for the stage than for the pew or pulpit.' The 'Merie Tales of Skelton' are a series of buffoonic stories composed after his death, relating singular antics as having been performed by him; thus he is described as coming to an inn, calling for drink, not being attended to, crying 'Fire!' in order to arouse the people, and pointing to his throat when asked by a terrified crowd where the conflagration was. Such are the traits which delighted the readers of the time, who sought for 'pleasaunt recreacion of minde' without caring much about the truth. Far other, however, is the man as he appears in his writings. He indeed appears, especially to our age, to have indulged in vulgarity and coarseness. The fastidious Elizabethan critics censured him for those faults; but they wrote when Italian polish had already profoundly leavened the English taste; Wyatt's satire had been diluted by a refined sentimentalism, and Surrey had imitated Petrarch. Skelton had not travelled, like the son of his patroness; he had not seen a Geraldine at Florence, or become imbued with the Italian spirit. He was the product of an earlier and coarser age, and must not be charged with the blemishes of

his time. He performed the necessary work of his age—a work which Surrey, Wyatt would have had to perform had they lived under the same circumstances and had the same ability. Satire was sufficiently coarse as late as the eighteenth century; in this age there is no satire at all; and to charge Skelton with the faults of his age and vocation is to charge the ichthyosaurus with uncouthness. His instrument, the language, was very imperfect; his attempts to improve it, and his consciousness of its roughness, were weighty evidences of his literary penetration. His embarrassed phraseology is the result of his desperate endeavour to enrich the literary dialect by graftings from the vernacular tongue.

In writing he had two purposes to accomplish—to write as ‘ornately’ as possible, but especially to make his language popular, in order that his satire might be widely relished. Wyatt and Surrey, on the contrary, were mere court poets, comparative purists whose only care was to prune their language of ‘ragged’ words and imitate the flow of Italian verse. Had Skelton been less copious and popular he would have been more polished; but what he would have gained in elegance, he would have lost in power, candour, and variety of expression. Even his predecessors, such as Chaucer, and many of his contemporaries, Roy, Lindsay, Barclay, are not so tattered and rugged, merely because they did not make that effort to popularity of language, which Skelton did. He probably, like Sir Thomas More, studied the vernacular speech in streets and markets. It was he who gave the modern impulse to the fixation of the language, by exhibiting its vernacular power in its fullest aspect, and demonstrating the extreme ruggedness of that speech; he showed from what the language was to be purified before it could become a perfect vehicle of literary expression. In his writings are seen shoals of vernacular words such as *fysgygge*, *flirt*; *blother*, to gabble, *tunning*, *brewing*, &c. His writings are like Roger Bacon’s optic tube, in which future events were discerned; in Skelton’s verse is fore-shown the excellence which a succeeding generation attained. But as for himself, he was not bent on writing agreeable sentimental verses inspired from Petrarch. He had studied Juvenal much more than Petrarch, and was bent on imitating the satirist and not the sonnet-poet. His mission was to express the rough, unsettled, and transitionary side of the age. The language presents both power and beauty; Skelton expressed its power, and left the beauty to be evinced by his younger successors; but in casting his speech in the popular mould he was as great and useful a neologist as those

who assumed the Italian manner. His works are like the great geological strata, which are the pillars of the earthly crust—the deposits where uncouth and gigantic creations, ichthyosauri, plesiosauri, pterodactyls, are found; these layers must not be expected to yield brilliant peals and precious stones, but the saurians are, to philosophic eyes, more valuable than many diamonds, because they bear witness to great evolutions in the history of the globe. Far above them are the alluvial fields that produce fruits and flowers, but each series of layers has its own importance, is a thought of God, intimately linked to the great whole. It is thus in literature, where every phase must be understood and nothing depreciated. Skelton was the ablest representative of the reforming and satirical spirit of his age; More, the only Englishman of his time who could have vied with the Laureate in learning and wisdom, adheres to a conservative and mystical spirit. Both those great men lived at court; both were humorists; but More was an ascetic and mystic; Skelton a cynic. That good-nature, which is often compatible with the most apparently severe cynicism, made him, however, always ready to regret the violence which his fervid temperament imprinted to his attacks; impulsive, but not virulent, his anger stings but does not fester in the wound; his pugnacity, as evinced in the quarrel with the Scotch poet, is often the effect of strength and buoyant spirits rather than deliberate hostility. He had no pride or undue vanity, but the amiable and harmless egotism of an aged literary man surrounded by a friendly coterie. That garland of laurel, which ladies wove for him in his time, has now been somewhat withered and forgotten in the rush of ages; Abbot Islip, Wolsey, Nix, the Benedictine friars, the old Laureate, have passed away; but Skelton's phantom can still be evoked from his writings, while his body is undergoing its changes under St. Margaret's Church; around which gin shops disperse their 'tunning,' and the tide of human nature flows continually.

## Notes

- 1 These lines were appended to the 1624 edition of 'Elynor Rumming'; they are reprinted in Dyce, II, p. 155.
- 2 Jean-Baptiste-Louis Gresset (1709–77), French satiric poet and dramatist, and Jean de la Fontaine (1621–95), author of 'The Fables'.

## 46. JAMES RUSSELL LOWELL ON SKELTON AND 'PHILIP SPARROW'

1875, 1889

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(a) From an article entitled Spenser in the 'North American Review', CXX (1875), pp. 334–94; this extract is from p. 340.

Lowell (1819–91) was a distinguished American poet and critic.

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One genuine English poet illustrated the early years of the sixteenth century, —John Skelton. He had vivacity, fancy, humor, and originality. Gleams of the truest poetical sensibility alternate in him with an almost brutal coarseness. He was truly Rabelaisian before Rabelais. But there is a freedom and hilarity in much of his writing that gives it a singular attraction. A breath of cheerfulness runs along the slender stream of his verse, under which it seems to ripple and crinkle, catching and casting back the sunshine like a stream blown on by clear western winds.

But Skelton was an exceptional blossom of autumn. A long and dreary winter follows.

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(b) From Lowell's Address to the Modern Language Association of America in 1889, as printed in 'Publications of the Modern Language Association of America', V (1890), pp. 5–22; this extract is from p. 15.

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Shall I make the ignominious confession that I relish SKELTON'S 'Philip Sparowe', pet of SKELTON'S Maystres Jane, or parts of it, inferior though it be in form, almost as much as that more fortunate pet of Lesbia? There is a wonderful joy in it to chase away what SKELTON calls odious Enui, though it may not thrill our intellectual sensibility like its Latin prototype.

## 47. JOHN CHURTON COLLINS ON SKELTON

1880

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From 'The English Poets', edited by Thomas H. Ward (1880), I, pp. 184–5.

The scholar and critic John Churton Collins (1848–1908) contributed these introductory notes to a selection of Skelton's works.

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Skelton's claims to notice lie not so much in the intrinsic excellence of his work as in the complete originality of his style, in the variety of his powers, in the peculiar character of his satire, and in the ductility of his expression when ductility of expression was unique. His writings, which are somewhat voluminous, may be divided into two great classes—those which are written in his own peculiar measure, and which are all more or less of the same character, and those which are written in other measures and in a different tone. To this latter class belong his serious poems, and his serious poems are now deservedly forgotten. Two of them, however, 'The Bowge of Court', a sort of allegorical satire on the court of Henry VIII, and the morality of 'Magnificence', which gives him a creditable place among the fathers of our drama, contain some vigorous and picturesque passages which have not been thrown away on his successors. As a lyrical poet Skelton also deserves mention. His ballads are easy and natural, and though pitched as a rule in the lowest key, evince touches of real poetical feeling. When in the other poems his capricious muse breaks out into lyrical singing, as she sometimes does, the note is clear, the music wild and airy. 'The Garlande of Laurell' for example contains amid all its absurdities some really exquisite fragments. But it is as the author of 'The Boke of Colin Cloute', 'Why come ye nat to Court', 'Ware the Hawke', 'The Boke of Philipp Sparowe', and 'The Tunnyng of Elinore Rummyng', that Skelton is chiefly interesting. These poems are all written in that headlong voluble breathless doggrel which, rattling and clashing on through quick-recurring rhymes, through centos of French and Latin, and through every extravagant caprice of expression, has taken from the name of its author the title of Skeltonical verse. The three first poems are satires. 'Colin Clout' is a general attack on the ignorance and sensuality of the clergy. The second

is a fierce invective against Cardinal Wolsey, and the third is directed against a brother clergyman who was, it appears, in the habit of flying his hawks in Skelton's church. These three poems are all in the same strain, as in the same measure—grotesque, rough, intemperate, but though gibbering and scurrilous, often caustic and pithy, and sometimes rising to a moral earnestness which contrasts strangely with their uncouth and ludicrous apparel.

[Quotes 'Colin Clout', lines 53–8.]

And the attentive student of Skelton will soon discover this. Indeed he reminds us more of Rabelais than any author in our language. In 'The Boke of Philipp Sparowe' he pours out a long lament for the death of a favourite sparrow which belonged to a fair lay nun. The poem was probably suggested by Catullus' Dirge on a similar occasion. In Skelton, however, the whole tone is burlesque and extravagant, though the poem is now and then relieved by pretty fancies and by graceful touches of a sort of humorous pathos. In 'The Tunnyng of Elinore Rummyng' his powers of pure description and his skill in the lower walks of comedy are seen in their highest perfection. In this sordid and disgusting delineation of humble life he may fairly challenge the supremacy of Swift and Hogarth. But Skelton is, with all his faults, one of the most versatile and one of the most essentially original of all our poets. He touches Swift on one side, and he touches Sackville on the other.

#### 48. RICHARD HUGHES ON SKELTON

1924

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The Introduction to Hughes's edition of 'Poems by John Skelton' (London, 1924), pp. ix–xv. One footnote has been deleted.

Hughes (1900–76) achieved his greatest recognition as the author of such novels as 'A High Wind in Jamaica' and 'Fox in the Attic'.

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It happens from time to time that some poet almost forgotten suddenly comes into his own. There is nothing strange and freakish about this: and it does not really give us license to crow over our fathers. The colour of the reading mind changes from one generation to another, as it changes from man to man: in becoming able to appreciate something our fathers found incomprehensible, or unpleasant, we generally lose our appreciation of something they found estimable. The ground shifts under us.

Certain poets have to wait a long time for the advent of a sympathetic generation: Skelton has had to wait four hundred years. Yet, you might say, in his own day his reputation was international: Oxford, Cambridge, and Louvain crowned him with laurel: he was tutor to Henry VIII and *Orator Regius*: Erasmus, Caxton, and other smaller fry praised him whole heartedly: and he was a sufficiently popular figure for a whole cycle of myth to have accumulated about his personality. But the learned admired him for his learning, and the people admired him as one of the most amusing and boisterous writers of any century: Skelton, knowing himself to be not only a scholar and a jocular but a poet, looked to Posterity for nice appreciation. The quality of poetry in Skelton was one of which it was impossibility absolute, in the rudimentary state of criticism and aesthetic theory, for the age of Henry VIII to have any inkling. (That they called him a poet, being deceived into a true verdict by irrelevancies, is nothing.) And so he placed his faith in Posterity: and Posterity has played the jade with him: never quite giving him his *congé*, she has kept him dangling after her through century after century—has been to him a sort of everlasting Fannie Brawne.

The reason for this neglect is simple and superficial. In the first place, he wrote at a time when the pronunciation of English was on the eve of a drastic change, and the dropping of the final *e* in so many words soon rendered his rhythms unintelligible. In the second, he came close before one of the greatest revolutions that ever transformed the surface of literature—the Elizabethan Era. Precurring signs of that revolution were already in the air: and he set his face against them. It is easy for us now, prejudiced by a knowledge of what was to come, to blame him: it is easy to explain after the race why such and such a horse won. But it would have been impossible to guess, at that time, from the stilted Italianate compositions of the opposite camp that the unaccountable Spirit of the Lord would choose such dry bones for its dwelling. Judged by themselves, they were worthless, and Skelton was right in condemning them. But he backed a loser: and has paid

for his misfortune with four centuries of neglect and incomprehension.

For four centuries he has lain in his grave, food for the grammarians.

Largely, they are to blame. If the critic is a man who has failed at one of the arts, the scholar is generally a man who has failed at criticism. He looks for no aesthetic worth in his subject-matter: for his purposes it is irrelevant, hardly even an encumbrance.\* If he made this position clear, one would not blame him, one would not ask blood from a stone. But he does not; he pretends to criticism for form's sake: he accepts ready-made the judgment of the general, damning with one hand what he edits with the other: he takes his judgment from the general, while the general imagine that they are taking their judgment from him. They respect him: he has read all these unheard-of people, he knows: if there was any good in them, he would announce it. But he does not announce it, because he could not see it, even if it were shown him. God help any poet who hopes to be rescued from oblivion by the scholars! His only hope is to be set some day before a sympathetic generation in some form un-encumbered by excess of learning, that his readers may discover him for themselves. Even then, not till the very servant-girls devour him by candle-light will it occur to his editors that the subject of their life's work had any intrinsic value of its own.

Their treatment of Skelton has been particularly scurvy. Only one, the Rev. Alexander Dyce, has taken him at all seriously. Such editions as appeared before the time of Dyce were almost unintelligible conglomerations of naively-accepted miscopyings. Dyce undertook the great and necessary work of putting the text into an intelligible form: and gave half his life to it. Dyce's edition is a fine piece of scholarship, and the standard text on which all future work must be based. But it is doubtful whether even Dyce realised the full aesthetic value of Skelton's poetry. As for the others, they deserve all opprobrium. The writers of literary histories have been content to repeat with parrot-like persistence, one after the other, that Skelton was a witty but coarse satirist, having occasionally a certain rude charm, but in the main bungling, disgusting, prolix, and tedious: and they have

\* One gentleman, to whom the Editor was told to apply for information, answered that his interest in Skelton lay in the possibility of reconstructing the Church of Diss from the description of it in 'Ware the Hauke'. That was at any rate frank: the literary historians are not. See the 'D.N.B.', etc.

relegated him to that most damning of insignificancies, the part of an ‘influence.’ They have been content to leave Dyce’s edition, published eighty years ago, not only unrevised, but out of print and now practically un-obtainable. But, truly, Skelton is a poor satirist compared with his powers as a poet: his influence is negligible when compared with the value of his original work: and simply regarded as a rhythmical technician he is one of the most accomplished the language has ever known. There is more variety of rhythm in Skelton than in almost any other writer.

Take, for example, the first piece published in this book, ‘Speke, Parot’.\* They regard it as an unintelligible piece of political satire, interesting only for its references to Wolsey and the Introduction of Greek! Those last three stanzas, which set the pointer to the parable, which tell us that

Parot is my owne dere harte... [line 213]

—they are entirely overlooked. Yet no one who bears those those three stanzas in mind can misread the rest, can fail to see the beauty of the whole conception. Shakespeare did not misread it: as his ‘Phoenix and Turtle’ bears witness.

So much for the core of the poem. But alas!

Crescent in immensum me vivo Psittacus iste: [line 513]

[That Parrot will grow to a boundless extent while I  
am alive]

Skelton, finding the Parot so convenient a mouthpiece for his views on things in general, has later hidden the sensitive mystery of his poem under a great deal of additional matter that is simply concerned with mundane affairs. (For it is generally admitted that the poem, as

\* The sole reference to this poem in the ‘Dictionary of National Biography’ is to say that it is ‘written in Chaucer’s well-known stanza’: which is not only inadequate, but also untrue. The rhyme-scheme is certainly that of Rhyme-royal: but the metre had never been used before; and so far as I am aware, has only once been used since—in ‘Rocky Acres’, by Robert Graves. I know of no other poem with more originality, more beauty, more subtle variety of rhythm than this same ‘Speke, Parot’.

But if I were to continue quoting the stupidities uttered about Skelton in high places, there would never be an end.

it has reached us, is a hodge-podge composed at many different dates.) Admittedly it is a difficult poem: but the extraordinary sense of rhythm, the extraordinary intellectual grasp that not only makes every word significant but every juxtaposition of words, every possible turn and shade of meaning, render it one of those few poems that can be read with increasing admiration, increasing comprehension and delight year after year. The more one reads it, the more one learns of its meaning, the more certain one is of never getting to the bottom of it. It is a living thing, its roots branching innumerable: comprehension of it is interminable. And, as all fine poetry must, it baffles eulogy.

Far simpler, far more easily popular, is the 'Boke of Phyllyp Sparowe'. Here is no high lyrical mystery; only, in the words of Coleridge, 'A beautiful and romantic poem': very simple and pathetic. Jane Scroupe, a school-girl of Carowe, mourns for her dead pet. It is remarkable that at a time when Elizabethan drama was still below the horizon Skelton should have so *characterised* the poem, have brought Jane so vividly into our minds, not by description but by the very words she speaks. In two things the mediaeval poets excelled, even the dullest of them—in the description of birds and young girls: Skelton, if in the senses he is the first of the Georgians, in another is the last of the mediaevals: he has brought these two things to a climax in 'Phyllyp Sparowe'

[Quotes lines 115–26.]

It is a pretty thing.

Next, one is faced with

The topsy-turvy tunnyng  
Of Mistress Elynour Rummyng.

