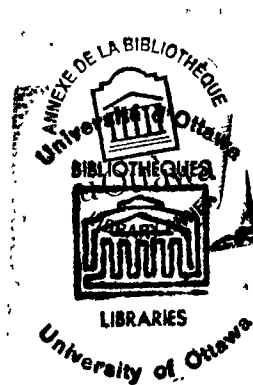


JOHN SKELTON: LIVING MAN, LIVING POET

by Sister Maris Stella, C.S.J.

Thesis presented to the Faculty of Arts
of the University of Ottawa as partial
fulfilment of the requirements for the
degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

*Agree granted
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To my Sisters in Community
to my Parents
and
to Patricia
whose prayerful encouragement
made this study possible

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INTRODUCTION

From 1485 to 1535, England experienced an age of ferment and change: years that produced one of the most important eras of transition in her history. Following the Battle of Bosworth Field in 1485, the Duke of Richmond, later Henry VII and the first Tudor, launched a royal line that would guide England through

a century of change down new and larger streams of destiny, undreamt of by any man who plied bow and bill that day in the old-world quarrel of York and Lancaster.¹

And within this age, rose and fell great men: Bishops like John Fisher and Thomas Cranmer; scholars like Colet and Linacre; lawyers like Sir Thomas More; cardinals like Wolsey; soldiers like Northumberland and Surrey. And known by all of them, yet beloved by few, was the poet John Skelton: about twenty-five years of age at the time of Henry VII's coronation.

Skelton spanned the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries with an almost equal number of years on either side of 1500. His birth in 1460 had witnessed the first faint gaspings of the end of the Middle Ages and his death in 1529 came just a few years before the birth of the Reformation. And during

1. Trevelyan, G.M., A Shortened History of England, Middlesex, Penguin Books, 1965, p. 200.

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those nearly seventy years, the turbulent Tudor transition became a vital part of his own stormy career. As a result, he is sometimes Mediaeval, sometimes Renaissance, never totally either and occasionally completely out of time. During his life, he produced plays, made translations of some of the Classics, wrote treatises on the virtues and other spiritual subjects, and composed thousands of lines of poetry both in English and Latin. It is with the merits of his poems in English and his play Magnyfycence that this dissertation deals.

In spite of his formidable output, John Skelton has remained practically unknown except to those few scholars who have made a special study of the man and his work. In his own time there were those scholarly contemporaries whose compliments he enjoyed. In 1499, Erasmus, for example, celebrated the court poet in a poem:

The debt that ancient Greece
To homer owed, to Virgil Mantua,
That debt to Skelton owes Britannia,
For he from Latium all the muses led
And taught them to speak English words instead
Of Latin, and with Skelton England tries
With Roman poets to contend the prize.²

and later in his Description of Britain, the same scholar

2. Henderson, Philip, John Skelton's Complete Poems, 1460-1529, London, Dent and Sons, 1964, 448 p. (From here on this text is referred to as Poems), Introduction, p. xi.

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describes him as "Skelton, that incomparable light and ornament of British letters."³ Whether this praise was given from his heart, or whether he thought compliments to the royal tutor would get him preferment from the hands of the king is not known. In any case, the fact that Erasmus singles out the court laureate for such praise shows that the name and position of John Skelton must have carried with it some weight in court circles, and that the poet deserved more than a passing nod.

In his Preface to "The Boke of the Eneydos", Caxton commended Skelton for his reading of the "Nine Muses"; Cornysshé joined him in a poet-musician collaboration; Henry VII appointed him as tutor to the royal children; Henry VIII made him his "orator regius". The Universities of Oxford, Cambridge and Louvain honored him with laureation; the Church bestowed upon him the Sacrament of Holy Orders. None but a scholar; none but a living, vibrant character, could enjoy such honour.

The vibrancy, the fullness of life of this Tudor poet can be witnessed in every period of his career. Chapter One outlines the zest with which Skelton must have pursued his early studies, for in the "Garlande of Laurelle" he enumerates the many translations he has done, including the

3. Poems, p. xi.

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lengthy Diodorus Siculus of Poggio Bracciolini. For his studies he earned degrees from three universities. By the age of thirty, Skelton embarked on a delightfully gay period of court life and Chapter Two studies the songs, the lyrics, the hymns and religious poems (including what may be considered the first example of the Skeltonic metre) written at this time.

Chapter Three follows Skelton to the royal school-room. The official recognition of his abilities by Lady Margaret Beaufort, Countess of Richmond and her son Henry VII was a challenge which the poet was ready and able to meet head-on. This was the period of several other religious poems, treatises for his royal pupil, sharp darts directed against the "Comely Coystroun" and the final cynical dream poem "The Bowge of Courte". This period, too, saw his ordination to the priesthood into which he threw himself whole-heartedly, though lacking sufficient preparation.

At the death of Prince Arthur, the poet-priest was removed to Diss in Norfolk. Gone were the lusty notes of his songs, the beauty of his "Woefully Array'd", the emotion of his hymns to the Trinity, even the original handling of the rhyme royal stanza of the "Bowge of Courte". For the time being, his courtly past was dead and so were the old poetic forms that belonged to it. But in Chapter Four we

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meet a new and different man: a man whose epitaphs for two of his parishioners bristle with his detestation of their foibles and follies. In this poem is "enshrined" what some call the first known example of Skeltonic verse:

Though these knaves be dead,
Full of mischief and queed, (evil)
Yet wheresoever they lie,
Their names will never die.⁴

And before the ten year period in Diss was over, he had scandalized scholars and churchmen alike by his mock mass over Jane Scroupe's dead "Philip Sparrow"; had written "The Tunning of Eleanour Rumming" in the goliardic tradition with its "drunken, squalid, dirty women prodigal of words"; and with his "A Laud and Praise Made for Our Sovereign Lord the King", to commemorate the accession of Henry VIII, he made his first bid to get back to the court.

Skelton's success was not immediate, but when Henry returned from France in 1513, Skelton left Diss for good. Chapters Five and Six concern the last and greatest periods of the poet's career. Armed with the title of "Orator Regius", he displayed not only life to the highest degree but also a courage which produced a brilliancy of political satire bursting with linguistic fire works as yet unknown in his poetry or any other poetry of the period.

4. Poems, p. 55.

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Now his attacks took definite shape and for those who have analysed carefully and critically Magnyfycence and the "Wolsey Trilogy", nearly every word and phrase indicates a definite person, place or event in the England of Henry VIII. Even though the ordinary reader cannot decipher many of the riddles hidden among the words of satire and hence miss much of the excitement that Skelton's contemporaries would have experienced, he who was "palpitatingly alive in life", can still communicate much of his power through his words and metres.

He loved language for its own sake: for its sound, for its beauty, for its ability to express what he wanted it to say. Skelton was first and foremost a consummate craftsman, as is shown by the copiousness, the singing quality, the allusiveness of his verse. In the English poetic tradition he was carrying on the ideas and the traditions of the mediaeval poets; he was working through their forms, moods, and methods, as he moved at the same time, safely and surely into the Renaissance.

When reading the poetry one cannot fail to notice that Skelton's mood, tone, language, and even his musical overtones are always a response to his environment and his milieu. This thesis will endeavour to prove this and in so doing, show that this poet was not so much interested in satire, as he was a full-blooded man who wrote poetry that

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was alive: alive to the poet, his contemporaries and to posterity.

With many of these qualities a number of prominent Skelton scholars would not agree. Such critics as Robert Graves might underline them all. One would be safe to say that there is a great deal yet to appreciate about Skelton: Laureate. However, concerning the rugged individualism of the man and the variety of the metre and verse forms found in his complete works, there can be no doubt. He has appealed to a wide variety of literary people. To Elizabeth Barrett Browning,

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. It is the very sans-culottism of eloquence.⁵

Robert Graves and other Oxford scholars re-discovered him shortly after World War I, when English poetry badly needed a lift. In the twenties, echoes of his "sans-culottism" can be heard in Edith Sitwell's verse, and W.H.Auden and others of the thirties carry the same descant tune.

How would Skelton himself feel? It would seem that this poet who was so greatly concerned with the remaking of the English language as a literary instrument; who had a

Browning, Elizabeth Barrett, Essays on the Greek Christian Poets and the English Poets, New York, James Miller Publishing Co., Inc., 1864, p. 143.

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veritable passion for words, as witnessed in thousands of lines of poetry; who seems as if he were:

positively drunk with English words, as he
sets his poetry dancing and jigging to its mad
morris,⁶

would be gratified to know that the part he played in English literature can be, and is being, identified with an age of atom bombs, jet planes, space capsules, nuclear energy and impending trips to Mars and the Moon. In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries he was credited with the first use of hundreds of new words. Let us try to imagine, if we can, the lists he would have produced in the twentieth century!

6. Poems, p. xx.

CHAPTER ONETHE MAKING OF A LAUREATE

If we are to pursue the idea of a "full-blooded" Skelton who was alive to all around him, we must endeavour to be responsive to the social and intellectual milieu that produced him. It is practical then, to study the poet and his life in five phases, the first of which extends from his birth, around 1460, to his laureation by Henry VII at the University of Oxford in 1488.

John Skelton was the son of one Edward Skelton, of gentle though not exalted birth.¹ Though H.L. Edwards feels the poet's birth date may be as early as 1450, most literary historians think that 1460 is more likely to be correct. The place of his birth is likewise unknown, but Dunrabin proves² almost conclusively that because "Skelton" is a northern name, because many of his sympathies are with the people of the north, and because he seems to have a borderer's detestation of the Scots, it is possible he is of Yorkshire origin. His father may have been a tradesman³ and

1 Edwards, H.L.R., "John Skelton: A Genealogical Study", in RES, vol. ix, 1935, p. 406-20.

2 Dunrabin, R.L., "Skelton's Relation to Humanism" in MLR, xii, 1917, p. 129-39 and 257-65. This scholarly article has as its thesis that Skelton is a mediaeval poet and was influenced only slightly by the Humanists.

3 Green, Peter, John Skelton, Longmans, 1960, 46 p.

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he must have had sufficient means to send this son to school for further education. At any rate the years of his youth are formative ones - ones which produced this man in whose work

appears the first important Renaissance break with the mediaeval tradition in poetry.⁴

Though Skelton does not give us any indication of his early school days, the type of education he received can be gleaned from accounts of the grammar school days of his contemporaries. For Thomas Wolsey who had been no more than a butcher's son from the insignificant town of Ipswich, a career in neither the law nor commerce was open to him. As he was from the lower middle class, his future could not be self-determined:

However secular his mind might be, his profession must be clerical; and the doors of the church were open to all without much discrimination. Precocity paved his way to the university and his college would see to it that a fellow was not merely a clerk but a priest as well.⁵

Thomas More, son of a London lawyer, came from a different social class but his elementary education was of much the same type:

⁴ Swallow, Alan, "John Skelton: The Structure of the Poem" in PQ, xxxii, 1953, p. 29. This critic sees in Skelton's poetry a much greater Humanistic influence than Dunrabin. N.2, p. 1.

⁵ Pollard, A.F., Wolsey, London, Longmans, Green and Co., 1953, p. 303.

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The boy More had been sent at the age of seven to study under Nicholas, an enthusiastic Latin grammarian and rhetorician, at St. Anthony's School in London, then the foremost school of the town.⁶

More was an honour student and therefore worthy to be recommended for a place in Cardinal Morton's palace at Lambeth, where he listened to scholars and statesmen and foreign ambassadors. Such an opportunity provided him with a stepping stone to Oxford University at age fourteen.

Thomas Cranmer whose father was a small Nottinghamshire gentleman, had spent much of his childhood learning the arts of riding, hunting and hawking. But a tutor had been provided too:

'a marvelous severe and cruel scholemaster' who had so appalled and daunted him that he had never recovered his 'audacity'.⁷

For John Fisher there was education at Cathedral School, Rochester and for Desiderius Erasmus, the Brothers of the Common Life provided him with a situation at Deventer in which he was able to devote himself for four or five hours a day (Church services occupying the rest of his time) to

⁶ Sargent, Daniel, Thomas More, New York, Sheed and Ward, 1933, p. 7.

⁷ Bowle, John, Henry VIII: A Biography, London, George Allen and Unwin, 1964, p. 162.

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classical studies which so passionately attracted him, and above all to the cultivation of a good Latin style.⁸

In good time, all these men, like Skelton, ended up at University - the last four at Cambridge.

What did Skelton and the others find when they reached this goal? John Bowle summarizes Cranmer's words in the following way:

He had then taken his fill of scholastic learning at Cambridge - of the 'dark riddles and quiddities of Duns' - and had become as he remained, immensely learned, a theologian and a bibliophile; a literary genius who bequeathed a superb liturgy to the Anglican church.⁹

The fact that he had become "immensely learned" speaks highly of the courses that were given. As in most universities, the liberal arts course consisted of seven subjects, divided into two main groups: the "trivium" (Latin grammar, rhetoric and logic) and the "Quadrivium" (arithmetic, music, geometry and astronomy). All instruction was given in Latin and no one could enter a university without first becoming proficient in that language. There were no studies in literature, theology, history, philosophy or foreign languages. Most of the textbooks came down from classical antiquity - Donatus, Boethius, Euclid, Aristotle. The instructor would

⁸ Hughes, Philip, A Popular History of the Reformation, Doubleday, New York, 1962, p. 73.

⁹ Bowle, John, Henry VIII, p. 162.

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slowly read from the text and dictate his comments, called "glosses" for the students to write down word for word. Books were rare and few students could afford to own them. Advances in the sciences were not great but the overall programme of the mediaeval university provided a sound intellectual background for the earnest student. The following paragraph is a good summation of what a student like Skelton would have experienced during his college career:

The students had to study very thoroughly the few books they had. How many modern students, or professors, could attend closely to readings from a Latin version of Aristotle, supplemented by a running commentary, also in Latin? They had to do much more than memorize. Each student was expected to be a debater, able to defend his views in public discussion. Logic took on a new refinement, a keener edge, as the scholastic philosophers sharpened this tool on each other! Though philosophy had to keep within the limits defined by faith, the knowledge of pagan times was welcomed, and reason was declared not to be the enemy of faith, but its strongest ally.¹⁰

This was the Cambridge where such men as William Ruckshaw gave of their learning. And this "celeberrime doctor", professor of sacred theology at Peterhouse, is saluted by

¹⁰ Boak, A.E.R. and Albert Hyma, The Growth of Western Civilization, New York, Appleton-Century, 1951, p. 256.

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John Skelton in the tetrastichon following the "Northumberland Elegy":

Tetrastichon Skelton. Laureati ad magistrum Ruckshaw,
Sacrae theologiae egregium professorem

Accipe nunc demum, doctor celeberrime Rukshaw,
Carmina, de calamo quae cecidere meo;
Et quanquam placidis non sunt modulata camenis,
Sunt tamen ex nostro pectore prompta pio.
Vale feliciter, virorum laudatissime.¹¹

And it was the Cambridge too, which Skelton salutes at the
end of his life:

Ad aliam Universitatem Cantabrigensem

EULOGIUM CONSOLATIONIS

Alma parens, O Cantabrigensis,
Cur lacrymaris? Esto, tui sint
Degeneres hi filii, sed
Non ob inertes, O pia mater,
Insciolos vel decolor esto.
Progenies non nobilis omnis,
Quam tua forsan mamma fovebat.
Tu tamen esto Palladis almae
Gloria pollens plena Minervae,
Dum radiabunt astra polorum:
Jamque valeto, meque foveo,
Namque tibi quondam carus alumnus eram.¹²

There is genuine sincerity in the sorrow that the poet feels
for his "pia mater" and his "alma universitas". And this
deep affection preserved over so many years pays high trib-
ute to the university that formed him.

¹¹ Poems, p. 431.

¹² Poems, p. 414, "Replycation".

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That he had been schooled well in the mediaeval culture that Cambridge had to offer is evident in his poetry, but as Dunrabin points out, Skelton did not necessarily achieve the great scholarship of Cardinal John Fisher, Sir Thomas More or Archbishop Cranmer. Though he quotes in his poems seventeen Latin authors, he misses some very important ones (Caesar, Tacitus and Pliny the Younger among them); then too, his quotations may have been borrowed from the "Pharetra Doctorum", and many, if not all, of these were well-known to mediaeval scholars:

To those not at home in classical scholarship Skelton's list may seem long but no humanist of his time would have thought that it showed any remarkable learning.¹³

And then with regard to his Latin verses, Professor Williams says that they are

full of false quantities, bad Latin, inept alliterations and artificial conceits.¹⁴

Dunrabin adds to this remark by stating that

his verses may have passed muster with pre-Renaissance Oxonians or with the Germans who went to lecture in Leipsig on "Sulpitius de quantitativibus syllabarum", but Erasmus would have laughed at his presumption in publishing such barbarous stuff.¹⁵

¹³ Dunrabin, R.L., "Skelton's Relation to Humanism" in MLR, xii, 1917, p. 257-65.

¹⁴ Williams, W.H. A Selection from the Works of John Skelton, Isbiston, 1902, p. 22.

¹⁵ Dunrabin, R.L., p. 130.

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As a matter of fact, Skelton's knowledge of the classics was not uncommon to the educated of the fifteenth century.

Much as he reveres Cambridge, he seems to have left there without taking a degree and according to Caxton's word, proceeded on to Oxford. Sometime before his laureateship, he translated the Bibliotheca Historica of Diodorus from the Latin of Poggio Bracciolini, the Epistles of Tully, and a number of other Latin classics. That he was skilled at this is certain, for he merits the following words of praise from Caxton who had asked him to "oversee and correcte" his translation of the Boke of the Eneydos because he too had rendered diverse works

oute of latyn into englysshe, not in rude and
olde langage, but in polysshed and ornate termes
craftely.¹⁶

In 1483,¹⁷ Skelton produced one of his two elegies - the only extant poem from the first period of his life. That he should write on "The Death of the Noble Prince, King Edward the Fourth" is not surprising, for to him, about twenty-three years of age at the time, the death

¹⁶ Culley, M.T., (Oxford) and F.J. Furnivall (Camb.), editors, Caxton's Eneydos, 1490, Englyst from the French Livre des Eneydes 1483, London, E.E.T.S., 1890, prologue, p.3.

¹⁷ Throughout this thesis, the dates for the poems are those of P. Henderson in John Skelton's Complete Poetry.

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of the king at age forty must have occasioned if not sorrow, at least some timely meditation on the four last Ends. The opening line of the poem seems to be an allusion to the thought that

It is a holy and wholesome thought to pray for
the dead that they may be released from their
sins.¹⁸

and further, that his late king needed to be remembered. This in turn brought to mind the prayer of the souls in purgatory:

Miseremini mei saltem vos amici mei, quia
manus Domini tetigit mei!¹⁹

the echo of which is in the first line:

Miseremini mei, ye that be my friends!²⁰

King Edward died on April 8, 1483, and the elegy is filled with notes of the liturgy from Ash Wednesday, through Easter, to the Feast of St. Justin Martyr on April 14. Skelton may still have been at the university at this time and if so would have assisted daily at Mass and Office in choir: at this particular time, the Office of the Dead for

18 Machabees, Bk. 2, 12:46.

19 Job, 19:21. Breviary, Matins, Wed., Sat., Less. VII.

20 Poems, "Elegy", p. 1.

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the king.

As the poet recalls the words of the priest as he signs the foreheads of the people with the ashes:

Memento, homo, quia pulvis es, et in pulverem reverteris.²¹

he has Edward ask:

How may I endure, when that everything endes?
And this thought is emphasized by a line of chorus at the end of each stanza:

Et, ecce, nunc in pulvere dormio!

During the season of Passiontide, the symbol of Death is everywhere present, for the work of redemption is:

a wondrous struggle between the Prince of Life, and the Prince of Death.²²

and St. Paul's words in these days remind us that:

For by a man came death and by a man the resurrection of the dead: and as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive.²³

Over and over again, Skelton has the king repeat this idea of the imminence of death: that comes "like a thief in the

21 St. Andrew Daily Missal, Mass for Ash Wednesday, the Blessing of the Ashes, p. 202.

22 St. Andrew Daily Missal, Doctrinal Note for Passiontide, p. 357.

23 St. Paul to the Corinthians, 1 Cor., 15:21.

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night". In this poem, this theme appears in lines like:

How may I endure when that everything endes? (1.3)

What creature is born to be eternall? (1.4)

I sleep now in mould as it is naturall
That earth unto earth hath his reverture.
What God ordained to be terrestriall
Without recourse to the earth of nature.
(11.13-16)

. . . in this world nothing may endure. (1.19)

Now from this world she (Fortune) hath me exiled
When I was lothest hence for to go.
(11.33-4)

When death approacheth, then lost is the field.
(1.88)

There are several allusions to the idea of storing up treasure on earth instead of heavenly treasure, and the poet is keen enough to see that King Edward has been more attentive to the first than to the second:

I stored my coffers and also my chest
With taskes taking of the commonalty;
I took their treasure, but of their prayers missed.
(11.41-3)

I had enough, I held me not content,
Without remembrance that I should die;
(11.49-50)

And I but late in honour did excell,
Et, ecce, nunc in pulvere durmio.
(11.83-4)

What a pity, thinks the poet, that during the holy season of Lent, when the people of God have been so constantly reminded of fast and mortification for the betterment of their lives, that the king has not made the necessary

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preparation for his sudden and unprovided death. In his youth and vigour, life was his only thought:

And I am in age but, as who said, a child. (1.146)

Ye wot well all I was of no great eld. (1.86)

Many of the other themes in the poem were dear to the heart of the mediaeval poet, chief among them being the "fall of princes". But Skelton does not deal with a mythical Lancelot or Arthur, nor even an Anglo-Saxon Alfred. His hero is a king who just a few days or weeks ago had been mighty and powerful in the land. To him, acquainted only with the reality of life, had suddenly come the reality of death. And in the aureate tradition King Edward tells us this fact not once but at least a dozen times throughout the course of the poem by repeating his plea to "miseremini mei".

There is a shadow of the theme of the "Nine Worthies" in stanza seven where the king reminds himself that Saint Bernard, Alexander, Sampson, Solomon and Absalom all suffered the same end as he and like him, for all their worldly qualities were subjected to the fate of returning "unto wormes meat". Skelton is clever in the choice of the worthies. He praises Edward by telling us that like Bernard he was a founder, like Alexander a soldier; he had the strength of Sampson, the wisdom of Solomon. But there is a warning in the allusion to Absalom who was rash and

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unprepared when his end came.

The imagery also is mediaeval as in the "vanitas vanitatis" motif:²⁴

As vanity to nought all is withered away. (1.65)
the preoccupation with doomsday:

For I am departed till doomes day. (1.67)
the wistful return to Boethius' "ubi sunt" re-echoed, as in
Francois Villon's "Where are the snows of yester-year":

Where is now my conquest and victory?
Where is my riches and my royal array?
Where be my coursers and my horses high?
Where is my mirth, my solace, and my play?
(11.61-4)

Further we cannot miss the tone of the mediaeval "Debate of Body and Soul":

'Where ben þi wurthli wedes,
þi somers with þi riche beddes,
þi proude palefreys and þi stedes?
þat þou about in dester leddes?
þi fauccouns þat were wont to grede,
And þine houndes þat þou fedde?
Me þinkeþ God is þeto gneþe,
þat alle þine frend beon fro þe fledde.²⁵

Though Skelton has conformed to the aureate style of the twelve-line stanza, the pentameter line and the regularity of rhyme, we see as early as this first poem the

²⁴ Book of Ecclesiastes, 12:8.

²⁵ Emerson, O.F., A Middle English Reader, "The Debate of the Body and the Soul", p. 48, New York, Macmillan, 1960, 478 p.

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irregularity of metre - a foreshadowing of what he would do with his poetic lines in twenty-five years' time. In one stanza alone there is this variety:

I had enough, I held me not content,
 I knew not to whom I purchased Tattershall;
 And London I provoked to fortify the wall;
 Yet at the last I went from them all.
 (stanza 5)

The poem is comprised of eight stanzas. In the first two, Edward "who reigned of late in great felicity" asks his friends to have great pity on him who sleeps "now in mould". Stanza three describes Lady Fortune's "sugred lippes" as she led him "beguiled" from this world to his exile in the next. Stanzas four and five list the many accomplishments which were his during life and in the following stanza comes the question: "Where is all this now?". In Stanza seven the fate of all the great men of the past is likened to his and from this he gets some consolation. The last stanza concludes with a reference to the mediaeval "pageant" which by Edward's time had reached huge proportions of costume, colour and staging. In terms of this symbol Edward sees his whole life and it is here that Skelton makes use of the theme that "life is a stage and we are the players":

I have played my pageant, now am I passed. (l.85)
 But the splendour is accompanied by a new resignation:

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In manus tuas, Domine, my spirit up I yield. (1.91)
 reminiscent of the Gospel for Wednesday in Holy Week:

Pater, in manus tuas commendo spiritum meum.
 Et haec dicens exspiravit.²⁶

There is a stern reality about the "pageant" that has been played by the monarch. The historicity of Skelton's facts is strengthened when we see how closely recorded history parallels the details he gives. The king keeps asking for prayers: "Pray for me all!"; "Mercy I aske of my misdoing."; "forgive and have on me pity."; and

O ye courteous commons, your heartes unbrace
 Benignly now to pray for me also.
 (11.93-4)

Well might he have made this petition for he finds on his conscience: his clandestine marriage to Elizabeth Woodville while Warwick was negotiating with France at the same time for a match with their royal princess; his alliance with Bergundy, arch enemy of France, while his minister was commissioned to make the same with the French; his supposed murder of Henry VI after the Battle of Tewksbury, who died in the Tower "of pure displeasure and melancholy".²⁷ and the execution of his brother George, the Duke of Clarence, for which he gave orders against the wish of his whole family,

²⁶ St. Luke, 23:46.

²⁷ Myers, A.R. England in the Late Middle Ages, London, Penguin Books, Inc., 1965, p. 116.

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even the historically notorious Richard III.

In stanza three, the poet speaks out with clear reference to Edward's relationships with France:

Granted not she me to have victory,
In England to reign and to contribute France?
(ll. 27-28)

Edward was willing and ready "to contribute France" in 1474 when parliamentary funds had been granted him to fight on the continent. When he reached there, however, he changed his mind for Louis XI offered to buy him out and

he accepted the terms of the Treaty of Picquigny of 75,000 gold crowns and an annual pension of 50,000 more for the rest of his life.²⁸

And his decision was made more emphatic when he commissioned Warwick to do all possible to maintain this peace:

To make it impossible for Margaret, wife of Henry VI to arrange any alliance on the continent the Duke of Warwick tried to establish a permanent peace with Louis XI, the French king, and strove with ceaseless energy to improve relations with France.²⁹

The throne that Edward IV left to his heir was richer by far than the one to which he had come, so when

²⁸ Ibid, p. 186.

²⁹ Costain, T.B., The Last Plantagenets, New York Popular Library, 1962, p. 310.