The weak stomach will be turned by it: but those with a gizzard for strong meat will find it a remarkable piece. I do not speak of it as a precursor of the 'realistic' school of poetry: it is more valuable than that. It is the processional manipulation of vivid impressions, the orchestration, the *mental* rhythm which strikes me. So far from calling it a realistic poem, I would call it one of the few really abstract poems in the language. Its aesthetic effect is that of a *good* cubist picture (or any picture dependent on form for its value).

It would be foolish to take each of his poems in turn: but one word should be said for the 'Garlande of Laurell'. 'This,'

say the historians, 'is the longest poem ever written by a poet in his own honour.' They accuse the author of pomposity and vanity in consequence. I only ask you to read it: I do not think he makes any claims in it which are not justified: after all, he is the finest poet in England (Scotland is *hors concours*) between Chaucer and the Elizabethans, and he cannot be blamed for knowing it. If he errs, it is in attaching too much reverence to Gower and Lydgate, not to himself. Anyhow, the whole is very pleasant reading; and some of the incidental lyrics are wholly delightful.

What wonderful plays, one thinks after reading 'Phyllip Sparowe', he might have written: what easy characterisation! That he did write plays is known: and one, 'Magnyfycence', has survived. The others, like a great many of his poems, have unhappily vanished. The nineteenth century dubbed it 'the dullest play in any language.' From the point of view of the nineteenth century the judgment was admissible, seeing the ideal of drama it serves was not then invented: but not from the point of view of the twentieth. It is an abstract play, a sort of morality—still, even at the date I write, a little ahead of the times: but I believe that if the language were modernised and the whole produced with skilful expressionistic lighting it could not fail to create a sensation. Not in England, perhaps, for another twenty years or so: but I confidently recommend it to the notice of Berlin and Prague—and perhaps New York....

49. EDMUND BLUNDEN ON SKELTON'S 400th ANNIVERSARY

1929

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From the 'Times Literary Supplement', 20 June, 1929, pp. 481–2; an unsigned review to mark the 400th anniversary of Skelton's death.

Blunden (1896–1974) was an English poet and man of letters.

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Charles Lamb's thesis on the sociable nature of antiquity rises in the memory on the four-hundredth anniversary of the death of 'Master Skelton, Poet Laureate,' a being so little destroyed in his

individuality by the passage of this long period as to commend exactly the sweet reasonableness of the words, 'Surely the sun rose as brightly then as now, and man got him to his work in the morning.' Scarcely less than Chaucer, Skelton habitually sets forth like a cheerful sunrise and a jolly workman; there is sunshine and there is action in his ancient and modern verse. Speaking across so wide a range of time, society, science and creed, the tutor of Henry VIII and the too candid friend of Wolsey has power to bring us to our windows with all the freshness of a known and sudden voice. What has age to do with Skelton?

[Quotes 'Garland of Laurel', lines 1004–22.]

Nothing could be more instantaneous, though in our date we have not quite the same inbred notion of the nobility of falcons.

This song of Skelton's, springing out from the fifteenth century into the twentieth, will not be refused as a realisation of poetical ubiquity; nor do I quote an unfamiliar poem. But we must proceed to the admission that, in spite of his carolling intimacy, Skelton suffers considerably from the malady of being registered among the 'old authors.' Between posterity and antiquity there is always a distorting mist. There are faults on both sides. In the instance of Skelton, the faults of posterity have been more than usually stubborn and unkind. The character of the man, which must always imply for the majority the worth of the poet, has been scribbled upon with an indolent vaingloriousness. Had he been living in the eighteenth century, he would have been estimated in the same vein of cordiality as were Arbuthnot and Gay. In the nineteenth there would have been little to withhold from him a name of breezy honesty and eccentric virtue, akin to that of Edward FitzGerald. In the twentieth, one may picture him in the sphere of Mr. Chesterton, or Mr. Shaw. But being demonstrably an 'old author' he fell under the careless lash of Pope (himself not the most infallibly offenceless of wits), and was put in his place:

Chaucer's worst ribaldry is learned by rote,  
And beastly Skelton heads of houses quote.

Fifty years later came Thomas Warton, from whom a critical and personal good-fellowship might have been anticipated towards a predecessor whom he was professing to have read; but what had Warton to say? 'It is vain to apologise for the coarseness,

obscenity, and scurrility of Skelton, by saying that his poetry is tinctured with the manners of his age. Skelton would have been a writer without decorum at any period.' Epithets like these of Pope and Warton, fostered by negligent reading, have overgrown the simple honour of Skelton the original. While most of us shrink from active elucidation of the works, we apprehend that they are not as ingenuous as they might be. Our minds have been obscurely assured that Skelton was guilty of producing 'The Tunning of Elinor Ruming.'

And indeed it is one of his considerable works. Even Dyce, who stood up so valiantly in defence of Skelton, glances at its darker reputation with uncertainty: 'If few compositions of the kind have more coarseness or extravagance, there are few which have greater animation or a richer humour.' Strong and bitter are its ingredients. It is rhyming Rowlandson. But I mistake greatly if it is not as a whole a sharp medicine, and no concoction for the perverted taste of the insolent. Elinor Ruming is a witch, her alehouse a den, and the poor slatterns who are fascinated into it are as the victims of Circe. It is not Skelton's fault that his startling talent for sketching human peculiarity makes the poem incidentally a mirror of low life, nor that his genial preferences come in to vary his pitiless facsimiles with milder humour. His object was to show what intemperance can do with the female sex; to present the contrast between his merry Margarets and his Margery Milkducks; even (for he was the parson as well as the laureate) to show some of his congregation, in a more penetrative form than sermons, the ruinous costliness of the tavern:

[Quotes 'Elynor Ruming', lines 600–6.]

Let us accord to Skelton the credit given in ordinary to an author, and consult his own Latin postscript to 'The Tunning of Elinor Ruming' for his stated intention in the satire. 'The poet,' he declares, 'invites all women, who are either too fond of the bottle, or are notorious for their sluttishness, or their disgraceful indecencies, or their gossip and clack, to pay attention to this little book.'

Skelton was capable of furious and relentless onslaughts on those who challenged him. Once roused, he became a human battery of hoarse and hasty invective, hurling out expressions of contempt by the dozen, serious and comic mixed, against 'false stinking serpents,' 'Moorish manticors,' 'mockish marmosets.' In that there is nothing vicious. Rude railing has been practised by later poets, even Byron and Swinburne, and they are

appreciated. In brief, I may express the conviction that ‘beastly Skelton’ never mounted the pulpit at Diss, never set Latin exercises to a Royal pupil; though, at the same time, we may be grateful for one or two of the nonsensical remarks made against our poet on the assumption of his beastliness. So the dear authoress of the ‘Lives of the Queens of England’ gathered her forces for a crushing comment: ‘It is affirmed that Skelton had been tutor to Henry VII. in some department of his education. How probable it is that the corruption imparted by this ribald and ill-living wretch laid the foundation for his Royal pupil’s grossest crimes!’ The final reply to Pope and Warton and Agnes Strickland, and our own inherited legend, is the collected poetry of Skelton, whether we consider what has chiefly produced the misunderstanding—his satire against drunken women—or his fine, wise and humane allegory ‘Magnificence,’ or those songs of April and innocence which seem so like this year’s, or that deep-toned direct utterance of the Crucifixion:

[Quotes ‘Wofully Araid’, lines 1–6.]

Thus far of the false barrier between us and the manly truth of Skelton; I come now to the other conditions which have troubled the understanding between this poet and ourselves. Pope, with another purpose, indicates them:

Authors, like coins, grow dear as they grow old;  
It is the rust we value, not the gold. (1)

Yet, though the passion for the antique may preserve some precious relics of old glory, its process is often only a disguised limitation. Posterity, which is a very busy and breathless monster, naturally stands aloof from matter which it fears to be nearly unintelligible. The scholar is left to work out the assumed abracadabra of discarded speech, orthography, interest and allusion. At first sight, most of the pages of Dyce’s Skelton appear too cryptic to come within the scope of our common reading and our leisure for it; and Dyce himself only ventured to offer his two volumes to ‘a very limited class of readers.’ Two poets of the younger school, Mr. Robert Graves and Mr. Richard Hughes, have particularly endeavoured to clear the air and show Skelton as a living and communicative poet; for my part I may observe that a great deal of his writings is as natural in style and as clear in significance as could be wished. The medieval spelling which indeed veils the outlines or varnishes the hues of his poetry can



with a little labour be made no veil at all; one may think Skelton into modern English, for long passages together, with no more strain than that of transliterating 'braynsycke frantycke folys' into 'brainsick frantic fools.' In my present quotations I have done as much, taking what perhaps the canon of scholarship may censure generally as permissible here at least, because the effect of Skelton's presence is felt on ripened acquaintance without much accidental interruption: obsolete formalities do not belong to him; he lives in an essential approach-ableness. One must see him, if at all, as a friend of poetry and humanity and not as a perplexing fragment in a curiosity shop.

Among the British poets Skelton is remarkable for his metrical, as for his emotional, independence; his restless and whimsical nature expresses itself in a volleying succession of rapid rhythms, made more brilliant by the fund of alliteration, assonance and unexpected rhyme which he flings forth. But in his appearance of abandon there is an art concealed. His free verse is not what Warton superficially calls it, 'this anomalous and motley mode of versification.' It is founded on a decisive feeling for accent, and those 'strong and fastened' syllables which will carry a play of less obvious ones through a long composition. It is the literary employment of the popular song-metre, which requires always a colloquial indifference, though that is controlled by mood and intention. Swinging, dancing, dodging; laughing, clowning measures are instinctive with Skelton. Thus he seems to carry on a perpetual campaign against the philosophical and cloistered iambic, which has obtained so overwhelming a position in the verse-history of our poets. He cannot or he will not tread in its ordered placidity. He may sometimes attempt it, but is soon springing round its track with incorrigible variations. The secret of this is perhaps discoverable in his own words:

[Quotes from 'A Replyacion...', lines 365-78.]

The classic observation of Dr. Harvey as he laid down his Virgil may more readily be applied to Skelton; he has a demon, and only a few other writers (such as the poet of 'Hudibras,' or of 'Don Juan') give the same impression of audacity and urgency. The vigour of syncopation did not begin with our day; Skelton takes the lead:

[Quotes 'Magnificence', lines 1039-54.]

Under such a merry-andrew fusillade, to be sure, the poet is not the only one to grow dizzy; and the defect of Skelton is his

superfluity of noise and phrase. But while we admit the monotony into which his voluble ecstasies lead us, we must allow that his spirit and his metre do yield graver and sweeter melodies. After the fun of the Skeltonian fair comes another voice, and none has exceeded its mild purity:

[Quotes 'Garland of Laurel', lines 985–92.]

Or the laconic lines will assume a dignity in which the impossible seems about to happen, and Skelton for a moment, turned Solomon, dreams of the sublime:

[Quotes 'Upon a Deedmans Hed', lines 7–11.]

For the young poet, wondering at the mystery of words and attempting the instrument of English verse, in such a season of discovery as that which sent Keats delighted through Chapman's Homer, the works of Skelton might be no unlucky recommendation. A mind naturally safe from excess of imitative enthusiasm could only win resource and comprehension from the diction and music of Skelton's poetical festivity. In the singular poem called the 'Garland of Laurel,' where occur the faultless lyrics in praise of Margaret Hussey and Isabel Pennell and other ladies, the technique of the poet is perhaps most versatile and impressive. The 'Garland of Laurel,' again, is acceptable to the general friend of Skelton because it displays him with harmless vanity—indeed, with that pride which belongs to health and hopefulness—warming both hands before the fire of his poetic life, and sketching his own various bibliography with affection. Paler light invests our later considerations of poetry as a profession. We have grown timid as writers and as readers. Both as writer and as reader of his own verse, John Skelton was radiant with contentment. He blessed his stars that he was a poet, and that he was a good one.

Of one of his major performances, and some of his shorter yet not less notable achievements, I have already taken notice. In commemorating Skelton four hundred years after his death, it is just to review his principal poems, so far as they are known to us; and actually, in spite of his volubility, the total extent of his surviving verse need not deter anyone from knowing him better. His closing years were themselves a proof of the influence of his poetry; they were passed in sanctuary at Westminster, away from the indignation of Wolsey, who had 'read the book with interest.

'Skelton opened fire on this prodigious grandee in his 'Colin Clout,' which begins with a pleasing pretence of the futility of proceeding, since

The devil, they say, is dead,  
The devil is dead. [lines 36–7]

Yet, Skelton proceeds, the devil is not dead. He is in the the Church. Then follows a great catalogue of his misdoings, each one stated in short, sharp definition. The sensual profits which he is making are reckoned; the luxuries of his new mansions are imagined with lively irony. These denunciations are at length concentrated unmistakably,

For one man to rule a king! [line 991]

Throughout the whole work Skelton combines solidity of sense, earnestness of heart and courage of opinion; moreover, the turns of the satire are dramatically forcible, and the argument is maintained as though by a bioscope of actual incidents and persons: 'look on this picture—and on this!'

In 'Speak, Parrot' the invective against Wolsey is fearlessly increased; although, had we nothing more of the poem than the delicate, gay and ingenious overture, we might be content. Here is the parrot once and for all among the birds of the British poets, sparkling with rogue vitality

[Quotes lines 17–23.]

But Skelton's main object is not to vie in verse with Edward Lear's paintings of parrots. 'Ware the cat, Parrot, ware the false cat!' Wonderfully does the poet manipulate his invention. The parrot is put forward with his little wanton eye—but there are certain things he is pre-eminently able to detect. He also earns several presents of dates by describing those things with masterly anger. They are the characteristics of one who

carryeth a king in his sleeve, if all the world fail;  
[line 423]

whose

Wolves' head, wan, blue as lead, gapeth over the crown.  
[line 428]

'Why Come Ye Not to Court?' is the further exposure of Wolsey. The tone is curt and final. These, says Skelton, are the facts; and what will England do to counter them?

[Quotes lines 289–96.]

There could hardly be a more dangerous and momentous calmness than that which Skelton affects by way of a change in his appeal to the people—the 'simple Hodge' manner:

[Quotes lines 398–406.]

It was no idle fancy in 'Colin Clout' that the author, as he wandered through the streets, had the knack of hearing what people said. Skelton is rich in the tune and term of shop door, ale bench, market-place; quaintly learned and of a wide-roaming fancy, he brings his subject home with the sudden directness of language immediately conceived in necessities. If in this part of his poetic method he draws upon the harsher weapons of the vulgar tongue, I hold that his natural brightness of character remains un-sullied; his 'anger has a privilege'; and so, in his last condemnation of Wolsey, the occasional brutality is to be regarded as marking his complete belief in the mission of his satire. The marvel is that he escaped; had he been what he has been counted, a mere buffoon, there would have been no marvel; but Skelton wrote with an inspired persecution, comparable with the voice that cried in the wilderness.

Two admirable productions of Skelton's on the large plan remain for my annotation. 'Philip Sparrow,' which Coleridge (who never confused ancient date with vanished value) found 'exquisite and original,' is his prettiest work. It combines a dirge for a pet bird with a song in honour of the bird's owner; and, although Catullus had shown what beautiful caprice could be expressed on such an occasion, it might not have been thought that a new poet would so enrich and illumine and berhyme the matter as Skelton does. Orthodoxy might demur at his parody of the service book, which nevertheless demanded genius, of humour as of metre:

De pro fun dis cla ma vi

When I saw my sparrow die.

[lines 145–6]

All that is noticed of the sparrow is touched with a choice Lilliputian lightness, and with a mythological play that here and there adventures into the higher air of romance. The funeral

congregation of birds, too, though doubtless of an heraldic rather than ornithological circumstance, is a profusion of 'sounds and sweet airs.' And at last when the poet turns from the lament for Philip, while the sun with sympathetic leave-taking sinks westward, then he surprises us after his many inventions by discovering a strong and happy impulse, culminating in the song to her who

Flourisheth new and new  
 In beauty and virtue:  
 Hac claritate gemina  
 O gloriosa femina.

[lines 896–99]

Gems and blossoms, which he chooses in order to express this lady's grace, might be the images of his own style in a singing so matins-like.

The interlude 'Magnificence' is Skelton's most serious imaginative design. In this play the characters are abstractions, as Felicity, Liberty, Measure, Counterfeit Countenance, Crafty Conveyance; but there is no thin abstract monotony in their dialogues or speeches. The campaign of integrity and decency against licence and sharp practice is fought out with freedom of incident and keenness of stroke; excellent fooling makes the didactic and moralising passages more agreeable. The pleasure of Skelton's shrewdness, and of his mastery of aphorism, proverb and the wit of the crowd, is deepened by his apparently invincible skill in rhyme, with which he points and quickens the dialogues as though our ordinary talk ran that way:

[Quotes lines 1152–7.]

Such byplay contributes to the ultimate sobering of magnificence with 'sad circumspection,' and the whole may make us grieve that the interlude ascribed to Skelton by Warton, on a Necromancer, has either disappeared, or as some sceptical observers of Warton declare (as though avenging Skelton for the view of him in the 'History of English Poetry') never existed.

Skelton at all events existed. No necromancy placed him there between Chaucer and Marlowe, an erratic luminary darting his fireworks, in defiance of all other poetic rays and splendours, as the whim struck,

From Ocean the great sea  
 Unto the Isles of Orcady,  
 From Tilbury ferry  
 To the plain of Salisbury.

['Philip Sparrow',  
 lines 318–21]

He has been regarded as a decidedly unheavenly body. Among folks of this world, however, I take him to have been a genuine worthy and entirely a man to have on one's side—an anticipation, in some measure, both of the temper and the talents of Swift. There was in him, however, a greener leaf than that great nature could put forth. When these and other attempts at an estimate of Skelton have been made, one thing remains certain: it is long enough since the item, 'of Mr. Skelton for viii. tapers *ol.* 2s. 8d.' was entered in the churchwarden's accounts of St. Margaret's Westminster, but still we find a pathos in the substitution of those dim lights at last for the sunlight so heartily enjoyed and glorified by the laurelled Skelton.

#### Note

- 1 Pope, 'Imitations of Horace', Epistle II, i, 35–6.

#### 50. HUMBERT WOLFE ON SKELTON'S INNOVATION

1929

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From 'Notes on English Verse Satire' (London, 1929), pp. 42–8. Wolfe (1885–1940) was a poet and essayist.

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Time, on the whole, is a trusty critic. Not frequently, nor for long periods, will he slight a great talent. On the rare occasions that he does full atonement is made, as with Herrick, whose star burns ever brighter after a dusky first ascension. Of diamonds he is as expert a cutter as those of Holland, though he may sometimes permit a semi-precious stone to be mislaid among featureless pebbles. But John Skelton is one of Time's errors, and he must be sternly impeached for this lack. In a book claiming some authority, 'The English Poets', edited by Thomas Ward, Mr. Churton Collins writes thus of Skelton: 'Skelton's claims to notice lie not so much in the intrinsic excellence of his work as in the complete originality of his style, in the variety of his powers, in the peculiar character of his satire, and in the ductility of his

expression when ductility of expression was unique.' He continues with amiable condescension, 'These poems [the Satires] are all written in that headlong voluble breathless doggerel...often caustic and pithy, and sometimes rising to a moral earnestness which contrasts strangely with their uncouth and ludicrous apparel.' But lest we should concede too much to the rogue, Mr. Collins notably concludes in respect of 'Elinore Rummynge' that 'In this sordid and disgusting delineation of humble life he may fairly challenge the supremacy of Swift and Hogarth.' [See No. 47.] In his mild and obscure way Mr. Collins seeks to do for Skelton what Morley with greater publicity did for Swinburne. (1) But the task of Collins was easier, because his was the less heroic task of flogging a dead lion.

It is not difficult to understand why Victorian shabby gentility waved a black-gloved hand severely at this shameless friend of naked truth. The period which sub-stituted 'too much of nothing' for the Greek 'nothing too much' could not but have sought to damn him with faint praise. But why did the Elizabethans ignore him, why had he no place in the Augustan age, and why is he still known only to the learned and the curious?

Something must, as with Dunbar, be due to the mere difficulty of his language, though it is nearer to us than that of the Scots poet. But more to the inopportunity of his birth. The dates of his birth and death are conjecturally placed at the middle of the fifteenth and at the end of the third decade of the sixteenth century. He was born, therefore, in the queasy time of the Yorkists, was in the twenties when Richard fell at Bosworth, and lived to see the eighth Henry, and what is even more to the point, bitterly to attack the great Cardinal Wolsey. These were times too unsettled for the poet. Civil War and Reformation are not nurses of the Arts. It was his misfortune to be one of the strong that had lived before Agamemnon. The Elizabethans, beginning with Marlowe, seemed to step ready-armed from the head of the virgin Queen. They were too dazzled with the light of their own splendour to look back to the preceding dark. Their eyes were on Italy and on Spain. They might (as Shakespeare often did) hear echoes of country chanties. But for the rest Italy and the Renaissance served their need.

Skelton suffered too because he was as English as Hogarth, and as great a master of his craft. Mr. Collins makes the comparison almost by way of cursing. But any writer (or painter) who can sustain that comparison is blessed indeed. Skelton, when all were for foreign examples, was unshakably

English. That would not commend him. But more than that he was a sturdy innovator in verse forms. What Mr. Collins calls headlong doggerel is on the contrary a quite startling mastery of prosody. Not only had nobody before Skelton used the form he so brilliantly applied in such poems as those against Garnesche, but no one has been able completely to master it since. Doggerel? What is the test of a verse-form? That it should fit the matter and express the mind of the maker, and that it should both move and sing. Did ever any verse more completely fulfil these criteria than such as this in the lament on Philip Sparowe?

[Quotes lines 127–37.]

Every trick, not excluding that of enjambement, is there. This is not writing about the sparrow. It is the sparrow in a verse that jerks it as neat as his two strutting feet. Nor does it fit only the rapid narrative. It can be slow in denunciation, as:

That vengeaunce I ask and crye  
 By way of exclamacyon  
 On all the hole nacyon  
 Of cattes wild and tame!  
 God send them sorrow and shame! [lines 273–7]

And it can even rise to a certain mock-heroic tragedy with:

Farewell, Phillyp, adeu!  
 Our Lorde thy soule reskew!  
 Farewell, without restore!  
 Farewell for evermore! [lines 331–4]

Doggerel! I wish that we had more English poets capable of writing it.

As an innovator he was, however, doubly unfortunate. All such are opposed in their beginnings, but it happens often that they become the dogma of the succeeding age. Skelton suffered from the strange accident that he was immediately succeeded by innovators as violent as himself, and of greater genius. It seemed, indeed, as though Fate itself had decided that to be three times Laureate was not merely an end but a termination in itself.

Professor Collins, in the passage dismissing ‘the intrinsic excellence’ of Skelton’s work, calls attention among instances of its lack of intrinsic excellence to ‘the peculiar character of his



satire.’ The adjective is not ill-chosen. Like the rest of his work Skelton’s satire is ‘peculiar’ in the sense that he was the first Englishman to write so. Chaucer, his master in the form of such a poem as ‘The Bowge of Court’, could and indeed did teach him nothing in the form of ‘Colin Cloute’. While Dunbar—the best of his predecessors—hit the mark with a cross-bow, Skelton was rattling away with a machinegun. His is the very ecstasy of vituperation, but with a mock breathlessness for ever regaining its second wind. If ever a man hated heartily and honestly, if ever a man had the gift to brand that clearly and ringingly, that man was Skelton. Hear him ‘Against the Scottes’

[Quotes lines 99–102.]

Or in the tremendous denunciation of ‘Colin Cloute’, that hits all the harder for the scornful laughter implicit in its very form

[Quotes lines 595–7, 644–53, 666–72.]

And still another and harsher mood let Parotte ‘s’en va complayndre’:

[Quotes ‘Speak Parrot’, lines 470–6.]

This is unhappily not the place to deal with Skelton’s qualities as a lyric poet. Professor Collins is good enough to observe that he ‘deserves mention’ in this regard. He does. Here it is sufficient to let his satires mention themselves—in no uncertain tone.

At the end of one of the most barren periods in all English verse Skelton is the sown at the edge of the desert. Unhappily time has permitted the sand-storms behind to overwhelm him. In front in brilliant contrast stretch the green uplands of Elizabeth. That is his great misfortune, but ours is greater still if we permit it to continue. We cannot claim that he influenced the course of literature after this time. His immediate successors—Wyatt and Surrey—wrote as though Skelton had never existed. Nor is there a trace in Hall and Marston—the Elizabethan satirists—of his influence. He remains unique. There are worse fates.

#### Note

- 1 John Morley, the Victorian critic, who launched a savage and influential attack on Swinburne’s ‘Poems and Ballads’ in the ‘Saturday Review’ (1866).

## 51. ROBERT GRAVES ON HENDERSON'S EDITION OF SKELTON

1931

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Originally published as *An Incomplete Complete Skelton in 'Adelphi'*, III (1931–2), pp. 146–58. This article is a review of Philip Henderson's 1931 edition of Skelton.

Graves (1896-) is former Oxford Professor of Poetry and a distinguished poet, scholar and critic.

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Mr. Philip Henderson, in the introduction to his edition to 'The Complete Poems of John Skelton,' tells that it is only in the last ten years that Skelton has begun to be rediscovered popularly as a poet. The first and the most enthusiastic modern rediscoverer was, let me say at once, myself; and if I had not done so much to create a demand for a Complete Skelton this book would not be here for me to review. So I have no hesitation in complaining on Skelton's behalf and on my own that Mr. Henderson has bungled his job. I only wish he had bungled it much worse: I have read several reviews of the book and none of the reviewers seem to have realised what is being put over on them. They are just blankly grateful that at last they have a Complete Skelton to fill that blank on their shelves. And so the book will sell and nobody will think of asking for a better one. Except myself.

But first about Skelton. He was born about 1460 and died in 1529. Henry VII made him tutor to Henry, Duke of York, afterwards Henry VIII, for whom he wrote a handbook of princely behaviour called 'Speculum Principis,' and who appears to have had great personal fondness for him, making him his Poet Laureate when he succeeded to the throne. Skelton was a famous scholar and a friend of Erasmus. But without pedantry. He was opposed to the Greek cult in the universities because it was too academic:

[Quotes 'Speak Parrot', lines 150–2.]

He was Laureate of Oxford, Cambridge and Louvain, an aggressive enemy of Church abuses, rector of Diss in Norfolk, and the only man in England who had the courage to stand up against Cardinal Wolsey when he was at the height of his power and tell him what he really thought of him. For instance,

that he was a cur, a butcher's dog, that he hated religion, that he suffered from the pox, that the Pope had given him a special indulgence for lechery on account of his natural incontinence, that he knew no Latin, that his pride was immense and insane, that one day he would lose the King's favour and come to complete ruin, and that he was an obscene Polyphemus. Against Wolsey he wrote popular verse-satires which had a wide circulation among the common people. They were not intended as serious poetry but were put in easy rhyme for the convenience of ballad circulation. Though 'Colin Clout' and 'Why Come Ye Not to Court?' have a strong historical appeal which tempts professors of literature to misrepresent them as Skelton's most important work, and though Skelton took a lot of trouble with them—

To makē such trifles it asketh some cunning—

it is not on their account that Skelton has been rediscovered. They are still trifles. Wolsey was slow in taking action against Skelton, whose position at Court was extremely strong. He was the privileged buffoon, companion to Henry in his adventures among the common people and playfellow of the young Court ladies. His open jealousy of Wolsey's political influence with the King seems to have been regarded at Court as a standing joke. Wolsey would be thought a dull fellow if he did not laugh too, especially when the joker was so obviously at his mercy— a priest subject to his princely authority as Cardinal. Finally Wolsey seems to have entered into the spirit of the joke, which was not a joke really. No more of a joke than that other part of Skelton's buffoonery, his glorious self-admittance in 'The Garland of Laurel' to the House of Fame. For Skelton knew perfectly well how good a poet he was, and Wolsey knew perfectly well what real dislike Skelton had for him. Wolsey sent him to prison. Skelton refused to take this as a joke and complained loudly to his friends, who brought the news to Wolsey. The story is that Wolsey then sent for him and abused him at length. Skelton, kneeling with mock humility, asked for a boon. Wolsey refused it. Some court officials, aware of the joke that wasn't really, tried to ease things by persuading Wolsey to grant the boon. 'It may be a merry conceit that he would show to your Grace.' It was. 'I pray Your Grace to let me lie down and wallow, for I can kneel no longer.'

Skelton had a 'musket' to whom he was devoted (secretly his wife) and by whom he had several children. He did not believe in the celibacy of the clergy and used his buffoon's

reputation as a way of keeping her with him. He obeyed the Bishop's order to send her out of his door but took her back through the window. He brought his child into church and told the congregation that they had no good cause to complain about him, as they had done. It was a very nice-looking child, he said, not a monstrous birth, with a calf's or a pig's head, or with wings like a bird. They were unreasonable. 'And if you cannot be contented that I have her (his wife) still, some of you shall wear horns.'

Skelton went too far with his satires, and his privileged position counted for nothing when the King was so dependent on Wolsey for raising money and arranging his divorce. He was finally compelled to take sanctuary at Westminster, where he lived six years until his death, being buried obscurely in a neighbouring church. Wolsey's fall came soon after.

Skelton's poems. About a third of his works survive. The titles of those that have been lost raise regrets. 'The Ballad of the Mustard Tart.' 'A Devout Prayer to Moses' John.' 'John Jew.' 'The Grunting of the Swine.' 'The Pageants of Joyous Garde.' 'Minerva and the Olive Tree.' 'Apollo Whirléd Up His Chair.' But there is still that surviving third, and the range of poetry in them is very wide. There is the 'Tunning of Elinor Rumming,' written at Henry's request about an ale-wife at an inn near Leatherhead. It is very pleasantly piggish and has given Skelton a bad name. The ale was so good—not only malt went into it but other accidental farmyard ingredients which gave it body—that all the women for miles around came to the Tunning (brewing) to get drunk on it. They paid Elinor in kind:

[Quotes 'Elynor Rumming', lines 244–8, 303–8.]

and soon lost all modesty.

Then there is 'Philip Sparrow,' a long nonsense elegy for little Jane Scrope's bird which was killed by a cat in the Black Nuns' convent at Carow where Jane was at school.

[In this fore-runner of 'Who Killed Cock Robin?' occur, by the way, some seventy first-mentions in English of different bird-species.]

[Quotes lines 386–402.]

Then there are Skelton's popular songs. 'Lullay, lullay, like a child,' 'Mannerly Margery Milk and Ale,' and 'Rutterkin, Hoyda.' And his satire on the Scots. And 'Magnificence,' a lively play in the morality style but with no religious characters

in it. Among Skelton's other distinctions is that he was the originator of the English secular drama. Then his 'Prayer to the Father of Heaven':

[Quotes lines 1–8.]

And his poem 'Woefully Array'd' about the Crucifixion, beginning:

[Quotes lines 1–6.]

And the early 'Elegy for the Death of King Edward IV.' And the macaronic 'Trentale on the Death of Old John Clarke sometimes called The Holy Patriarch of Diss,' which ends:

*Sepultus est* among the weeds,  
 God forgive him his misdeeds!  
 With hey, ho, rumbelbow,  
*Rumpopulorum*  
*Per omnia saecula saeculorum.*

['A Devoute Trentale',  
 lines 18–19, 61–3]

And then 'Speak Parrot' in which, as if to resolve these apparent contradictions, the Philip Sparrow sentiment and the Father of Heaven sentiment and the Colin Clout sentiment and all the other sentiments fuse in a great parrot-confusion of serious gibberish. The joke once more that is not really a joke; and Skelton's most peculiar poem. Why has Skelton been forgotten so long? It has not been merely because of his reputation for beastliness—Urquhart's translation of Rabelais has always been deservedly popular among the educated classes. It is that he has always been too difficult, not only in his language, so full of obsolete words, but in his metres, which became unintelligible as soon as the iambic metre and syllable-counting overcame the native English style of writing, musically, in stresses.

In the late eighteenth century Chaucer was rediscovered in spite of his obsolete vocabulary; but then Chaucer wrote iambics. The early nineteenth century was so preoccupied with the Elizabethans that it could afford to go no further back than Wyatt and Surrey in the direct line of English Poetry, except to Chaucer as to an unaccountable Melchizedek. Skelton was over the boundary-line in the pre-sonnet, that is to say, in the pre-poetry epoch. From 'Beowulf' to Skelton was the province of the antiquary, not of the reader of poetry.

But the antiquarians had consciences, and the Reverend Alexander Dyce spent twenty years or so on an antiquarian edition of Skelton's complete works. That was in 1843, and he did his job extraordinarily well. But there has not been a re-issue of the book. A Dyce's Skelton, if you are lucky enough to get one, will cost you at least five pounds. Since 1843 there has been a great extension of the boundaries of English poetry. Henryson and Gavin Douglas have been rediscovered and Child's 'British Ballads' and Chambers and Sidgwick's 'Early English Lyrics' have appeared. And even 'Beowulf' has been recognised as a real poem. And in the later traditional line, too, certain misfit poets who did not seem to belong because they wrote too personally have been given garlands of laurel and published popularly in decent collected editions. Blake and Donne, for example. Skelton was misfit as well as pre-sonnet, so his rediscovery has been the longest delayed.

Dyce was a very capable antiquarian. He routed out all the manuscripts and all the black-letter books he could hear about and reprinted the texts in their original spelling, letter by letter. And so anyone who has money and buys a Dyce and is prepared to recognise any poetry that there may be there waiting for him will find it very hard to keep the poetry sense of what he is reading when he has to deal with words like 'puplyshyd' (published), 'ffylty' (filthy), 'preuye' (privy), and 'Diologgis of Ymagynacioun' (Dialogues of Imagination). He will almost certainly give it up.

I read the Parrot's: 'With my beke I kan pyke my lyttel praty to' several times before I recognised that he meant that he could peck his little pretty toe.

In 1915 someone gave me a Skelton and I made the discovery and wrote about it. Ever since I have been asking for a Complete Skelton, an improvement on Dyce's book, with his notes re-edited in the light of recent antiquarian research, and newly discovered poems added, and the spelling modernised enough to make it at least as readable as the Globe edition of Chaucer. A publisher wanted me to do the job myself, but I refused because I had not the time or the research equipment to do it worthily. The only Skelton I have edited since is a sixpenny book of extracts for the 'Augustan' Series, and that was merely more ground-bait for an improved Dyce.