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he says:

I stored my coffers and also my chest
With tasks taking of the commonalty;
(11.41-2)

the poet has him speak truth, for though the Wars of the
Roses had thinned the ranks of the nobility,

The monarchy's chronic lack of resources was
being remedied by the wide estates of the House of
York, and by the confiscations and resumptions
of lands, in spite of exemptions and restorations
of property to pardoned opponents.³⁰

In Stanza six there is further reference to the royal
riches: investments in the royal residences of Nottingham
Castle, Windsor and Eltham, all of which he had fortified and
decorated; the building of London into a rich commercial
capital, for business prospered as never before in the cen-
tury. Not only did trade with France and Belgium improve,
but

the commercial revival of Edward IV's reign
saw the zenith of Italian trade in England, and
with it of Southampton's mediaeval prosperity.³¹

London Merchants became rich and the king himself engaged
in trading ventures becoming so

ingeniously avaricious that he ended his days
with a fortune - the first English king to do so
since the twelfth century.³²

It is understandable then, that in stanza four Edward

30 Myers, A.R., England in the Late M.A., p. 117.

31 Ibid, p. 148.

32 Myers, A.R., England in the Late M.A., p. 149.

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reminds the people that he was their king in more than name:

I was your king, and kept you from your foe. (1.46)

To the north, south and west the English troops met with success. Edward's accession brought to the crown the most important Welsh Marches and by means of a Council appointed in 1471, foundations were laid to crush disorders in Wales. To the north, Richard, Duke of Gloucester, faithful always to his brother, enforced royal authority.

Within the country Edward was equally successful. In stanza five he tells us that he purchased Tattershall, a foundation commenced by Lord Cromwell, treasurer to Henry VI. He began the rebuilding of St. George's Chapel, Windsor, in 1473 and established a fine choir in connection with it. Queen's College, founded by Margaret of Anjou in 1448, was refounded by his wife, Elizabeth Woodville. In addition to making the Tower, Eltham and Windsor, places "full royall", he organized in his household a band of minstrels later to flourish in the Tudor court. These were skilled musicians often with university degrees.

And there are allusions to the royal entertainments always an important part of court life:

Where be my coursers and my horses high?
Where is my mirth, my solace, and my play?
(11.63-4)

Indeed one of Edward's Greatest extravagances towards the end of his life was the erection of an extremely costly

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stable, described by the common folk, says Costain, like this:

Over their wine, men would wink slyly and drink
to 'the princely stables and the favourite grey mare'
a play on the queen's name in her first marriage.³³

From 1471 on, the young king had established himself so firmly at the reins of government that well might he conclude with the pompous line:

For right well you know your king I was. (1.95)

further substantiated by one historian who says that

He was the unchallenged master of his realm.
Indeed, many of his acts were done by his own
authority, without the formal attestation or assent
of his council at all.³⁴

Following such an analysis as this, two points become obvious: first, that Skelton was keenly aware of the social, political and economic situation of his time, and as early as 1483 was willing to risk public allusion to it in his poetry; and second, that his form and structure were on the whole according to the gospel of the mediaeval tradition which surrounded him at the university. Those with whom he studied, those whom he imitated (for is this not the usual way to launch a career as a poet?) were bathed in what Henderson calls "the sweet smoke of rhetoric". Like them, Skelton amplifies one idea after another. At

33 Costain, T.B., The Last Plantagenets, p. 367.

34 Myers, A.R., England in the Late M.A., p. 121.

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least a dozen times, in as many versions, is the introductory lament that

This world has conformed me downe to fall. (1.2)
Four times in the same stanza, he reminds us that his body "shall return unto wormes meat" (1.76). "Where are my glories?" he asks over and over again, reminding his people in the same breath that he was their king. Repeated also are the thoughts that only lately he was reigning "in great prosperity"; that he never seemed to have enough of this world's goods and was "not content"; that he realizes he needs prayers because he remembered not "that he would die" and thus asks his friends to "pray for me also".

But through the "sweet smoke" there is a new flame arising. This poet sees the "suggared lippes" of Lady Fortune but he also sees her "dissembled countenance"; he is alive to the fact that the king has taken of the people's "treasure" as well as to the more hidden fault that he has "of their prayers missed". And as Skelton turned his gaze outward to the world around him, he had become increasingly certain that not only his "prince" needed the "example to think on" provided by the sudden death of Edward IV, but also his other superiors and peers. This realization expressed in this first poem remained one of the poet's conflicts throughout his whole life. He did constant battle to cling to the past which had produced Edward and himself

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alike but had to live in a present which was increasingly becoming a contradiction of all he held dear. The struggle was almost analagous to the "aggiornamento" of the twentieth century, and knowing Skelton's attitude to his own times we might not go too far in conjecturing the power this poet might have had if there had been a Vatican Council and a Pontiff to suggest that the Church open up her windows and let in a little fresh air.³⁵

There are conflicting opinions regarding the merits of this first elegy. Lloyd says that

The poem as a whole never rises above the pedestrian and there is not the slightest trace of personal feeling. The work is clearly an exercise . . .³⁶

On the other hand, Gordon says that although it is a "jejune and apprentice" piece of work, it is at the same time the work "of a young poet accepting his most accessible models".³⁷

It is true that there is much of the maker of verse evident in the "Elegy" but the critics seem to miss the underlying tone of real concern which Skelton expresses. And it is by

35 Pope John XXIII re the work of Vatican II.

36 Lloyd, L.J., John Skelton: Laureate, Oxford University Press, 1938, p. 26.

37 Gordon, I.A., John Skelton: Poet Laureate, Melbourne Univ. Press, Australia, 1943, p. 47.

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the development of this "concern" in his poetry that Skelton becomes a lone voice in the last days of the Middle Ages.

In the six years that follow this poem, Skelton seems to have written nothing if we are to go by the fact that no literary piece is extant. But it does not seem likely that one who was so clearly aware of Edward IV and his times would find fulfilment in silence. Either his manuscripts during this period were lost or perhaps he destroyed what he wrote, feeling it inadequate to express what he was trying to say. We cannot deny that he became a poet - or writer - of note during this time; otherwise there would have been no reason to confer upon him the laureateship of Oxford in 1488.

To pass in review the Skelton of this first period, we find that he is a young man of about twenty-eight. He has a good foundation in Latin and has studied at Cambridge and Oxford where he has been introduced to the great minds of the past and has come in contact with a number of brilliant men of his own time. He is seeing another generation arise and he is disturbed by what he sees. From the accumulation of these circumstances, arises his "problem" and it is this problem that gives the life to his poetry. He is not projecting the shortcomings of Edward alone into the lines of the "Elegy" but he is questioning his own fidelity, his own attitudes. And upon this foundation he

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will later chastise not only Wolsey, or Henry VIII, or the Court but also John Skelton: Laureate. Long before the advent of Mistress Anne Boleyn, long before the man who wanted her was even born, Skelton is already alive to an England which needs religious, social and political reformation.

"on the Death of the Noble Prince" asks almost prophetically:

Why should a man be proud or presume high? (1.73)
and forty years later, Skelton will thunder the condemnation at one who did not heed the warning:

He ruleth all the roast
With bragging and with boast.³⁸

No longer is a dead man asking a question, but a live one is taking aim at the most powerful man in the realm. When Edward IV laments over being fooled by Fortune:

But, what for her dissembled countenance,
I could not beware till I was beguiled:
(11.30-1)

he recognizes the fact that he is "beguiled" and expresses regret; when many years later Skelton reminds the Tudor

38 Poems, "Why Come Ye Nat to Court?", p. 314, 200-1.

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Henry VIII that:

It is a wondrous case
That the kinges grace
Is toward him so minded

And so far blinded
That he cannot perceive
How he doth him deceive.³⁹

the king is not even aware of being "beguiled" and Skelton, still alive to the evils besetting monarchs feels powerless to set him right.

Until 1488, then, we leave Skelton working quietly at his classics, his Latin, his translations, his books. We can imagine too, that occasionally, perhaps often, he penned a poem in "singing robes" or experimented with some new form. Caxton tells us that "he hath dronken of Elycon's well":⁴⁰ praise which he must have merited for Caxton to put it in print. Soon the time will come when he will enjoy the royal array, the mirth, the solace and the play that Edward IV longs for in the "Elegy". Soon, he will have arrived.

³⁹ Poems, "Why Come Ye Nat..?", p. 327, ll.651-56.

⁴⁰ Caxton, W. Preface to the Boke of the Eneydos,

CHAPTER TWOOF FAME ROYALL

In the summer of 1488, Henry VII was making a royal procession in the neighbourhood of Oxford¹ and being so near at hand, it is possible that he honored the University with his presence and presided over the conferring of degrees. One of the highlights of the afternoon apparently was the ceremony of John Skelton's laureation. Just what this "degree" or "honour" involved is not quite certain, but definitely it cannot be equated with the position of "poet laureate" as we understand it today. In the reign of Richard II, Geoffrey Chaucer had also been a "king's laureate". Costain says that:

it was a rather vague title which carried with it the gift of a pitcher of wine every day, a gift to be collected from the king's butler.²

The "gift" sounds trifling but it seems to have carried with it certain fringe benefits for from this time on, Chaucer seemed to find even greater favours at the hand of the king. Whether or not any monetary reward or benefice accompanied Skelton's title, we do not know. But it is evident that he was very proud of being Laureate for it is one piece of biographical knowledge which is mentioned a number of times

¹ Edwards, H.L.R., The Life and Times of an Early Tudor Poet.

² Costain, T.B., The Last Plantagenets, New York, Doubleday, 1962, p. 144.

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throughout his poetry. From this time forward each poem is signed Skelton: Laureate and several times he uses his title in battle against his rivals. For example in the "flyting" commanded "Agaynst Garnesche" he tells him:

A king to me mine habit gave:
At Oxforth the university
Avanced I was to that degree;
By whole consent of their senate
I was made poet laureate.³

And in the "Garlande of Laurelle", Occupation begins to read "some part of Skelton's books and ballads with a salute to this honour conferred in his youth":

Of your orator and poet laureate
Of England, his workes here begin!⁴

Whether Skelton had been to London for any lengthy period before 1488 is not known. But immediately after his laureation he comes into prominence at the court of Henry VII and a new career opens up to him. For his official position, it seems that the king granted Skelton the privilege of a white and green habit embroidered "Calliope". This favour must have rankled in the hearts of some, for late in life the laureate was still answering the question: "Why wear ye Calliope embroidered with letters of gold?" And as a final apologia he answers the question in both Latin and English:

3 Poems, "Agaynst Garnesche", p. 161-2, ll.292-96.

4 Ibid, "Garlande of Laurelle", p. 385, ll.1147-8.

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Candida Calliope, vatam regina, coronans
 Pierios lauro, radiante intexta sub auro!
 Hanc ego Pierius tanto dignabor honore,
 Dum mihi vita manet, dum spiritus hos regit artus:
 Quamquam conficior senio, marcescoque sensim,
 Ipse tamen gestare sua haec pia pignora certo,
 Assensuque suo placidis parebo camenis.
 Inclyta Calliope, et semper mea maxima cura est.

Haec pierius omni Spartano liberior.⁵

Translated into English in the two-stress lines called Skeltonics which the poet made famous, the answer becomes more straight-forward:

Calliope,
 As ye may see,
 Regent is she
 Of poets all,
 Which gave to me
 The high degree
 Laureate to be
 Of fame royall;
 Whose name enrolled
 With silk and gold
 I dare be bold
 Thus for to wear.
 Of her I hold
 And her household;
 Though I wax old
 And somedeale sere,
 Yet is she fain,
 Void of disdain,
 Me to retain
 Her serviteur,
 With her certain
 I will remain,
 As my sovereign
 Most of pleasure,
 Maulgre touz malheureux.⁶

11.1-9. 5 Poems, "Calliope: Latinum Carmen", p. 439,

6 Ibid, "Calliope", p. 346.

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It is important to understand the significance of the honour that was conferred on Skelton when he received the Calliope costume. Calliope was one of the Nine Muses and her particular duty was to preside over eloquence and heroic poetry. Horace goes further and believes her able to play upon any musical instrument. Therefore, she is usually represented as holding a trumpet in her right hand and books in her left: her office to take notice of the famous actions of heroes. Is the Calliope dress, then, an indication of the qualifications that Skelton possessed to make him worthy of laureation by the king? As was pointed out in Chapter One, the musicians who came to Henry's court were not novices in their art, but skilled and degreed men. If such excellence was demanded in the art of music, it seems logical to believe that the same calibre of craftsmanship would have been required of the court poets. At any rate, Skelton's appointment to a court career was important enough to be mentioned by Caxton in 1490:

Late created poet laureate, in the university of Oxford.⁷

The fact that Caxton, royal printer of Westminster Abbey, knew Skelton and admired his work indicates that those in the king's employ fraternized together. To further substantiate

7 Boke of the Eneydos, Preface, p. 3.

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this, we know that it was to Caxton's assistant, Wynkyn de Worde that we owe the first printed edition of a Skelton poem:

Here begynneth a lytell treatyse named the bowge of courte. (Anon.) Emprynted at Westminster by Wynkyn the Worde. Two issues, one before and one after 1500.⁸

To his friendship with these printers, he added that of William Cornysse, the king's Master Singer. He had entered the royal household in 1492 and along with Robert Penn, a court musician, was on intimate terms with the poet Skelton. Such mutual admiration inspired collaboration and it is quite likely that they spent a good deal of time together composing poetry and music, some of which is still extant.⁹ Knowing the lavish displays of the Tudor Court (witness the colorfully dramatic welcome given to Katherine of Aragon as the betrothed of Prince Arthur), one can deduce that men of such talent were much in demand.

The poetry from this phase of the poet's life can be divided conveniently into three types: (a) the second of his elegies, "Upon the Dolorous Death and Much Lamentable Chance of the Most Honorable Earl of Northumberland" written

⁸ Poems, "Bibliography", p. xxiii.

⁹ Blom, Eric, ed., Grove's Dictionary of Music and Musicians, London, MacMillan and Co., Ltd., 1954, Vol. 2, p. 452-53.

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the year after his laureation; (b) a series of religious poems including three to the Blessed Trinity; (c) a group of poems headed: "Here folowythe dyuers Balettys and Dyties solacious deuysed by Master Skelton, Laureat."

Though six years separate the Northumberland poem from Skelton's first elegy, much of the Skelton of the first phase is evident here. That he should write at such length in honour of Percy, Earl of Northumberland should be explained. Henry Percy, fourth Earl, was murdered near Thursk as he tried to reconcile a mob to taxes being levied by King Henry VII for war. This man had been a very controversial figure and had swayed back and forth in his sympathies for first one king and cause and then another. It is to be wondered how he was able to maintain such a position in times when speedy execution for treason was the order of the day. The facts of history tell us that Richard III

made his final and most tragic mistake: when he allowed himself to believe Percy's honesty of purpose - Percy, that sly and almost toothless satyr of the north, who had turned his coat often and would continue to do so in the future.¹⁰

The Earl lived amid pomp and prestige, for his was the hereditary house of the north of England in which he was "as regal as a king in the north country."¹¹ Like all the great

¹⁰ Costain, T.B., The Last Plantagenets, p. 210

¹¹ Ibid, p. 243.

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nobles of early Tudor England, he enjoyed privileges much like his mediaeval predecessors whose

life was passed in the midst of vast families that made up their households, organized in imitation of the royal court which was indeed thought 'requisite to be the mirror of others.'¹²

From this "vast family" of retainers, the Earl was able at short notice to assemble a sizeable force for his king, as when Edward IV set out for France in 1475,

the Earl of Northumberland mustered sixty men-at-arms and three hundred and fifty archers.¹³

Edward commended him at the Parliament of 1483; Richard III allowed him to succeed to much of the royal prestige of the north; Henry VII retained him in his service. Which ever way the wind blew Percy blew with it. Under such circumstances the murder of a "sly satyr" might be expected. But the lamentation that opens the elegy cannot be explained away so easily. Says the poet:

I wail, I weep, I sob, I sigh full sore
The deadly fate, the doleful destiny
Of him that is gone, alas without restore
Of the blood royall descending nobelly.¹⁴

Why does Skelton consider this event such a tragedy? Why does he express such personal sorrow?

¹² Williams, Penry, Life in Tudor England, London, B.T. Batsford Ltd., 1964, p. 50.

¹³ Jacob, E.F., The Fifteenth Century: 1399-1485, Oxford at the Clarendon Press, 1961, p. 575.

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In 1489 Skelton was still shining in the reflected glory of that unforgettable moment when "a king to me mine habit gave." To him, this king was ruler by divine right and obedience to his will had to be given at all cost. This was Skelton's philosophy; so that, when not two years later the king lost his "most honorable earl" engaged in carrying out a royal command, Skelton rose up not so much against the sin of murder as against the affront to the majesty of Henry VII. Northumberland's retainers, then, were "madmen" to rise against their "naturall lord" when:

The ground of his quarrel was for his sovereign lord,
The well concerning of all the whole land,
Demanding such duties as needes must accord,
To the right of his princes, which should not
be withstand.

(11.64-67)

The same idea is expressed in Skelton's first elegy when he has Edward tell his people to pray for him since "Right well you know your king I was." Later on he will tell Garnesche that the king's command to him is law:

My study might be better spent;
But for to serve the king's intent
His noble pleasure and commandment.¹⁴

Much later, as we shall see, he will condemn Wolsey not for being the king's right-hand but for being the power behind a man who to him was already all-powerful.

14 Poems, p. 342, ll. 1152-55.

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The "Elegy on the Death of Northumberland", then, is a highly alliterative poem in rhyme royal in which the court laureate is championing the cause of loyalty to the throne of England. After the expression of personal sorrow: "I wail, I weep" (of which there is no such touch in the "Edward" elegy), he praises the Earl who was "true to his prince in word, and deed, and thought" (l.7) and calls upon Clio, first of the Nine Muses, for inspiration. She who is laurel-crowned and who records the deeds of brave heroes, will assist him to express his "sorrowful ditties". Following a stanza which states that such a tragedy as this has never occurred before (hyperbole in the light of history), twenty-four stanzas either enumerate the Earl's qualities:

So noble a man, so valiant lord and knight.
Fulfilled with honour, as all the world doth ken.
(ll.29-30)

blame the commoners for his death:

And were they not to blame, I say also,
That were about him, his own servants of trust,
To suffer him slain of his mortal foe?
(ll.36-8)

or express his inadequacy to deal with such an elevated theme by means of ordinary speech:

My words unpolished be, naked and plain,
Of aureat poems they want illumining;
(ll.127-8)

What needeth me for to extol his fame
With my rude pen enkankered all with rust.
(ll.141-2)

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Such is the magnitude of the "lord" that the poet feels inadequate even with the help of the "whole chorus of the Muses nine" under divine inspiration; even if,

To me also although it were promised
Of laureat Phoebus wholly the eloquence,
All were too little for his magnificence.
(11.159-61)

The next two stanzas salute the "younge lion" and beg for him from God a long and prosperous life. Then Skelton returns to theme of the great loss suffered in the death of Henry Percy, and the last five stanzas implore Christ, "O peerless Prince of Heaven", and Mary, "Goddess Mother dear", all the angels, "the heavenly hierarchy" and finally the Blessed Trinity,

The Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost,
In Trinitate one God of mightes most.
(11.216-7)

to receive the soul of this honorable earl "into their company".

The qualities of the poetry in this elegy are much the same as in his first of six years before. He is still hampered by clinging to the aureate style but there are lines that foreshadow what he will become:

I say, ye commoners, why were ye so stark mad?
What frantic frenesy fell in your brain?
(11.50-1)

and:

But there was false packing, or else I am beguiled.
(1.71)

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These contrast noticeably with such lines as those borrowed from Geoffrey de Vinsauf's "Poetria Nova" of 1210:

O cruell Mars, thou dedly god of war!
 O dolorous Tuesday, dedicate to thy name,
 When thou shook thy sword so noble a man to mar!
 O ground ungracious, unhappy be thy fame,
 Which wert endyed with red blood of the same.
 (11.113-17)

One critic sums up the qualities of the poem as follows:

His orthodoxy is no less literary than religious; Skelton is conspicuously faithful to the elegiac tradition: the muses, the gods, and the spirit of the deceased are addressed in the familiar manner.¹⁴

and adds that although the two elegies are successful as documents in the poet's intellectual history, "as poems" they are unsuccessful. The success of such poetry must be measured by the norms imposed by the literary framework of the times. Skelton is faithful to the mediaeval tradition because he is writing for an audience that knows and is capable of appreciating what that tradition can produce. But what constitutes his success for us is the fact that we can see within the Northumberland Elegy the occasional example of unique diction and rhythm which are an early foreshadowing of the later Skelton. Within its lines are a vehemence and directness that promise even stronger stanzas. Neither can we fail to notice that the poet is alive in this

¹⁴ Fish, Stanley Eugene, John Skelton's Poetry, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1965, p. 24.

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elegy more than in the first. It is as if the poet is in Northumbria at the moment of the murder. He does not view this act objectively as a historian but sees it as a menace to his own security as well. This is the power of the mob:

Barons, knightes, squires, one and all,
 Together with the servantes of the family,
 Turned their backs, and let their master fall,
 Of whose life they counted not a fly.
 (11.92-5)

that turns on power when it becomes evil. Therefore the poet warns young Percy to

Stable thy mind constant to be and fast,
 Right to maintain, and to resist all wrong.
 (11.170-71)

So soon he has learned the deceit and pretence of courtiers, for he tells the new Earl:

All flattering faytors abhor and from thee cast;
 Of foul detraction God keep thee from the blast.
 (11.172-3)

He is involved; he is alive; he is different. Time will have only to remove the cords that fasten him to the "sweet smoke" of past forms and then with words as sharp as daggers he will pierce the external show of a few of the most eminent men and situations of early Tudor times.

The second category of poems which belong to this period includes those on religious themes. It is not likely that they were written consecutively nor composed immediately after the elegy but according to date Skelton wrote them while at court. The three prayers to the Blessed Trinity

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are:

clearly in the fifteenth century literary manner - the manner of Lydgate.¹⁵

and the fact that of Lydgate critics make such statements as:

The most - if not the only - amusing thing about him is the distaste, amounting almost to fascination which the nearly 150,000 lines of his surviving works have aroused in modern literary historians.¹⁶

cause these same critics to pass off Skelton's religious poetry with the adjective "early" and leave it at that.

However, if we are to appreciate this poet's later conflicts, particularly in his position as poet-courtier-priest, we must understand that the intensity of feeling present in the religious poetry is not mere sentiment but is rather a lifting of his heart to God expressed in the poetic language of the day - the only manner for the time being in which he was practiced. Gordon suggests that "There is nothing but impersonal devotion" in these lyrics.¹⁷ But prayer and its manner are very personal and can often be misinterpreted. Each individual speaks to God in his own way. If the style of Skelton's trilogy is his way, then it is grossly unfair

¹⁵ Swallow, A., "John Skelton: The Structure of the Poem", in PQ, xxxii, 1953, p. 29.

¹⁶ Ward, A.C., English Literature: Chaucer to Shaw, London, Longmans, 1962, p. 35.

¹⁷ Gordon, I.A., John Skelton: Poet Laureate, p. 118.

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to call these poems mere rhetoric and nothing more. When we consider that they were written when the poet was in his thirties, they must be indicative of the thinking that was shaping his life at this time.

It is of interest to note that these poems were written about the time of the jubilee year of the conclusion of the Council of Florence. This seventeenth ecumenical council laid a firm foundation of orthodox Trinitarian doctrine and the introductory beliefs set forth at that time in the "Decree of the Jacobites" sound very much like a background for Skelton's poems:

The Holy Roman Church, founded by the decree of our Lord and Saviour firmly believes, professes, and teaches: There is one true God, all-powerful, unchangeable, and eternal, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one in essence, but three in persons.¹⁸

As the allusions in the trilogy point directly to either the above decree or the Creed as said in the Mass, then Gordon's remark that

On dogma he (Skelton) was dumb. So the religious lyrics are less characteristic of him.¹⁹

is badly taken, for the lyrics are not only expressed with exactness of detail but also with an element of intense

¹⁸ Van Ackeren, G., S.J., The Church Teaches: Documents of the Church in English Translation, London, Herder Book Co., 1955, p. 135.

¹⁹ Gordon, I.A., John Skelton: Laureate, p. 117.

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fervour.

In his poem to God the Father, the poet dwells on the power and the immutability of "the Lord incomparable". The second poem to the Son, emphasizes the power but strengthens the idea of the Trinity:

The only Son of God by filiation,
The Second Person withouten beginning,
Both God and man our faith maketh plain relation.
(11.2-4)

The same idea of the unicity of the three Persons is present in the third poem to the Holy Spirit:

To the Father and the Son thou are communicable
In unitate which is inseparable.
(11.4-5)

and emphasized in the second stanza:

To whom is appropriated the Holy Ghost by name,
The Third Person, one God in Trinity,
Of perfite love thou art the ghostly flame:
(11.9-11)

There is a profession of his faith too in the Fatherhood of God and the Motherhood of Mary:

Both God and man our faith maketh plain relation,
Mary thy Mother, by way of incarnation.
(11.4-5)

A man's devotion to the Mother of God usually has strength that would do battle for his lady. Such was Skelton's for the faith expressed here carried through his whole life until thirty years later in his "Replycacion" he condemned those scholars who called it idolatry to venerate Mary and who denied the maternity and the perpetual virginity of the

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Blessed Virgin. What the poet says as early as this second period of his life, foreshadows the proceedings of the Council of Trent twenty-five years later when it stated in the "Constitution Cum Quorundum" of 1555, that:

We call to account and warn ... all those who have asserted or believe that the same most Blessed Virgin Mary is not the true mother of God and that she did not remain a perfect virgin before, while, and forever after she gave birth.²⁰

In a discussion of Skelton's religious lyrics, then, it seems impossible to agree with any such criticism as his being "dumb"²¹ on matters of dogma when it is quite plain that Skelton has deep roots in the traditional doctrines of the Church. For him, God is the power, the glory, the magnificence, the Creator. But he can turn to His divine goodness just as easily, for he realizes that from it proceeds the support of which "all creatures have need". This is sufficient to call forth the spontaneous prayer:

Assist me, good Lord, and grant me of thy grace
To live to thy pleasure in word, thought and deed,
And, after this life, to see thy glorious face.
(11.14-16)

In those lines is the same preoccupation with life after death that we have seen before in the two elegies. And

20 VanAckeren, G., S.J., The Church Teaches, p. 206.

21 Gordon, I.A., John Skelton, p. 117.

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because:

Mine heart, my mind, my thought, my whole delight
Is, after this life, to see thy Glorious Face.
(11.7-8)

he will ask his "benign Jesu" to defend him with His
"piteous woundes five",

Against all bodily and ghostly tribulation (1.7)

Against the world, the flesh, the devil also. (1.15)

and the "fiery Fervence", which to him symbolizes the Holy
Spirit, to preserve him

Against all suggestions deadly and damnable (1.7)

Against all stormes of hard adversity. (1.8)

In this trilogy, then, we find the mediaeval rhyme
royal, the usual abstractions, the frequent repetitions, the
aureate language. But occasionally we see also a freshness
and simplicity that reflect a mind that speaks from the
heart; a mind that has alerted itself to the spiritual con-
flicts of contemporary man; a mind that later will re-
examine and re-evaluate its own position in the changing
times ahead. The longer we study the Skelton of this second
phase, the more we understand the struggles that came later
in his life.