In 1924 Richard Hughes, to whom I had introduced Skelton when he was still a schoolboy, undertook, without mentioning his intention to me, to prepare an edition. He had never done the necessary research work, but he borrowed a copy of Dyce from an Oxford Library and sat down in a

remote cottage in North Wales to do the sort of book that needed only an intelligent copyist. Among the curious omissions of Mr. Hughes's edition are 'Lullay, lullay, like a child,' and the Addition to Philip Sparrow,' which is almost the best part of the poem....

Mr. Philip Henderson is a young poet, as Mr. Richard Hughes was in 1923; but Mr. Hughes had at least the enthusiasm of a young poet. Mr. Henderson, without any of the equipment of a scholar, has made a tedious bluff of being one—writing as if with a scholar's moderation. He has put a little more work into the job than Mr. Hughes. He has visited the British Museum and consulted the recent authorities and put in two short new pieces which he found in Brie's 'Skelton-Studien.' But he has not apparently been to the trouble of studying the original manuscripts and printed texts, even in this country—taking Dyce's word for variant readings; still less has he found an American correspondent to help him with readings from the many important black-letter Skelton texts in the United States. Worse than not being a scholar, or getting the co-operation of scholars, he has not even shown a common-sense consistency in presenting his modernisations of Dyce. And he has proved himself to be without any true ear for Skelton's rhythms. He has had the effrontery to write of Skelton (who was, to say only that, one of the most skilful metrists in English) that 'Skelton's line should not be read as iambics even when they approximate to such smoothness, which is not often, for by attempting to read them in that way we shall turn what, in its own time, *was fairly regular and artistic verse* into wretched halting stuff.' He has been explaining about the final e which in Skelton's time was being less frequently sounded than in the time of Chaucer. He admits that he often cannot be sure in Skelton's lines whether the Elizabethan printers of Skelton (whose manuscripts have mostly been lost) have not omitted terminal e's from their editions which Skelton intended to be sounded. So he is content, he says, to mark only those which are necessary for scansion. Fairly artistic scansion only. The fact is, that scansion is not as easy with Skelton as with Chaucer, for readers without ears. Chaucer's syllable-counted iambics allow no mistake.

*Whan that Aprillë with her shourës sootë* can only be read one way. With Skelton, readers without ears can make mistakes. He wrote by stress.

Let me explain what I mean, by analogy. Nursery rhymes are written by stress. Take the rhyme:

Misty moisty was the morn,

Chilly was the weather:  
 There I saw an old man  
 Dressed all in leather...

Suppose that, being mediaeval in composition, this rhyme had survived only as an Elizabethan broadside, reading there:

Myste moiste was the morn,  
 Chylle was the weather...

It would then be *possible* to modernise it, disregarding the final e as:

Mist-moist was the morn,  
 Chill was the weather;

but obviously *wrong* to do so, because of the general needs of the rhythm. Or take the last line of 'Humpty-Dumpty,' to which common nursery usage rightly gives an extra bar (so as to mark the catastrophe with a long-drawn out sadness), by putting the stress on *Couldn't* instead of on put. If this were modernised into 'Couldn't put Humpt-Dumpt together again' that also would be obviously wrong. Mr. Philip Henderson has made far too many misty-moisties into mist-moists and Humpty-Dumpties into Humpt-Dumpts. To take the first four lines in his book, the opening stanza of the 'Elegy on the Death of King Edward IV.'

He prints:

*Miseremini* me, ye that be my friends!  
 This world hath conforméd me down to fall.  
 How may I endure, when that everything ends?  
 What creature is born to be eternall? [lines 1-4]

There is a misprint in the first line, *me* for *mei*. 'Down to fall' is sheerest Humpt-dumpt. There must be a sounded e at the end of 'down.' Edward did not fall like a sack of coals; it is a tragic not a comic piece. The original reading of 'friends' is 'frendis,' and the word should be kept two-syllabled, and so should 'endis.' 'Creature' was in Skelton's time pronounced 'Crèature' and 'eternall' was pronounced 'aeternall' with an accent on all three syllables. Mr. Henderson elsewhere makes 'creature' three-syllabled by dotting the e, so that it is clear that he reads it here as only two. And he does not give 'born' a final e. What is the result? Humpt-dumpt-mist-moist, fairly artistic, wretched, halting stuff! About that Latin misprint. Mr.



Henderson seems to have been dependent on an uncle for ‘worrying out’ the meaning of the Latin parts of Skelton’s poems; and to have only a rudimentary knowledge of Latin himself. (Also of Greek and Spanish, which he mistranslates.) But he might have taken the trouble to copy the texts properly for the benefit of others who are better educated. For instance, Skelton’s obscure Latin hexameter cypher in the satire ‘Ware the Hawk’ is made more obscure than ever by the omission of four separate letters (including lines over vowels which indicate terminal consonants) in the four lines.

Modernisation should be consistent. Mr. Henderson has no consistency. The word written ‘toote’ by Skelton, meaning to peer, is sometimes made ‘toot’ and sometimes ‘tote.’ He sometimes spells the three-syllabled ‘ladyes’ like that, and sometimes makes it two-syllabled, as ‘ladies.’ He modernises ‘denty’ as ‘dainty,’ except in ‘prickmedenty;’ where he does not apparently recognise it. Prick-me-dainty is a word used to describe one of Elinor Ruming’s customers who behaved coyly and affectedly, as if she were ashamed of finding herself in such low company. There are women like her in the private-bars of London public-houses every Saturday night. To turn the coarse ‘prick-me-dainty’ into a refined ‘per-nicketty,’ as Mr. Henderson does in a foot-note, is doing the situation an injustice. In another footnote to ‘Elinor Ruming’ Mr. Henderson has invented a mediaeval verb, ‘I tun, thou tunnest, he tuns,’ meaning ‘I fall, thou fallest, he falls,’ by a misreading of a simple passage to which Dyce has, for once, given no note. About the hens contributing their share to the brew:

And dongë, when it comës,  
 Into the ale tunnës.                    [‘Elynor Ruming’, lines 193–4]

He has mistaken ‘dongë’ for a noun and ‘ale; for a noun on its own, and ‘tunnës’ for a verb. Whereas ‘dongë’ is the verb, and ‘ale-tunnës’ are the ale tuns in which Elinor was doing her tunning. Scholars are not supposed to guess at words like that. On another occasion we find him incorporating an explanatory note in the text:-

Also a Devout Prayer to Moses’ Hornës  
 Metrified merrily, meddeléd with scornës                    [‘Garland of  
 Laurel’, lines 1381–2]

Mr. Henderson has explained ‘meddeléd’ to himself as ‘mingléd’ and then accidentally put ‘mingled’ up into the line. This is wrong from every point of view. It spoils the rhythm by

removing a syllable, it spoils the succession of short me's, and Skelton did not write it. These instances could be multiplied. He has not, I think, left out any of Skelton's verses, except those which preface his 'Book of Three Fools' —he should have put those in, of course. But he has left out Skelton's Latin marginal notes to 'Speak Parrot,' 'A Replication' and the 'Garland of Laurel,' and that is bad. To go on saying the same thing, I am afraid that these omissions and the many inaccuracies mentioned above and all the other faults will not be noticed, or considered important enough, if noticed, to justify the competitive publication of the really Complete Skelton that has been so long wanted. Mr. Henderson has probably delayed that for another ten years or more.

But that pretending mature sobriety, for which, on the jacket of this book Arnold Bennett praised his 'First Poems,' and which is really so disgraceful in a young poet! It even allows him to write here:

Although no one would pretend that Skelton was a great poet, one hesitates to apply to him the epithet 'minor.' One feels all the while that he worked at a disadvantage—

What is wrong with Mr. Henderson? What difficult emotion is he suppressing? One feels that one hesitates to guess, but that it is probably so. One suspects, in fact, that *Mr. Henderson is a Proud Scot*. Especially when he writes:

Skelton's savage exultance over the Scottish defeat at Flodden is sufficient to show that for all his culture, he still had a good deal of the unredeemed bar-barian in him.

Skelton disliked the Proud Scots very heartily and pleasantly. He would have disliked Mr. Henderson particularly, as being also one of those:

Stoicall studiantes and friscaioly younkerkyns much better bayned than brained, surmised unsurely in their perihermenial principles to prate and preach proudly and lewdly and loudly to lie.

Yes, that is almost certainly right about the Scottishness. The unusual and nervous display of foot-notes to Skelton's 'Against the Scots' cannot be a coincidence.

I will take a risk on it. So:

Walk, Scot,  
 Walk, sot,  
 Rail not so far!

[‘...Dundas...Caudas contra  
 Angligenas’, lines 61–3]

Not that Mr. Henderson rails. With a scholar’s moderation he merely scoffs.

52. W.H.AUDEN ON SKELTON ‘THE ENTERTAINER’

1935

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John Skelton by Wystan Hugh Auden, included in ‘The Great Tudors’, edited by K.Garvin (London, 1935), pp. 55–67. This essay has not hitherto been reprinted: several corrections subsequently made to the text by Auden are included here for the first time.

Auden (1907–73) was one of the foremost twentieth-century poets as well as an important critic.

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To write an essay on a poet who has no biography, no message, philosophical or moral, who has neither created characters, nor expressed critical ideas about the literary art, who was comparatively uninfluenced by his predecessors, and who exerted no influence upon his successors, is not easy. Skelton’s work offers no convenient critical pegs. Until Mr. Robert Graves drew attention to his work some years ago, he was virtually unknown outside University-honour students, and even now, though there have been two editions, in the last ten years, those of Mr. Hughes and Mr. Henderson, it is doubtful whether the number of his readers has very substantially increased. One has only to compare him with another modern discovery, Hopkins, to realise that he has remained a stock literary event rather than a vital influence.

My own interest dates from the day I heard a friend at Oxford, who had just bought the first Hughes edition, make two quotations:

Also the mad coot  
 With bald face to toot [‘Philip Sparrow’, lines 410–11]

and

Till Euphrates that flood driveth  
 me into Ind, [‘Speak Parrot’, line 4]

and though I should not claim my own case as typical, yet I doubt if those to whom these lines make no appeal are likely to admire Skelton.

Though little that is authentic is known of Skelton’s life, a fairly definite portrait emerges from his work: a conservative cleric with a stray sense of humour, devoted to the organisation to which he belonged and to the cultural tradition it represented, but critical of its abuses, possibly a scholar, but certainly neither an academic-dried boy or a fastidious highbrow; no more unprejudiced or well-informed about affairs outside his own province than the average modern reader of the newspapers, but shrewd enough within it, well read in the conventional good authors of his time, but by temperament more attracted to more popular and less respectable literature, a countryman in sensibility, not particularly vain, but liking to hold the floor, fond of feminine society, and with a quick and hostile eye for *pompositas* in all its forms.

Born in 1460, he probably took his degree at Cambridge in 1484, and was awarded a laureate degree by Cambridge, Oxford, and Louvain, which I suppose did not mean much more than winning an essay prize or the Newdigate would to-day, became tutor to the future Henry VIII, was sufficiently well known socially to be mentioned by Erasmus and Caxton; took orders at the age of thirty-eight, became Rector of Diss, his probable birthplace, about 1500; began an open attack on Wolsey in 1519, and died in sanctuary at Westminster in 1529. Thus he was born just before Edward IV’s accession, grew up during the Wars of the Roses, and died in the year of Wolsey’s fall and the Reformation Parliament. In attempting to trace the relations between a poet’s work and the age in which he lived, it is well to remember how arbitrary such deductions are. One is presented with a certain number of facts like a heap of pebbles, and the number of possible patterns which one can make from them are almost infinite. To prove the validity of the pattern one chooses, it would be necessary first to predict that if there were a poet in such and such a period he would have such and such poetical qualities, and then for the works of that poet to be discovered with just those qualities. The literary historian can do no more than suggest one out of many possible views.

Politically Skelton’s period is one of important change. The Plantagenet line had split into two hostile branches, ending one

in a lunatic and the other in a criminal. The barons turned their weapons upon each other and destroyed themselves; all the English Empire in France except Calais was gone; the feudal kind of representative government was discredited and the Church corrupt. The wealth of the country was beginning to accumulate in the hands of the trading classes, such as wool merchants, and to be concentrated in the cities of the traders. Traders want peace which gives them liberty to trade rather than political liberty, secular authority rather than a religious authority which challenges their right to usury and profit. They tend therefore to support an absolute monarchy, and unlike a feudal aristocracy with its international family loyalties, to be nationalist in sentiment. Absolute monarchies adopt *real politik* and though Machiavelli's 'Prince' was not published till 1513, his principles were already European practice.

Skelton's political views are those of the average man of his time and class. A commoner, he had nothing to lose by the destruction of the old nobility; like the majority of his countrymen, he rejoices at royal weddings and national victories, and weeps at royal funerals and national defeats. With them also he criticises Henry VII's avarice.

Immensas sibi divitias cumulasse quid horres?      ['Elegy on  
Henry VII', line 15]

[Why were you shocked that you had accumulated great  
riches?]

Like a good bourgeois he is horrified at the new fashions and worldliness at Henry VIII's court, but cannot attribute it to the monarch himself, only to his companions; and hates the arrogance and extravagance of Wolsey, who by social origin was no better than himself.

In religious matters he is naturally more intelligent and better informed. Though Wyclif died in 1384, his doctrines were not forgotten among the common people, and though Skelton did not live to see the English Reformation, before he was fifty Luther had pinned his protest to the church door at Wittenberg, and he lived through the period of criticism in the Intelligentsia ('The Praise of Folly' was written in 1503) which always precedes a mass political movement.

The society of Colet, Grocyn, Linacre, and More was an intellectual and international one, a society of scholars who, like all scholars, overestimated their capacity to control or direct events. Skelton's feelings towards them were mixed. Too honest

not to see and indeed in 'Colin Clout' unsparingly to attack the faults of the Church, he was like them and like the intelligent orthodox at any time, a reformer not a revolutionary, that is to say, he thought that the corruptions of the Church and its dogmatic system were in no way related; that you could by a 'change of heart' cure the one without impairing the other; while the revolutionary, on the other hand, attributes the corruption directly to the dogmas, for which he proposes to substitute another set which he imagines to be fool-proof and devil-proof. Towards the extremists he was frightened and hostile.

[Quotes 'Colin Clout', lines 542-3, 548-52.]

His difference from the early reformers was mainly temperamental. He was not in the least donnish and, moving perhaps in less rarefied circles, saw that the effect of their researches on the man in the street, like the effect on our own time, for example of Freud, was different from what they intended.

He has been unjustly accused of opposing the study of Greek; what he actually attacked was the effect produced by the impact of new ideas upon the average man, never in any age an edifying spectacle.

[Quotes 'Speak Parrot', lines 146-52.]

As a literary artist, it is difficult to escape the conclusion that Skelton is an oddity, like Blake, who cannot be really fitted into literary history as an inevitable product of the late fifteenth century. There is every reason for the existence of Hawes or even Barclay as the moribund end of the Chaucerian tradition; it is comparatively easy to understand Elizabethan poetry as a fusion of the Italian Renaissance and native folk elements; but the vigour and character of Skelton's work remains unpredictable.

One may point out that the *Narrenschiff* influenced the 'Bouge of Court,' that Skeltonics may be found in early literature like the Proverbs of Alfred,

Ac if pu him lest welde  
 werende on worlde.  
 Lude as stille  
 His owene wille, (1)

or that the style of his Latin verses occurs in Goliardic poetry or Abelard.

*Est in Rama*  
*Vox audita*  
*Rachel fluentes*  
*Eiolantes*  
*Super natos*  
*Interfectos.*

But that a writer should be found at that particular date who would not succumb to aureate diction, and without being a folk writer, should make this kind of rhythm the basis of work, would seem, if it had not occurred, exceedingly improbable.

Excluding 'Magnificence,' Skelton's poetry falls naturally into four divisions: the imitations of the 'aureate' poetry of Lydgate and similar fifteenth-century verses, such as the elegy on the Duke of Northumberland and the prayers to the Trinity; the lyrics; the poems in rhyme royal such as the 'Bouge of Court' and 'Speke Parrot'; and those like 'Elinor Rummung,' 'Philip Sparrow,' and 'Colin Clout,' written in skeltonics.

Of the first class we may be thankful that it is so small. The attempt to gain for English verse the sonority of Latin by the use of a Latinised vocabulary was a failure in any hands except Milton's, and Skelton was no Milton. It was dull and smelt of the study, and Skelton seems to have realised this, and in his typically ironical way expressed his opinion.

[Quotes 'Philip Sparrow', lines 769–73, 800–7, 811–12.]

and in the 'Duke of Albany' he rags the aureate vocabulary by giving the long words a line a piece.

[Quotes lines 446–51.]

As a writer of lyrics, on the other hand, had he chosen he could have ranked high enough. He can range from the barrack room. "Twas Xmas day in the workhouse" style of thing, to conventional religious poetry like the poem 'Woefully arrayed' and the quite unfaked tenderness of the poem to Mistress Isabel Pennell, and always with an un-failing intuition of the right metrical form to employ in each case. Here is an example of his middle manner. Fancy's song about his hawk in 'Magnificence',

[Quotes lines 984–95, 1000–3.]