Another religious poem of this period is "Woefully
Arrayed". It is in quite a different form from the trilogy
to the Blessed Trinity and the tone changes in such a manner
that it could have been sung as a hymn. To substantiate this

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further, the poem is found in the Fairfax MS (B.M. 5465)²² in which also are the songs set to music by William Cornyssh of the Chapel Royal. From the form of this poem, alternating four long lines and six short lines, it can be thought likely that there was music for it too. The stanza,

Woefully arrayed,
My blood, man,
For thee ran,
It may not be nay'd:
My body blo and wan,
Woefully array'd.

is placed at the beginning and at the end, in the printed editions of the poetry but there is no reason for its not being sung at the end of each long verse. As each stanza concludes with the key words "woefully array'd", this could have been the signal for the congregation to join in on the chorus. The regular rhythm throughout suggests that the hymn may have been used for a processional on Good Friday, perhaps at the Veneration of the Cross after the singing of the Lamentations as required in the liturgy. Certainly the appeal of Our Lord to consider his betrayal, His being nailed to the cross, the pain of the crown of thorns, the nails, the agony and the final request to "Give me thine heart free to reward mine hire" (1.44) evokes the Holy Week Liturgy. Henderson

22 Poems, "Manuscripts", p. xxv.

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calls this Skelton's "beautiful and moving hymn"²³ and in the fifteenth century as well as in many generations of Catholics since, the words would have stirred up devotion. It is within this framework that the poem must be judged, because our critical view on church music has changed since the Sacred Congregation of Rites has instructed that

it is necessary that popular religious songs fully conform to the Catholic Faith, that they expound and explain it rightly, that they use simple language and simple melodies, that they be free of ostentatious and inane superfluity of words...²⁴

What the twentieth century might consider maudlin, might have roused a mediaeval congregation to a realization of Christ's love for them, as in:

Remember my tender heart-root for thee brake,
With paines my veines constrained to crake.
(ll.19-20)

And they would have considered their own death too for once more there is Skelton's recurring theme:

With me to reign in endless wealth:
Remember, man, thy soules health.
(ll.65-6)

These religious poems with their rhythm of natural speech and the familiarity with which man speaks to God and vice versa, remind us eloquently of John Donne and Gerard

²³ Poems, "Introduction", p. ix.

²⁴ Sacred Congregation of Rites, Sacred Music and the Liturgy, Sept. 3, 1958, "Regarding certain kinds of sacred music", p. 18.

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Manley Hopkins, and Henderson reminds us that

The rediscovery of Skelton coincided with the rediscovery of Donne and Hopkins, both poets who in their use of rhythms of ordinary speech have had an enormous influence on the development of contemporary techniques.²⁵

In "Woefully Arrayed" we get the feel of Donne's lines as he asks God to "ravish" him:

Batter my heart, three person'd God; for you
As yet but knocke, breathe, shine and seeke to mend
That I may rise, and stand, o'erthrow mee and bend
Your force, to breake, blowe, burn and make me new.²⁶

and of Hopkins as he addresses Christ:

Thou art indeed just, Lord, if I contend
With thee; but, sir, so what I plead is just,
Why do sinners ways prosper? and why must
Disappointment all I endeavour end?²⁷

Thus far we have seen that the Skelton of this second period was steeped in the mediaeval literary and religious traditions of his university background. But there was a gayer, lighter side to his career described as his "more private alter ego" which

was strolling down Thames Street, whistling the latest air, head stuffed with old ballads, heart running on love.²⁸

25 Poems, "Introduction", vi.

26 Nicholson, D.H.S., Oxford Book of English Mystical Verse, Clarendon Press, 1953, p. 15.

27 Cecil, Lord David, Oxford Book of Christian Verse, Clarendon Press, 1951, p. 502.

28 Green, Peter, John Skelton, p. 5.

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Having been deprived of such freedom up until now, the Calliope of the court no doubt ran the gamut of the inns and the alehouses of London, delighting in such society as would have been taboo for an Oxford don. And it needed very little encouragement to exchange the organ, the choir and the hymns of the Chapel Royal for the rebec, the whistled tune and the merry laughter of the village green.

The best known of the songs of this period is his "Mannerly Margery Milk and Ale" set to music by William Cornysse who was already writing tunes of a humorous and satirical nature at this early date. One critic has said of "Mannerly Margery" that the composer wrote

an excellent setting of a humorous poem in three sections by John Skelton, whose jumbling metres and crude and crazy satires are as far removed from the spirit of motet and madrigal as can be imagined.²⁹

This is a glib criticism which does not even take into consideration the date of the songs. The "jumbling metres" of the satires for which Skelton is popularly (but not always fairly) known were written twenty years after this second period and to apply such a criticism here is irrelevant. Furthermore, it is obvious that the poet was not trying to compose a motet; so, such a "spirit" would be entirely out of place. For Cornysse to have bothered to compose music for

²⁹ Blom, Eric, ed., Grove's Dictionary of Music and Musicians, London, Macmillan, 1954, Vol. 2, p. 452-3.

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the song is a good indication that he thought it worth it. His music which is extant, is a three-part counterpointed madrigal.³⁰ As the second voice supports alternately either the first or the third, the poem becomes a dialogue with all voices mingling in the refrain. There is no restraint in either subject or form. It is possible that it was a "student-lyed" and certainly it is one of the few examples of the popular song of the day. In it we notice Skelton's movement towards the iambic tetrameter, the freedom in the number of his syllables, the shift of accent falling to the last "y" in the line and the lusty drinking-song chorus. At the beginning of each stanza there are five rhyming lines instead of the traditional four, in the midst of which the many exclamation marks and questions tell the tale of the knave who is a "wanton clerk" seducing Margery a servant girl. It is a coarse and vulgar theme composed in the spirit of the times but it would be naive to suppose that it was the only such song of this type.

There are those who would brand this poem as "brutal" and wonder therefore over the care given it by the composer.

³⁰ A form of secular composition for two or more voices, the earliest extant example of which is "Sumer is icumen in". The subjects were chiefly amorous but often political or satirical.

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But if, as we must presume, both the poet and composer were enjoying the lilt of the iambic tetrameter and the hearty "Gup, Christian Clout, etc." of the chorus, then it would be more unlikely if they had not given of their best. Evidently both men were moving with the times and for Skelton a second melody was weaving itself inextricably into the pattern of his monastic polyphony.

Shaping up before us, then, is a kind of dual personality: the Skelton of the court, and the Skelton of the tavern; a poet who can swing easily from a mediaeval poem on Christ crucified to a gay tune on a jolly rutterkin; from the mannerless meddling of Maistres Anne, to the stanza:

Nothing earthly to me more desirous
 Than to behold your beauteous countenance:
 But, hateful absence, to me so envious,
 Though thou withdraw me from her by long distance,
 Yet shall she never out of remembrance:
 For I have graved her within the secret wall
 Of my true heart, to love her best of all.³¹

of which one critic says:

To what extent Skelton is a forerunner of the Elizabethans may be gauged from the concluding stanza of 'Knowledge, Acquaintance, etc.' This cannot well be later than 1500, but it may be doubted whether Wyatt or Surrey ever wrote anything more sinewy or balanced than these last two lines.³²

31 Poems, p. 31.

32 Lloyd, L.J., "A Note on Skelton" in RES, vol. 5, 1929, p. 302-6.

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The unnamed lady of the poem shines in the reflected glory
of the aureate terms which describe her; she is

Herber enverdured, continual fresh and green;
Of lusty summer the passing goodly queen;
(11.13-4)

her features are "far passing my report"; she is an "electuary", a "Hesperus", a "lodestar"; nothing is more delightful to him than to see her "beauteous countenance", to embrace her in his "armes twain". But his whole description is purely conventional until we come to the final stanza, when for the first time Skelton

breaks through his clinging web of verbiage
and rises to something approaching his full stature.³³

Such control as we see in this final couplet would only have been possible if the poet had had respect for the object of his compliment. The poem is a far cry from the tone of the companion poem "The Ancient Acquaintance, Madam, Between Us Twain" wherein Skelton takes advantage of his "ancient acquaintance" to upbraid a woman, also of "goodly port" and "beauteous visage" because she has forgotten her "old true loving knight". Here, the final couplet:

Play fair, madam, and look ye play clean,
Or else with great shame your game will be seen.
(11.41-2)

is filled with scorn and cynical correction. None of her, or

33 Lloyd, L.J., John Skelton, p. 30.

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her "features favourable" are deserving of compliment for she is a "wily pie". Neither is she alone in her double-dealing - others tread the same path for Skelton says that her husband is "not first hath had a loss". Side by side, these two poems show us the contrast between two types of women of the court: those of "goodlihood", "courteous and benign" behaviour and "womanhood", and those who "hueth never a deal", who are "courtly hags" and "wrenches". The gentle courtesy he shows for the first type is poles apart from the evident enjoyment he seems to get from association with the latter. And here is another of Skelton's problems: the dictates of conscience do not match up with the dictates of his heart. The attraction of virtue is powerful but in the face of vice is less so: "the heart is willing, but the flesh is weak," and as we pursue the study of Skelton's life into the third and fourth periods, we can see that it is a problem that shadows him: what he desires does not always match up with what he does; often too, it is a case of, "Do what I say; do not do what I do."

The last poem of this period is the dramatic song "My Darling Dere, My Daisy Flower". Here Skelton experiments with rhyme scheme and metre. The poem is headed by two lines of chorus:

With lullay, lullay, like a child,
Thou sleepest too long, thou art beguiled.

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This word "lullay" of a mother's lullaby, appears in numbers of carols of the fifteenth century, a form which appears only in the mediaeval period, roughly 1425-1550, and is restricted to England.³⁴ In such a form is the beautiful but very obscure:

Lully, lullay, lully, lullay,
The falcon hath borne my mate away.³⁵

the story of Mary's constancy during Christ's suffering. The themes of the early carols were mostly religious but gradually they became parodies of Christian themes and degenerated into love songs of knights and ladies and lovers' lullabies, as in:

With lullaby they still the child;
And if I be not much beguiled,
Full many a wanton babe have I,
Which must be still'd with lullaby.³⁶

and this is the stuff of which "My Darling Dere" is made.

Skelton's first stanza begins eloquently enough and were it not for the overtones in the word "beguiled" found in the opening refrain, one might easily be fooled into believing that the poem is within the carol tradition.

³⁴ Rossell, H.R., Ed., Early English Christmas Carols, New York, Columbia University, 1961, p. 1.

³⁵ Myers, A.R., England in the Late Middle Ages, London, Penguin, p. 170.

³⁶ Eliot, C.W., Ed., English Poetry: From Chaucer to Gray, New York, Collier, 1910, p. 198.

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My darling dere, my daisy floure,
 Let me, quod he, lie in your lap.
 Lie still, quod she, my paramour,
 Lie still hardely, and take a nap.
 His head was heavy, such was his hap,
 All drowsy dreaming, drowned in sleep,
 That of his love he took no keep.
 With hey lullay, lullay, like a child,
 Thou sleepest too long, thou art beguiled.
 (stanza 1)

and by means of a great number of soft consonants, particularly l, d, m, and n, the poet produces a drowsy, hypnotic effect designed by the "daisy floure" to bring sleep to the "paramour". Sleep comes as the "lullaby" intends but there is an ironic twist to the whole affair: the sleep that overcomes the man prevents the whore from her enjoyment of him and he in turn loses her to another. His "trust" in her "payment" causes him to "lose all his pay" and she "after her cold" found one who "halsed her heartily" and "kissed her sweet".

The whole poem is a cynical commentary on the type of love which Skelton saw flourishing all around him and the diction which he uses to describe the second lover in the poem, is reminiscent of the words of the "gast" to the "foule fleisch" in the "Debate of the Body and the Soul":

pou art unsemly for to se,
 Uncomli for to kissen swete;³⁷

a just reward for all "Darling Deres" of the type in this

37 Emerson, O.F., A Middle English Reader, New York Macmillan, 1960, p. 52.

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song. The original paramour was so sure of himself that we can imagine Skelton having a good laugh when he says at the end:

Well may thou sigh, well may thou groan,
To deal with her so cowardly:
Ywis, pole hatchet, she bleared thine eye.
(11.34-36)

adding perhaps, "The joke is on you!"

Some critics go so far as to see no humour in the song at all. One says that it

becomes a bitter variation on the biblical
'For what does it profit a man if he gain the whole
world, but suffer the loss of his own soul.'³⁸

Under the circumstances indicated by the song, it seems difficult to believe that Skelton had any such text in mind, and viewed in such a light Fish's interpretation is a mistake. As Pollet says:

Telle 'berceuse', comme 'Lullay, lullay, like
a child' n'a de berceuse que le refrain et relève
plutôt de la raillerie populaire.³⁹

Such a song might easily have gained much popularity in its day because of its theme, its lilt, and the "haunting rhythms" which Edith Sitwell says "have produced the drowsiest poem in the English language."⁴⁰

³⁸ Fish, S.E., John Skelton's Poetry, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1965, p. 52.

³⁹ Pollet, M., John Skelton, Paris, Didier, 1962, p. 238.

⁴⁰ Green, P., John Skelton, p. 10.

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This, then, is the Skelton that emerges from the second period of his career: a mad mixture of tremendous emotional and religious intensity, spiritual fervour, love, and song. This is the "busy self" that will be chosen from among many to be tutor to the young Prince Henry and later priest of the Roman Catholic church. Knowing now, as we do, the drives that motivated this man, we should be able to appreciate better the contradictions that we find in his later life.

CHAPTER THREECREANCER TO A PRYNCE

In the years following his appointment as poet laureate, Skelton became increasingly involved in the affairs of a court that challenged his intellect, his musical talents and his religious ideals. He could look up to a king who not only encouraged scholarly pursuits but also by his royal presence at university ceremonies showed his personal interest in intellectual progress. Already we have seen him officiating at an Oxford convocation and Father Filippo Alberici, of Mantua refers to an occasion when Henry personally presented degrees at Cambridge:

You are the first when you wage war, and you are the first to bestow the laurel wreaths upon learned men with your honored hand. Justly, therefore, may the emblems of a double triumph be allowed you. It is fitting that you be decorated both with the helmet and with the laurel.¹

His court was to be "musically erudite" too, and he

surrounded himself from the first with the best musicians that he could lay hands on, determined that the Tudor court should compare favourably with that of the Plantagenets in musical distinction.²

Simultaneously, his mother, the pious Lady Margaret Beaufort did her share to encourage intellectual pursuits and together with John Fisher, Bishop of Rochester, did much to build up

1 MS Arundel 317, Fol. 24, Nelson, p. 14.

2 Blom, Eric, Music in England, Penguin Books, Middlesex, England, 1947, p. 23.

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the prestige of Cambridge University:

Their mutual devotion to true learning founded a strong bond of sympathy between these two great minds . . . and it was because of her splendid devotion to Christ in his priesthood that Lady Margaret lavished her wealth and her influence upon the realization of the wise and saintly Chancellor's plans for reforming the starved university. Thus the two great colleges, Christ's and St. John's came into being.³

Under the watchful eye of such keen minds, the education of princes and royal children was closely supervised. Appointments as tutors were made with care, and candidates for such positions were well prepared in the mediaeval universities of Oxford, Cambridge, or the Continent. In 1487, Lawrence Squire, the priest-musician, became Master of the Children of the Chapel Royal - frequently young men destined for outstanding careers. Five years later, William Cornysshe, a versatile artist with a doctor's degree from Cambridge, succeeded him.

For Skelton, these years were the dawn of a sunlit day. He was laureated by Louvain in 1492 as noted by the Grace Book of Cambridge:

Johanni Skelton Poete in partibus transmarinis
atque Oxonie laurea ornato.⁴

³ Wilby, Noel Macdonald, The Story of Blessed John Fisher, London, Burns, Oates and Washbourne, 1929, p. 49-50.

⁴ Grace Book B....., of the University of Cambridge, ed. Mary Bateson, Cambridge, 1903, p. 54.

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Pollet thinks that the university was giving this degree "honoris causa" to the poet of a king who was

allié à une époque où Maximilien faisait front avec Henri VII contre Charles VIII. Mais il pourrait s'agir tout aussi bien d'un geste émanant directement de Maximilien de Habsbourg, dans le cadre d'une politique destinée à tenir l'Angleterre écartée de la France, ce qui expliquerait l'absence d'allusion à toute université.⁵

A few months later, Cambridge granted him the same degree with which he had been already twice honored.

These were moments of triumph for Skelton. Calliope of the court, witty, clever, and at thirty-three in his full manhood, he was open to any opportunity. It came from the Lady Margaret, who as Pollet says "se réservait les questions d'éducation à la Cour" she appointed Skelton tutor to the young Prince Henry who at age four had been created Duke of York. Some biographers say that Henry's mother, who was Countess of Richmond in Yorkshire, may have made the choice because of family friends in the North of England - the Percy's, the Scrope's or the Neville's.⁶ This may have been, but she surely would have been guided also by this young man's qualifications of intellect and religious background. As we have seen, there is no reason to believe that Skelton

⁵ Pollet, Maurice, John Skelton (C.1460-1529), Paris Didier, 1962, p. 42.

⁶ See the lengthy discussion of this point in the work John Skelton: (C.1460-1529) by Maurice Pollet.

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wasn't well equipped in both these areas. However, being aware of the themes of some of his songs, the Lady Margaret perhaps wondered about the latter, for most people think that she was the "gentlewoman" who sent him a skull upon which to meditate. Was this a test? It is possible that the poet laureate asked himself this same question. Now, he wasn't satisfied to be simply "My Lady the Kinges moder poete" - he already had greater titles! He was out to show his worthiness as a royal tutor; and to prove his religious and spiritual zeal, he decided to make as splendid a meditation upon death as he could - though death was no doubt the last thing Skelton wanted to contemplate at this time. Here he was entrusted with the education of one who might some day be a mighty duke, an archbishop or even king. Who could know? Therefore, nothing must stand in Skelton's way. So, seated before his skull, he wrote:

UPON A DED MAN'S HEAD

That was sent to him from an honourable gentlewoman for a token, Skelton, Laureate, devised this ghostly meditation in English, covenable, in sentence, commendable, lamentable, lacrimable, profitable for the soul.⁷

Gordon dates this poem "probably" much earlier, even before 1489. Though he says that this poem should be grouped with the two elegies because they are his "purest examples of

7 Poems, p. 19.

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mediaeval thought and form", there is no trace anywhere of a "gentlewoman" who would have sent him the "token" before Lady Margaret.

The subject of death and final judgement was not new to the poet - we have noted previously his preoccupation with it. However, this meditation was to be different, for it was not to be in Latin, the language of the Church, but in English "covenable". The word "sentence" in its archaic sense denotes a "meaningful saying". Therefore the adjectives that follow are likely to be capable of a double interpretation. The first, or literal sense, is that the thoughts expressed are praiseworthy and profitable to the soul, arouse sorrow and tears over our past sins and thus lead to the "Myrres vous y" as suggested in the last line of the poem. This is doubtless the interpretation that Skelton hoped Lady Margaret and others in her circle would give to the meditation. However, the archaic meaning of the word "commendable" is "deserving to be recalled to the mind of another". Was he trying to say that this tearful and mournful meditation was "profitable" in that it expressed ideas as old as time in an entirely new way? If so, then we can see quite plainly the dual conflict in Skelton: the effort to maintain his position as laureate, courtier, general favourite, exteriorly "busy about many things", and at the same time to remember that "only one thing is necessary" - the salvation of his

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soul. Even before reading the poem, then, one is prepared to find something different and highly important.

Though the thought of his death is far from him, he addresses the skull as though his end is imminent. The sight of it does not merely distract him from his simple and ordinary duties and pleasures but it has "broken" his mind from "worldly lust". Death for him was not an angel, nor a pleasant release, a quietus or a Stygian shore; it was "hollow-eyed"

With sinews wydered,
With bones shydered,
With his worm-eaten maw,
And his ghastly jaw
Gasping aside,
Naked of hide,
Neither flesh nor fell.
(11.12-18)

In death he sees a deteriorated physical body, with

Our eyen sinking,
Our bodies stinking,
Our gummes grinning,
Our soules brinning.
(11.33-36)

For him, hell is a real place against which he needs a "shield" for protection. He asks this of Mary, so

That we be not exiled
To the dyne dale
Of bootless bale,
Nor to the lake
Of the fiendes black.
(11.44-48)

The strenth of that realistic picture inspires a far greater degree of horror in Skelton than the much weaker image of

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"solace" provided by thoughts of heaven:

And to purchase
Thine heavenly place,
And thy palace
Full of solace
Above the sky
That is so high.
(ll.51-56)

But then the "hell" image is brought to mind whenever we ask
in the Offertory of the Mass for the Dead:

Deliver the souls of all the faithful departed
from the pains of hell and the deep pit; deliver
them from the lion's mouth; may hell not swallow
them up, nor may they fall into darkness.⁸

and Skelton's five lines are almost a paraphrase of this.

That this is the case ties in with an analysis of
this poem by Kinsman,⁹ in which the writer shows Skelton's
debt to the mediaeval theme of the "Signs of Death"; this is
seen in such poems as the thirteenth-century

Wanne mine eyhen misten,
And mine heren sissen,
And mi nose koldet,
And mi tunge ffoldet,
And mi rude slaket,
And mine lippes blaken,
And mi mup grennet,
.....
Al to late, al to late,
Wanne þe bere ys ate gate.¹⁰

8 Offertory of the Daily Mass for the Dead.

9 Kinsman, R.S., "Skelton's 'Upon a Deedman's Hed':
New Light on the Skeltonic", in SP, Vol. 1, 1953, p. 101-9.

10 Brown, Carleton, Ed., English Lyrics of the
XIIIth Century, Oxford, 1932, p. 130.

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and the Latin version of the "Signs" from Fasciculus Morum:

Quando nasus frigescit
 facies pallescit
 oculi tenebrescunt
 aures surdescunt
 nerui & vene rumpuntur
 cor in duas partes diuiditur.¹¹

And these in turn have the tone of such passages as:

The flesh has been consumed, and my bones
 cleave to my skin, and nothing but lips are left
 about my teeth.¹²

I waste away like a rotten thing, like a gar-
 ment that the moth hath consumed.¹³

and many others like them, familiar to the mediaeval man,
 in particular the cleric who often chanted the Office of the
 Dead.

The organization of the poem is carefully done and
 a method of meditation is evident. The first stanza is the
 "composition of place" in which he focuses both on the skull
 and the end to which he will come: dust thou art and to dust
 thou shalt return. Stanza two states the subject of the medi-
 tation: no one may hide from death. Stanza three prepares him
 to make the application and is a prelude to the consideration
 found in stanza four: no matter who we are, or where we are

¹¹ Brown, Carleton, Ed., English Lyrics of the
 XIIIth Century, p. 220.

¹² Job, 19:20. (Matins of the Office of the Dead)

¹³ Job, 13:28. (Matins of the Office of the Dead)

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"our days are dated". Hence, in the affections of stanza five we are roused to ask the "Child of Mary mild" to keep us from the "dynne dale" and resolve in stanza six to live in such a way that we shall "behold and see the Trinity!" The concluding line in French which Pollet calls "un dernier trait féroce" warns us to "Myrres vous y". If this is the colloquy, and Skelton might well mean it to be, it is a vigorous warning which can often be called to mind. How did Skelton feel as he "viewed himself therein"? We can get some idea of the tumult going on in his mind from the fact that he expressed himself in English rather than in Latin; that for probably the first time, he moved away from the stately "rhyme royal", to what may well be his first experience with the "Skeltonic". There is a feeling of unrest in this meditation. Already, no doubt, Skelton had witnessed the many areas in which change was needed. Not alone to the poet or the gentlewoman was the "Mirres vous y" applicable. But to make the application, was another thing. Skelton was going to have to do battle with himself and perhaps he had already begun when he called out:

O goodly Child,
Of Mary mild,
Then be our shield!
That we be not exiled
To the dynne dale.
(11.41-5)

In 1495 Skelton's royal pupil could look forward to ten or more years of private teaching. As the royal tutor

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had not been prepared for any special profession, the priesthood was ideal for him, and Skelton was no doubt quick to realize that the ascetic Lady Margaret would suggest Holy Orders. Whether, then, it was due to her insistence or the influence of his friend, Bishop John Blythe of Salisbury, as Pollet suggests,¹⁴ Skelton became a priest in 1498, within three months of its being suggested.

Realizing the nature and extent of the Seminary programme as we have known it, we are aghast at the little preparation this man had for the reception of this Sacrament and the responsibilities it involved. It was completed for him in a matter of months: the sub-diaconate received on March 31, 1498, the diaconate on April 14, and ordination on June 9. This whole period was spent in St. Mary's Abbey near the Tower of London, at this time a royal residence. Following the reception of Holy Orders, Skelton must have stayed on at the palace, for in November, the records show that he celebrated Mass for King Henry VII at Westminster.¹⁵

This imprudent decision on the part of Skelton and his patrons, together with his lack of spiritual orientation and formation, account in great part for the difficulties he

¹⁴ Pollet, M., John Skelton, p. 63

¹⁵ Dyce, Rev. Alexander, ed., Poetical Works of John Skelton, Vol. 1, Thomas Rodd, 1843, Intro. p. xx-xxl.

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experienced in his priesthood and for the blame that posterity has laid upon him for his conduct at Diss and later at court. But during his term as preceptor to the royal children, he seems to have fulfilled both his spiritual and temporal duties. It is hyperbole and hasty judgement to claim that:

the corruption imparted by this ribald and ill-living wretch laid the foundations of his royal pupil's grossest crimes.¹⁶

There is no evidence but heresay to substantiate this claim and the criticism can only be based upon The Merie Tales of Skelton which cannot be proven to be fact.¹⁷ Furthermore, even if the "Tales" were true, they took place during the two later periods of the poet's life and his conduct then could have had no influence on his term at Eltham.

Filled with the first fervour of his consecration, he may have, at this time, composed all his "Gothic religious verse" as Sola da Pinto suggests,¹⁸ and Kinsman thinks

¹⁶ Strickland, Agnes, Lives of the Queens of England, London, Henry Colburn, Publisher, 1844, p. 50.

¹⁷ Skelton, John, Merie Tales of Skelton, published posthumously in 1567. There is no way of knowing whether these are true in part or in whole. Many feel that they are based on fact but that Skelton took evident enjoyment in embroidering the actual events. Not even the wife he was supposed to have at Diss can be traced.

¹⁸ Pinto, Sola da, John Skelton: A Selection from his Poems, New York, Grove, 1950, Intro.

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that "Upon a Deedman's Hed" was composed after ordination
 as a way of proving his Christian morality as
 a priest and his didactic fitness as a tutor. He
 had set aside courtly sophistication.¹⁹

Actually, he did not have to prove either of these after
 his ordination; his "didactic fitness" could hardly be in
 question after being honoured by three universities; his
 "Christian morality" had been proved before his reception
 of Holy Orders as shown already.

Following ordination and recognized as a poet and
 musician of some merit, he may have been invited to compose
 a "Vexilla Regis" for the Lenten observances of that year.
 In the "Garlande of Laurelle", Skelton devotes one stanza
 to a group of religious hymns and prayers of which this
 particular hymn is one:

With, Woefully Arrayed, and shamefully betrayed;
 Of his making devout meditations;
 Vexilla Regis he devised to be displayed;
 With Sacris Solemnis, and other contemplations,
 That in them comprised considerations;
 Thus passeth he the time both night and day,
 Sometime with sadness, sometime with play.
 (Stanza 168)

As he tells us that his "Vexilla" is "devised to be displayed", we might fix the anthem more exactly for Vespers of Passion Sunday at which time it is the official hymn. It could also have been used as a hymn during the Veneration of

¹⁹ Kinsman, R.S., "Skelton's 'Upon a Deedman's Hed'" in SP, Vol. 50, 1953, p. 106.

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the Cross on Good Friday. It is worthy of note that this early Skelton seems to be introducing the vernacular into the church services.

The whole spirit of the Passiontide liturgy attempts to renew and increase faith and virtue so that the people of God may be raised up and live more closely united with Christ. For this reason, Skelton has made some additions and changes in the tone and length of the original Latin hymn. In Latin, the events of the crucifixion are given in the third person. The poet follows this only in the first four lines:

The king's banner on field is splayed,
The cross's mystery cannot be nay'd,
To whom our Saviour was betrayed,
And for our sake.
(11.1-4)

The next line of this stanza is very short and we become aware immediately that the speaker is changing: "Thus saith he:" (1.5). For the next ten stanzas, Christ speaks to us from the cross, telling us of his sufferings but emphasizing more His reason for suffering: "man, for thy guilt", "for love bought thee so dear", "to bring thee fro hell", "might cleanse thee soon". In this way the language and the content become more vital to the Christian. Now the people sing with their whole heart the final stanza:

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Now, Jesu, for thy great goodness,
 That for men suffered great hardness,
 Save us from the devil'd cruelty,
 And to bliss us send,
 And grant us grace
 To see thy Face
 Withouten end.

(Stanza 11)

Whether we approve of Skelton's liturgical style or not, we must admit that there is greater congregational appeal in the English version than in:

Te, fons salutis, Trinitas,
 Collaudet omnis spiritus:
 Quibus Crucis victoriam
 Largiris, adde praemium. Amen.

V. Eripe me, Domine, ab homine malo.
 R. A viro iniquo eripe me.

In form Skelton's "Vexilla Regis" has much in common with the ancient carol:

The true carol differs from a hymn or religious song. When it was a living form, the carol always had set stanzas (generally quatrains) alternating with a "burden", two lines sung at the beginning of the carol and repeated after each stanza.²⁰

and Gordon reminds us that:

As a matter of fact, it appears in Kele's 'Christmas Carolles' (no date) with no name attached.²¹

If we compare this hymn to "Blessed May Thou Be"²², for

²⁰ Robbins, R.H., Ed., Early English Christmas Carols, New York, Columbia University Press, 1961, Intro.p.i.

²¹ Gordon, Ian A., John Skelton, p. 115.

²² See Appendix II for a copy of this Christmas Carol, taken from R.H. Robbins' book mentioned above.

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example, we find that the three first lines, the "burden" and lines five and six combined are alike in rhythm and metre: iambic tetrameter. But Skelton has made an addition to the form of the carol cited; he has inserted a line of two stresses after the fourth and sixth lines. These lines fulfil two purposes: they give an added marching swing to the processional and make a statement of special note.

For example, in stanza six, the main quatrain is:

Man, understand now thou shall,
Instead of drink they gave me gal,
And eisel mingled therewithal;
These pains on me / I suffered for thee.
Now sing we, etc.

But to emphasize the doer of this action, he throws in after line three, "The Jewes fell"; and to impress the reason for the suffering, Christ says after line four: "to bring thee fro hell". In this way Skelton creates a more personal involvement and the people can become one with the words of the hymn.

The music for the carols was usually designed for professional choirs and there is evidence of the same in the "Vexilla". The tenor voices would likely have sung the words of Christ all the way through with the whole congregation joining in on the "burden" after each stanza. The boy sopranos might have opened with the first five lines of narration and closed with the last stanza, begging that Jesus save His people and grant through His grace, to see His Face

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"withouten end". Used in this way Skelton's "Vexilla Regis" would have been a memorable processional. Anyone who has been alive to the reaction towards the many changes in liturgical music since the time of Pius XII, can well imagine the fifteenth century repercussion, after hearing - in church - this free rendition of the "Vexilla Regis Prodeunt".

Within the hymn we have the striking word pictures of mediaeval hymnology which is also the language of the Mediaeval play:

Behold my Body, how Jews it dong
With knots of whipcord and scourges strong.
(11.19-20)

Instead of drink they gave me gal,
And eisel mingled therewithal.
(11.47-8)

There are easy rhymes: "splayed, betrayed, nay'd; "dear, here, cheer"; "misled, adread, shed"; and there is the same organization in the first three lines all the way through. The rhyme scheme is regular throughout: a,a,a,b,c,c,b and the "burden"; the "b" rhymes are the extra lines to the carol added by the poet, and the "c" rhymes can either be in two lines of two stresses each or form the fourth line of the quatrain with internal rhyme, giving an added processional quality to the poem.

The diction is simple, and there are no difficult comparisons or obscure metaphors. Christ's words to man sing themselves along in a conversational tone. Since He is

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speaking so simply in the language of the people, they will listen. All can be summed up in the thought that Christ asks for our sympathy and love in His sufferings, and in return we shall live for Him alone in order to be with Him for all eternity. Almost five centuries ago, then, Skelton was sufficiently alive to the needs of the Church to know that Vespers of the Divine Office would be more meaningful in the vernacular. He was some forty years ahead of his time as far as the Anglican Church was concerned, for at the time of the Reformation English became the language of divine worship. And it was only with the twentieth century "Aggiornamento" in the Roman Catholic Church that Priests were permitted to say the Divine Office in the vernacular.

As a priest of Holy Church, Skelton must have found himself confined. True, he was at court performing the double duty of tutor and cleric, but even so this could scarcely have fulfilled the restless soul of Skelton, Laureate. When he tells us his duties in the poem "Agaynst Garnesche"

The honour of England I learned to spell,
In dignity royal that doth excel.
Note and mark well this parcel:
I gave him drink of the sugared well
Of Helicon's waters crystalline,
Acquainting him with the Muses nine.
It 'cometh thee well me to remord
That creanser was to thy sovereign lord!
It pleaseth that noble prince royall

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Me as his master for to call
In his learning primordial.²³

there is lacking the enthusiasm that we find in the rest of the poem, in the hymns or even the elegies. But in spite of this, he must have been kept busy both by Lady Margaret and the royal children, for he tells us of a good deal of his work during this period in the "Garlande of Laurelle". He is the author of tracts or perhaps sermons on various subjects:

Item, the Book how men shouldst flee sin;
Item, the Book to speak well and be still;
Item, to learn you to die when ye will.
(stanza 149)

Of Virtue also the sovereign interlude;
The False Faith that now goeth, which daily
is renewed;
Item, New Grammar in English compiled.
(stanza 150)

He did translations at the request of the queen mother:

Of my lady's grace at the contemplation,
Out of Frenche into English prose,
Of Man's Life the Peregrination,
He did translate, interpret and disclose.
(stanza 156)

He was special tutor to Prince Henry and wrote for him a treatise on how to conduct himself in a princely manner:

The Duke of York's creancer when Skelton was,
Now Henry the Eight, King of Englande,
A treatise he devised and brought it to pass,
Called Speculum Principis, to bear in his
hande,

23 Poems, p. 162.

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Therein to read and understande
 All the demeanour of princely estate,
 To be our King, of God preordinate.
 (Stanza 157)

In all these we see the man who is struggling to live up to the obligations he has assumed. Though we cannot judge Skelton's motives, there seems to be little of the love of God as the impelling force behind the lines quoted above. Try as he might he could not quell the inner urge to expose his real self: a self that is becoming increasingly aware of the state of the court of which he is one of the stars. He sees intrigue everywhere. For him, this is the "lizard" of one of his earlier poems:

Though ye suppose all jeopardies are passed,
 And all is done that ye looked for before,
 Ware ye, I rede you, of Fortune's double cast,
 For one false point she is wont to keep in store,
 And under the fell oft festered is the sore:
 That when ye think all danger for to pass
 Ware of the lizard lurking in the grass.²⁴

Two poems emerge from this conflict: "Agaynst a Comely Coystroun", which has been analysed in detail as a satirical piece against "Jock who would be a gentleman" but "that late was a groom".

The unfortunate courtier, called Dr. Devias, master, minstrel and fiddler, was probably a Flemish musician who had somehow incurred Skelton's wrath at the court of Henry VII.²⁵

²⁴ Poems, p. 33.

²⁵ Carpenter, Nan Cooke, "Skelton and Music: Rotv Bully Joys", in RES, VI, 1955, p. 279

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and second, "The Bouge of Courte" itemized in the "Garlande as "Item, Bouge of Courte, where Drede was beguiled", called

that sober, neurotic, horribly life-like half-allegory.²⁶

and referred to also as a

conventional mediaeval dream allegory, which shows considerable originality in its handling of the old rhyme royal stanza.²⁷

That the "comely coystroun" who incurred Skelton's wrath was not a native of England, is quite likely for

the crowd of foreigners in the royal service during the reign of Henry VII, takes on the character of a mass invasion.²⁸

Such "foreigners" as Antonio Bonvisi, Adrian of Castello, Polydore Vergil and Desiderius Erasmus, all intellectual giants, were exceedingly influential in the realm of English scholarship. But there must have been hangers-on of much less talent, hopeful of making a name for themselves in the court but not having "enough native talent for the purpose". These were the little men, the lesser lights, who would impress equally lesser courtiers. But in the sphere of music and poetry, John Skelton was one with whom they had to

²⁶ Green, P., John Skelton, p. 12.

²⁷ Poems, p. xiii.

²⁸ Nelson, W., John Skelton: Laureate, New York, Columbia University Press, 1939, p. 30.

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reckon. Apparently Dr. Devias had not taken this fact into consideration.

If the good "doctor" were Flemish, as Mrs. Carpenter points out, Skelton must have thought with some mirth of the historian Georges Chastellain's autobiographical note: that he was a born Fleming, writing in the French language but in a coarse speech,

a man of the cattle-breeding marshes, rude,
ignorant, stammering of tongue, greasy of mouth and
of palate and quite bemired with other defects,
proper to the nature of the land.²⁹

Note the similarity of thought in Skelton's description of the "Coystroun": He was born "full base", "his wit is lean", he is "a red angry man", he dreams "in dumpes to wrangle and wrest", he drinks "at a draught a large and long", plays the lute like the "sobbing of an old sow", "brawls and barks" and is a rustic:

An usher of the hall fain would I get
To point this proud page a place and a room,
For Jack would be a gentleman that late was
a groom.

(11.40-42)

This "peevish proud" braggart who teaches the lords and ladies of his school "so wisely to solf and to fayne",

²⁹ Huizinga, J., The Waning of the Middle Ages, a study of the Forms of life, thought and art in France and the Netherlands in the Dawn of the Renaissance, Doubleday, New York, 1954, p. 285.

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without any adequate training, reminds us a little of Pope's warning two centuries later that "A little learning is a dangerous thing." It is easy enough to conjure up a picture of this man: Puffed up with self-importance, peevish, red-faced, nervous, high-strung, always singing a bit sharp:

He solfas too haute, his treble is too high. (1.23)

Too sharp is his Mi. (1.25)

His descant is dashed full of discords. (1.38)

Huizinga goes on to say that Chastellain's style of writing can be accounted for by his Flemish birth: it is flowery, pompous and grandiloquent. In making an analogy between his prose and Jan Van Eyck's painting of the altar-piece of the Lamb, he says:

Those heavy red dresses of red and gold brocade, loaded with precious stones, those too heavy grimaces, the somewhat puerile decoration of the lectern - all this in painting is the equivalent of the showy Bergundian prose. It is a rhetorician's style transferred to painting.³⁰

If these "undeniable affinities" exist between writing and painting, then we can expect to find them too, between writing and music. They are there, says Skelton, and to the shame of Dr. Devias:

His descant is busy, it is without a mean;
Too fat is his fancy, his wit is too lean.
(11.27-8)

30 Huizinga, J., Waning of the Middle Ages, p. 285.

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After Skelton tells us that this learned doctor "whistleth so sweetly, he maketh me to sweat" we are not surprised that Devias claims to be able to "counter 'Custodi Nos'" a versicle and response sung just before the "Nunc Dimittis" at the close of Compline. This indeed would be the "rhetorician's style" transferred to music, for the words "Custodi nos Dominus ut pupillam oculi" followed by "Sub umbra alarum tuarum protege nos."³¹ would be sung either in recto tono or plain chant. Rarely, if ever, would such versicles be counterpointed unless removed from the Office and used as an anthem for some occasion. Such musical embroidery was frowned on in the fifteenth century as now, for use in church services.

But there is a still deeper meaning in this allusion to "Custodi nos". The versicle beseeches God that He

V. Keep us, O Lord, as the apple of thy eye.

R. And protect us under the shadow of thy wings.

And well might Devias pray this, says Skelton, with all the "countering" known to the Flemish musicians, for such a "coystroun" would have difficulty maintaining his position except by prayer. And the poet continues sarcastically to advise him to sing "Sospitati dedit aegros" (give succour to

³¹ Breviarum Romanum, Psalterium Breviarii Romani, Dominica ad Completorium, p. 43. (Tomus Prior, H. Dessain, Mechliniae, Belgique.)

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the sick), in this way reducing him to the state of a "parish town clerk" - an obvious gibe at the musician's low standing, his lay state and his pretence of musical training.

The terminology used in Skelton's images denotes an above-average knowledge of music gained during his years at Cambridge. The Coystroun's voice, like his tongue, is peevish and harsh, and he has difficulty reaching either high or low: "But for in his gamut carp that he can." (l.13) He can "counter" and "knack" of Martin Swart and Perkin Warbeck because he, like them, is an imposter; but this "holy water clerk" will not be able to become a ruler of lords by means of his monochord³² for musicians are born not fretted.

The puns on "rule nor in space", "that born was full base", "music without measure"; the irony in "lumbreth on a lewd lute", "fumbleth in his fingering" but

Well sped in spindles and turning of tavells;
A bungler, a brawler, a picker of quarrels.
(ll.34-5)

the character delineation in:

He findeth a proportion in his prick song,
To drink at a draught a large and long.
(ll.48-9)

³² An apparatus widely used in the M.A., designed to investigate into the length of strings and intervals; a single string stretched over a long wooden box and a movable fret to vary string length.

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and the method by which he makes a real hare of his victim:

He teacheth them so wisely to solf and to fayne
That neither they sing well prick-song or plain.
(11.53-4)

all make use of technical terms in music and are indicative of Skelton's knowledge of this art.

There is a good deal of fun in these gay rhyme royal stanzas and it is at the expense of some musician over whom Skelton felt he had the ascendancy. Therefore the poet reminds him throughout that he is a "coistrel", making use of such images as: "sweet sugar-loaf", "dun", "maunchet", "morell", "sire". He damns him with faint praise by the use of the adjective "comely"; taunts him with allusions to boisterous tavern songs:

With hey trolly lolly, lo, whip here, Jack,
Alumbeck sodildim sillorum ben!
(11.15-6)

and the "rumble down, tumble down, hey go, now, now" (1.30) hand clapping and toe tapping that accompanied the dancing alluded to in "Roty Bully Joys"³³

Woven in among the fun are a few cutting remarks. This "groom" must have levelled some jealous criticism at Skelton or meddled in his affairs for the poet tells him quite plainly:

³³ Carpenter, N.C., "Skelton and Music", p. 281.

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Yet bear ye not too bold to brawl nor to bark
 At me that meddled nothing with your work:
 Correct first thyself: walk and be nought!
 Deem what thou list, thou knowest noth my thought.
 (11.60-64)

Thus has the coystroun brought down upon himself Skelton's first shower of darts. The royal priest-tutor is jealous of his position at court and secure in his knowledge of princely favour. As he looks about him he finds this worthless knave and others of the same type, fawning upon those whom they think can procure royal preferment. Skelton and his confreres have come into their own by means of intellectual excellence, university honours and royal favour. What they have earned by dint of struggle and years of waiting, others seem to be gaining by deceit and hypocrisy. The "Comely Coystroun" is one of these. The acquaintance of such courtiers causes Skelton to write the second of his poems that show his increasing awareness of court intrigue: the "horribly lifelike half-allegory "Bowge of Courte" in which

things overheard, things misunderstood, a
 general and steadily-growing sense of being out of
 one's depth, fill the poem with a Kafka-like un-
 easiness.³⁴

What creates in the "Bowge" this sense of uneasiness which is so readily apparent even centuries later? The fact that Skelton, the court poet, lived with it. As the young

³⁴ Lewis, C.S., English Literature in the Sixteenth Century, Oxford, 1954, p. 135.

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laureate, he had been free to come and go at leisure. When all at once he had become a priest and been brought under the discipline of Holy Orders which we have every reason to believe he meant to observe, he found himself "cabin'd, cribb'd, confined." A late vocation often brings such problems and Skelton at thirty-eight, with his particular background and environment must have found the situation at times almost unbearable. Removed from much of the social whirl of the court, he had an ever-increasing amount of time on his hands, during which he took a long look around and obviously did not like what he saw.

The result of his unfavourable impressions he wove into his "Bowge of Courte", a poem described by Warton as one "in the manner of a pageant". The seventy-one Chaucerian seven-line stanzas are in the form, and somewhat in the mood, of the "Comely Coystroun". The frame-work of the poem is the dream-allegory so familiar to the literature of the Middle Ages. But there is a certain newness of tone and characterization: a preview of the satire that will later be directed at specific individuals and definite events. C.S. Lewis describes it like this:

I suppose that no reader has forgotten the vividness of its characters or its nightmare crescendo from guilelessness to suspicion, from suspicion to acute nervousness, and thence to panic and awakening. The experience of a young man during

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those painful years in which he first discovers that he has entered a profession whose motto is 'Dog eat Dog', could hardly be better described.³⁵

His "dream" takes place in autumn, and with the added images of "radiant heat", "enrip'd" and "corn" we get the comfortable feeling of warmth and fruition. But this mood is quickly dispelled in the very next line by the images of the fickleness of "Luna" who smiles "half in scorn at our folly and unsteadfastness". At this point the word "autumn" takes on a different meaning: either a final chapter in his career or life, or in the life of the court. But his career is only beginning and he is still young. And if he means the court, then it is a vastly different picture from the one generally painted in history of this particular period. For example,

But at length in 1485, Henry VII, the first of the Tudor dynasty, secured the crown and ushered in a new era of English history.....By 1500, England was a real national monarchy and the power of the king appeared to be distinctly in the ascendant.³⁶

The answer lies in the fact that in Skelton's position he was able to see the intrigue rampant in court circles. Furthermore, he was alive to it and did not close his eyes to what he knew was a menace to the security of king and country. He

³⁵ Lewis, C.S., Allegory of Love, Oxford University Press, 1936, p. 252.

³⁶ Hayes, Carlton, J.H., A Political and Cultural History of Modern Europe, Vol. 1, New York, The Macmillan Co. 1952, p. 28, 30.

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hated the fawning hangers-on, not because they affected his life directly - though it is most likely he had enemies among them - but rather because they were a threat to the majesty of the king. Here is a repetition of that same idea found in the elegy on the death of Northumberland; and there are echoes of it also in the "Speculum Principis", the treatise written for the education of the princes. He warns them that:

Advisers are a poor staff, that those who claim knowledge are untrustworthy, those who are doubtful are useless....you may expect wounds....incalculable secret hatreds hidden behind courteous language, rare sweetness and endless tribulation, frail spirits apparently sure today but worth nothing tomorrow, unsuspected perils....beware of ingratitude, flattery....³⁷

To make his point in the "Speculum", Skelton uses his right as royal tutor; in "The Comely Coistrown", a personal enmity; in the "Bowge" the veil of allegory. But this type of poetry is merely a trial run. The time will come - though he does not yet know the moment - when such notes of criticism will be completely "countered" in his satirical compositions.

That his method is different from the allegory of the past is shown in the second place by his invocation. He does not call upon the Muses, but addresses himself in memory to the former poets:

³⁷ Nelson, William, John Skelton, Laureate, New York, Columbia University Press, 1939, p. 76.

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I calling to mind the great authority
 Of poets old, which full craftily,
 Under as covert terms as could be,
 Can touch a truth and cloak it subtilly
 With freshe utterance full setentiously,
 Diverse in style, some spared not vice to wyte,
 Some of morality nobly did endite:
 (stanza 2)

As this seems precisely what he wants to do, we realize that we shall find between the lines that follow, truths "cloak'd subtilly" and of great import. In only a moment, however, he becomes discouraged by the words of Ignorance, who calls him "unsure" and "to-dull". By the end of the second stanza, then, we are prepared for the dilemma into which the poet is thrown when faced with the thought

But of reproach surely he may not miss
 That climbeth higher than he may footing have:
 What an he slide down, who shall him save?
 (11.26-28)

Fear makes his mind "drawen and cast", and "sore enwearied"; he takes refuge not in rose bowers or under linden trees but prepares for bed,

And to lie down as soon as me 'dressed.
 At Harwich port slumbering as I lay
 In mine hostes house, called Powers Key.
 (11.33-35)

From the first moment of stanza six: "methought I saw a ship", we are inclined to say with the modern movie producer, "lights, camera, action!" and very likely Hollywood would do a great deal more with the dramatic possibilities here present than most of the critics until this time. Held

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down as he was by the poetic form, he gives us action. We fear not for him, but with him as he boards the good ship "Bowge of Court": he "thought" he had better not "dwell behind"; he puts himself "in press"; he has "too little conning to report" the beauty of "Lady Sanspeer"; he stands reading the verse on the throne "myself alone"; Danger appears and gives him "a taunt":

And I then softly answered to that clause,
That so to say I had given her no cause.
(11.74-75)

It is no surprise to us now to find out that his name is Drede. His description of Desire, then becomes more humorous; she looks at him "with browes bent" and leaves him standing there "a mazed man"; she puns on his name: "Yet I advise you to speak, for any drede.", and his state is ludicrous as she adds, "Who spareth to speak, in faith, he spareth to speed." In answer all he can do is excuse himself:

'Mistress,' quod I, 'I have none acquaintance
That will for me be mediator and mean;
And this another, I have small substance.'
(11.92-94)

Here is the heart of the matter, then, for the poet. For him who will seek free board at the King's table, all that is necessary is friends and fortune: the magic crew and cargo that sails life's ship to earthly paradise.

The sail is up, Fortune ruleth our helm,
We want no wind to pass over all;

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Favour we have tougher than any elm,
 That will abide and never from us fall.
 (11.127-30)

but happiness is short-lived and "under honey of time lieth
 bitter gall";

For, as methought, in our ship I did see
 Full subtil persons, in number four and three.
 (11.133-34)

For a while these seven individuals suffer the
 advances of Drede, for he, like them, is a friend of Fortune.
 But not for long is his "disport endurable", and for the rest
 of the poem we see the planned intrigue of these wily knaves:

The first was Favell, full of flattery,
 With fables false that well could feign a tale;
 The second was Suspect, which that daily
 Misdeemed each man, with face deadly and pale;
 And Harvy Hafter, that well could pick a male,
 With other four of their affinity,
 Disdain, Riot, Dissimular, Subtility.
 (11.204-10)

Although most of the travellers on the "bowge of Courte" are
 the usual mediaeval abstractions, there is a zest in their
 portrayal. As one critic has said, these seven figures are

a blend of the abstractions of the Middle Ages
 with the rotund characterization of a new age.³⁸

This characterization is done in a number of ways. First, by
 Drede himself in his monologues. We smile at his descriptions
 but what is most amusing is the fact that Drede does not mean

38 Gordon, I.A., John Skelton: Poet Laureate, p.55.

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to be funny.

They said they hated for to deal with Drede.
(1.146)

But, as methought, he wore on him a cloak
That lined was with double doubleness.
(11.177-8)

And when he (Suspect) came walking soberly,
With hum and ha, and with a crooked look,
Methought his head was full of jealousy
His eyen rolling, his hande fast they quoke.
(11.190-93)

And Harvy Hafter - surely some man whom Skelton knew - came
leaping toward him "light as lynde":

He gazed on me with goatish beard,
When I looked on him, my purse was half afeard.
(11.237-38)

The cock-sure expression of Disdain is excellent:

I looked on him, I wend he had been wood,
He set the arm proudly under the side
And in this wise, he 'gan with me to chide.
(11.320-22)

Riot, a thoroughly disgusting and repulsive drunkard, is
done in minute detail:

A rusty gallant, to-ragged and to-rent. (1.345)

Then I beheld how he disguised was:
His head was heavy for watching over night,
His eyen bleered, his face shone like a glass;
His gown so short that it ne cover might
His rump, he went so all for summer light.
His hose was garded with a list of green,
Yet at the knee they were broken, I ween.
(11.351-57)

Three more stanzas following are devoted to him, and after
the departure of this fellow, Drede adds:

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Gone is this knave, this ribald foul and lewd.
 He ran as fast as ever that he might.
 Unthriftiness in him may well be shewed,
 For whom Tyburn groaneth both day and night.
 (11.414-17)

The next to appear is Dissimulation, and the contrast between him and Riot is dramatically handled. This would be good stage business if Skelton had been writing a play.

That one was lean and like a pined ghost. (1.429)

I saw a knife hid in his sleeve
 Whereon was written this word, Mischief.
 And in his other sleeve, methought I saw
 A spoon of gold, full of honey sweet
 To feed a fool and for to prove a daw.
 (11.433-37)

and Deceit is "trussed in a garment straight" and sets the stage for the capture and slaying of Drede. Except for the fact that Drede awoke in time and thus prevented his murder (or suicide) the final scene is almost as dramatic as Shakespeare's portrayal of the assassination of Caesar. As when the Cassius-Brutus faction came in for the kill, Deceit says:

'Hearken', quod he, 'lo here mine hand in thine!
 To us welcome thou art, by Saint Quintine.'
 (11.510-11)

and after an oily speech telling Drede how he saved the poet's life, the victim turns around:

Methought I see lewd fellows here and there
 Come for to slay me of mortal intent.
 (11.527-28)

In the second place, when Skelton's Fortune and friends of Fortune speak, they characterize themselves. In

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warning Drede of the pitfalls threatening a successful trip,
Desire gives him her own philosophy:

'Forsooth' quod she, 'however blow the wind,
Fortune guideth and ruleth all our ship;
Whom she hateth shall over the seaboard skip.'
(11.111-12)

Favell flatters Drede on his ability to write poetry (we
know already the ultimatum of Ignorance!), tells him that
he knows he is worth "a thousand pound" to his lady and then
says:

But this one thing - ye may be sure of me;
For, by that Lord that bought dear all mankind,
I cannot flatter, I must be plain to thee!
(11.162-64)

He has no more than departed when Suspect comes to warn
Drede against him:

Ye remember the gentleman right now
That communed with you, methought a pretty space?
Beware of him.
(11.197-99)

but at the same time, he is interested to know:

Spake he, i' faith, no word to you of me?
I wot, an he did, you would me tell.
(11.204-5)

But I wonder what the devil of hell
He said of me, when he with you did talk.
(11.208-9)

Harvy Hafter, the only one of these personalities to whom
Skelton gives a name, is a rogue and a dandy not too unlike
the comely coystroun. He has all the popular songs running
through his head and the tunes are on the tip of his tongue.

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This is not surprising in one who "would be merry, what wind that ever blow!" He talks at great length and with a speed to match, giving no time for answers. His is no dialogue! Several times he repeats his questionable welcome:

And ye be welcome, sir, so God me save!
I hope hereafter a friend of you to have.
(11.279-80)

But the friendship lasts only until he meets with Disdain, at which time the two plot Drede's downfall:

Then quod Harvy Hafter, 'Why art thou so dismayed?
'By Christ,' quod he, 'for it is a shame to say:
To see yon Johan Dawes, that came but yesterday

How he is taken in conceit,
This Doctor Dawcock, Drede, I ween, he hight.
By Goddes bones, but if we have some slight
It is like he will stande in our light.'
'By God,' quod Harvy, 'and it so happen might.
Let us therefore shortly at a word
Find some means to cast him overboard.
(11.299-308)

Short-lived are the ties of friendship if they stand in the way of privilege!