Skelton's use of Rhyme Royal is in some ways the best proof of his originality, because though employing a form used by all his

predecessors and contemporaries and at a time when originality of expression was not demanded by the reading public, few stanzas of Skelton's could be confused with those of anyone else.

The most noticeable difference, attained partly by a greater number of pater or unaccented syllables (which relate it more to a teutonic accentual or sprung rhythm for verse) lies in the tempo of his poetry. Compare a stanza of Skelton's with one of Chaucer's:

Suddenly as he departed me fro  
 Came pressing in on in a wonder array  
 Ere I was ware, behind me he said 'BO'  
 Then I, astoned of that sudden fray  
 Start all at once, I liked nothing his play  
 For, if I had not quickly fled the touch  
 He had plucked out the nobles of my pouch.        [‘Bouge of  
 Court’, lines 498–504]

But a word, lordlings, herkeneth ere I go:  
 It were full hard to finde now a dayes  
 In all a town Griseldes three or two  
 For, if that they were put to such assayes,  
 The gold of hem hath no so bad aloyes  
 With brass, that though the coyne be fair at ye,  
 It would rather breste a-two than plye. (2)

In Chaucer there is a far greater number of iambic feet, and the prevailing number of accents per line is five; in the Skelton it is four.

Indeed, the tempo of Skelton's verse is consistently quicker than that of any other English poet; only the author of 'Hudibras,' and in recent times Vachel Lindsay, come anywhere near him in this respect.

It seems to be a rough-and-ready generalisation that the more poetry concerns itself with subjective states, with the inner world of feeling, the slower it becomes, or in other words, that the verse of extrovert poets like Dryden is swift and that of introvert poets like Milton is slow, and that in those masters like Shakespeare who transcend these classifications, in the emotional crises which precede and follow the tragic act, the pace of the verse is retarded.

Thus the average pace of mediaeval verse compared with that of later more self-conscious ages is greater, and no poetry is more 'outer' than Skelton's.

His best poems, with the exception of 'Speke Parrot,' are like triumphantly successful prize poems. The themes—the



death of a girl's sparrow, a pub, Wolsey, have all the air of set subjects. They may be lucky choices, but one feels that others would have done almost equally well, not, as with Milton, that his themes were the only ones to which his genius would respond at that particular moment in his life; that, had they not occurred to him, he would have written nothing. They never read as personal experience, brooded upon, and transfigured.

Considering his date, this is largely to the good. Pre-Elizabethan verse, even Chaucer, when it deserts the outer world, and attempts the subjective, except in very simple emotional situations, as in the mystery plays, tends to sentiment and prosy moralising. Skelton avoids that, but at the same time his emotional range is limited. The world of 'The soldier's pole is fallen' is not for him.

[Quotes 'Upon a Deedman's Heed', lines 5–8.]

is as near as he gets to the terrific. This is moralising, but the metre saves it from sententiousness.

The skeltonic is such a simple metre that it is surprising that fewer poets have used it. The natural unit of speech rhythm seems to be one of four accents, dividing into two half verses of two accents. If one tries to write ordinary conversation in verse, it will fall more naturally into this scheme than into any other. Most dramatic blank verse, for example, has four accents rather than five, and it is possible that our habit of prefacing nouns and adjectives by quite pointless adjectives and adverbs as in 'the *perfectly* priceless' is dictated by our ear, by our need to group accents in pairs. Skelton is said to have spoken as he wrote, and his skeltonics have the natural ease of speech rhythm. It is the metre of many nursery rhymes.

Little Jack Horner  
Sat in a corner;

or extemporised verse like the *Clerihew*:

Alfred de Musset  
Used to call his cat pusset;

and study of the Woolworth song books will show its attraction to writers of jazz lyrics:

For life's a farce  
Sitting on the grass.

No other English poet to my knowledge has this extempore quality, is less 'would-be,' to use a happy phrase of D.H.Lawrence.

It makes much of his work, of course, quite unmemorable—it slips in at one ear and out at the other; but it is never false, and the lucky shots seem unique, of a kind which a more deliberate and self-conscious poet would never have thought of, or considered worthy of his singing robes:

Your head would have ached  
To see her naked.                    ['Elynor Ruming', lines 478–9]

Though much of Skelton's work consists of attacks on people and things, he can scarcely be called a satirist. Satire is an art which can only flourish within a highly sophisticated culture. It aims at creating a new attitude towards the persons or institutions satirised, or at least at crystallising one previously vague and unconscious. It presupposes a society whose prejudices and loyalties are sufficiently diffuse to be destroyed by intellectual assault, or sufficiently economically and politically secure to laugh at its own follies, and to admit that there is something to be said on both sides.

In less secure epochs, such as Skelton's, when friend and foe are more clearly defined, the place of satire is taken by abuse, as it always is taken in personal contact. (If censorship prevents abuse, allegorical symbolism is employed, e.g. 'Speke Parrot.') If two people are having a quarrel, they do not stop to assess who is at fault or to convince the other of his error: they express their feelings of anger by calling each other names. Similarly, among friends, when we express our opinion of an enemy by saying 'so and so is a closet' we assume that the reasons are known:

The Midwife put her hand on his thick skull  
With the prophetic blessing, 'Be thou dull,'

is too much emotion recollected in tranquillity to be the language of a quarrel. Abuse in general avoids intellectual tropes other than those of exaggeration which intensify the expression of one's feelings such as, 'You're so narrow-minded your ears meet,' or the genealogical trees which bargees assign to one another.

Further, the effect on the victim is different. Abuse is an attack on the victim's personal honour, satire on his social self-esteem; it affects him not directly, but through his friends.

Skelton's work is abuse or flyting, not satire, and he is a master at it. Much flyting poetry, like Dunbar's and Skelton's

own poems against Garnesche, suffer from the alliterative metre in which they were written, which makes them too verbal; the effect is lost on later generations, to whom the vocabulary is unfamiliar. The freedom and simplicity of the skeltonic was an ideal medium.

[Quotes 'Dundas...Caudas contra Angligenos', lines  
50–63.]

Later literary attempts at abuse, such as Browning's lines on Fitzgerald or Belloc's on a don, are too self-conscious and hearty. Blake is the only other poet known to me who has been equally successful.

You think Fuseli is not a great painter; I'm glad  
This is one of the best compliments he ever had. (3)

With his capacity for abuse Skelton combines a capacity for caricature. His age appears to have been one which has a penchant for the exaggerated and macabre, and he is no exception. His description of a character is as accurate in detail as one of Chaucer's, but as exaggerated as one of Dickens's. Compared with Chaucer he is more violent and dramatic; a favourite device of his to interpolate the description with remarks by the character itself.

[Quotes 'Bouge of Court', lines 344–50, 365–71.]

This has much more in common with the Gothic gargoyle than with the classicism of Chaucer; 'Elinor Ruming' is one of the few poems comparable to Breughel or Rowlandson in painting. The effect is like looking at the human skin through a magnifying glass.

[Quotes lines 418–35.]

All Skelton's work has this physical appeal. Other poets, such as Spenser and Swinburne, have been no more dependent upon ideas, but they have touched only one sense, the auditory. The Catherine-wheel motion of Skelton's verse is exciting in itself, but his language is never vaguely emotive. Indeed, it is deficient in overtones, but is always precise, both visually and tactually. He uses place-names, not scientifically like Dante, or musically like Milton, but as country proverbs use them, with natural vividness:

And Syllogisari was drowned at Sturbridge Fair. [*'Speak Parrot'*, line 170]

Naturally enough the figures of classical mythology which appear in all mediaeval work (just as the Sahara or Ohio appears in modern popular verses) occur in Skelton also, but he is never sorry to leave Lycaon or Etna for the Tilbury Ferry and the Plains of Salisbury. The same applies to the Latin quotations in *'Philip Sparrow'*; not only have they dramatic point, but being mainly quotations from the Psalter, they make no demands upon the erudition of his audience, any more than would *'Abide with me'* upon a modern reader.

Of Skelton's one excursion into dramatic form, *'Magnificence'*, not much need be said. It is interesting, because he is one of the few dramatists who have attempted, and with success, to differentiate his characters by making them speak in different metres, thus escaping the tendency of blank verse to make all the characters speak like the author; which obliged the Elizabethans to make their comic characters speak in prose; for the future of poetic comedy it may prove important. Its fault, a fatal one in drama, is its prolixity, but cut by at least two-thirds it might act very much better than one imagines.

Skelton's reputation has suffered in the past from his supposed indecency. This charge is no longer maintained, but there are other misunderstandings of poetry which still prevent appreciation of his work. On the one hand, there are those who read poetry for its message, for great thoughts which can be inscribed on Christmas calendars; on the other, there are admirers of *'pure'* poetry, which generally means emotive poetry with a minimum of objective reference. Skelton satisfies neither of these: he is too carefree for the one, and too interested in the outer world for the second.

If we accept, and I think we must, a distinction between the visionary and the entertainer, the first being one who extends our knowledge of, insight into, and power of control over human conduct and emotion, without whom our understanding would be so much the poorer, Skelton is definitely among the entertainers. He is not one of the indispensables, but among entertainers—and how few are the indispensables—he takes a high place. Nor is entertainment an unworthy art: it demands a higher standard of technique and a greater lack of self-regard than the average man is prepared to attempt. There have been, and are, many writers of excellent sensibility whose work is spoilt by a bogus vision which deprives it of the entertainment

value which it would otherwise have had; in that kind of pride Skelton is entirely lacking.

### Notes

- 1 'Proverbs of Alfred': cf. the edition of O.S.Arngrart (1955), lines 233–6.
- 2 Chaucer, 'Clerk's Tale', lines 1163–9.
- 3 'Verses to Robert Hunt', in 'The Poems of William Blake', ed. W.H.Stevenson (1971), p. 594.

### 53. G.S.FRASER ON SKELTON

1936

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Originally published as Skelton and the Dignity of Poetry in 'Adelphi', XIII (1936–7), pp. 154–63.

Fraser (1915–80) was a British poet and critic. This essay was written while he was still an undergraduate.

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The fifteenth century is the dullest period in the history of English poetry. But anatomy is easy on the dead model, and the period has a fascination for the critic. For him, its interest is that it shows, with extraordinary clearness, the dangers of an unbroken tradition. After Chaucer had died, Gower went on writing like Chaucer, and not so well. After Gower had died, Lydgate and Hoccleve went on writing like Chaucer and Gower, and not so well. They, too, had died. And at the very end of the fifteenth century, poor Stephen Hawes went on writing like Chaucer and Gower and Lydgate and Hoccleve—and not so well. Hawes is the final dilution of the pure Chaucerian spring, the last splash of soda in the stale nectar. Chaucer was to be, after Hawes, a dead influence, until Spenser recreated him, looking on him with an eye not dazed by custom. It is easy to point out, by taking a random sample of his verse, just how and why Stephen Hawes is not good. Consider the rhymes of this stanza.

The boke of fame, which is sentencyous  
He drewe himself on his own invencyon:

And than the tragidydes so pitous,  
 Of the XIX ladyes was his translation;  
 And upon his ymaginacion  
 He made also the tales of Canterbury:  
 Some vertuous, and some glad and mery. (1)

It is a complicated stanza, and Hawes is writing a long poem, 'The Pastime of Pleasure.' He makes the rhymes ridiculously easy. There is a predominance especially of rhymes on the weak and meaningless suffixes of words, an unnatural predominance, since even in these days and even with borrowed French words (naturalised, mostly, since Chaucer's day) the beat of English words was on the root. Hawes is always racking the natural accent of English. It is too painful to keep up this distortion in reading, and one tends to read Hawes with as little emphasis on the beat as possible, a modulation more or less syllabic and French, a dreary slurring, a drawl on the unimportant. This fault also, of course, affects Hawes' vocabulary. For the sake of rhyme he uses the trite adjective,

And than the tragidydes so pitous, [line 1326]

the heavy abstraction,

Over the waves of grete encombraunce, [line 1299]

the abstraction almost resoundingly hollow of meaning,

Remember thee of the trace and daunce  
 Of poetes old, with all the purveyance. [lines 1315–16]

With all the purveyance! With all, one supposes charitably, that the poets purveyed, but what an effect of hopeless floundering. Typically, too, Hawes uses this damp, trailing word 'purveyance' to close a couplet with, instead of the sharp, suitable word (which he has to hand), 'daunce.' For anyone who cares for the craft of poetry, Stephen Hawes is a depressing study.

Now Hawes, as I have said, was simply following a tradition. It is easy, of course, to blame tradition. One does not suppose that, with the best of advantages, poor Hawes would have become a very exhilarating poet. Yet it does seem that there comes a stage in every tradition when it is quite fully diluted. Every great and original poet gets such a crowd of second-rate imitators that other great and original poets, following him, react against his influence, and go back to some other and older

tradition. They break, that is, with the immediate past if it does influence good poets, often influences them from a foreign source. The fifteenth century is anything but the dullest period in the history of Scottish poetry. It is probably the greatest period. Yet James I, Dunbar, Henryson, 'good Gawaine Douglas, Bishop of Dunkell' were, like Lydgate, like Hoccleve, like Hawes, Chaucerians. The difference is that for [them] the Chaucerian tradition was a foreign influence, a grafting, what the second Samuel Butler calls a 'cross.' In England, unfortunately, there was no tradition older than Chaucer for a man like Hawes to fall back on. There was no alternative, foreign tradition, Chaucer was France and Italy and England, an all-embracing orthodoxy. Skelton is the one living poet of the fifteenth century in England. He is living only because he managed without a tradition. He is that very rare thing, an original artist.

'Skeltonic' is a word still used for any jogging doggerel metre. Skelton's metre is, in itself, an anomaly. There are no rules for it except that it shall have go, push, vigour. This metre is perfectly intelligible, however, if one considers it as a reaction against the decadent Chaucerian tradition, against the verse of people like Hawes. Skelton is determined, above all things, not to be dreary. The tendency of Hawes' verse, we have seen, is to rack the natural accent of English, to approximate unhappily to syllabic modulation and French. Skelton completely ignores syllables. His lines move wholly on the beat. He emphasises this by his rhymes: unlike Hawes' rhymes, they are usually rhymes on short, sharp, single-syllabled words. The same rhyme is carried on, often, for five or six lines. The effect is like tap-dancing or rub-a-dub.

[Quotes 'Colin Clout', lines 16–26.]

There is no more music in that than in a percussion drum. On the other hand, like the dancing of Fred Astaire, (2) the repetition of one small trick, again and again, till it surprises and interests us, the sudden finish,

Or if he speak plain,

[line 26]

a transition, in the poem, from patter to anger, it is undeniably an evidence of training and skill. This is language in trim, Hawes' verse is language run to seed. It is not, perhaps, wholly fantastic to see in Skelton's doggerel line Hawes' sorry, slurring iambic pentameter *squeezed*: all the superfluous epithets, cumbrous abstractions, 'aureate terms,' wrung out of the bag; a hard, tough curd of language left.

There is a current phrase, originally used about some of Mr. Auden's productions— 'buffoon-poetry.' (There is something exhilarating, said Baudelaire, about the company of buffoons.) This phrase applies very well to Skelton. It is not that he has not beauty. He has, quite frequently; the cock, for instance, in 'Philip Sparrow,' who was never taught

by Ptolemy,  
Prince of Astronomy,  
Nor by Haly;  
And yet he croweth daily  
And nightly the tides  
That no man abides, [lines 503–8]

the other birds,

The goose and the gander,  
The swan of Menander, [lines 435, 434]

the phoenix,

The bird of Araby  
That potentially  
May never die. [lines 513–15]

these creatures, undeniably have a brittle and angular beauty. The verse, too, is skilful. The passage about the phoenix shows Skelton's use (very 'modern' and with him sometimes highly successful) of repetition: the 'phoenix kind' —

[Quotes lines 540–9.]

It is the echo 'plain, plain' that gives a sort of sinister and resonant tone to this passage, the muttered repetition of that one short line— 'Plain matter indeed' [line 548] —casts a quiver of doubt *back* on the firm climax,

Saving that old age  
Is turned into courage  
Of fresh youth again, [lines 544–6]

and this doubt, again, seems half resolved by the new firmness, the sharp, flat

Whoso list to read. [line 549]



This may seem fanciful. But if other people agree with me that the lines do express this ambivalent mood, they will agree with me that Skelton can use verse, when he cares, with quite subtle skill. But both beauty and subtlety are incidental, are perhaps even accidental in Skelton's poems. They are by-products. Of what?

It is hard to put it precisely. Anyone reading Skelton can see just what he was aiming at, but the proper word for it, the exact, just phrase is, somehow, elusive. Fun, satire, energy? Energy is perhaps nearest it. There is fun, it is true; Skelton has an astonishing eye, an astonishing gusto. But the scenes he chooses are often not intrinsically funny. It is rather that he deliberately makes them funny, that he sustains the reader's amusement with his own energy of vision. On a much greater scale, of course, Rabelais does the same sort of thing. Think of the famous twenty-seventh chapter of 'Gargantua,' Friar John's defence of the Abbey. It is an orgy of blood and slaughter, bowels, brains, bones flying everywhere. Why do we laugh at it, on the deepest analysis of the matter, but because Rabelais wants us to? It is his amusement which makes the scene comic, we laugh for company. This ability then, to make one laugh at anything is not so much the character of a humorist as of an orator; it is a way not of increasing perception, but of exerting power.