Riot speaks so convincingly that for a moment we forget that he is an allegorical figure. He might be any one of a number of real people in the Tudor court. And this feeling is underlined when we listen to his philosophy:

And, sir, in faith why com'st not us among
To make thee merry, as other fellows done?
Thou must swear and stare, man, all day long,
And wake all night, and sleep till it be noon;
Thou mayst not study, or muse on the moon;
This world is nothing but eat, drink, and sleep,
And thus with us good company to keep.
(11.379-85)

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Dissimulation as his name implies, never comes out with the truth:

Right now I spake with one, I trow, I see -
But what - a straw! I may not tell all thing!
(11.458-9)

And he hits the proverbial nail on the head when he admits:

Ywis I could tell - but, humlery, hum!
I dare not speak, we be so laid await,
For all our Courte is full of deceit.
(11.467-69)

And as if to prove this, Deceit arrives in person, not shouting or even talking, but "rounding in his ear" so that he may better express horror at the actions of Dissimulation:

But to hear the subtilty, and the craft,
As I shall tell you, if you will hark again!
(11.519-21)

and he would have struck to the kill if it hadn't been the "drede" he had that "murder would come out." Most of these characters reveal themselves to be the type implied by their allegorical name. But there is a refreshing newness in what they say and a conversational tone evident in the way they say it that is a healthy addition to the mediaeval allegory.

In the third place, the poet himself is alive to the situation which he satirizes. His is no half-hearted exposé of the fate of one Drede, court poet. We are not sure either that the poem is an open campaign against what Skelton could see was an intolerable state of affairs. However, judging from what he wrote during the next quarter century of his

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life, we can be certain that he realized that this was only a beginning. In the milieu of Eltham, the poet-priest-tutor feared to speak out too openly. This is evident in the warning he gives the reader, that "in every point" he be "indifferent". But the final couplet:

But yet oft-time such dreams be found true.
Now construe ye what is the residue!
(11.538-39)

recalls the opening thoughts that the "old poets"

Under as covert terms as could be,
Can touch a truth a cloak it subtilly.
(11.10-11)

Here is Skelton's conflict again; he has something to say and says it but it must be "cloaked" and "covert".

To attribute to the poem any other motive than that of exposing critically an intolerable situation, is to miss the point of the "Bowge of Courte". Gordon concludes that:

The Bowge of Courte must be associated with his (Skelton's) break from the courtier's life and his entry the same year to holy orders.³⁹

Although there are a number of subjective elements in the poem (even Drede, the poet, is Skelton), the whole is viewed too objectively to be written by someone immediately involved in the situation he is describing. Once he had been ordained and had removed himself, at least in part from the "rackateers,"

39 Gordon, I.A., John Skelton: Poet Laureate, p.55.

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he could afford to be more pointed - even though cloaked - for now he would speak with the voice of a churchman. And he is describing a general, even universal situation. As Lewis states:

As was natural in Tudor times, the particular 'world" or "racket" described is the court; but almost any man in any profession can recognize most of the encounters: the direct, unprovoked snub from Danger; the effusive welcome from Favell; the confidential warnings of Suspect; the apparently light-hearted good fellowship of Harvy Hafter . . . the downright bullying of Disdain . . . 40

How many years separate this poem from the death of Prince Arthur and Skelton's removal to Diss is not known. It does not seem possible, in the light of what has been said, to believe that the poem occasioned the removal. The death of the heir-apparent to the throne left Prince Henry in direct line and the sudden change in the affairs of state brought about a complete upheaval in the organization of Henry's education. His schoolroom became the palace; his tutors became the world.

Skelton's work with Prince Henry was over but there is nothing to suggest that Henry VII dismissed him dishonorably or gave him his mere "40 shillings to the Duk of Yorke scolemaster."⁴¹ It may have been at the Queen Mother's

⁴⁰ Lewis, C.S., English Literature, 16th Century, p. 135.

⁴¹ Public Record Office, MS E, 101-415-3, in Nelson, p. 74.

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request that the gift of Diss was given to Skelton, or Skelton may have asked for it himself thinking to retire and enjoy the peace of a country parish. At any rate, with the "Bowge of Courte", whose method

was to borrow an old shell and fill it with
new drink.⁴²

the third period of Skelton's poetry came to an end.

⁴² Swallow, Alan, "John Skelton: The Structure of the Poem" in PQ, XXXII, 1953, p. 31.

CHAPTER FOURLITURGICAL ECHOES

On April 29, 1502, Henry VII paid to the "Duc of Yorke Scolemaster" forty shillings,¹ bringing Skelton's tutorial duties to an abrupt close and ushering in the fourth period of his career. Nothing further is heard of him until April 10, 1504,

on which day, Skelton as rector of Diss witnessed the will of his parishioner, Margery Cowper.²

There is a good deal of conjecture as to what happened between these two dates. One author has found evidence that there was a John Skelton imprisoned in the Tower for a short time in 1502, the offence unknown, and that this was the poet. He uses this as a reason for the appearance of Skelton's name in the Pardon Roll of 1509-10, at the time of Henry VIII's accession to the throne.³ Lloyd asks the question: "Why was he 'banished' to Norfolk?"⁴ and gives two main reasons: that he may have asked for it as he was disillusioned with court life (the "Bowge of Courte" gives ample evidence of this), or he may have felt that this was

1 Public Record Office, MS E, 101-415-3, quoted by Wm. Nelson, in John Skelton, Laureate, p. 74.

2 Ibid, p. 81.

3 Gordon, I.A., John Skelton: Poet Laureate, p. 21.

4 Lloyd, L.J., John Skelton, p. 18.

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the place for his fulfilment as a scholar and poet.

As Skelton had been intimately associated with the court for thirteen years, seven of which had been as tutor to the princes, we might expect that this move to Diss would be dependent upon the will, or the whim, of Henry VII. Why was Diss the chosen parish? Pollet gives some good reasons for the choice of this country church:

Le rectorat de Diss relevait alors de la famille royal, depuis que le fief des Fitzwater, dont il dépendait normalement, avait été confisqué par le souverain en 1494, dans les circonstances dramatiques qui touchaient à la grande conspiration de Perkin Warbeck. Le poste de recteur, d'abord laissé vacant, avait été attribué, en 1498, au chapelain du roi absentéiste, Peter Graves. Lady Margaret ayant acquis un manoir à Diss à la même époque, il est permis de supposer qu'une fois de plus elle avait influé sur la destinée du poète en contribuant à sa nomination à cette cure de Diss, à l'expiration de son préceptorate.⁵

Furthermore, Diss was near Cambridge, the university heavily endowed by the Countess of Richmond and under the spiritual and intellectual guidance of Bishop John Fisher, her chaplain. Cambridge, being the Alma Mater of the scholar John Skelton, would have been another drawing card if the poet was given an opportunity to request some particular living as a gift for services rendered at Eltham.

Of Diss itself, we have several very differing opinions. Lloyd gives the impression that it was anything but

5 Pollet, Maurice, John Skelton, p. 63.

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a prize: ninety miles from London, obscure and

No sort of fitting reward for a man who had been a royal tutor and the most distinguished scholar of his generation. In no sense of the word could it be described as a preferment.⁶

Pollet describes it with much the same flavour: it is

une grosse bourgade agricole au débouché de la riante vallée de la Waveney.⁷

intimating that Diss for Skelton was an "exile". Fish goes even further along the same line to say that

Skelton's 'exile' effectively isolates him from the pressures of a scene that threatened to overwhelm him.⁸

Another calls his church "ungainly" and Diss an "unprepossessing market town" and a "quiet backwater".⁹ E.M. Forster, on the other hand, is much more enthusiastic in his introduction to Skelton's new parish:

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 . . . 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 Blyborough or Framlingham. But it is adequate, it is dignified and commodious, and it successfully asserts its pre-eminence over its

6 Lloyd, L.J. John Skelton, Laureate, p. 18.

7 Pollet, M., John Skelton, p. 63.

8 Fish, S.E., John Skelton's Poetry, p. 82.

9 Nelson, W., John Skelton: Laureate, p. 102.

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surroundings. Here our poet-clergyman functioned for a time, and I may add carried on.¹⁰

Somewhere between the boundaries imposed by these conflicting opinions stand Skelton's reactions to his new parish.

It does not seem possible to ignore the fact that the living of Diss was, at least in part, a gift. Both Lady Margaret and Henry VII had been instrumental in securing Skelton as a royal tutor: a scholar worthy of encomiums by both Caxton and Erasmus. Such a man was not likely to be dismissed without some recompense beyond "forty shillings"; therefore, this parish must have been considered sufficient for such a reward. But if Skelton did not ask for it, (as supposed above), we might well question Henry's motives in sending this man ninety miles away from court - distances being what they were in the fifteenth century - when there must have been some "plum" closer at hand. Maybe, then, it was just a happy coincidence that provided a means of clearing the court of a clever mind whose latest poetry was hitting a bit too close to the mark.

Meanwhile, how was Skelton thinking? By 1502 he is four years ordained. With little preparation for Orders, it is obvious that he had less for parish administration. More

¹⁰ Forster, E.M. "John Skelton" in Two Cheers for Democracy, New York, Harcourt, Brace, Ltd., 1951, p. 135.

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than likely such a move had never occurred to him, for in the ordinary flow of events, life for him in the court would have grown with his royal pupil, and after his teaching days were over a royal preferment would have awaited him at the end. Such was not to be. The death of Prince Arthur suddenly removed him from a milieu that had promised so much and had rewarded so little: a milieu, furthermore, with which he was fast becoming more disgusted and disillusioned. And so, he moved off to care for souls - he who, ironically enough, needed an understanding soul to care for him.

What were his dispositions when he arrived at Diss? Some have maintained that he was "sincere enough". If we are to conclude this from the fact that we hear nothing of him for two years, then perhaps it is right. However, on the basis of his first poetry produced in this environment, we might question the word "enough". Around 1506-7, Skelton wrote his famous "Epitaph for Adam Uddersall" and "A Devout Trental for old John Clarke." The titles are misleading for they do not issue from the pen of a pious parish priest but from the accumulated wrath of two years' endurance. Here is evidence of the same "Dog eat Dog" philosophy that he despised at the court. The "holy patriarch" has insulted him:

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Rectori proprio
 tam verba retorta loquendo
 Unde resultando -
 que Acheronta boando tonaret.
 (11.32-35)

and he counters with:

Fratres, orate
 For this knavate,
 By the holy rood,
 Did never man good:
 I pray you all,
 And pray shall,
 At this trental
 On knees to fall
 To the football;
 With, 'Fill the black bowl
 For Jayberd' soul.'
 (11.66-76)

The bailiff extorts money from the poor, and Skelton justifies himself with a curse:

De Dis haec semper erit camena,
 Adam Uddersall sit anathema!
 (11.37-8)

Two wrongs never make a right and this comes as a shock from the lips of a consecrated priest!

But these poems are palpitatingly alive. The first sparks of fire are in the introduction:

Though these knaves be dead,
 Full of mischief and queed,
 Yet, wheresoever they lie,
 Their names shall never die.
 (11.3-6)

which parodies the tone of an epitaph. The idea of the English poem is repeated in Latin, where the word "versipellibus" infers that these rogues were one thing on the surface

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and something else underneath. The idea is repeated in the double meaning of "notissima": obviously here, "most notorious" but also capable of the interpretation "most distinguished"; and in "vilitate" which implies a far greater degree of roguishness than either "Mischief" or "queed". Once more Skelton has shown how he despises duplicity. And over it all is a kind of grim humour when we realize that after four centuries these two knaves "sometime of Diss" are still being "celebrated".

Both poems are mockeries of remembrances for the dead: an epitaph being a tribute to a deceased person and a trental, a thirty days' prayer for his soul - long a pious custom. That a priest should write either, or both of these is not uncommon. But here is a priest enjoying himself at the expense of these two men lately dead. That he dares so to do is a foreshadowing of what is yet to come. But as he lists the many words which describe his anger at John Clarke there is always that feeling that he is enjoying himself in the doing:

In malitia vir insignis,
 Duplex corde et bilinguis;
 Senio confectus,
 Omnibus suspectus,
 Nemini dilectus,
 Sepultus est among the weeds:
 God forgive him his misdeeds!
 (11.13-19)

And after a whole volley of name-calling in which the

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"Jayberd" is compared to a mule, an ass, an ox, a goat and a sheep, Skelton bursts forth in a grand finale:

Tendens adque forum,
fragmentum colligit horum,
Dentibus exemptis
mastigat cumque polentis
Lanigerum caput aut ovis
aut vaccae mugientis.
(11.52-57)

Against Adam Uddersall he lets loose a flood of invective:

Perfidus, iratus,
numquam fuit ille beatus:
Uddersall stratus
benedictis est spoliatus,
Improbis, inflatus,
maledictis jam laceratus:
Dis, tibi bacchatus
ballivus, praedominatus:
Hic fuit ingratus,
porcus velut insatiatus,
Pinguis, crassatus;
velut Agag si reprobatus!
(11.17-28)

and so "Belsabub his soul save." He piles up words for the sheer delight of seeing how far he can extend the rhyme and re-echo his theme. And even if one cannot understand the Latin, one can get the mood and the tone from the sounds of the words. The ordinary smoothness and music of the language has been disturbed by the many cacophonous "t's", "d's" and hard "c's". When he reaches the end he is almost breathless:

Anima ejus
De malo in pejus.

and completely so in "Amen", this last a quite obvious echo of the Requiem Mass,

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Et lux perpetua luceat ejus
Requiescat in pace. Amen.

But true to the self we see developing, he is never finished. The poem is followed by a postscript in which he gives the date: January 5, 1507, and then a final thought: a pun on Adam's name "Adam, Adam, where art thou?" The poet passes his own judgement by using a free Latin translation of a verse from Job:

(in) a land of misery and darkness, where the
shadow of death, and no order, but everlasting
horror dwelleth.¹¹

It cannot be accidental that there are dozens of words whose "s" sounds hiss themselves through these mock prayers somewhat reminiscent of the lizard "lurking in the grass". Diss has not removed the "jeopardies" from his life but has only produced different ones. And John Clarke who had offended him personally, together with Adam Uddersall whose offence was against the general good, were not the last. One other comes close upon the heels of both - the hawking parson of Diss who offends against the church. Therefore in "Ware the Hawk",

Skelton has been compelled to review the present state of the clergy and to ask himself what will be the end of the matter.¹²

¹¹ Job, X: 22

¹² Lloye, L.J., John Skelton, p. 75.

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There is a diversity of opinion among critics as to the tone of this poem. Fish gives a summation of the work done on it:

For Gordon the poem is a prelude to 'Colin Clout' and 'expresses significantly his resentment at the license of the parish priest' (p. 105). For Edwards it is an illuminating reference to Skelton's years of exile at Diss. (p. 89-92). To Lloyd the 'capital fooling' of the poem indicates that 'Skelton cannot remain angry for very long' (p. 73). It seems to me a moot question whether Skelton was angry at all.¹³

Another writer¹⁴ calls the occasion of "Ware the Hawk" the "plus belle occasion" of his priestly career to observe human nature in action and that, in consequence, he composed

une diatribe indignée d'un chrétien dans son bon sens exhorbite par l'extravagance d'un spectacle inoui.¹⁵

Just what is Skelton saying in the poem? The narrative element can be summed up very briefly. Skelton arrives at his church in time for Vespers on August 29 (Pollet: Août vingt-huit, jour anniversaire de la decollation de St. Jean) to find the doors locked against him. He looks in the window and sees his neighbourhood curate racing madly about the church. The "sporting parson" is training his hawks! Everything is against him: the bold young parson, the barred

13 Fish, S.E., John Skelton's Poetry, p. 93.

14 Pollet, M., John Skelton, p. 67.

15 Ibid, p. 66.

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doors, even the interior architecture of the church:

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 on to the communion table.¹⁶

For a few moments Skelton must have been rendered speechless. Then as the truth dawns on him he realizes that he must get in. Nelson conjectures his method:

Skelton's pretty ingenuity is to be found in the unusual structure of the Diss church. The western tower stands apart from the rest of the edifice, and is connected with it by only a hollow arch. From the space beneath this arch, one door leads into the church and another into the tower. He may have passed through the arch and descended by a small door (now blocked up) into the nave of the church.¹⁷

What happened next must have been ludicrous. Red-faced and highly incensed, the parish priest of Diss comes face to face with the "Rector de Whipstok, doctor cognomine Daucok, et dominus Wodcock".¹⁸ There is an order to stop but the "rebel" refuses to obey and is unrepentant:

But he saide that he would,
Against my mind and will,
In my church hawke still.
(11.97-99)

¹⁶ Forster, E.M., "John Skelton" in Two Cheers for Democracy, p. 141.

¹⁷ Nelson, W., John Skelton, Laureate, p. 105.

¹⁸ Poems, Appendix, p. 432. These words are contained in the Latin lines that follow Marshe's edition of "Ware the Hawke" (1154).

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It seems that the heart of the matter lies in the refusal:
a refusal not of one man alone, but of many others like him.
This we learn in the prologue. This "sporting parson" and
his like who "do amiss", have "so far abused"

They cannot be excused
By reason nor by law.
(11.6-7)

Therefore Skelton's "book" has been written "such daws to
amend". What must be amended is woven skillfully into the
threads of vituperation consequent upon the sin of the "fond
frantic falconer". The first accusation against such men is
that they "play the daw",

To hawk, or else to hunt
From the altar to the font,
With cry unreverent,
Before the sacrament,
Within holy church's boundes,
That of our faith the ground is.
(11.9-14)

As Skelton thinks on the "cry unreverent" the words of the
Fathers of the Church come to him. St. John Chrysostom says:

That the Lord is not so much enraged against
any sinner as against him, who while he shines with
the splendour of the sacerdotal dignity, insults the
divine majesty.¹⁹

and St. Gregory:

Alas! my Lord God, those that should govern thy
Church persecute you more than the rest.²⁰

19 St. Alphonsus de Liguori, Complete Works,
Vol. 12, "Dignity and Duties of the Priest", p. 73.

20 Ibid, p. 74.

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Skelton feels justified, therefore, in saying that such priests seem "schismatics" or else "heretics".

The words of St. Bernard that "ingratitude dries up the source of divine favours",²¹ and Cassian's:

that he saw many sinners consecrate themselves to God with their whole heart, but that he knew no one that had risen from tepidity to fervour.²²

causes Skelton to declare:

That priest that hawkes so
All grace is far him fro;
(11.16-17)

And Skelton probably saw many such tepid priests whose pleasurable pastimes occupied much of their time and extended even "within holy church's boundes".

The second half of the prologue gives us the details of the "hawker's" crimes. He "stripped the altar bare" in order to stand upon it; he swore "horrible oaths before the face of God"; he allowed his hawks to kill a pigeon so that its blood "ran down raw upon the altar-stone"; and then he used the "corporas face" to clean up. It is a disgusting picture but behind the lines it is easy to see the priest who is careless with the altar appointments - the corporals, finger towels, altar cloths, albs and

21 St. Alphonsus, Complete Works, p. 79.

22 Ibid, p. 93.

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vestments; who will indulge in his own pleasures no matter what the cost; who will even use the church and his priestly orders to hide his irreverence, his lukewarmness, his sin.

Later in the poem, we even are given a foreshadowing of the state of the church at the time of the reformation:

Down went my offering-box,
Book, bell and candle,
All that he might handle -
Cross, staff, lectern, and banner.
(11.111-14)

when the services were made sport of:

This falconer then 'gan shout,
'These be my gossellers,
These be my epistolers,
These be my choristers
To helpe me to sing,
My hawkes matins ting!'
(11.119-24)

and the church was wrong and man was right:

The Church is thus abused,
Reproached and polluted;
Correction hath no place,
And all for lack of grace.
(11.160-63)

Even the apostates Julius and Nestorius did not defile the church itself:

Thou shalt nowhere read
That they did such a deed,
To let their hawks fly
Ad ostium tabernaculi,
In que est Corpus Domine.
(11.299-303)

But such an analysis of Skelton's grievances against this "hawking Parson" shows them all to concern

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externals. There is no deep or abiding love of things spiritual; no raising of the heart to God, nothing positive. In spite of the fact that the poet-priest is keenly aware of the corruption in the Church, he has neither the spiritual nor priestly formation to set it right. Certainly, though, he is doing battle for this Church which he sees is rapidly losing ground in a weakening religious milieu; a Church whose very pastors are neglecting the spiritual and temporal works which give reason for their being. Therefore, it is impossible to agree with those critics who feel that Skelton is "not angry at all".

But although he is truly angry at the shortcomings of the clergy, Skelton is still having fun in the composition of "Ware the Hawk". Furthermore, it is the skilful weaving of the threads of wit and humour into the pattern of the poem that makes it satire. The situation that he uses as a basis for his criticism is an effront against himself: hence the amusement he affords the reader with his excessive use of hyperbole, his sputtering anger, even his now proverbial reference to his laureateship:

I shall you make relation,
By way of apostrophation,
Under supportation
Of your patient toleration,
How I, Skelton Laureate,
Devised and also wrate
Upon a lewd curate,
A parson beneficed.

(11.29-36)

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Apparently, he too is a sporting parson or at least, he knows a great deal about the sport in which his adversary is indulging. He can describe in detail the method used to train hawks and he uses some forty lines on what Lloyd calls the

solemnity with which he halts here to give an entirely unsavoury disquisition on the habits of hawks.²³

The careful intermingling of Latin and English is a stroke of wit designed to show the incongruity in the life of this "mazed, witless, smeary smith": we are to "observe" and "devinate" how this "Domine Dawcock",

Ye simplex syllogista,
Ye devilish dogmatista

hawked whenever he liked "in ecclesia ista"; and how he went bird-catching "ad sacramentum altaris". Such words as "ostium tabernaculi", "corpus Domine" and "crucis Christi" draw attention to the horror of the crime. And the final thrust:

Ye are therefore beknaved:
Quare? quia Evangelia,
Concha et conchylia,
Accipiter et sonalia,
Et bruta animalia,
Caetera quoque talia
Tibi sunt aequalia:
(11.310-16)

But this same breathless mixture, this copiousness of words,

23 Lloyd, L.J., John Skelton, p. 73.

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ends up with a kind of explosion:

Vos valete,
Doctor indiscrete!
(11.336-7)

that has a smile of triumph in its hearty farewell.

There is a stroke of ingenuity in the insertion of the first of Skelton's riddles:

Look on this table,
Whether you are able
To read or to spell
What these verses tell.
(11.235-38)

The "dawcock" was mystified, the poet tells us and indeed we are too. We expect to find some powerful invective concealed within. Whether his contemporaries had the key or not, is not known but after several hundred years when a scholar deciphered the puzzle he found out that:

Sicculo lutueris est colo buraara
Nixphredras uisarum caniuter tuntantes
Raterplas Natabrian umsudus itnugenus.
18. 10. 2. 11. 19. 4. 13. 3. 3. 1. ten valet.
(11.239-42)

translated meant that Skelton proclaimed himself the phoenix of Britain:

Sic velut est Arabum phenix avis unica tantum
Terra Britannia suum genuit Skeltonida vatem.²⁴

Once more we can see the smile on his face as he contemplates the hours it will take to find the solution of a

²⁴ Bradley, H., "Two Puzzles in Skelton" in Academy, (Solution of number cypher in "Ware the Hawk"), 1896, p. 83.

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riddle that glorifies himself!

The same weaving of hearty good humour with an attempt to point to an evil is found in "The Tunning of Elinour Rumming", which asked "some conning" of Skelton to write in "honest mirth" so that:

The white appeareth the better for the black
After conveyance as the worlde goes,
It is no folly to use the Welshman's hose.²⁵

The chief merit of the poem lies in the graphic and effective description of which Skelton makes powerful use to give us a picture of the tavern of one, Elinour Rumming,

At home in her wonning;
And as men say
She dwelt in Surrey,
In a certain stead
Beside Leatherhead.
(11.94-98)

Now, there is nothing more disgusting than a drunken woman and in this ale-house we see a whole circle of them. The hostess whom Skelton sarcastically calls "a comely Gill" is one whose visage "would assuage a man's corage". Her skin is "all bowsy",

Comely crinkled,
Wondrously wrinkled,
Like a roast pig's ear,
Bristled with hair.
(11.18-21)

Her nose is "somedele hooked", her back is crooked and she is

²⁵ Poems, p. 388.

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"jawed like a jetty"; in her Sunday finery she reminds us of
Chaucer's Wife of Bath:

She thinketh herself gay
Upon the holy day
When she doth her array
And girdeth in her geets
Stitched and pranked with pleats;
Her kirtle Bristol-red,
With clothes upon her head
That weigh a sow of lead.
Writhen in wondrous guise,
With a whim-wham
Knit with a trim-tram
Upon her brain-pan.

(11.65-76)

"Early and late" come her cronies, each one as coarse as the
other. There are Kate, Cisly and Sarah,

With their legs bare
And also their feet
Hardely full unsweet.

(11.117-122)

Testy Joan is "angry as a waspy" and drunken Alice is "ful
of tales". "Mad Kit that had little wit", Margery Milkduck
whose legs are "sturdy and stubbed, mighty pestles and
clubbed" and Maud Ruggy, who is "ugly hipped"

And ugly thick-lipped,
Like an onion sided,
Like tan leather hided

(11.469-71)

all join the company. None could pay for their drink so they
brought what they could, some of their wares as disgusting
or more so, than they themselves. But Elinour accepted it
all in payment for a brew that sounds like that of Macbeth's
witches. And with her "mangy fistes" she produces an ale

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that has great selling power for it makes these hags look,

Younger than ye be
 Yeares two or three,
 For ye may prove it by me.
 'Behold, 'she said, 'and see
 How bright I am of ble!'
 (11.213-17)

Skelton must have enjoyed this speech from one whom he has already described in hyperboles of ugliness.

In Elinour's ale-house we meet with the lowest ebb of society. We might not like what we see but this was the reality that Skelton saw in his day. And although he had "honest mirth" in the composition of the poem,

Skelton thoroughly enjoys himself: Like
 Chaucer, he rejoices in everything that is good
 'in its kind'.²⁶

he is, at the same time, filled with repugnance at the depths to which woman had fallen. So, fearlessly the poet invites "omnes feminae quae nimis bibulae sunt" to listen to "hunc libellum" which gives his frank and honest estimate of the drunken woman. As Lloyd says, this is the poem which "probably brought down Pope's 'beastly' Skelton."²⁷ It is "beastly" only if we attribute wrong motives for Skelton's writing and ignore the facts that formed a basis for the

²⁶ Lloyd, L.J., John Skelton: Laureate, p. 63.

²⁷ Ibid, p. 64. (Pope: Horatian Satires and Epistles H.H. Erskine-Hill, ed., Oxford University Press, 1964, p. 59.)

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poem. To have made the ale-house of Elinour Rumming any different would have been for Skelton a perversion of the truth. Innuendoes and veiled conclusions had no place in the poetry of a man who painted truth as he saw it. The fact that posterity has become so much aware of Elinour's "foule drabbes" and their sin is a tribute to a man who wrote the pen-portraits over four hundred years ago.