This quality of Skelton's is seen very well in his poem, 'The Tunning of Eleanor Rummyng.' This picture of ale-house manners is as good, in its way, as Rowlandson. Nobody has ever seen, not even in Rowlandson, quite such lewd carbuncular bloatedness in life. Nevertheless, while we look at these exquisite drawings, Rowlandson's people convince us. They seem portraits of monsters, not caricatures of men. They exist in their medium. As a mere artist, Skelton is much the inferior of Rowlandson, who can build up a complete effect of brutal strength by individual touches as light and sensitive as possible. But Skelton's figures are also portraits not caricatures. Eleanor Rummyng, regrettably, exists:

[Quotes line 17–21.]

one sees vividly. Every detail (and the details grow more and more unsavoury) adds to her reality. Skelton, moreover, knows exactly how people eat and drink:

[Quotes lines 303–8.]

How shocking that last couplet, how memorable, how true! Finally, from this remarkable poem, let me quote the

description of a cheese.

[Quotes lines 431–5.]

‘It was tart and punyete,’ [line 435]. Does that not strike you as an unusually felicitous phrase? It is obvious, of course, that ‘punyete’ means ‘pungent.’ The odd thing about Skelton, however, is that he is continually using phrases which strike one as felicitous if one could fathom what they meant. It is this (too absolute an up-to-dateness, probably, in idiom) which prevents him from being a really witty poet. For instance, I have quoted already,

But drink, still drink,  
And let the cat wink. [lines 305–6]

Why let the cat wink? The phrase, perhaps because of the sly, conniving cat in ‘Alice in Wonderland,’ we are apt at first to let pass without question. But what does it really mean—and how does it manage, still, to convey a sense of comic mischief? There are other more obvious instances of this sort of phrase.

What hath lay men to do  
The gray goose to shoe? [‘Colin Clout’, lines 197–8]

This mocks the language of churchmen, we know by the context. We feel it has energy, we are at a loss about what it refers to? Even more obviously in, say,

For a simoniac  
Is but a hermoniac, [‘Colin Clout’, lines 298–99]

while the energy is still communicable, has the meaning lapsed. (When, with the aid of the professors, we do *root* out the meaning of ‘hermoniac’ —Armenian and hence, possibly, heretic; there is still some doubt where the wit lies. ‘Simony is only a kind of heresy.’ ‘Burglars are only Bolsheviks,’ might be equivalent for us. This, of course, cuts both ways, according to your feelings about Bolsheviks, and so may have Skelton’s joke.) It is here that Skelton is inferior to Samuel Butler, of ‘Hudibras,’ who, with a regular metre, is very like Skelton in energy of humour. Skelton is too profuse or too particular, he cannot gather himself together for the general statement. Compare Butler’s

This we among ourselves may speak.  
 But to the wicked or the weak  
 We must be cautious to declare  
 Perfection-truths, such as these are. (3)

with

Their mules gold doth eat,  
 Their neighbours die for meat, [‘Colin Clout’,  
 lines 321–2]

the embryo of an epigram, lost in the rush of Skelton’s rhymes. Yet Skelton is in many ways a pleasanter poet than Butler. ‘Hudibras’ is too full of plums to be very digestible. Butler has a dry, dull attitude towards his characters. They are lay figures to build jokes around. He has no charm. Skelton has charm, and his attitude towards his characters, a sort of mock identification of himself with them, is much more sympathetic than Butler’s.

Skelton is damned for many people as a poet because he lacks dignity. Hawes has, I suppose, in his dreary way, dignity. His incompetence is heavy, is tragic with the weight of a century’s deterioration. He is, after all, the last man of the Middle Ages, the last Chaucerian voice. There is nothing of this atmosphere in Skelton, this atmosphere of the breaking of gray daylight into a heavy dream. ‘Buffoon-poetry’ is typical, always, of a man living between two sets of values, two ways of looking at life. Skelton lacks both the melancholy of the Middle Ages and the grandiose manner of the Renaissance. He is a man, for once, just writing as he likes, and giving us verse for talk. He uses both Mediaeval theme and Renaissance learning. The catalogue of birds or beasts or flowers is a favourite item in Mediaeval poems of the type of ‘The Romaunt of the Rose.’ But in the ‘Kingis Quhair,’ for instance, the effect of such a catalogue is that of being conducted, too slowly, past dark and threadbare tapestries. In ‘Philip Sparrow,’ the catalogue of birds shows knowledge and imagination. The interest, however, is not that of Faustus, ‘the lust of the eye.’ It is rather, again, the interest of patter. What, another bird still! How long will he keep it up?

Is poetry an essence or a medium? That is the question by which Skelton must stand or fall. Is poetry something which is achieved only occasionally, achieved with great difficulty—a blaze, as Mr. Peter Quennell has figured it, which will flare up only for a second, after one has been rubbing for ages together

the dry sticks of verse? So many estimable people (and particularly Platonists) think. Or is poetry just a medium like prose (prose for statement and poetry for expression, prose for thought and poetry for feeling?) a medium which it is difficult to become a master in? The alternatives are crudely stated, and most people will dislike intensely the implication that prose which is expressive and emotional is poetry; though nobody, again, so far as I know, has denied the possibility of writing a 'prose poem.' I agree, however, that most expressive and emotional prose is not poetry. Poetry implies intensity, consistency, concentration, and most writers, to attain these qualities when they are expressing their feelings, require the discipline of verse. I incline, myself, to the theory that poetry is a medium. Such a theory, at least, leaves little room for *charlatanerie* in critics. We can all judge pretty well whether a poem expresses a man's personality with honesty and economy. We will quarrel till doomsday about what (and where) is 'beauty.' If poetry is a medium, Skelton, it seems to me, is a fair master in it.

Skelton, in our day, has enjoyed a certain popularity. He has interested and influenced Mr. Robert Graves. Mr. Auden has written (in a compilation vaguely called 'The Great Tudors') an essay about him, with a brilliant choice of quotations. Skelton seems, also, to have influenced Mr. Auden in his poems, particularly in his 'buffoon-poetry.' Like Skelton, Mr. Auden always misses wit; his idiom is private, precious, and he is thinking of too small and intimate an audience. Like Skelton, he has charm. I do not think he beats Skelton at his own game. Here are two passages for comparison, both expressing an exasperation at listless people.

This is Auden's.

Fitters and moulders,  
Wielders and welders  
Dyers and bakers,  
And boiler-tube makers,  
Poofs and ponces,  
All of them dunces,  
Those over thirty  
Ugly and dirty,  
What are they doing  
Except just stewing? (4)

This is Skelton's,

He is but a fool  
Let him go to school,  
On a three-legged stool  
That he may down sit  
For he lacketh wit:  
And if that he hit  
The nail on the head,  
It standeth in no stead,  
The devil, the say, is  
dead,

The devil is dead  
['Colin Clout', lines 28-37]

The poor, the unemployed have, of course, more immediate interest than the thick-skins whom Skelton is mocking.

On the other hand, Skelton's strategy of identifying himself with the enemy is much cleverer than Auden's plain grumble. Merely as verse, however, Skelton's passage seems to me to have much more drive than Auden's. The trochaic movement and feminine rhymes of Auden's passage rob it, obviously, of a good deal of energy. You get a slightly plaintive, querulous note, a thing fatal to satire. Auden is trying to be tough about these people, but they are getting into his nerves. It is Skelton's *voice* which is better than Auden's for 'buffoon-poetry,' on the whole. Auden's voice has the *miaulement* which lurks at the bottom of the lyric, and a hint of that is in his satire, giving it—I admit, on a second reading—a slightly fractious air. I suppose this fractious tone (I have noticed it in people expensively brought up) is a legacy of the English public school. Skelton was more like George Robey, (5)

[Quotes 'Colin Clout', lines 944, 946–49, 951.]

Auden's 'schoolmaster writing "Resurgam" with his penis in the sand' is aimed at a more special and less central audience.

What is the justification for 'buffoon-poetry'? The example of Skelton suggests that it is justifiable to write 'buffoon-poetry' when a tradition is exhausted and when there is no other obvious tradition to turn to. This, I believe, was Auden's case as well as Skelton's. What is remarkable about Auden is that, not content with 'buffoon-poetry,' he has also created for himself a tradition. A person of desultory reading, turning over Auden's pages, will recognise uses of Freud, case-books of psychology, geology, folk-plays, spy stories, military manuals, and what not. Skelton (who was admired by Erasmus and Pico della Mirandola) had the same sort of harum-scarum erudition. He had not the *miaulement*, the lyric cry. He had not the *paranoia* (to use Salvador Dali's term) by which all this discrepant stuff could be used to illustrate one heroic obsession. He achieves, in his few lyrics, only (as here and there throughout his longer poems) a brittle and angular beauty:

[Quotes 'Garland of Laurel', lines 1004–7.]

He created no tradition, therefore. He is quite unique in his kind. The great stream of English literature would have taken much the same course if he had never written. But I have never held to the theory that a poet is only justified, in the end, by the saturation of his tradition, by the number and final deadness of his imitators. Shakespeare stands without Shirley. Skelton will always

remain an example for poets caught up in the coils of a tradition, a decent way of writing, which they feel to be constricting their lives. It is better, always, to be a buffoon than a bore.

## Notes

- 1 Hawes, 'Pastime of Pleasure', lines 1324–30.
- 2 An American film star and dancer.
- 3 'Hudibras', First. Part, Canto II, lines 1099–102.
- 4 From Auden's 'The Orators' (1932), Ode III.
- 5 An English comic actor.

## 54. E.M.FORSTER ON SKELTON

1950

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From E.M.Forster's 'Two Cheers for Democracy', first published in 1951. I have followed the text of the Abinger Edition (London, 1972), pp. 133–49.

Forster (1879–1970) was one of the most distinguished novelists of the twentieth century. His novels include 'The Longest Journey' (1907), 'Howards End' (1920) and 'A Passage to India' (1924). In addition he wrote volumes of biography and criticism. The lecture printed below was first given at the Aldeburgh Festival in 1950.

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John Skelton was an East Anglian; he was a poet, also a clergyman, and he was extremely strange. Partly strange because the age in which he flourished—that of the early Tudors—is remote from us, and difficult to interpret. But he was also a strange creature, personally, and whatever you think of him when we've finished—and you will possibly think badly of him—you will agree that we have been in contact with someone unusual.

Let us begin with solidity—with the church where he was rector. That still stands; that can be seen and touched, though its incumbent left it over four hundred years ago. He was rector of Diss, a market town which lies just in Norfolk, just across

the river Waveney, here quite a small stream, and Diss church is somewhat of a landmark, for it stands upon a hill. A winding High Street leads up to it, and the High Street, once very narrow, passed through an arch in its tower which still remains. The church is not grand, it is not a great architectural triumph like Blythburgh or Framlingham. But it is adequate, it is dignified and commodious, and it successfully asserts its pre-eminence over its surroundings. Here our poet-clergyman functioned for a time, and, I may add, carried on.

Not much is known about him, though he was the leading literary figure of his age. He was born about 1460, probably in Norfolk, was educated at Cambridge, mastered the voluble inelegant Latin of his day, entered the Church, got in touch with the court of Henry VII, and became tutor to the future Henry VIII. He was appointed 'Poet Laureat', and this was confirmed by the universities of Cambridge, Oxford and Louvain. In the early years of Henry VIII he voiced official policy—for instance, in his poems against the Scots after Flodden. But, unfortunately for himself, he attacked another and a greater East Anglian, Cardinal Wolsey of Ipswich, and after that his influence declined. He was appointed rector of Diss in 1503, and held the post till his death in 1529. But he only seems to have been in residence during the earlier years. Life couldn't have been congenial for him there. He got across the Bishop of Norwich, perhaps about his marriage or semi-marriage, and he evidently liked London and the court, being a busy contentious fellow, and found plenty to occupy him there. A few bills and documents, a few references in the works of others, a little posthumous gossip, and his own poems, are all that we have when we try to reconstruct him. Beyond doubt he is an extraordinary character, but not one which it is easy to focus. Let us turn to his poems.

I will begin with the East Anglian poems, and with 'Philip Sparrow'. This is an unusually charming piece of work. It was written while Skelton was at Diss, and revolves round a young lady called Jane, who was at school at a nunnery close to Norwich. Jane had a pet sparrow—a bird which is far from fashionable today, but which once possessed great social prestige. In ancient Rome, Catullus sang of the sparrow of Lesbia, the dingy little things were housed in gilt cages, and tempted with delicious scraps all through the Middle Ages, and they only went out when the canary came in. Jane had a sparrow, round which all her maidenly soul was wrapped. Tragedy followed. There was a cat in the nunnery, by name Gib, who lay in wait for Philip Sparrow, pounced, killed him

and ate him. The poor girl was in tears, and her tragedy was taken up and raised into poetry by her sympathetic admirer, the rector of Diss.

He produced a lengthy poem—it seemed difficult at that time to produce a poem that was not long. ‘Philip Sparrow’ swings along easily enough, and can still be read with pleasure by those who will overlook its volubility, its desultoriness and its joky Latin.

It begins, believe it or not, with a parody of the Office for the Dead; Jane herself is supposed to be speaking, and she slings her Latin about well if quaintly. Soon tiring of the church service, she turns to English, and to classical allusions.

[Quotes ‘Philip Sparrow’, lines 17–30, 36.]

Then—in a jumble of Christian and antique allusions, most typical of that age—she thinks of Hell and Pluto and Cerberus—whom she calls Cerebus—and Medusa and the Furies, and alternately prays Jupiter and Jesus to save her sparrow from the infernal powers:

[Quotes lines 115–17, 120–42.]

Jane proceeds to record his other merits, which include picking fleas off her person—this was a sixteenth-century girls’ school, not a twentieth-, vermin were no disgrace, not even a surprise, and Skelton always manages to introduce the coarseness and discomfort of his age. She turns upon the cat again, and hopes the greedy grypes will tear out his tripes.

[Quotes lines 338–41.]

She goes back to the sparrow and to the church service, and draws up an enormous catalogue of birds who shall celebrate his obsequies—

[Quotes lines 428–31.]

—together with other songsters, unknown in these marshes and even elsewhere. She now wants to write an epitaph, but is held up by her diffidence and ignorance; she has read so few books, though the list of those she has read is formidable; moreover, she has little enthusiasm for the English language—

[Quotes lines 774–83.]



Shall she try Latin? Yes, but she will hand over the job to the Poet Laureate of Britain, Skelton, and, with this neat compliment to himself, Skelton ends the first part of 'Philip Sparrow'.

He occupies the second part with praising Jane:

[Quotes lines 1136–40.]

bypasses the sparrow, and enters upon a love poem:

[Quotes lines 1145–50.]

The rector is in fact losing his head over a schoolgirl, and has to pull himself up. No impropriety is intended, he assures us.

[Quotes lines 1133–5, 1251–9.]

Then he too slides into Latin and back into the Office of the Dead: *Requiem aeternam dona eis Domine* [line 1238], he chants.

This poem of Philip Sparrow—the pleasantest Skelton ever wrote—helps to emphasize the difference in taste and in style between the sixteenth century and our own. His world is infinitely remote; not only is it coarse and rough, but there is an uncertainty of touch about it which we find hard to discount. Is he being humorous? Undoubtedly, but where are we supposed to laugh? Is he being serious? If so, where and how much? We don't find the same uncertainty when he read his predecessor Chaucer, or his successor Shakespeare. We know where they stand, even when we cannot reach them. Skelton belongs to an age of break-up, which has just been displayed politically in the Wars of the Roses. He belongs to a period when England was trying to find herself—as indeed do we today, though we have to make a different sort of discovery after a different type of war. He is very much the product of his times—a generalization that can be made of all writers, but not always so aptly. The solidity of the Middle Ages was giving way beneath his feet, and he did not know that the Elizabethan age was coming—any more than we know what is coming. We have not the least idea, whatever the politicians prophesy. It is appropriate, at this point, to quote the wisest and most impressive lines he ever wrote—they are not well known, and probably they are only a fragment. They have a weight and a thoughtfulness which are unusual in him.

Though ye suppose all jeopardies are passed  
 And all is done that ye looked for before,  
 Ware yet, I warn you, of Fortune's double cast,  
 For one false point she is wont to keep in store,  
 And under the skin oft festered is the sore;  
 That when ye think all danger for to pass  
 Ware of the lizard lieth lurking in the grass.  
 ['Dyuers Balettys and Dyties Solacious', lines 9–15]

It was a curious experience, with these ominous verses in ray mind, to go to Diss and to find, carved on the buttress of the church, a lizard. The carving was there in Skelton's day; that he noticed it, that it entered into his mind when he wrote, there is no reason to suppose. But its appearance, combined with the long grass in the churchyard, helped me to connect the present with the past, helped them to establish that common denominator without which neither has any validity.

[Quotes *ibid.*, lines 14–15.]

So true of the sixteenth century, so true of today! There are two main answers to the eternal menace of the lizard. One of them is caution, the other courage. Skelton was a brave fellow—his opposition to Cardinal Wolsey proves that—but I don't know which answer he recommends.

But let us leave these serious considerations, and enter Diss church itself, where we shall be met by a fantastic scene and by the oddest poem even Skelton ever wrote: the poem of 'Ware the Hawk'. Like 'Philip Sparrow', it is about a bird, but a bird of prey, and its owner is not the charming Jane, but an ill-behaved curate, who took his hawk into the church, locked all the doors, and proceeded to train it with the help of two live pigeons and a cushion stuffed with feathers to imitate another pigeon. The noise, the mess, the scandal, was terrific. In vain did the rector thump on the door and command the curate to open. The young man—one assumes he was young—took no notice, but continued his unseemly antics. Diss church is well suited to a sporting purpose, since its nave and choir are unusually lofty, and the rood-loft was convenient for the birds to perch on between the statues of the Virgin and St John. Up and down he rushed, uttering the cries of his craft, and even clambering onto the communion table. Feathers flew in all directions and the hawk was sick. At last Skelton found 'a privy way' in, and managed to stop him. But he remained impenitent, and threatened that another day he would go fox-hunting there, and bring in a whole pack of hounds.

Now is this an exaggeration, or a joke? And why did Skelton delay making a poem out of it until many years had passed? He does not—which is strange—even mention the name of the curate.

[Quotes lines 38–42.]

That is moderately put. It was amiss. Winding himself up into a rage, he then calls him a peckish parson and a Domine Dawcock and a frantic falconer and a smearable smith, and scans history in vain for so insolent a parallel; not even the Emperor Julian the Apostate or the Nestorian heretics flew hawks in a church. Nero himself would have hesitated. And the poem ends in a jumble and a splutter, heaps of silly Latin, a cryptogram and a curious impression of gaiety; a good time, one can't help feeling, has been had by all.

How, though, did Skelton get into the church and stop the scandal? Perhaps through the tower. You remember my mentioning that the tower of Diss church has a broad passage-way running through it, once part of the High Street. Today the passage only contains a notice saying 'No bicycles to be left here', together with a number of bicycles. Formerly, there was a little door leading up from it into the tower. That (conjectures an American scholar) may have been Skelton's privy entrance. He may have climbed up by it, climbed down the belfry into the nave, and spoiled, at long last, the curate's sport.

There is another poem which comes into this part of Skelton's life. It is entitled 'Two Knaves Sometimes of Diss', and attacks two of his parishioners who had displeased him and were now safely dead; John Clerk and Adam Uddersall were their names. Clerk, according to the poet, had raged 'like a camel' and now lies 'starke dead, Naver a tooth in his head, Adieu, Jayberd, adieu,' while as for Uddersall, 'Belsabub his soule save, who lies here like a knave.' The poem is not gentlemanly. Little that Skelton wrote was. Not hit a man when he is down or dead? That's just the moment to wait for. He can't hit back.

The last East Anglian poem to be mentioned is a touching one: to his wife. As a priest, he was not and could not be married, but he regarded his mistress as his legal consort, and the poem deals with a moment when they were parting and she was about to bear a child:

'Petually  
 Constrained am I  
 With weeping eye  
 To mourn and 'plain

That we so nigh  
 Of progeny  
 So suddenly  
     Should part in twain.

When ye are gone  
 Comfort is none,  
 But all alone  
     Endure must I  
 With grievely groan  
 Making my moan  
 As it were one  
     That should needs die. (1)

There is a story about the birth of this child which was written down after Skelton's death, in a collection called 'The Merry Tales of Skelton'. According to it, there were complaints to the bishop from the parish, which Skelton determined to quell. So he preached in Diss church on the text *Vos estis*, you are, and suddenly called out, 'Wife! Bring my Child.' Which the lady did. And he held the naked baby out to the congregation saying: 'Is not this child as fair as any of yours? It is not like a pig or a calf, is it? What have you got to complain about to the bishop? The fact is, as I said in my text, *Vos estis*, you be, and have be and will and shall be knaves, to complayne of me without reasonable cause.' Historians think that this jest-book story enshrines a tradition. It certainly fits in with what we know of the poet's fearless and abusive character.

Tenderness also entered into that character, though it did not often show itself. Tenderness inspires that poem I have quoted, and is to be found elsewhere in his gentle references to women; for instance, in the charming 'Merry Margaret', which often appears in anthologies.

[Quotes 'Garland of Laurel', lines 1004–10.]

And in the less known but still more charming poem 'To Mistress Isabel Pennell' which I will quote in full. Isabel was a little girl of eight—even younger than Jane of the sparrow. ('Reflaring', near the beginning of the poem, is 'redolent'. 'Nept' means catmint.)

[Quotes 'Garland of Laurel', lines 973–1003.]

Women could touch his violent and rugged heart and make it gentle and smooth for a little time. It is not the dying tradition of chivalry, it is something personal.

But we must leave these personal and local matters, and turn to London and to the political satires. The main group is directed against Cardinal Wolsey. The allusions are often obscure, for, though Skelton sometimes attacks his great adversary openly, at other times he is covering his tracks, and at other times complimentary and even fulsome. The ups and downs of which have furnished many problems for scholars. Two points should be remembered. Firstly, Skelton is not a precursor of the Reformation; he has sometimes been claimed as one by Protestant historians. He attacked the abuses of his Church—as exemplified in Wolsey’s luxury, immorality and business. He has nothing to say against its doctrines or organization and was active in the suppression of heresy. He was its loyal if scandalous son.

Secondly, Wolsey appears to have behaved well. When he triumphed, he exacted no vengeance. Perhaps he had too much to think about. The story that Skelton died in sanctuary in St Margaret’s, Westminster, fleeing from the Cardinal’s wrath, is not true. He did live for the last years of his life in London, but freely and comfortably; bills for his supper parties have been unearthed. And though he was buried in St Margaret’s it was honourably, under an alabaster inscription. Bells were pealed, candles were burned. Here again we have the bills.

The chief anti-Wolsey poems are ‘Speke Parrot’, ‘Colin Clout’, ‘Why come ye not to Court?’ and the cumbrous Morality play ‘Magnificence’.

Speke Parrot—yet another bird; had Skelton a bird complex? Ornithologists must decide—Speke Parrot is one of those convenient devices where Polly is made to say what Polly’s master hesitates to say openly. Poor Polly! Still, master is fond of Polly, and introduces him prettily enough.

[Quotes ‘Speak Parrot’, lines 209–15.]

Skelton’s genuine if intermittent charm continues into the next stanza.

[Quotes lines 216–22.]

The ‘popinjay royal’ —that is to say the bird of King Henry VIII, whose goodness and generosity Wolsey abuses. And parrot, given his beak, says many sharp things against the Cardinal, who ‘carrieth a king in his sleeve’ and plays the Pope’s game rather than his liege’s. Subtly and obscurely, with detailed attention to his comings and goings, the great man is attacked.

It is a London poem, which could not have been written in a Norfolk rectory.

Much more violent is ‘Why come ye not to Court?’ where the son of the Ipswich butcher gets brutally put in his place.

[Quotes lines 398–406.]

And at Hampton Court Wolsey rules, with

[Quotes lines 488–91, 569–75.]

As for ‘Colin Clout’. The title is the equivalent of Hodge or the Man in the Street, from whose point of view the poem is supposed to be written. It is a long rambling attack on bishops, friars, monks and the clergy generally, and Wolsey comes in for his share of criticism. I will quote from it not the abusive passages, of which you are getting plenty, but the dignified and devout passage with which it closes. Skelton was, after all, inside the church he criticized, and held its faith, and now and then he reminds us of this.

[Quotes lines 1250–67.]

It is a conventional ending, but a sincere one, and reminds us that he had a serious side; his ‘Prayer to the Father of Heaven’ was sung in the church here, to the setting of Vaughan Williams. He can show genuine emotion at the moments, both about this world and the next. Here are two verses from ‘The Manner of the World Nowadays’, in in which he laments the decay of society.

[Quotes lines 169–76.]

‘Magnificence’, the last of the anti-Wolsey group, is a symbol for Henry VIII, who is seduced by wicked flatterers from his old counsellor (i.e. from Skelton himself). Largess, Counterfeit-Countenance, Crafty-Conveyance, Cloaked-Collusion and Courtly Abusion are some of the names, and all are aspects of Wolsey. At enormous length and with little dramatic skill they ensnare Magnificence and bring him low. By the time Stage 5, Scene 35 is reached he repents, and recalls his former adviser, and all is well.

Well, so much for the quarrel between Skelton and Wolsey—between the parson from Norfolk and the Cardinal from Suffolk, and Suffolk got the best of it. Skelton may have had right on his side and he had courage and sincerity, but there is no doubt that jealousy came in too. At the beginning of Henry VIII’s reign he

was a very important person. He had been the King's tutor, he went on a semi-diplomatic mission, and as Poet Laureate he was a mouthpiece for official lampoons. With the advent of Wolsey, who tempted the king with pleasure, his importance declined, and he did not live to see the days when Henry preferred power to pleasure, and Wolsey fell.

The satires against the Scots, next to be mentioned, belong to the more influential period of Skelton's life. They centre round the Battle of Flodden (1513). King Henry's brother-in-law, James IV of Scotland, had challenged him, had invaded England, and been killed at Flodden, with most of his nobility. Skelton celebrates the English victory with caddish joy. In quoting a few lines, I do not desire to ruffle any sensitive friends from over the Border. I can anyhow assure them that our Poet Laureate appears to have got as good as he gave:

[Quotes 'Against the Scots', lines 91–4, 139–42.]

And still more abusively does he attack an enemy poet called Dundas who wrote Latin verses against him.

[Quotes lines 1–10, 25–8, 54–5, 60–3.]

The accusation that Englishmen have tails is still sometimes made, and is no doubt as true as it ever was. I have not been able to find out how Dundas made it, since his poem has vanished. We can assume he was forcible. Nor have I quoted Skelton in full, out of deference to the twentieth century. He is said to have written it in his Diss rectory. That is unlikely—not because of its tone, but because it implies a close contact with affairs which he could only have maintained at Court.

Our short Skeltonic scamper is nearing its end, but I must refer to the 'Tunning of Elinor Rumming', one of the most famous of Skelton's poems. Elinor Rumming kept a pub—not in East Anglia, but down in Surrey, near Leatherhead. The poem is about her and her clients, who likewise belonged to the fair sex.

[Quotes lines 1–5, 7–11, 18–21.]

You catch the tone. You taste the quality of the brew. It is strong and rumbustious and not too clean. Skelton is going to enjoy himself thoroughly. Under the guise of a satirist and a corrector of morals, he is out for a booze. Now the ladies come tumbling in:

[Quotes lines 117–30.]

They get drunk, they tumble down in inelegant attitudes, they trip over the doorstep, they fight. Margery Milk-duck, halting Joan, Maud Ruggy, drunken Alice, Bely and Sybil, in they come. Many of them are penniless and are obliged to pay in kind, and they bring with them gifts often as unsavoury as the drink they hope to swallow—a rancid side of bacon for example—and they pawn anything they can lay their hands on, from their husbands' clothes to the baby's cradle, from a frying-pan to a side-saddle. Elinor accepts all. It is a most lively and all-embracing poem, which gets wilder and lewder as it proceeds. Then Skelton pulls himself up in characteristic fashion.

[Quotes lines 618–21.]

And remembering that he is a clergyman and a Poet Laureate he appends some Latin verses saying that he has denounced drunken, dirty and loquacious women, and trusts they will take his warning to heart. I wonder. To my mind he has been thoroughly happy, as he was in the church at Diss when the naughty curate hawked. I often suspect satirists of happiness—and I oftener suspect them of envy. Satire is not a straight trade. Skelton's satires on Wolsey are of the envious type. In 'Elinor Rummung' and 'Ware the Hawk' I detect a coarse merry character enjoying itself under the guise of censoriousness

[Quotes 'Philip Sparrow', lines 1201–03.]

One question that may have occurred to you is this: was Skelton typical of the educated parish priest of his age? My own impression is that he was, and that the men of Henry VIII's reign, parsons and others, were much more unlike ourselves than we suppose, or, if you prefer it, much odder. We cannot unlock their hearts. In the reign of his daughter Elizabeth a key begins to be forged. Shakespeare puts it into our hands, and we recover, on a deeper level, the intimacy promised by Chaucer. Skelton belongs to an age of transition: the silly Wars of the Roses were behind him; he appears even to regret them, and he could not see the profounder struggles ahead. This made him 'difficult', though he did not seem so to himself. His coarseness and irreverence will pain some people and must puzzle everyone. It may help us if we remember that religion is older than decorum.

Of his poetry I have given some typical samples, and you will agree that he is entertaining and not quite like anyone else,



that he has a feeling for rhythm, and a copious vocabulary. Sometimes—but not often—he is tender and charming, occasionally he is devout and very occasionally he is wise. On the whole he's a comic—a proper comic, with a love for improper fun, and a talent for abuse. He says of himself, in one of his Latin verses, that he sings the material of laughter in a harsh voice, and the description is apt; the harshness is often more obvious than the laughter, and leaves us with a buzzing in the ears rather than with a smile on the face. Such a a row! Such a lot of complaints! He has indeed our national fondness for grumbling—the Government, the country, agriculture, the world, the beer, they are none of them what they ought to be or have been. And, although we must not affix our dry little political labels to the fluidity of the past (there is nothing to tie them on to), it is nevertheless safe to say that temperamentally the rector of Diss was a conservative.

On what note shall we leave him? A musical note commends itself. Let me quote three stanzas from a satire called 'Against a Comely Coistroun' —that is to say, against a good-looking kitchen-boy. The boy has been conjectured to be Lambert Simnel, the pretender to the crown of England. He was silly as well as seditious, and he fancied himself as a musician and 'curiously chanted and currishly countered and madly in his musicks mockishly made against the Nine Muses of politic poems and poets matriculate' —the matriculate being Skelton, the Poet Laureate. Listen how he gets basted for his incompetence; you may not follow all the words, but you can hear the blows fall, and that's what matters

[Quotes lines 22–42.]

Kitchen-boy Simnel, (2) if it be he, was evidently no more a performer than he was a prince. Yet I would have liked to have him here now, red, angry, good-looking, and making a hideous noise, and to have heard Skelton cursing him as he screeched. The pair of them might have revived for us that past which is always too dim, always too muffled, always too refined. With their raucous cries in your ears, with the cries of the falconer in Diss church, with the squawking of Speke Parrot, and the belchings of Elinor Rumping, I leave you.

## Notes

- 1 Not in fact by Skelton, but included in Henderson's 1931 edition of his works, p. 19.

- 2 Lambert Simnel, a pretender to the throne of Henry VII, was permitted to survive as Henry's kitchen boy.

55. C.S.LEWIS ON SKELTON, 'THE REALLY GIFTED AMATEUR'

1954

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From C.S.Lewis, 'English Literature in the Sixteenth Century Excluding Drama' (Oxford, 1954), pp. 133–43.

Lewis (1898–1963) was a distinguished novelist, theological writer and literary critic. The following extract is from his volume contributed to the Oxford History of English Literature. Occasional footnotes have been deleted.

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But when all's said John Skelton (1464?-1529) is the only poet of that age who is still read for pleasure. Skelton was a translator, a laureate of more than one university, tutor to Henry VIII, the satirist and later the client of Wolsey, and a jest-book hero in Elizabethan tradition. Pope's epithet of 'beastly' is warranted by nothing that ought either to attract or repel an adult; Skelton is neither more nor less coarse than dozens of our older comic writers. His humanism is a little more important than his supposed beastliness, but it did not amount to much. It led him to translate 'Tully's Familiars' and (from Poggio's Latin version) Diodorus Siculus, at some date before 1490. These translations, which still remain in manuscript, are said to abound in neologisms, often successful, and it is plain from such scraps of Skelton's prose as are accessible in print that he was a lover of ink-horn terms. But his humanism extended only to Latin and he was one of those who opposed the study of Greek at the university and called themselves 'Trojans'. One of his objections to Greek learning is of great historical interest. He complains that those who learn Greek cannot use it in conversation, cannot say in Greek

How hosteler fetche my hors a botell of hay.  
(*'Speeke Parot'*, 152.)

This shows that the very conception of a dead language, so familiar to us, was to Skelton a ridiculous novelty. The process of classicization which was finally to kill Latin seemed to him merely the improvement of a living tongue.

If the list of his own works which Skelton gives in the 'Garland of Laurel' is accurate he must have been one of our most prolific authors, and his lost books must have outweighed in volume those which have survived; indeed his 'Of Man's Life the Peregrination', if it was really a version and a complete version of Deguileville's 'Pèlerin-age', would have done so by itself. But it is hard to believe that so busy and erratic a genius ever completed such a task. In what follows I must naturally base my judgement on the extant works; but it should be remembered that we know Skelton only in part and the part we do know is by no means homogeneous. We cannot be sure that the recovery of the lost works might not seriously modify our idea of him.

In his earliest surviving pieces Skelton appears as a typical poet of the late Middle Ages: a poet no better than Barclay and, in my judgement, inferior to Hawes. His elegies on Edward IV (1483) and on the Earl of Northumberland (1489) reveal nothing of his later quality. We may probably assign to the same period (and certainly relegate to the same oblivion) three heavily aureate poems addressed to the Persons of the Trinity, a poem on Time, and an amatory 'Go Piteous Heart'. The only effect of all these is to set us thinking how much better they did such things in Scotland.