At the opposite pole, but equally graphic in its portraiture, is the "goodly floure" Jane Scrope who lived among the "Nunnes black" at Carrow, Norwich. This young girl loses her pet sparrow to villainous Gib, the convent cat, and Philip's death inspires a poem of which C.S. Lewis says:

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.²⁸

"Philip Sparrow" is one of the most popular of Skelton's poems and it has been the object of much good scholarship. A most interesting study of its relation to the Roman breviary and the Missal was undertaken by Ian Gordon²⁹ He came to the following conclusions: that there

²⁸ Lewis, C.S., English Literature in the XVth Century, p. 138.

²⁹ Gordon, I.A., "Skelton's Philip Sparrow and the Roman Service Book" in MLR, xxix, 1934, p. 396.

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is no parody in any accepted sense of the word; that the formulae of the various services are introduced but are unchanged and perhaps not even ridiculed; that instead, they give a mock-serious background to the lament for Philip that is at any time liable to lose its mockery; and that Skelton was as serious over Jane's loss as Catullus over Lesbia's; and that the touch of formality in his use of the Services for the Dead adds an attractiveness not present in Catullus.

Gordon goes further to say that the poem is so graceful and sensitive that it detracts in no way from the poet's reputation as a churchman:

It would be difficult to see how it could. The eclipse of the Goliardic was only temporary - and Skelton went back to their best element - their poetry. That some of his contemporaries considered that he had returned to their scurrility and abuse of the church, is a reflection on their critical powers and not Skelton's poetry.³⁰

Another excellent study concerns the structure of the poem, noting its integration with the Roman Services, the frequency of Skelton's method of accumulation, particularly in the "Commendations", the management of tone "between humour and pathos, between burlesque and sentimentality" - one of the poem's important achievements.³¹

³⁰ Gordon, I.A., John Skelton: Poet Laureate, Melbourne University Press, 1943, p. 134.

³¹ Swallow, Alan, "The Structure of the Poem" in PQ, xxxii, 1953, p. 37-9.

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Kinsman examines the short statement in Latin at the end of the poem, in particular the word "titulus" that occurs in the last line. In summation he states that Skelton meant by this:

'Memorial verse' and that the use of the word and its association with the 'rotuli mortuorum' enriches a poem already freighted with reminiscences of the services of the dead.³²

so that, besides being a lament for the dead sparrow and a set of commendations for the fair mourner, it contains reflections of the mediaeval custom of prayers for the dead.

Since all these elaborations and layers of background are skillfully blended, small wonder that Skelton remarked of his poem, 'Nec minus hoc titulo tersa Minerva mea est.'³³

Kinsman contradicts Dyce who interprets the word "titulus" as "title". However, we cannot overlook this meaning. The poem is based on the liturgy both of the Breviary and the Mass for the Dead. As this is composed in great part of the Psalms, then it is important to remember that the heading for each Psalm is called a "titulus" which designates:

one of (1) the character of the psalm, (2) matters connected with its musical setting, (3) liturgical use, (4) historical situation, (5) author.³⁴

³² Kinsman, R.S., "Phyllip Sparrowe: Titulus" in SP, clvii, 1950, p. 474.

³³ Ibid, p. 484.

³⁴ Tos, Rev. A.J., Approaches to the Bible, the Old Testament, New Jersey, Prentice-Hall, 1963, p. 228.

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When we return to the "tituli" of the Psalms, and in translation read such headings as:

'To the choir-master. For stringed instruments. A maskil.' 'To the choir-master. Melody, Yonat Elem Rehoquim. Of David.'³⁵

we can understand more fully why an oral reading of "Philip Sparrow" makes us want to break into chant or song whenever the Latin comes into the poem.

In order to fully appreciate this poem one must be immersed in the poetry and the liturgical terminology of the Middle Ages, the nuances of courtliness, and the mediaeval background. The allusions, the biblical references, the archaic language, must be seen in their proper perspective. This is no love song for a young girl, nor is Skelton involved with Jane Scroupe more than with any other convent boarder at Carrow. An occasion - the death of Jane's pet sparrow - and an inspiration for a clever poem descend upon him simultaneously one day, and the poem is the result.

In "Philip Sparrow" can be heard all the echoes of Skelton's liturgical training at Cambridge, the music of the court and his love of song. Along with this, as pastor of Diss Church, he has at his fingertips the Mass tunes and the Psalm tones of the services at which he officiated daily.

³⁵ Knox, Ronald, The Psalms, New York, Sheed and Ward, 1955, p. 7-77.

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Suddenly all these ring their bells at once. And it is not for such romantic reasons as Jane's being in "un refuge contre l'adversité" at the age of twenty-three "au plus" as maintained by Pollet. He sees a little girl in tears, lamenting over her loss:

I wept and I wailed,
The teares down hailed,
But nothing it availed,
To call Philip again,
Whom Gib, our cat, hath slain.
(11.23-27)

and it is quite possible, and not improbable knowing Skelton, that the Biblical text:

Are not two sparrows sold for a farthing? And yet not one of them will fall to the ground without your Father's leave.³⁶

flashed across his mind. Then there arose a series of symbols: the sparrow, death, Jane's sorrow, consolation, Requiem; and off the poet's mind goes to Vespers of the Office for the Dead. "Placebo," he chants. "I shall please the Lord in the lands of the living", and there is an easy movement in his mind from "Domino" to "domina", as evidenced later in the "Commendations", and from "Diligo Dominum" in the Psalm following to "Dilexi dominam."

Henderson says here, that the "words are broken up to correspond with the plainsong notes."³⁷ This is even more

36 St. Matthew, 11:29.

37 Poems, n.l, p. 60.

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evident in the fifth line, "Fa, re, my, my," for these are the notes of the scale which correspond with the Psalm tone endings and the responses for the Mass of Requiem. Furthermore, all the end syllables of the next six lines can be fitted in almost perfectly to the same musical pattern.

Each of the next six sections of the poem begins with a word or two of the Antiphons and a few words from the Psalms of each of the first six parts of the Office for the Dead. Even though the words do not fit to the chant tunes, it is remarkable that the mood and tone of each are like background music for Jane's words as she speaks her monologue. For example, as the choir chants:

The cords of death encompassed me; the snares
of the nether world seized upon me; I fell into
distress and sorrow.³⁸

Jane moans of her "pain" when she beheld her "sparrow dead and cold"; but whereas the psalmist puts his trust in God, she puts hers in the "maiden, widow, and wife" whom she asks to "learn to weep at me!" At the antiphon "Opera" there is an allusion to Psalm 110, several verses of which extol the greatness of the works of God. Jane, meanwhile, tells of her labour to embroider Philip's likeness into a sampler. But her needle "waxed red" as she "pricked him in the head" and

³⁸ Psalm 114:3. Titulus: the prayer of a just man in affliction, with a lively confidence in God.

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her work was of no avail:

My fingers, dead and cold,
 Could not my sampler hold:
 My needle and thread
 I threw away for dread.
 (11.133-36)

All the way through, the onamatapoeia of the plain-song can be heard, sinking to the depths in the "De Profundis clamavi" - when "I saw my sparrow die - and rising to the heights in the "Lauda, anima mea, Dominum!" following which is the invitation to some sixty birds:

To weep with me look that ye come
 All manner of birdes in your kinde;
 See none be left behind.
 To mourning looke that ye fall
 With dolorous songes funerall,
 Some to sing, and some to say,
 Some to weep, and some to pray,
 Every birde in his lay.
 (11.387-94)

And then for almost two hundred lines, Jane makes detailed preparations for the Solemn High Mass of Requiem for Philip. As she assigns the various roles, she takes into consideration the musical ability of each of the birds, so that in truth, there will only be "some to sing" even though all have been told to come in mourning "with dolorous songes funerall". The "softly warbling robin" will be the officiating priest, assisted by the "reed sparrow" and the "chattering swallow." The lustrous black raven will sing his plainsong "to sol-fa": likely the intoning of the Proper of

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the Mass. The "whistling thrush" will read the Epistle, followed by the "loud voice" of the peacock who "shall sing the Grail". Then the popinjay, practised in telling "her tale" will read the Gospel and the cuckoo with its "large and long" will chant the Offertory. The phoenix "that potentially may never die", like a patriarch or pope "in blacke cope" will "cense the hearse" and

He shall sing the verse,
 Libera me,
 In de la, sol, re,
 Softly B molle
 For my sparrow's soul.
 (11.531-35)

Jane has the finest of all bell-ringers: the ostrich, the largest and most powerful of birds. Though he has a poor voice and is therefore unable to sing tunably,

Yet at a brayd
 He hath well assayed
 To sol-fa above E-la.
 Fa, lorell, fa, fa!
 Ne quando
 Male cantando,
 The best that we can,
 To make him our bell-man,
 And let him ring the bells.
 He can do nothing else.
 (11.485-94)

And so the arrangements for the Mass are concluded.

But what of the non-singers? There is a place for them too. While the bittern, the crane, the swan, the goose, and the gander can only "watch at the wake", others: the "gagling" gant, the "churlish" chough, the knot, the ruff,

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the barnacle and the buzzard are to help the "owl to howl". And none of this is to happen without a rehearsal! (For a moment here, it is hardly Jane speaking, but rather Skelton with his tongue in his cheek as he assigns these roles so familiar to him as a longtime student at Cambridge.) As soon as the birds arrive, they are to assemble before the "provost" and the "sub-dean" for practice:

But for the eagle doth fly
Highest in the sky,
He shall be the sub-dean,
The choir to demean,
As provost-principal
To teach them their Ordinal;
(11.550-55)

The saker with them shall say
'Dirige' for Philip's soul;
The goshawk shall have a roll
The choristers to control.
(11.561-64)

With all these detailed plans how could anything fail for they had practised well!

And now the dark cloudy night
Chaseth away the Phoebus bright,
Taking his course toward the west,
God send my sparrow's soul good rest!
Requiem aeternam dona eis, Domine!
Fa, fa, fa, mi, re, re,
A por ta in fe ri,
Fa, fa, fa, mi, mi.
(11.571-78)

Thus we see that the music of this poem is woven inextricably into Jane's childlike chatter. Even where there is no allusion to music, the daintiness and fragility of many of her words remind us that this is the sweet soprano

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of a little girl. For example, when she describes the habits of her sparrow:

Sometime he would 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.
Lord, how he would pry
After the butterfly!
Lord, how he would hop
After the gressshop!
(11.128-37)

or when she tells of her hopes for Philip's eternity:

That Philip may fly
Above the starry sky,
To tread the pretty wren,
That is Our Lady's hen.
Amen, amen, amen.
(11.597-601)

or even in writing the Latin epitaph in his honour:

Flos volucrum formose, vale!
Phillipe, sub isto
Marmore jam recubas,
Qui mihi carus eras.
(11.825-28)

✓ The delight of the musical overtones continues into the second part of the poem, the "Commendations". Now we find echoes of the court laureate and shades of "Knowledge, Acquaintance, Resort, Favour with Grace." The prelude in Latin, "Beati immaculati in via, O gloriosa femina!" cannot but evoke the hymn to Our Lady, "O gloriosa virginum, sublimis inter sidera", particularly as the first verse of Psalm 118, "beati immaculati in via: qui ambulant in lege

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"Domini" is part of the Introit for the Mass of a holy woman not a martyr. Henderson's reference to this as being from the Ordo for the Souls would be apt except that this Psalm is not included in the Mass for Philip. With the now Major Psalm tone going through his mind, he bursts forth with:

Now mine whole imagination
And studious meditation
Is to take this commendation
In this consideration.
(ll.846-49)

to praise the beauty of this "most goodly maid". And in order that he may be better able to return melody for melody, he asks Apollo for aid in his attempt to write and

Melodiously to it devise
His tunable harp strings
With harmony that sings
Of princes and kings
And of all pleasant things,
Of lust and delight,
Thorough his godly might.
(ll.863-69)

Then there follow eleven sections of such "pleasant things", each one ending with a chorus:

For this most goodly floure,
This blossom of fresh colour,
So Jupiter me succour,
She flourishesth new and new
In beauty and virtue.
(ll. 988-92)

The three-foot lines swing along like a popular song, and the five-line chorus is an interesting variation of the usual ballad quatrain; the latter, reappears, however, in a Latin chorus immediately following the one in English. It recalls

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the opening couplet, and in every case adds two appropriate lines from the Psalms: a clever way of proving his point.

For example, the second Latin chorus reads:

Hac claritate gemina,
O gloriosa femina,
Legem pone mihi, domina,
viam justificationum tuarum!
Quemadmodum desiderat cervus
ad fontes aquarum.
(11.993-96)

Henderson says here that Skelton "blasphemously substitutes 'domina' (lady) for 'Dominus' (Lord) - Jane Scrope for God. Surely this is going too far. The poet meant this for a witty and clever compliment to this young girl, and though modern times might label it "blasphemy" the middle ages would understand it for what it was. But to prove that human nature changes little over the ages, there were those too in Skelton's time who depraved "Philip's grave, his Dirige, and her commendation". Hence the "Addition made by Master Skelton" on which is based the modern condemnation of the poem.

The diction throughout shows the harmony for which earlier he asked Apollo. There are "golden sands" and "strange reames"; "ruby ruddes" and "rose buddes"; "daisies delectable" and "jeloferes amiable". Jane is like a "radiant star" and a "white swan"; she is synonymous with the most beautiful of the goddesses: Pollexene, Calliope, Penelope, Diana and Venus. The onomatopoeia is as gentle as the

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"Lully, lullay" of "My Darling Dere". But in the "Addition" where he must justify his praise of Jane, the diction is as cacophonous and noisy as the Vaughan Williams arrangement of "Elinour Rummung". Skelton's temper boils over as he consigns the "jangling jays" to the depths of a hell guarded by Hecate, Pluto, the ugly Eumenides, Coccytes and Charron. He swears by "hercules that hell did harrow" that he will discharge himself to "lettered men". Words like "savage", "lugging", "wrestling", "venemous" and "the infernal posty where soules fry and rosty" give us a vivid picture of a temper aroused to a white heat.

Such then, was the music of Skelton's life at Diss: an interesting combination of the delicacy, the fragility, and the sweetness of "Philip Sparrow" and the muscular, hearty bombast of the "Hawk". The countryside of Norfolk was no placid Symphonic Poem, for even his sweet Sparrow had been subjected to the contempt and criticism of his adversaries. Far from the excitement of the court and the noise and bustle of London streets, he had tried out a combination of lute and psaltery with the percussion and brass. In the future he would utilize the whole orchestra and would know the exact moment for the entrance of each instrument, the precise shade of tone for every mood. Diss had "countered" the melodies of Eltham, and a decade in Norfolk had given him a taste of this newly-acquired power.

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Now there was necessary only the podium of the Tudor Court to give this composer-conductor full command of his composition. To return there, then, had to be the object of all his days.

CHAPTER FIVEORATOR REGIUS

In 1509, another event took place that was to change the life of John Skelton: Henry VII died, followed two months later by his mother, Lady Margaret. Almost immediately, Skelton made a bid to get back to court, a move indicative of the fact that his isolation in Norfolk had been intensely irksome to him, and perhaps also that it had in truth been enforced by the monarch. So, in 1509, with great joy - and greater hope - Skelton celebrated the coronation of his former pupil with "A Laud and Praise made for Our Sovereign Lord the King."

What kind of London was it for which the whole being of this man longed so ardently? It was rich, for, in one London street wrote an Italian official:

there are fifty-two goldsmiths' shops, so rich and full of silver vessels, great and small, that in all the shops of Milan, Rome, Venice and Florence together, I do not think there would be found so many of the magnificences to be seen in London.¹

and its people were proud, for as another reporter said:

(they are) great lovers of themselves. They think there are no other men than themselves and no other world but England; and whenever they see a handsome foreigner they say that 'he looks like an Englishman'.²

¹ Ricker, John C., and J.T. Saywell, et al, The British Epic, Toronto, Clarke, Irwin and Co., Ltd., 1964, p. 83.

² Ibid, p. 83.

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As for Henry VIII himself, he was eighteen, vibrant, exciting and dynamic. The Venetian ambassador declared that he was:

the handsomest potentate I have ever set eyes on. He speaks French, English, Latin and a little Italian, plays well on the lute and harpsicord, draws the bow with greater strength than any man in England and jousts marvellously. He is fond of hunting and never takes his diversion without tiring eight or ten horses.³

But he who had inherited a flourishing nation from his father, was to display

traits characteristic of second generations. He spurned the drudgery of the office-stool and aspired to cut a figure in the world. He coveted honour and glory.⁴

A letter from Lord Mountjoy to Erasmus speaks of the young Prince Henry in the same strain:

I have no fear but when you heard that our Prince, now Henry VIII whom we call our Octavius, had succeeded to his father's throne, all your melancholy left you at once. The heavens laugh, the earth exults, all things are full of milk, of honey, of nectar.⁵

These were exciting times. Thomas More was rising in prominence as a London lawyer. His guest Desiderius

3 Ricker, John, The British Epic, p. 84.

4 Bindoff, S.T., Tudor England, Pelican History of England, London, Penguin Books, 1965, p. 67.

5 Sargent, Daniel, Thomas More, New York, Sheed and Ward, 1933, p. 47.

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Erasmus was writing his "Praise of Folly", in which he set down his abuse of theologians, and his indignation against monks. John Fisher was Bishop of Rochester and Chancellor of Cambridge University. And Thomas Wolsey, eleven years a priest, was on the threshold of a career unique in history.

In the realms of art and scholarship, evidences of the Renaissance could be discerned. Commerce was reviving and as the ranks of the nobility were sadly depleted:

civil wars, attainder and mortality had so thinned (their ranks) that by 1509 only one duke and one marquis were left in England.⁶

new men of business were taking the places of aristocrats around the king and in government. But all was not in a spirit of change:

What is usually not stressed enough is the predominance of conservative forces in the early years of Henry VIII's reign. In spite of Renaissance elements in his education, the young king was a traditionalist in outlook.⁷

It was upon this last point, no doubt, that Skelton based much of his hope. Young Henry had been schooled by him according to the Cambridge tradition; he was a devout Roman Catholic and he seemed to be following in the footsteps of his father as far as domestic affairs were concerned. However, a child of nine or ten does not remember, at eighteen,

6 Myers, A.R., England in the Late Middle Ages, p.191.

7 Ibid, p. 191.

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much of the contribution his teachers have made to his life and if he does, he is not likely anxious to have his mentors around to manage his life. Apparently Henry acted according to this pattern and Skelton's "Laud" received the same treatment as the many other Coronation odes that arrived around the same time.

But Skelton persisted. He presented to the king a manuscript copy of the "Chronique de Rains" prefaced with verses of dedication, and as a further gracious move for favour, dedicated to him his "Speculum Principis" written for the boy prince when the poet was his tutor:

Grant me favour, O Jupiter, God of Trophies,
lest I wear away my years at Eurotas.

Skelton Laureate, once royal tutor, soliloquizes mutely with himself, like a man wholly consigned to oblivion or like one dead at heart.

Alas for the faith of gods and men! Why has it happened to me that I should be herded off from the others, that I alone should suffer such misfortune? Royal munificence has not yet to help me, nor has the benevolence of fortune favoured me more richly.⁸

Still nothing seems to have happened, for Skelton was still at Diss in 1511. But in 1512, still hoping for royal favour, he returned to Westminster where the Abbot, John Islip, gave him residence. The king must finally have given in to the

⁸ Skelton, John, Speculum Principis, IX, 29, in Latin. In English translation by Nelson in John Skelton, Laureate, p. 117.

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persistent request because Skelton signed all his poems from this time on with "orator regius".

As with the honour of "laureate", the significance of this new title is not clear. But at least we know that Skelton was retained as court poet. In this connection, Nelson notes that the word "orator" had a double meaning: "poet" and "ambassador and secretary". The poet's training fitted him for both positions; therefore,

Skelton certainly served the king as poet and it is possible that he was also employed as a secretary. He wrote odes to celebrate his country's victories and morality plays to edify the court; engaged in a "flyting" to amuse the king, and composed lyrics to delight him.⁹

The first poem of this period is his ode in honour of Henry VIII's coronation. In it, there is nothing of the new Skelton which we witnessed in "Ware the Hawk" and "Elinour Rumming"; nor is there the warmth of the mediaeval hymns or the ingenuity of "Woefully Arrayed". This full-blooded man of Eltham and Diss is loathe to return to the anaemic style of his youth and yet still not ready to spread his wings in his new guise.

The Ode begins conventionally and the poet pays a compliment to the Tudor line:

9 Nelson, W., John Skelton, Laureate, p. 124.

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The Rose both White and Red
 In one Rose now doth grow:
 Thus thorough every stead
 Thereof the fame doth blow.
 Grace the seed did sow:
 England, now gather floures,
 Exclude now all doloures.
 (lines 1-7)

he sustains this metaphor:

They shall worry no mo
 Nor root the Rosary
 By extort treachery.
 (11.26-8)

and again in stanza seven,

Adonis of fresh colour
 Of youth the goodly
 (11.43-4)

There are the stock mediaeval comparisons of Henry to Alexis, the handsome youth of Virgil's "Eclogues"; to venerable Adrastus, mighty king of Argos; to Astraea, goddess of Justice,

That from the starry sky
 Shall now come and do right.

(11.15-16)

and to Adonis and Priam. And after calling him a "lusty knight" of Mars, he ends with the prayer "God save him in his right". In fine, it is the feeble attempt of one to whom greater things call!

Next we find Skelton engaged in "Agaynst the Scots" and "Agaynst" Dundas". These poems are filled with so much venom that they sound more like personal diatribes than hymns

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of victory over the Scottish neighbours to the north. As Nelson maintains,¹⁰ Skelton may have been carrying out his duty of "secretary" at this time of writing, and if so the Scots' poem may be considered a very subjective type of sixteenth century "reporting". On August 16, 1513, Henry and the Emperor Maximilian won the brilliant Battle of the Spurs at Therouenne against the French. Three weeks later, taking advantage of Henry's absence, James IV of Scotland led a very large army to a strong position on Flodden Hill. Immediately, the Earl of Surrey, seventy years old and with experience to match, surrounded the hill and placed his army between the Scots and their own country. Imprudent and fool-hardy, James decided to meet the enemy on the plain, using the smoke from their burning tents to cover their movements. By nightfall, thousands of their men were killed and by morning the English were in possession of the field.

"Agaynst the Scots" is a revised version of the "Ballad of the Scottish King" which Skelton, probably at Therouenne with Henry VIII, wrote immediately after word of victory arrived. There are striking parallels between Henry's letter of August 12 to James and Skelton's poem, once more emphasizing the secretarial nature of the poet's

10 Nelson, W., John Skelton, Laureate, p. 128.

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work.

The first section, in stirring two-foot lines, is directed against the whole of the Scottish people: they are "fond sots", "tratling", "blind", "stour", "frantic mad" and "fools". Suddenly we come upon one of those long lists that will be so numerous later on in the politically-directed satires:

Are not these Scots
Fools and sots,
Such boast to make,
To prate and crake,
To face, to brace,
All void of grace,
So proud of heart,
So overthwart,
So out of frame,
So void of shame,
As it is enrolled,
Written and told
Within this quaire?
(11.29-41)

and which march along like a soldier on a crusade. And the next sixteen lines "When the Scot lived", are doubly long but equally well peppered with hatred and scorn. His surprising words of address: "Jolly Jemmy, ye scornful Scot" lead to a series of accusations against James IV which Gordon says:

pours scorn on his pretensions in verses of
startling vigour.¹¹

¹¹ Gordon, I.A., John Skelton: Poet Laureate,
p. 170.

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as in:

Ye may be lord of Loch Ryan -
Christ cense you with a frying pan!
(11.61-2)

Eight stanzas follow, headed by the title "When the Scot was slain". The tone changes in the first two: from the riot of movement just described, to the mock-heroic. He calls upon "Melpomene" the "Muse Tragediall" and "Thalia" to help him to make a medley. And then with the couplet:

And now to begin I will me address,
To you rehearsing the sum of my process.
(11.89-90)

he changes into the mood of scorn once more with "King Jamey Jemmy, Jocky my jo!" Most of what follows is name-calling in rhymed couplets, but towards the end we come to the first long list of end-rhymes:

Your wealth, your joy, your sport, your play,
Your bragging boast, your royal array,
Your beard so brim as boar at bay,
Your Seven Sisters, that gun so gay,
All have ye lost and cast away.
Thus Fortune hath turned you, I dare well say,
Now from a king to a clot of clay.
(11.159-65)

Apparently he was criticized for lashing out at the king's brother-in-law in such a manner, and to these "divers people" he is "constrained":

With wordes nothing feigned,
This invective to make,
For some people's sake

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That list for to jangle
 And waywardly to wrangle
 Against this my making.
 (11.185-90)

He reminds these people that James was to Henry like "false Cain against Abel". Furthermore, he was a traitor. And then he plays his trump card: He was a "subtle schismatic":

Right near an heretic,
 Of grace out of the state,
 And died excommunicate.
 (11.212-14)

and if anyone disagrees with this:

He scantly loveth our king,
 That grudgeth at this thing:
 That cast such overthwarts
 Perchance have hollow hearts.
 (11.219-22)

Says Gordon:

Behind the double bulwark of king and church, Skelton darkly hints at capital crime of treason and heresy and leaves his critics suspect of the gravest intentions against the temporal and spiritual authorities, while he solemnly reproves them for the offence of criticizing his verses. We can almost see his sardonic grin.¹²

And he wears the same "sardonic grin" in his four poems "Against Garnesche". Several times in these poems, Skelton mentions that these flytings are not serious; so that, we may gather that the King staged a sort of contest in vituperation for his own amusement. The poet is careful

12 Gordon, I.A., John Skelton: Poet Laureate, p. 176.

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too, to insert at the end of each poem: "By the King's most noble commandement".

The first two are in rhyme royal stanza but this is about all they have in common with the mediaeval form.

Though he uses alliteration, he leans so heavily upon it that it becomes a parody of the mediaeval device. So coated are some of the lines that we are aware that he is actually searching for the alliterative word and enjoying the search.

For example:

Ye foul, fierce and fell, as Sir Ferumbas the freke,
 Sir captain of Catywade, catacumbas of Cayre,
 Though ye be lusty as Sir Libius lances to break,
 Yet your countenance uncomely, your face is not fair;
 For all your proud pranking, your pride may impaire.
 (11.15-19)

This is the third stanza and the alliteration continues throughout, becoming increasingly more of a contest for words as the poet nears the end of nearly five hundred lines.

He has a real affection for the hiss of s's and uses a multitude of them: "strong, sturdy stallion", "so stern and stouty", "Balthasar with his basnet", "wind-shaken shanks", once more reminiscent of the "lizard lurking in the grass". Second only to the "s" come the crackling "c's" and "k's", particularly when his anger becomes inflamed in the fiery Skeltonics of the last two pieces, all leading up to the scorn of the final couplet:

Scribble thou, scribble thou, rail or write,
 Write what thou will, I shall thee requite.
 (11.498-99)

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In the first two poems he makes use of the chorus:

But say me now, Sir Satapas, what authority ye have,
In your challenge, Sir Chester, to call me a knave.

and in the second:

Ye capped Cayface copyus, your paddock on your pate,
Though ye prate like proud Pilate, beware of checkmate.

This gives a swinging song effect to the whole thing and shows Skelton's enjoyment in the writing. He who sang so many popular songs in his youth, would find no difficulty in this kind of composition.