With the 'Bouge of Court' (probably written in 1498 or 1499) we reach work which is of real value, but we do not reach the fully 'Skeltonic' Skelton. The 'Bouge' is just as characteristic of the late Middle Ages as the previous poems; the difference is that it is good. There is no-novelty, though there is great merit, in its satiric and realistic use of the dream allegory. The form had been used satirically by Jean de Meung and Chaucer and had always admitted realistic detail; in the 'Flower and the Leaf' and the 'Assembly of Ladies' it had offered almost nothing else. The merit of Skelton lies not in innovation but in using well an established tradition for a purpose to which it is excellently suited. The subject is a perennial one—the bewilderment, and finally the terror, of a man at his first introduction to what theologians call 'the World' and others 'the racket' or 'real life'. Things overheard, things misunderstood, a general and steadily growing sense of being out of one's depth, fill the poem with a Kafka-like uneasiness. As was natural in Tudor times the particular 'world'

or 'racket' described in the court; but almost any man in any profession can recognize most of the encounters—the direct, unprovoked snub from Danger ('She asked me if ever I drank of sauces cup' [line 73]), the effusive welcome of Favell, the confidential warnings of Suspect, the apparently light-hearted good fellowship of Harvy Hafter (but the very sight of him sets your purse shivering), and the down-right bullying of Disdain. It ends in nightmare with the hero leaping over the ship's side: his name, which is *Drede*, gives the keynote to the whole dream. The metre is chaotic, but the poem almost succeeds in spite of it.

So far, if my chronology is correct, we have seen Skelton working along the lines marked out for him by his immediate predecessors. He was to do so again in the Flyting 'Against Garnesche' (1513–14), in 'The Garland of Laurel' (1523), and in the huge morality play of 'Magnificence' (1515–16) which I surrender to the historians of drama. But in the next group of poems which we must consider we are confronted with a different and almost wholly unexpected Skelton. The pieces in this group cannot be accurately dated. 'Philip Sparrow' was certainly written before 1509. 'Ware the Hawk' was obviously written while Skelton was resident at Diss, and therefore probably between 1502 and 1511. The 'Epitaphe' (on 'two knaves sometime of Diss') cannot be earlier than 1506 when the will of one of the 'knaves' was proved. The 'Ballad of the Scottish King' and its revised version 'Against the Scots' must have been composed in the year of Flodden (1513). The 'Tunning' I cannot date, for the fact that the real Alianora Romyng was in trouble for excessive prices and small measures in 1525 does not much help us.

The most obvious characteristic of all the poems in this group is the so-called Skeltonic metre; 'so-called', for by some standards it is hardly a metre at all. The number of beats in the line varies from two ('Tell you I chill' ['Elynor Rummyng', line 1]) to five ('To anger the Scots and Irish keterings with all' ['Against the Scots', line 83]) with a preference for three. The rhyme is hardly ever crossed and any given rhyme may be repeated as long as the resources of the language hold out. In other words there is neither metre nor rhyme scheme in the strict sense; the only constant characteristic is the fact of rhyming. Scholars have shown much learning in their attempts to find a source for this extraordinary kind of composition. Short lines with irregular rhyme have been found in medieval Latin verse, but they do not show the Skeltonic irregularity of rhythm. More recently attention has been drawn to the rhyming

passages in later medieval Latin prose; and in an earlier chapter we have noticed something faintly like Skeltonics in such Scotch poems as 'Cowkelbie Sow' and 'Lord Fergus' Gaist'. This is not the only affinity between Skelton and his Scotch contemporaries; his 'Lullay, Lullay' (not to be confused with the noble carol) and his 'Jolly Rutterkin' may be regarded as poor relations of the comic lyric about low life which we find in the Scotch anthologies. Skelton himself would rise from the grave to bespatter us with new Skeltonics if we suggested that he had learned his art from a Scotchman: but these affinities may suggest (they certainly do not prove) some common tradition whose documents are now lost but from which the lower types of early sixteenth-century poetry, both Scotch and English, have descended. But whatever view is finally taken it remains true that there is nothing really very like Skeltonics before Skelton, and that his practice alone gives them any importance. Hints and vague anticipations there may have been, but I suspect that he was the real inventor.

The problem about the source of Skeltonics sinks into insignificance beside the critical problem. A form whose only constant attribute is rhyme ought to be intolerable: it is indeed the form used by every clown scribbling on the wall in an inn yard. How then does Skelton please? It is, no doubt, true to say that he sometimes does not. Where the poem is bad on other grounds the Skeltonics make it worse. In the 'Ballad of the Scottish King' the rodo-montade of the non-combatant, the government scribbler's cheap valiancy, is beneath contempt, and qualifies the poet for the epithet 'beastly' far more than 'Elinor Rumping'; and in the revised version the sinister hint that those who disliked the 'Ballad' must be no true friends of the king adds the last touch of degradation. Here the looseness of the form does not help matters: it aggravates the vulgarity. This can be seen by turning to the similar poem on 'The Doughty Duke of Albany' (1523) where the 'Envoy', by dint of its strict trimeter quatrains, is much more tolerable than the main body of the poem. Where thought grovels, form must be severe: satire that is merely abusive is most tolerable in stopped couplets. But, of course, there would be no problem if all Skelton's Skeltonic poems had been on this level. The real question is about 'Elinor Rumping' and 'Philip Sparrow'. I am not at all sure that we can find the answer, but we may at least eliminate one false trail. They certainly do not please by the poet's 'facility in rhyme' considered as virtuosity. On Skelton's terms any man can rhyme as long as he pleases.

In modern language the kind to which 'Philip Sparrow' belongs may roughly be called the mock-heroic, though the term must here be stretched to cover the mock-religious as well. Requiem is sung for the pet bird. At the appropriate place in the poem, as in 'Lycidas', the mourner remembers that 'her sorrow is not dead' and asks

But where unto shuld I  
Lenger morne or crye?

[lines 594–5]

Solemn execration is pronounced on Gib our cat (mountain of mantichores are to eat his brain) and on the whole nation of cats. She calls on the great moralists of antiquity to teach her how to moderate her passion. Thus, superficially, the humour is of the same kind as in 'The Rape of the Lock': much ado about nothing. But Pope's intention was ostensibly corrective; if Skelton had any such intention it got lost early in the process of composition. It may indeed be thought that something of the same kind happened to Pope, that he loved, if not Belinda, yet her toilet, and the tea-cups, and the 'shining altars of Japan', and would have been very little pleased with any 'reform of manners' which interfered with them. But if such love for the thing he mocks was one element in Pope's attitude, it is the whole of Skelton's. 'Philip Sparrow' is our first great poem of childhood. The lady who is lamenting her bird may not really have been a child—Skelton's roguish reference to the beauties hidden beneath her kirtle (itself a medieval commonplace) may seem to suggest the reverse. But it is as a child she is imagined in the poem—a little girl to whom the bird's death is a tragedy and who, though well read in romances, finds Lydgate beyond her and has 'little skill in Ovid or Virgil'. We seem to hear her small reed-like voice throughout, and to move in a demure, dainty, luxurious, in-door world. Skelton is not (as Blake might have done) suggesting that such 'sorrows small' may be real tragedies from within; nor is he, in any hostile sense, ridiculing them. He is at once tender and mocking—like an affectionate bachelor uncle or even a grandfather. Of course, he is not consistently dramatic and by no means confines himself to things that the supposed speaker could really have said: a good deal of his own learning is allowed to creep in. The mood of the poem is too light to require strict consistency. It is indeed the lightest—the most like a bubble—of all the poems I know. It would break at a touch: but hold your breath, watch it, and it is almost perfect. The Skeltonics are essential to its perfection. Their prattling and hopping and their inconsequence, so birdlike and so childlike, are the best possible

embodiment of the theme. We should not, I think, refuse to call this poem great; perfection in light poetry, perfect smallness, is among the rarest of literary achievements.

In the 'Tunning of Elinor Rumming' the metre has a more obvious and, I think, less fruitful appropriateness to the subject. Skelton here lets himself loose on the humours of an inn presided over by a dirty old ale wife. Her customers are all women, confirmed drinkers, who mostly pay for their beer in kind—one brings a rabbit, another her shoes, another her husband's hood, one her wedding ring. We have noisome details about Elinor's methods of brewing, and there are foul words, foul breath, and foul sights in plenty. The merit of the thing lies in its speed: guests are arriving hotfoot, ordering, quarrelling, succumbing to the liquor, every moment. We get a vivid impression of riotous bustle, chatter, and crazy disorder. All is ugly, but all is alive. The poem has thus a good deal in common with 'Peblis to the Play' or 'Christis Kirk on the Green': what it lacks is their melody and gaiety. The poet, and we, may laugh, but we hardly enter into the enjoyment of his 'sort of foul drabs'. It is here that the metre most fully justifies Mr. Graves's description of Skelton as 'helter-skelter John'. The shapeless volley of rhymes does really suggest the helter-skelter arrival of all these thirsty old trots. But there is much less invention in it than in 'Philip Sparrow'. The technique is much more crudely related to the matter; disorder in life rendered by disorder in art. This is in poetry what 'programme music' is in music; the thing is legitimate, it works, but we cannot forget that the art has much better cards in its hand.

If I see these two poems at all correctly, we may now hazard a guess at the answer to our critical problem. The Skeltonic, which defies all the rules of art, pleases (on a certain class of subjects) because—and when—this helter-skelter artlessness symbolizes something in the theme. Childishness, dipsomania, and a bird are the themes on which we have found it successful. When it attempts to treat something fully human and adult—as in the Flodden poem—it fails; as it does also, to my mind, in 'The Duke of Albany' (1523) and the unpleasant 'Replicacioun' (1528). The other poems in which Skelton has used it most successfully are 'Colin Clout' and 'Why Come Ye Not to Court?' (1522).

All right minded readers start these two lampoons with a prejudice in favour of the poet: however he writes, the man who defies all but omnipotent government cannot be contemptible. But these poems have a real, and very curious, merit. I would describe it as anonymity. The technique, to be

sure, is highly personal; but the effect produced is that of listening to the voice of the people itself. A vast muttering and growling of rumours fills our ears; 'Lay men say'...'Men say'...'the temporality say'...'I tell you as men say'...'they crye and they yelle'...'I here the people talke'...'What newes? What newes?'...'What here ye of Lancashire?'...'What here ye of the Lord Dacres?'...'is Maister Meautis dede?' Thus to hand over responsibility to a vague *on dit* is no doubt a common trick of satirists: but thus repeated, thus with cumulative effect accompanying Skelton's almost endless denunciations, it acquires a strange and disquieting potency. It may be the truth that Wolsey needed to care for Skelton no more than Bishop Blougram for Gigadibs, and that the forgiveness for which the poet paid heavily in flattery was the forgiveness of tranquil contempt. But our imaginative experience in reading the poems ignores this possibility. In them Skelton has ceased to be a man and become a mob: we hear thousands of him murmuring and finally thundering at the gates of Hampton Court. And here once again the Skeltonics help him. Their shapeless garrulity, their lack of steady progression are (for this purpose) no defect. But he is very near the borders of art. He is saved by the skin of his teeth. No one wishes the poems longer, and a few more in the same vein would be intolerable.

But Skelton's abusive vein was not confined to Skeltonics. In the astonishing 'Speke Parot' (1521) he had returned to rhyme royal. This poem exists in two widely divergent texts; in the Harleian MS. it is mainly an attack on Wolsey, in the early print, mainly an attack on Greek studies; both are put into the mouth of the Parrot and both are almost wholly unintelligible. The obscurity is doubtless denser now than it was in 1521, but it was there from the beginning and is certainly intentional. Modern scholars have laboured with great diligence, and not without success, to dissipate it, but a critical judgement on the poem cannot be made with any confidence; not that we have no literary experiences while we read, but that we have no assurance whether they are at all like those the poet intended to give us. The very first lines have for me their own whimsical charm:

[Quotes lines 3–6.]

His curiously carven cage, his mirror for him to 'toot in', the maidens strewing the cage with fresh flowers and saying 'Speak parrot', the utter inconsequence (as it seems to us) of the statement 'In Poperynge grew paires when Parot was an egge'



[line 72] —all this delights us scarcely less than the voyage of the Owl and the Pussycat or the Hunting of the Snark. The same crazy sort of pleasure can be derived from lines like

For Ierichoe and Ierseye shall mete together as sone  
As he to exployte the man out of the mone [lines 307–8]

or

To brynge all the sea to a chirystone pytte. [line 331]

This raises in some minds the question whether we are reading the first of the nonsense poets, or whether Skelton is anticipating the moderns and deliberately launching poetry on ‘the stream of consciousness’. I believe not. I fear the poem was not meant to be nonsense: it is nonsense to us because it is a cryptogram of which we have lost the key. Our pleasure in it may be almost wholly foreign to Skelton’s purpose and to his actual achievement in 1521; almost, not quite, because unless his mind had been stocked with curious images, even the disorder into which they necessarily fall for us who know too little of the real links between them, would not affect us as it does. His modern admirers are thus really in touch with a certain level of Skelton’s mind, but probably not of his art, when they enjoy ‘Speke Parot’.

In the ‘Garland of Laurel’ (1523) Skelton returns, as far as the main body of the poem is concerned, to the broad highway of medieval poetry. The occasion of the poem was a desire to compliment the Countess of Surrey and certain other ladies: its form, stanzaic allegory: its characters, Skelton as dreamer, Pallas, Fame, Gower, Chaucer, and Lydgate. The catalogue of ‘laureate’ poets is enlivened by a refrain about Bacchus which has a hearty ring, but the only other good passage (that where Daphne, though already tree, quivers at Apollo’s touch) is from Ovid. All that is of value in this production is contained in the seven lyric addresses to ladies which are inserted at the end. Only one of these (‘Gertrude Statham’) is exactly Skeltonic, though ‘Margaret Hussey’ comes near to being so. ‘Jane Blennerhasset’ and ‘Isabel Pennell’ have the short, irregular lines, but there is in both a real rhyme-scheme. ‘Margert Wentworth’, ‘Margaret Tylney’, and ‘Isabel Knight’ are in stanzas. Some of these are very good indeed: what astonishes one is the simplicity of the resources from which the effect has been produced. In ‘Margery Wentworth’, which is twenty lines long, the same four lines are thrice repeated. Of the eight lines which remain to be filled up by a fresh effort of imagination,

one is wasted (and in so tiny a poem) on rubble like 'Plainly I cannot glose'. Yet the thing succeeds—apparently by talking about flowers and sounding kind. 'Isabel Pennell' captures us at once by the opening lines, which sound as if the 'baby' (whether she really was an infant matters nothing) had been shown to him that moment for the first time and the song had burst out *ex tempore*. After that, the flowers, the April showers, the bird, and 'star of the morrow gray' (only slightly improved by the fact that *morrow* is now an archaism) do the rest. 'Margaret Hussey' lives only by the opening quatrain: just as that very different lyric 'Mannerly Margery Milk and Ale' (which Cornish set) lives almost entirely on the line which makes its title.

The tenderness, though not the playfulness, of these little pieces is found also in 'Now sing we', and also, with much more elaborate art, in the fine devotional lyric 'Woefully Arrayed'. If this is by Skelton it is the only piece in which he does not appear to be artless.

It may naturally be asked whether this artlessness in Skelton is real or apparent: and, if apparent, whether it is not the highest art. I myself think that it is real. The result is good only when he is either playful or violently abusive, when the shaping power which we ordinarily demand of a poet is either admittedly on holiday or may be supposed to be suspended by rage. In either of these two veins, but especially in the playful, his lack of all real control and development is suitable to the work in hand. In 'Philip Sparrow' or 'Margery Wentworth' he 'prattles out of fashion' but that is just what is required. We are disarmed; we feel that to criticize such poetry is like trying to make a child discontented with a toy which Skelton has given it. That is one of the paradoxes of Skelton: in speaking of his own work he is arrogant (though perhaps even then with a twinkle in his eye), but the work itself, at its best, dances round or through our critical defences by its extreme unpretentiousness—an unpretentiousness quite without parallel in our literature. But I think there is more nature than art in this happy result. Skelton does not know the peculiar powers and limitations of his own manner, and does not reserve it, as an artist would have done, for treating immature or disorganized states of consciousness. When he happens to apply it to such states, we may get delightful poetry: when to others, verbiage. There is no building in his work, no planning, no reason why any piece should stop just where it does (sometimes his repeated *envoys* make us wonder if it is going to stop at all), and no kind of assurance that any of his poems is exactly

the poem he intended to write. Hence his intimacy. He is always in undress. Hence his charm, the charm of the really gifted amateur (a very different person from the hard working inferior artist). I am not unaware that some modern poets would put Skelton higher than this. But I think that when they do so they are being poets, not critics. The things that Mr. Graves gets out of Skelton's work are much better than anything that Skelton put in. That is what we should expect: achievement has a finality about it, where the unfinished work of a rich, fanciful mind, full of possibilities just because it is unfinished, may be the strongest stimulant to the reader when that reader is a true poet. Mr. Graves, Mr. Auden, and others receive from Skelton principally what they give and in their life, if not alone, yet eminently, does Skelton live. Yet no student of the early sixteenth century comes away from Skelton uncheered. He has no real predecessors and no important disciples; he stands out of the streamy historical process, an unmistakable individual, a man we have met.

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