The imagery is quite unusual in that the poet makes use of many animal comparisons. When he makes his remark to Garnesche, he asks him why he has "so currishly" slandered him. He calls him a "sturdy stallion", a "manticore", a "louse", a "wild goose", to mention a few. His cap is "rough as a bear". His skin is so hairy that no boar is "so brimly bristled"; his legs get special mention:

Your wind-shaken shanks, your long loathly legs,
Crooked as a camock, and as a cow calfless.
(11.29-30)

his "snout" is "hooked as an hawke's beak". He groans like a swine; his manners are "moth-eaten". The pattern has been to use animals that are parasites or those that tear their prey to pieces. This is apparently what Garnesche has done, and what Skelton will do in return.

The two pieces which follow are indicative of the poet's increasing fury; but this is the "furioso" that wins

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a battle rather than the passion aroused by personal anger.
 And who could hope to compete with Skelton's volley of
 words. The Skeltonics of these two poems are like gun-fire.
 Here for the first time in the contest he casts aspersions
 against the personal background of the man:

When ye were younger of age
 Ye were a kitchen-page,
 A dish-washer, a drivel,
 In the pot your nose did snivel;
 Ye fried and ye broiled,
 Ye roasted and ye boiled,
 Ye roasted, like a fon,
 A goose with the feet upon;
 Ye sluffered up souce
 In my lady Bruce's house.
 Whereto should I write
 Of such a greasy knight?
 (ll.108-119)

and abuses his knighthood:

Thou claimest thee gentle, thou art a cur;
 Herald's they know thy coat armour:
 Though thou be a gentleman born,
 Yet gentleness in thee is threadbare worn;
 Herald's from honour may thee divorce,
 For harlots haunt thine hateful course.
 (ll.362-67)

This knave and this lecher are in no position to challenge
 the poet on any ground, least of all in writing, for

Your terms are too gross,
 Too far from the purpose,
 To contaminate
 And to violate
 The dignity laureate.
 (ll.96-100)

His mind has no good reason,

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Nor good rhyme in your matter:
 I wonder that ye smatter,
 So for a knave to clatter!
 (11.105-7)

But there is plenty of fun for us, as there was for Henry,
 in the irony of the fact that he who was using thousands of
 words fit only for a knave, tells his adversary:

Cast up your curious writing,
 And your dirty inditing,
 And your spiteful despiting.
 (11.112-14)

All his pent-up venom is released as line by line he works
 up to such climaxes as:

Thou toad, thou scorpion,
 Thou bawdy babion,
 Thou bear, thou bristled boar,
 Thou Moorish manticore,
 Thou rammish stinking goat,
 Thou foul churlish parrot,
 Thou grisly Gorgon glaimy,
 Thou sweaty sloven seimy,
 Thou murrion, thou mawment,
 Thou false stinking serpent,
 Thou mockish marmoset,
 I will not die in thy debt!
 (11.240-51)

In "Garnesche" as in the "Comely Coystroun" and
 "Philip Sparrowe", are many references to music and dancing:
 always the merry Skelton! For his knowledge of song,
 Skelton gives Garnesche his only compliment:

Though ye can skill of large and long,
 Ye always sing the cuckoo song.
 (11.292-93)

However, his "churlish chanting is all one lay" and he
 "counters umwhile too captiously." Here is that same device

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of "damning with faint praise" that we have seen before and will see again in Skelton.

When we finally come to the crashing climax and then study in retrospect what Skelton has said, we realize that there is little of true personal feeling or warmth. If King Henry wanted recreation, he received it in copious measure, for we must not forget that he listened also to Garnesche's abuse of the court poet.¹³ Throughout the series of poems, there is enthusiastic use of words for words's sake. But the poet is never too busily occupied to slyly insert his own claim to fame. He has abundant knowledge of the classical and mediaeval characters, for he uses them aptly against his foe. He admires Cicero's "tongue of gold"; little wonder then, why he was "advanced" to the degree of Laureate. And five times in the Garnesche flytings he reminds him - and in so doing, Henry - of this fact. He had been tutor to the king: "The honour of England I learned to spell." Whereas he had taken time out to engage in this battle, he had better things to do: "My study might be better spent" but always the royal command came first and the sole purpose of this flyting was,

But for to serve the king's intent,
His noble pleasure and commandment.
(ll.470-1)

13 The poems by Garnesche have all been lost.

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But more than this, he just could not resist a battle. When he gives the war cry: "Baile, baile, at you both, frantic fools!" there is an urgency that is more than fun. He has "fun" in the exercise but the enjoyment comes only when he has won a victory over his opponents. Skelton does nothing by halves, not even engage in a flyting!

While he saw in Garnesche matter only for a jest, he saw others around him who were more dangerous. And this danger threatened not only the lesser courtiers and the nobility, but was reaching out to touch the king himself. He who himself was in Orders could feel in 1516 what this other in Orders might say years later to Sir Thomas More:

You're a constant regret to me Thomas. If you could just see facts flat on, without that horrible moral squint; with just a little common sense, you could have been a statesman.¹⁴

This was Thomas Wolsey. And in the year of "Garnesche" he, only eighteen years in the priesthood, had arisen to be

lord chancellor.....that is to say, he was speaker of the House of Lords whenever Parliament was sitting, and the chief of the king's judges, presiding in the king's Court of Chancery and the Court of Star Chamber and in lesser courts also. More than this he was the king's principal minister, and of such capacity and in such favour with the king that to him all the rest were, in fact, subordinate and Wolsey really came to rule the council

¹⁴ Bolt, Robert, Man For All Seasons, New York, Random House, 1962, p. 19.

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as though the other members were schoolboys.¹⁵

It is not possible to know whether his play was really an opportunity for Skelton to fire his "first shot in a campaign"¹⁶ against Wolsey or not. The laureate may have been touched by personal jealousy at seeing a rival, years younger, get ahead of him; or he may have had a sincere desire to warn the king of the danger implicit in Wolsey's rise to power. Whatever was his incentive, the result was Magnyfycence: "A Goodly Interlude and a Merry". Judging from the opening caption and adding to this the potentiality for fun, characterization and good drama that we found in the "Bowge of Courte", we are entitled to expect great things from this play. Skelton describes it thus in the "Garlande":

And of Magnyfycence a notable matter,
How Counterfeit Countenance of the new jet
With Crafty Conveyance doth smatter and flatter,
And cloaked Collusion is brought in to clatter
With Courtly Abusion; who printeth it well in mind
Much doubleness of the worlde therein he may find.
(11.1169-74)

and in this description we see the dual nature of the play. To Skelton it was "a notable matter" uniting a satirical element: "of the new jet", "smatter and flatter", "brought in to clatter", with a morality element: "much doubleness of the worlde therein he may find".

¹⁵ Hughes, P., A Popular History of the Reformation, New York, Doubleday, 1962, p. 147.

¹⁶ Lloyd, L.J., John Skelton, p. 79.

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The form of the play is conservative in that it is a mediaeval allegory in the framework of the morality play and the stock characters: Felicity, Liberty, Mischief, Perseverance and fourteen others play the parts. However, there is splendid originality, some say, in the fact that Skelton is commenting on contemporary events. These would make the play an

allegory of the state of affairs in England
between 1509 and 1516.¹⁷

and by the same token, it is the

earliest example in English of any dramatic
form used for political satire and propaganda.¹⁸

The first and most exhaustive study of Magnyfycence was done by Ramsay.¹⁹ In this play, he says, we are looking at the first five years of the reign of Francis, synonymous with the fame and "splendid profligacy" of the "Field of the Cloth of Gold". He analyses the form, the divisions, the theme and the characters, and devotes a goodly proportion of the Introduction to the interpretation of Magnyfycence as a satire. He begins this special part of his study as follows:

Our preceding discussion has shown nothing
unless it has shown the presence throughout Magny-
fycence of a compelling practical purpose. Its

17 Gordon, I.A., John Skelton: Poet Laureate,
p. 132.

18 Ibid, p. 137.

19 Skelton J., Magnyfycence, ed. Ramsay, cxcvii p.

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adaptation of the traditional morality plot, its innovations in the traditional cast, its adoption of novel sources for theme and motives, its altered method of characterization, are all mysteries to be unlocked by a single key - its political application.²⁰

He goes on to say that Henry is Magnyfycence and the vices and virtues become the two contending parties at the Tudor court: the party of prodigality and the party of economy. There are only two virtues but six vices and these, Ramsay considers as vehicles of satire against Wolsey.

In a study by William Harris, Magnyfycence as a political satire is re-evaluated. Although the interpretation and method of Ramsay's introduction has long been held up as a model, Harris maintains in a very lengthy paper, that:

such an interpretation is insupportable in the face of (1) the chronological difficulties and (2) the evidences attested by the play, the other works of Skelton, the literary conventions which affected him, and the primary historical documents of the era.²¹

One by one, aided by dates and historical facts, Harris refutes convincingly most of Ramsay's theories. Says he:

When, further, one takes into consideration the proven unlikelihood of so early a satire by Skelton against the Cardinal, the entire theory collapses under the weight of improbability.²²

20 Ramsay, R.L., Magnyfycence, Intro., p. xcvi.

21 Harris, W.O., "Wolsey and Skelton's 'Magnyfycence', A Re-evaluation", in SP, Vol. 57, No. 2, p. 99-100.

22 Ibid, p. 122.

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He suggests that the modern reader should approach the morality as free as possible from the former interpretation. Heiserman too, issues a warning:

If one accepts the validity of distinctions denoted by terms like 'secular' and 'religious' and 'philosophical' and 'theological' to analyze the history of literature, one might also accept these notions of the 'place' of Magnyfycence in the dramatic tradition. But these distinctions themselves tend to corrupt one's reading of the play. They lead Farnham to find a 'cooly measured acceptance of the world' in a play attacking the follies of the king...They lead Ramsay to state that the satire stopped when, after the entrance of Redresse, the 'theological' elements took over from the 'secular' ones, though the play's political satire is in fact directed by 'theological' concepts. They lead other commentators simply to remark the 'transitional' nature of the play, or to read it as 'a piece of active rebellion against the restraints of the formal morality.' But to read the play as a rebellion is as dangerous as to read it as a forerunner: either reading forces one to ignore much of the play. Skelton, like all great artists, adapts his tradition more than he rebels against it; he uses old conventions to achieve new effects.²³

But the "new effects" discovered by Heiserman are the "satiric purposes" converted by Skelton out of the "innumerable conventions from non-satiric moralities and mysteries."

A new study by Harris presents the play within the Cardinal Virtue tradition and assumes that Skelton was well schooled in the morality tradition, followed the dual-conflict structure, and wrote a characteristic early Tudor

²³ Heiserman, A.R., Skelton and Satire, University of Chicago Press, 1961, p. 124.

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morality. Harris's interpretation of the play, then, is that

it dramatizes not the usual virtue-vice struggle for man's soul but a struggle for a king's soul, conveyed in terms of the cardinal virtue considered appropriate to royal conduct, and that the struggle involves the full range of the morality structure. Skelton's modifications of the inherited genre are bold, but they are wrought in accordance with the structural-thematic principles he creatively respected.²⁴

David Bevington examines in particular Skelton's skilful handling of the casting and staging of Magnyfycence. His distribution of eighteen parts for the "four-men-and-a boy" troupes of Tudor times, his arrangement of the play into four phases each with a new cast, his "awareness" of planning for entrances and exits, and the soliloquies between stages all show a "consistency of organization." Although the late mediaeval structure remains intact, the play is

a morality that has undergone a degree of secular transformation. Its hero represents a limited range of human experience when compared with 'Mankind' or 'Humanum Genus', and its vice figures are courtly satiric types rather than generic derivations of the seven Deadly Sins. The interest is historical rather than timeless; the political advice to a prince is specific and practical rather than generic and spiritual. Secularization is one of the unmistakable developments in the chronology of the English moral play, and Magnyfycence like King John, represents a significant step forward.²⁵

²⁴ Harris, W.O., Skelton's Magnyfycence and the Cardinal Virtue Tradition, Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina, 1965, p. ix-x.

²⁵ Bevington, D.M., From Mankind to Marlowe, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1962, p. 136.

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Henderson introduces us to the skilful use of techniques employed by Skelton in this play:

This play is chiefly remarkable for its brilliant use of a variety of verse forms for the different characters, an example followed by T.S. Eliot in Murder in the Cathedral where Skelton's influence is evident in the First Tempter's speech.²⁶

This ability of Skelton's to use "a variety of verse forms" stems from his knowledge of the power of music and rhythms to create an effect. "Prosperity", the first stage, is filled with the idea of the power of Largesse: the power to buy anything, even great quantities of pardon, grace and fame. His awesome omnipotence causes such adulation on the part of Felicity, Measure and Magnyfycence that they speak in the stately rhyme royal stanza. In direct contrast to this is the almost "free verse" lines of Liberty, and the dancing four-beat rhymed couplets of Fancy. Measure sets the pace for the whole stage. Some of his lines are so stately that they have almost biblical overtones:

Where measure is master, plenty doth none offence;
 Where measure lacketh, all thing disordered is;
 Where measure is absent, riot leepeth residence;
 Where measure is ruler, there is nothing amiss.
 Measure is treasure, How say ye, is it not this?
 (11.122-26)

Measure speaks in terms of music: "all trebles and tenors be ruled by a mean", to point up the golden mean of which

26 Poems, Intro., p. xvii.

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he is guardian. Later when Magnyfycence asks him to dwell with Liberty, he says that "Liberty his large with Measure shall make." The Prince then sums up the qualities of this virtue also in terms of music: "For Measure is a mean, neither too high or too low."

In direct contrast with the ceremonious mood established thus far, Liberty speaks almost conversationally and his short clipped lines could almost be styled as the "vers libre" of modern poetry. This is in character, as are the octo-syllabic lines of Fancy, especially when he says to Felicity and Magnyfycence:

Now, benedicite, ye wee, I were some hafter,
Or else some jangling Jack of the Vale,
Ye ween that I am drunken, because I look pale.
(11.268-70)

The poet has told us that this will be a "goodly interlude" and so far it has been so. It is not long before we are aware that the "merry" is a vital part of it. Liberty presses his point that one is captive if one lives under the law and that "where dread leadeth the dance, there is no joy or bliss"; therefore there must be freedom "to sport at your pleasure, to run and to ride." Indirectly, too, he makes known the joie de vivre enjoyed by Felicity and Liberty in company, for when these tell him that he has come "in good season", he drily remarks:

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And it is wonder that your wild insolence
Can be content with Measure's presence.
(11.86-7)

But Liberty insists that "in joy and mirth" Measure's mind will be enlarged" and later wins Magnyfycence to the opinion that even "Measure is a merry mean."

In imagination it is easy to see that the stage directions for Stage 7 lend themselves to a clever bit of ballet and there is no doubt, either, that the original miming at this point brought laughter. While Magnyfycence is engaged in reading a letter, Counterfeit Countenance comes in humming. Fancy waves him back but not before he calls out "What Fancy! Fancy!" The Prince casts his glance over to Fancy and inquires who called. No one but a "Fleming Hight Hansy" is the answer. But from here to the end of the sequence we can always visualize Counterfeit Countenance "from a safe distance" and always behind the back of Magnyfycence, peeking around the corner, through the curtains or over a piece of furniture. We are ready for him, then, as alone he introduces himself and the second Stage "Conspiracy".

Skelton is adept in his method of counterfeiting even the metre of this villain's speech. He uses the seven-line stanza but each line has only four beats and the rhyme scheme is "bastard", "after the doggerel guise", as Counterfeit Countenance says. But as this fellow lightly steps around the stage, with a pretence of being confidential and

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secretive, he lets us in on what he knows to be the main error of his day - and his ability to "counterfeit" is the cause of it:

Whatever I do, all men me praise,
And mickle am I made of nowadays.
(11.454-55)

- so much, in fact, that the whole of society uses him to advantage:

Counterfeit preaching, and believe the contrary;
Counterfeit conscience, peevish pope holy;
Counterfeit sadness, with dealing full madly;
Counterfeit holiness is called hypocrisy;
Counterfeit reason is not worth a fly;
Counterfeit wisdom, and works of folly;
Counterfeit countenance every man doth occupy.
(11.491-97)

To counterfeit thus friars have learned me;
Thus nunnes now and then, an it might be,
Would take in the way of counterfeit charity
The grace of God under benedicite;
To counterfeit their counsel they give me a fee;
Canons cannot counterfeit but upon three,
Monks may not for dread that men should them see.
(11.512-18)

Furthermore, even man's "counterfeiting" is frequently motivated by caprice, so that the poet has "Fonnish Fancy, who frets" fraternize with all the actors who come on stage: Crafty Conveyance, Cloaked Collusion, Courtly Abusion and Folly.

Cloaked Collusion "promenades" as he tells us in rhyme royal that he is "a perilous thing":

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Double dealing and I be all one,
 Crafting and hafting contrived is by me;
 I can dissemble, I can both laugh and groan,
 Plain dealing and I can never agree:
 But division, dissension, derision, these three
 And I am counterfeit of one minde and thought,
 By the means of mischief to bring all things
 to noughte.

(11.628-34)

and through eight stanzas, he maintains this slow, solemn air by means of long vowels, much alliteration and aureate diction. In truth his "speech is all pleasure" but he stings "like a waspe." He ends on a threatening note: that by flattery and derisive laughter: "Fleering", he "brewes much bale."

Amid such thought-provoking silence as has been cast by the thought of the conspiracy against the Prince Magnyfycence, together with the mustering, the meddling, the moving, the mazing and the purpose "to spy and to pointe every man" of Cloaked Collusion, the loud singing of "huffa, huffa, tanderum, tanderum, tain, huffa, huffa!" is heard off-stage and almost at once we see the owner of the voice. It is Courtly Abusion with all the popular songs of the day on his lips: echoes of the "Roty Bully Joys" of the Comely Coystroun and the "Hey and the Ho and the Tirly Tirlow" of the ale-house. He and Cloaked Collusion, later joined by Crafty Conveyance, have a quick-moving conversation in rhymed couplets, most of the speeches being only one line in length. There is an attempt at clever repartee which is a welcome

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contrast to the long speeches of introduction engaged in by the vices so far. When left alone, Courtly Abusion tells us about himself in the same popular song mood as he was in at the first of the scene. Gordon calls his speech "an edged satire rapier-keen"²⁷ and although this metaphor seems overdone, the speech is nevertheless clever in its ridicule of the costumes of the day. His "person prest beyond all size", with

My hair brusheth
 So pleasantly,
 My robe rusheth
 So ruttingly,
 Meseem I fly,
 I am so light
 To dance delight.
 (11.767-73)

is so elegant in appearance and manners, that

All this nation
 I set on fire
 In my fashion,
 This their desire,
 This new attire:
 This ladies have,
 I it them gave.
 (11.816-23)

Fancy comes in on him with a "Stow, stow!" and after a short conversation in which they take turns swearing, ironically enough "by the God holy", "by Christ", "by the Mass", "by God's Sacrament" and then repeating the oaths. Fancy

²⁷ Gordon, I.A. John Skelton: Poet Laureate, p. 143.

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announces that Measure "shall from us walk" because of a "pretty sleight" of which Courtly Abusion will learn more later. When he proceeds to the meeting with Crafty Conveyance, Fancy is left "alone in the place" to give us in nine short stanzas of two-stress Skeltonics an elaborate account of hawking, and in some thirty lines of four stresses an equally elaborate account of himself:

Now too courteous, forwith unkind,
 Sometime too sober, sometime too sad,
 Sometime too merry, sometime too mad;
 Sometime I sit as I were solemn proud,
 Sometime I laugh over-loud,
 Sometime I laugh for a gee-gaw,
 Sometime I laugh for a wagging of a straw;
 With a pear my love you may win,
 And ye may lose it for a pin.
 (11.945-53)

reminding us over and over again, that he is

Busy, busy, and ever busy,
 I dance up and down till I am dizzy.
 (11.976-7)

And so even in his aloneness he is constantly on the move while awaiting the arrival of his partner Folly, the traditional court fool, who frolics onto the stage "shaking his bauble, capering about, and playing on an instrument." The two of them converse in true slap-stick style. So practised at the art is he, that when Crafty Conveyance arrives they make a real hare of him before his eyes! He begs to know "a word or twain" of Folly's course in "making fools". Folly explains, and once more Skelton makes use of the terminology

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of music:

Sir, of my manner I shall tell you the plain.
First, I lay before them my bauble,
And teach them how they should sit idle,
To pick their fingers all the day long;
So in their ear I sing them a song
And make them so long to muse
That some of them runneth straight to the stews.
(11.1161-67)

Much laughter follows, in the midst of which Crafty Conveyance assures Folly - now to be known as Conceit - that as soon as Magnyfycence meets him he will throw out all "measure and good rule." Liberty will permit them to do what they will and with this assurance the "two rutters" go out arm in arm to the tune of "Away the Mare."

This second stage concludes with a long speech by Crafty Conveyance, once more in rhyme royal and, therefore, in splendid contrast to the "horse-play" that has preceded it. He who "knits together many a broken thread", has done so again in this conspiracy against Magnyfycence. His is no "childes game" and so:

By conveyance crafty I have brought
Unto Magnyfycence a full ungracious sort,
For all hookes unhappy to me have resort.
(11.1314-16)

At the conclusion of this stage, the longest of the play, there are two observations to be made. First, we are disappointed in Skelton's long and tedious monologues. Although in the mediaeval moralities there were traditionally long, sententious speeches, and here Skelton is following the

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tradition, we have seen a dramatic power in him that could have been made use of, to characterize the personae of the play. Unfortunately he doesn't use this power in this regard. Secondly, and this is more important, the songs, the music, the pantomime and the elements of ballet are almost professional at times. We must not forget either, that Henry was skilled in the fine arts and that Skelton would have seen to it that all these parts were perfectly executed. He could not have afforded to have his "homily" fail.

Stage 3, "Delusion", opens with a skilful piece of stage business. From the first words of Magnyfycence it is clear that we are coming in on the middle of his conversation with Liberty and Felicity. There follows a discourse on the management of wealth in which we see that these two rogues are managing the Prince as well:

Fel. I say it is a folly to give all wealth away.
Lib. Whether should Wealth be ruled by Liberty,
Or Liberty by Wealth? Let see, tell me that.
Fel. Sir, as meseemeth, ye should be ruled by me.
Mag. What need you with him thus prate and chat?
Fan. Show us your mind then, how to do and what.
(11.1372-77)

They play so skilfully on words that finally the Prince's choice is really theirs. But none can stay with him; all must go "For, Sir, we can do nothing the one without the other." But they agree to send "lusty Pleasure", another of their henchmen, to keep company with their victim.

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The monologue of Magnyfycence that follows is wonderful in its sound and in its dramatic irony. The first round of battle is lost to him but he thinks he has been victorious:

For now, sirs, I am like a Prince should be:
I have Wealth at will, Largesse and Liberty.
(11.1400-01)

And as he pontificates on his glory in "two parts without a mean", his pomposity resounds like the full diapason of an organ. He is Alexander of Macedon, Cyrus of Babylon, Porsena of Turkey and Caesar of Rome fused into one.

I dread no danger, I dance all in delight:
My name is Magnyfycence, man most of might.
(11.1435-36)

Occasionally there are examples of alliteration and some high-flown diction but on the whole the colloquial flavour persists throughout. Some good illustrations of this are in the following lines:

Surely it is that all may save and spill.
(line 1421)
No, that I assure you: Look who was the best.
(line 1427)
I drive down these dastards with a dint of my fist.
(line 1429)
What man is so mazed with me that dare meet,
I shall flap him as a fool to fall at my feet.
(11.1449-50)
Nor none so hardy of them with me that durst crake,
But I shall frounde them on the foretop, and gar
them to the quake.
(11.1456-57)

Courtly Abusion - alias Pleasure - comes "doing reverence and courtesy", to the side of Magnyfycence and in

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honeyed words explains that anything, even fleshly satisfaction, can be gained by the payment of money. All he has to do is follow his own will: "by wayward wilfulness let each thing be conveyed." His reasoning continues thus:

Take your pleasure and use free liberty;
 And if you see anything against your mind,
 Then some occasion of quarrel must ye find,
 And frown it and face it, as though ye would fight,
 Fret yourself for anger and for despite;
 Hear no man, whatsoever they say,
 But do as ye list, and take your own way.
 (11.1541-47)

It is ironical to recall the history of the latter half of Henry's reign and realize that the real lesson of this "goodly interlude" was lost on the young king, while the "merry" of the lines above and the command a little later to "let your lust and liking stand for a law" became the rule of his life. Then, to find a "whoreson that will beat a knave" was no longer an abusion but a "princely pleasure and a lordly mind."

Having descended to such weakness, Magnyfycence casts Measure out the door,

For in Pleasure and Surveyance, and also in thee,
 (Cloaked Collusion)
 I have set my whole felicity,
 And such as you will, shall lack no promotion.
 (11.1733-35)

Folly rushes in and with wit worthy of one of Shakespeare's Fools, he bides the time before the entrance of Fancy "sad" of face. And all in a trice, Magnyfycence is overwhelmed

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with the knowledge of his foolishness:

Mag. What, hath Sadness beguiled me so?

Fan. Nay, madness hath beguiled you and many mo;
For Liberty is gone and so is Felicity.

Mag. Gone? alas, ye have undone me!

Fan. Nay, he that sent us Cloaked Collusion,
And your painted Pleasure, Courtly Abusion,
And your demeanour with Counterfeit Countenance,
And your surveyor, Crafty Conveyance,
Ere ever we were ware brought us in adversity,
And hath robbed you quite from all felicity.
(11.1805-13)

A grim spectre suddenly appears and as the Stage ends,
Magnifycence inquires: "Who is yonder that grimly looks?"
Fancy flees like all the others for he will not "Come in his
clutches." As in the case of Everyman, all his worldly
friends have fled.

Stage 4, the "Overthrow", opens with what Lloyd
calls a most

impressive passage. The great speech of Adver-
sity is one of the most memorable in the play.²⁸

Standing over Magnifycence, now "beaten down and spoiled of
all his goods and raiment", Adversity announces:

I am Adversity, that for thy misdeed
From God am sent to 'quite thee thy meed.
(11.1826-27)

The speech in iambic pentameter, parallels in many instances
the lofty speech of Magnifycence in Stage 3. From a "Prince
Peerless" he has become a "vile vilyard"; from a "duke" he

²⁸ Lloyd, L.J., John Skelton, p. 96.

descends to a "losel". He drove down the "dastards with the dint of my fist" and is in turn plucked down and rushed at "roughly and made "lie full low." He could boast of the might and the powers of emperors in his past, but now he would not dare "for shame look me in the face." Adversity spares neither prince nor pauper and has now come upon Magnyfycence:

And with all the echoes of the Old Testament God of Justice, he announces, "I am God's prepositor", adding that:

Suddenly he remembers that he must "take mischief and vengeance of other mo", and with a great flourish calls to Poverty to "take this caitiff to thy lore."

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prince cannot: "Alas, I wot not what I should pray!"

Abandoned by all, Magnyfycence "dolorously makes his moan" in a verse stanza filled with "o's" that once more is almost Shakespearian in tone and worthy to be set to music: sad, mournful, desperate. And softly, soothingly, on to the scene comes Liberty, with a lullaby designed to remind this fallen prince of days when he forgot to "beware of too much liberty." "The style of the Lully, lullay"²⁹ changes to a homily in octo-syllabic lines ending up with the philosophy that:

For I am a virtue, If I be well used,
And I am a vice where I am abused.
(11.2049-50)

Suddenly there is the melancholy tone of a horn blown "behind the audience" and Crafty Conveyance and Cloaked Collusion, later joined by Counterfeit Countenance,

standing figures round the fallen Prince, chant alternate verses like antiphons in a scene that has rich possibilities of dignified presentation.³⁰

This is the end for Magnyfycence and he wants to live no longer:

For to live in misery, it is harder than death.
I am weary of the world, for unkindness me sleeth.
(11.2232-33)

29 Lloyd, L.J., John Skelton, p. 87.

30 Gordon, I.A., John Skelton: Laureate, p. 143.

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This is Despair's cue and in he comes, following hard upon Adversity. He tells the prince that he is not worthy "to look God in the face" and his sins are innumerable so that he can never expect "mercy in His sight." Magnifycence agrees and wishes himself dead. Out of nowhere, and for the first time in the play, comes Mischief holding in his hand a halter and a knife. Magnifycence chooses the latter and as Despair tries to hide, and Mischief shouts "Alarum!", the hero prepares to stab himself, and Stage 4 closes.

This has been the most exciting Stage so far and Skelton has used to advantage a variety of metres and rhythms, the antiphonal chorus, surprise, conflict and action. At the end, the suspense is good and leads smoothly into Stage 5, "Restoration" together with the entrance of Goodhope who "snatches away the knife." In contrast to the rhyme royal stanzas of Despair, Goodhope and Magnifycence converse in pentameter lines. The prince listens to his advice: to flee always from Despair and Wanhope, and to turn to Goodhope, his "pothecary" who advises:

Now must I make you an electuary soft,
 I to minister it, you to receive it oft,
 With rhubarb of repentance in you for to rest;
 With drammes of devotion your diet must be drest;
 With gummes ghostly of glad heart and mind,
 To thank God of his sond, and comfort ye shall find.
 Put from you presumption and admit humility,
 And heartily thank God of your adversity;
 And love that Lorde that for your love was dead,
 Wounded from the foot to the crowne of the head.
 (11.2305-14)

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Humbly Magnyfycence commits himself "unto Goddes will" and prepares to meet Redress who sends for Sad Circumspection and gives the prince the "habiliment" of the state of grace.

In return, he must:

Determine to amende all your wanton excess,
And be ruled by me, which am called Redress.
(11.2359-60)

But redress is redeless, and may do no correction,
Now welcome, forsooth, Sad Circumspection.
(11.2367-68)

Sad Circumspection promises: "From crafters and hafters I you forfende," and Perseverance warns:

To the increase of your honour then arm you with right,
And fumously address you with magnanimity;
And ever let the dread of God be in your sight;
And know yourself mortal, for all your dignity.
(11.2435-38)

The play is rounded out with a moral on the mutability of Fortune:

This treatise, devised to make you disport,
Sheweth nowadays how the world cumbered is,
To the pith of the matter who list to resort;
To-day it is well, to-morrow it is all amiss,
To-day in delight, to-morrow hard of bliss,
To-day a lord, to-morrow lie in the dust:
Thus in the world there is no earthly trust.
(11.2470-76)

To all who have eyes to see and ears to hear, the moral comes through clearly and Skelton pronounces it through Magnyfycence:

This matter we have moved, you mirthful to make,
Pressly purposed under pretence of play,
Showeth wisdom to them that wisdom can take.
(11.2483-85)

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The fervent hope that ends the play, is in the words of
Redress:

And ye that have hearde this disporte and game,
Jesu preserve you from endless woe and shame!
Amen!

(11.2503-04)

It has in truth, been a "goodly interlude and a merry."

If we read the play from an unbiased point of view,
it is almost impossible to believe that Wolsey, and Wolsey
alone, was the target of all the satire. Lloyd mentions how
closely such criticisms of the Cardinal like:

A knuckleboneyard will counterfeit a clerk,
He would trot gently, but he is too stark,
At his cloaked counterfeiting dogs doth bark;
A carter a courtier, it is a worthy wark,
That with his whip his mares was wont to yark;
A coistrel to drive the devil out of the dark,
A counterfeit courtier with a knaves mark.

(11.485-91)³¹

fit in with Wolsey's character as Skelton later lampoons
it.³² Also Cloaked Collusion's advice to the prince:

Sir, of my counsel this shall be the ground:
To choose out of ii.iii. of such you love best,
And let all your fancies upon them rest;
Spare for no cost to give them pound and penny,
Better to make three rich than for to make many.

(11.1714-18)³³

But these darts might have been aimed likewise at the

31 Lloyd, L.J., John Skelton, p. 85.

32 Poems, p. 180.

33 Ibid, p. 220.

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courtiers in the "Bowge of Court" many years before, and at another generation of them in 1517. In other words, as Skelton has already called the play a "goodly interlude and a merry" and as the satire can quite easily be interpreted as general criticism of the state of the court, it seems like folly to concentrate on one man, Wolsey, at the expense of the morality elements of the play.

As for Magnyfycence, his descriptions and actions suit the young monarch Henry VIII, but he could also be any wealthy and powerful noble at any time influenced by a powerful man or fawning men. To say that each of the six vices "enlarges upon some particular defect in Wolsey's actions and character"³⁴ is to give more importance to one of Skelton's contemporaries than to the play itself. This would be contrary to the elements of good drama which we have already shown that the poet possessed. Perhaps Wolsey might have recognized himself in any one, or all of the vices, and if this is true, then it makes Magnyfycence a "first shot" against him. But we do not know that he did, nor is there any evidence that Henry did either. Save then for the elongated Stage 2, it is a good play and has much merit, least of which is its satire against Wolsey and the political policies of the time.

34 Lloyd, L.J., John Skelton, p. 79.

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Much more significant is the fact that in 1516 and not later than 1518, Skelton had such keen insight and that he was well tuned to the times, to the court and the courtiers, and to his former pupil. Furthermore, he was able to look out beyond the times and foresee a good deal of what was in store for the Tudor throne. That he put his finger quite accurately upon the evils of the times is evident by the reaction of the men "empoisoned with slander and false detractions" whom Skelton censures in "Against Venomous Tongues." These were the tongues of men who saw Magnyfycence and experienced the fact that the truth hurts. But they were cowards, too, for they were afraid to speak out. Of them the poet says:

Whosoever that tale unto you told,
He said untruly, to say that I wold
Control the cognizance of noble men
Either by language or by my pen.
(11.20-23)

He cares not for their "tongues running astray" and their "language full of villainy." These tongues "sharper than swords", "more stinging than scorpions",

More venomous and much more virulent
Than any poisoned toad or any serpent,
(11.53-54)

are the very ones which he has criticized in the play that they have condemned:

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Such tongues unhappy hath made great division
In realms, in cities, by such false abusion;
Of false fickle tongues such cloaked collusion
Hath brought noble princes to extreme confusion.
(ll.55-58)

The political and satirical overtones to the morality Magnyfycence, whereas not its most important characteristic, make a strong transition between the early satires like the "Bowge of Court" and the trilogy of political rockets which Skelton fired after 1521. In the poet's own estimation, this "Wolsey trilogy" as it has been called in literary history, was the great work of his life and the project for which all his writing had been a preparation.

CHAPTER SIXTRUMPETS OF SATIRE

As the world would judge success, John Skelton at sixty possessed it. He was an acknowledged scholar, an ordained priest, a favoured court poet of two monarchs and was now the privileged "orator regius" of a court known throughout Europe for its patronage of intellectual pursuits. But he had his enemies too, and some of these were powerful. No wonder then that he prefaces the Wolsey trilogy with the quotation:

Quis consurget mecum adversus malignantes? Aut
quis stabit mecum adversus operantes iniquitatem?
Nemo, Domine!¹

Indeed, he could find "no one, Lord!" to join forces with him in his militant campaign, first, against the most powerful man in Tudor England, and second, against a lethargy on the part of the Faithful, both priests and laity, that would usher in the Reformation before another generation would grow to manhood.

For years he had witnessed the increasing apathy taking hold of a clergy neither disciplined by their superiors nor capable of disciplining themselves. Many of them

¹ Psalm 93 (94) Who takes my part against the oppressor? Who rallies to my side against the wrong-doers? verse 16, Knox edition of the Holy Bible, p. 517.

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could scarcely be proud of their personal conduct and their lack of priestly dignity. On the other hand, many among the lower clergy were poorly prepared for their pastoral duties. They had come from a milieu which could afford no better calling for them, and therefore:

Few of them could have felt much zeal for a calling which few of them had chosen. Many were too ignorant to perform its duties competently.²

Just how ignorant they were is indicated in the following survey made prior to England's break with Rome:

Of two hundred and fifty clergy in one diocese one hundred and seventy-one could not say the Ten Commandments and ten did not even know the Lord's Prayer. Too many of the clergy were worldly and paid only lip service to their priestly vows.³

The bishops, absent often from their sees but financed by their flock, were no longer shepherds but prosperous members of a hierarchy which appeared to the people

parasitical and the service rendered incommensurate with the tribute levied.⁴

But in spite of the heavy financial burden of the two archbishoprics, the seventeen bishoprics, and the

diocesan pyramids of deaneries, archdeaconries, canonries and prebends, and the rich benefices with enough of which a determined pluralist

2 Bindoff, S.T., Tudor England, p. 80.

3 Ricker, J.S., The British Epic, p. 86.

4 Bindoff, S.T., Tudor England, p. 81.

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might net as much as a bishop⁵

the people appeared to be a devout nation, for the nine thousand parishes of England were centres of an intense "spiritual-cumsocial community life". But lack of adequate instruction was making attendance at Mass and church festivals purely social activities and upon this foundation one cannot build a strong church. Consequently, the state of the Church in England fell so low that even

the average Englishman was angered by the fact that they saw it endangered.⁶

Skelton had witnessed this for years, for as early as 1489 even the king had not put first things first. Edward had "stored his coffers"

With tasks taking of the commonalty:
I took their treasure but of their prayers missed⁷

Later, as a university don and a court poet, the poet could not have been blind to the increasing emphasis by the clergy on things temporal rather than spiritual but it was only after assuming the responsibilities of the priesthood himself that he realized by experience what in his lay state had been mostly conjecture: that the ranks of the clergy

5 Ibid, p. 81

6 Berdan, J.M., "On the Dating of Skelton's Satires" in PMLA, xxix, 1914, p. 514.

7 Henderson, P., ed., Poem, "On the death of the Noble Prince, King Edward the Fourth", p. 2.

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were filled with men whose lives were living contradictions of their promises of poverty and service and their vows of celibacy.⁸

In his position as poet-priest, he had difficulty in finding an ally who would rise up with him against evil-doers. Held suspect both by those good priests who did not trust him and by those lax ones who could not go along with his suggestions of reform; envied by the nobles and courtiers who were jealous of his privileged position in court; despised by some of his parishioners for such outspoken pieces as his "Epitaph for Adam Udersall", he could only hope that some of what he would say would bear fruit. His trumpet blasts would awaken many who had been listening all along to the same tunes, but for whom until now, they had been largely ineffectual.

Like Skelton, others had been raising their voices. Addressing, in 1518, Wolsey's Legatine Council, John Fisher, the saintly Bishop of Rochester, had spoken freely against the unworthiness of life, the worldliness of dress, and the pomp of many who had come to that clerical assembly:

Who can willingly suffer and bear with us, in
whom (preaching humility, sobriety, and contempt

⁸ If we can see anything behind The Merie Tales of Skelton published after his death, Skelton himself fell easy prey to the temptations of the world and the flesh.

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of the world) they may evidently perceive haughtiness in mind, pride in gesture, sumptuousness in apparel, and damnable excess in all worldly delicacies.⁹

Erasmus wrote in his preface to the Enchiridion, in 1517:

I did see the common people of Christendom to be corrupted, not only in their ways, but in their ideas. I considered the most part of those which profess themselves to be pastors and doctors to abuse the titles of Christ to their own advantage . . . preaching men's inventions and alleging them to be God's commandments.¹⁰

And Thomas More, in his Utopia has Raphael Hythloday say to Cardinal Morton:

For looke in what partes of the realme doth growe the fynest and therfore dearest woll, there noblemen and gentlemen: yea and certeyn Abbottes, holy men, God wot, - not contenting them selves with the yearely revenues and profytes. . . leave no grounde for tillage, thei inclose al into pastures. . . thei leave nothing standynge but only the churche, to be made a shepewse.¹¹

John Skelton must have listened to, or read, all these men and more, who were expressing their fears for a church whose doctrines, though unchanging, were in the hands of custodians who were being swayed by the winds of change. In spite of his many failings and the posthumous "Merie Tales", there is

⁹ Wilby, N.M., The Story of Blessed John Fisher, p. 108.

¹⁰ Hughes, Philip, A Popular History of the Reformation, p. 77 (quotation from Erasmus: Enchyridion)

¹¹ More, Thomas, Utopia, edited by Geo. Sampson, London, C. Bell and Sons, Ltd., 1910, p. 39.

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nothing extant to prove that Skelton at any time flouted the doctrines of the Roman church. It is for this reason, doubtless, that the poet felt justified in his criticism of the church and the clergy of England in general, and Cardinal Wolsey in particular.

Skelton uses for his first spokesman Colin Clout, a layman and a lowly wanderer, who in his travels over the countryside has discovered the complaints of the people. Who better than he, can express popular feelings? And he does so with all the gay abandon of the news reporter and in the sprightly metre of the minstrel. But the joviality is merely a lure to penetrate into the more serious interior, heightening the satire in the hundreds of lines of Skeltonics. And the poet makes this clear from the beginning when he has Colin say:

For though my rhyme be ragged,
Tattered and jagged,
Rudely rain-beaten,
Rusty and moth-eaten,
If ye take well therewith,
It hath in it some pith.
(ll.53-8)

There is a certain charm about this protagonist of the poet's and Skelton has used this quality as a technique to attract the reader to the "pith". Here is this fellow who can "rhyme", "write" or "indict"

Either for delight
Or else for despise.

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He can "compile" books in "divers manners style"; he can
 "preach" and "teach". He seems to be able to do anything.
 But what do people say of him? That his head is "so fat";
 that he knows not "whereof he speaketh";

He crieth and he creaketh,
 He prieth and he peeketh,
 He chides and he chatters,
 He prates and he patters,
 He clitters and he clatters,
 He meddles and he smatters,
 (11.19-24)

In fine:

He is but a fool;
 Let him go to school,
 On a three-footed stool
 That he may down sit,
 For he lacketh wit!
 (11.28-32)

And all this leads up to a rather shocking climax. Why
 won't his countrymen listen to what he has to say?

The Devil, they say, is dead
 The Devil is dead!

So we are hardly into the poem at all before we realize that
 the situation about which Colin will "speak plain" is so bad
 that the Devil can afford to make himself scarce. People
 don't have to be tempted; they have fallen already. And the
 clever omission of the comma after the first "the Devil is
 dead" heightens the feeling of impatience which the people
 show when Colin hits "the nail on the head".

It is not long before we are given the heart of the
 argument contained in the discourse:

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For, as far as I can see,
 It is wrong with each degree:
 For the temporality
 Accuseth the spirituality;
 The spiritual again
 Doth grudge and complain
 Upon the temporal men:
 Thus each of the other blother
 The one against the other.
 (11.59-67)

But from here on, Colin is careful not to argue from his own point of view (though we are sure that he agrees with everything he hears!) and emphasizes this fact by the insertion, frequent and emphatic, of such phrases as: "laymen say indeed", "the temporality say plain", "mensay", "I hear the people talk", "to hear the people jangle", "the commonalty doth report" and so on. Furthermore, in order not to antagonize any man who "virtuous is", he inserts, after eleven hundred lines of biting satire, the reminder that:

Of no good bishop speak I,
 Nor good priest I ascry,
 Good friar, nor good chanon,
 Good nunne, nor good canon,
 Good monke, nor good clerk,
 Nor yet of no good work.
 (11.1097-1102)

Nor can anyone blame him for anything he has said,

For no man have I named:
 Wherefore should I be blamed?
 (11.1113-14)

This is the same technique that Skelton has used "Against the Scots", in "Phyllyp Sparrowe" and the "Bowge of Courte". But with this, all similarity ends. Colin Clout speaks in

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biting staccato, with sound fitting sense in almost every case. There is no fanfare, no requiem, no dream vision. What he has to say he utters in violent plosives which give vent to his anger. And this gives the predominant tone to the whole piece: from the first line: "What can it avail" to the end of his report:

Run God, run Devil,
Run who may run best,
And let take all the rest!
We set not a nutshell
The way to heaven or hell!
(11.1224-28)

Another technique which makes this poem forceful is the simplicity of diction. Colin speaks always in the language of the people, for Skelton never forgets that it is the "laymen" whose words he is reporting. Therefore, their whispered complaints are made in "hugger-mugger"; the absence of their bishops occurs because they have gone to the "kinges hall",

To fat their bodies full,
Their soules lean and dull,
And have full little care
How evil their ship fare!
(11.128-31)

The common people are "loath to hang the bell about the cattes neck" but they say just the same that while the hierarchy is "belapped" in purple and

Their mules gold doth eat,
Their neighbours die for meat.
(11.317-18)

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Even the nuns are "silly"; the church "hath too mickle"; the bishops are "puffed with pride" - even those who having come of "poor estate"

Suddenly upstart
From the dung-cart,
The mattock and the shule,
To reign and to rule.
(11.646-49)

The comparisons are equally simple: Doctor Dawpatus is "drunken as a mouse"; the friars are "barrels full of glut-tony"; a woman's chatter is a "quean's yelling" of which to beware. Amid such straight-forward talk, then, any latin expressions are like arrows aimed for the bull's-eye: as when he describes ordination as catching "Dominus vobiscum by the head"; or the fornication committed by priests,

Cum ipsis vel illis
Qui manent in villis
Est uxor vel ancilla.
(11.253-55)

Prelates that should be "lanterns of light" instead are

Drowned in deliciis,
In gloria et divitiis,
In admirabili honore,
In gloria et splendore
Fulgurantibus hastae,
Viventes parum caste.
(11.440-45)

easily translatable even by those who do not know much latin, and cleverly using words familiar to the liturgy.

In the same way a sudden return to the aureate diction of the Digby manuscripts, as in:

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Some make epilogation
 Of high predestination;
 And of recidivation
 They make interpretation
 Of an awkward fashion;
 And of the prescience
 Of divine essence;
 And what hypostasis
 Of Christ's manhood is.
 (ll.517-25)

make high mockery of the terms used by the lay people to "spread abroad" their malicious criticism of the priesthood. Furthermore, their lack of power by the use of such language gives greater emphasis to the "pith" of Colin Clout's expression.

The poem is not lacking in touches of humour, made even more effective by the fact that in most cases it is accompanied by, or contained in, an excellent word picture. For example, many "noblemen born" are forced to fawn before those who have bought their way to prelacy. Then

Great lords must crouch and kneel
 And break their hose at the knee
 (ll.631-2)

But pride goeth before a fall, he warns, so

Let him be well beware
 Lest that his foot slip,
 And have such a trip,
 And fall in such decay,
 That all the world may say,
 'Come down, in the devil way!
 (ll.667-72)

Everyone "chats" about the bishops, yet

That though ye round your hair
 An inch above your ear,

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And have aures patentēs
 And parum intendentēs,
 And your tonsures be cropped,
 Your ears they be stopped!
 (11.675-80)

The friars, who are forced to preach instead of the bishops
 and priests, "blabber, bark and blother"

And make a Welshman's hose
 Of the text and of the glose.
 (11.780-1)

and being so attainted with "covetise, ambition and superstition"

That they be deaf and dumb,
 And play silence and glum,
 Can say nothing but "Mum!"
 (11.905-7)

The technique which Skelton uses with masterful force is the "Skeltonic" line, or "Skeltoniad" as it is sometimes called. Churton Collins calls this the poet's favourite metre which is

a headlong, voluble, breathless doggerel,
 which rattling and clashing on through quick recurring rhymes¹²

and is most effective in such satirical pieces like the one we are discussing. Kendle, who has made a detailed study of the form, describes it thus:

¹² Collins, Churton, "John Skelton" in the Oxford Companion to English Literature, ed. Sir Paul Harvey, OUP, 1958, p. 729.

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The Skeltonic is built around a series of short lines of generally two, and sometimes three or more stressed syllables. The lines are often characterized by parallelism of structure and a tendency toward rhyme-runs. Though the rhymes frequently occur in couplets, they seem to be used with no pre-determined arrangement in mind.¹³

Why does Skelton make such a studied use of this verse form in "Colin Clout"? First, no doubt, because Colin is a vagabond and a reporter. As such, he is no student and is versed only in the language of the people. What metre, then, could be better suited to the occasion than

the colloquial and apparently unstudied tone
of the ordinary Skeltonic.¹⁴

Colin speaks as the words occur to him: "For, as far as I can see"; "And while the heads do this"; "Take me as I intend"; "and all the fault they lay"; "Yet, over all that" and so on. But in spite of the conversational tone, the lines conform to the pattern of the Skeltonic: short, two-stressed and a number of unstressed syllables. There are numerous examples of parallelisms, particularly when the speaker wants to be emphatic. For example, he chides the bishops who "sit still" when they are surrounded by heretics and schismatics:

¹³ Kendle, Burton Stuart, The Ancestry and Character of the Skeltonic, Ph.D. thesis in English, University of Wisconsin, 1961, (unpublished), Intro. p. iii.

¹⁴ Ibid, p. 6.

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That would intoxicate,
 That would coinquinate,
 That would contaminate,
 And that would violate,
 And that would derogate,
 And that would abrogate
 The Church's high estates.
 (11.704-10)

There are rhyme-runs that extend from three lines to as many as five (frequently) and six or seven, several times. This is not just "breathless doggerel" but a real attempt to show that Colin, representing the laymen, is making a sincere and passionate attempt to launch

a bitter attack on the prelates of the church
 for not giving a lead to the nation against luxury
 and heresy.¹⁵

There can be no "predetermined arrangement" of rhyme and rhyme-runs, for this is not the ordinary way of speech. Colin uses no subtlety, no cunning. He charges head-on to attack a contemporary problem which must have disturbed a multitude of the thinking men of his time. But he mentions no names and points to no special place or area. This, he lets us know, is a general condition. All are talking about it; all should take heed.

However, Colin Clout is not subtle in his remarks. There is an urgency in his mood: a sort of now or never criticism which leads directly into, and makes an excellent

¹⁵ Gordon, I.A., John Skelton: Poet Laureate,
 p. 37.

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preparation for the two other poems of the trilogy.

There are some references that seem to be veiled utterances against definite targets, like that one which Henderson notes to be a dig at Wolsey's affair with a Miss Lark:¹⁶

For some say ye hunt in parkes,
And hawk on hobby larkes,
And other wanton warkes,
When the night darkes.
(11.189-92)

Edwards makes this same claim¹⁷ but Heiserman adds in a note:

But the larks are those of the cowardly clergy,
not of the cat whose neck they are loth to bell.¹⁸

Another few lines seem to refer to Wolsey's promulgation of a dispensation which eased the fasting regulations during the Lent of 1522,¹⁹

How some of you do eat
In Lenten season flesh meat.
(11.101-02)

Nor in holy Lenten season
Ye will neither beans ne peason;
But ye look to be let loose
To a pig or to a goose.
(11.108-11)

and the embroidery on this idea goes through twenty-five

¹⁶ Poems, p. 255.

¹⁷ Edwards, H.L.R., Skelton, p. 212.

¹⁸ Heiserman, A.R., Skelton and Satire, p. 196.

¹⁹ Nelson, W., John Skelton, p. 194.

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lines. But the pronoun "some" makes the "ye" plural so it is likely that there were many others who were only too glad to follow suit and Skelton is probably aiming at them all.

Cavendish quotes the gentleman-usher of the Cardinal: Wolsey would ride to court in the following way:

His upper garment was of either fine scarlet, or taffety, but most commonly of fine crimson satin engrained, his pillion of fine scarlet, with a neck set in the inner side with black velvet, and a tippet of sables about his neck; he rode a mule, a lowly commoner among beasts of burden...yet the mule was disguised out of all recognition in crimson velvet...The stirrups for my lord Cardinal's feet were of gold no less. Then marched he forward with a train of noble men and gentlemen, each having his footman.²⁰

It is tempting, therefore, to see how close Skelton comes to this in lines such as:

To ride upon a mule
With golde all betrapped,
In purple and pall belapped;
Some hatted and some capped,
Richly and warm bewrapped,
(God wot to their great pains!)
In rochets of fine Rennes,
White as morrow's milk;
Their tabbards of fine silk,
Their stirrups of mixt gold begared:
There may no cost be spared.
Their mules gold doth eat,
Their neighbours die for meat.
(11.316-28)

But it has already been mentioned that these same critical

²⁰ Cavendish, George, The Life of Cardinal Wolsey, London, 1885, p. 48 ff.

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remarks were levelled at all the clergy and hierarchy by Bishop John Fisher in 1518 at the Legatine Council.

Again, compare this description of Hampton court:

The area of glass in Wolsey's palace was more than doubled. The windows were glazed, and no longer closed only with a shutter ... His ambulatory spaces were long porticoes, or halls with windows on each side, looking on the gardens or the rivers ... one traverses eight rooms before reaching his audience chamber ... hangings were of wonderful value, and every place did glitter with innumerable vessels of gold and silver.²¹

with some of the descriptive words and phrases of Skelton's "Colin Clout". Buildings were being erected "royally" by the Bishops; halls and bowers "stretch to the stars"; there were "glass windows", "cloths of gold", "arras of rich array", and tapestries which can scarcely be other than "Petrach's Triumphs" purchased by the Cardinal.

Within a hundred lines of the conclusion of the poem, Skelton, through Colin, makes mockery of the prelates by having one of their number (supposed to be Wolsey) make reference to the fact that both clergy and laity were refusing to pay the "amicable grant" of 1522 to help pay for the war in France. Everywhere people rebelled against

the capital levy of one-sixth on the goods of the laity and one-third on those of the clergy, and a similar tax on incomes from lands, benefices,

²¹ Ferguson, Charles W., Naked to Mine Enemies, Boston, Little Brown and Co. 1958, p. 222 ff.

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salaries and wages; and these rates ... fixed in the secret instructions which Wolsey sent to the commissioners after their appointment.²²

This is borne out in Hall's account:

They saied that the cardinall and all the doers thereof were enemies to the kyng and to the commonwealthe. This infamie was spoken in preachynges an euerywhere.²³

This, according to the poet, is the high cleric's reaction to this turn of events:

At Paules Cross or elsewhere,
Openly at Westminstere,
And Saint Mary Spittle,
They set not by us a whistle!
At the Austin Friars
They count us for liars!
And at Saint Thomas of Akers
They clack of us like crakers,
How we will rule all at will
Without good reason or skill;
(11.1183-93)

And we will rule and reign,
And our matters maintain,
Who dare say there again,
Or who dare disdain,
At our pleasure and will.
(11.1214-18)

When so many sections of this poem seem to point to Wolsey, it is easy enough to interpret the whole in the light of the Cardinal's shortcomings. Thus the general nature of Colin is forgotten with the result that:

22 Pollard, A.E., Wolsey, Toronto, Longmans, Green and Co., 1953, p. 142-3.

23 Hall, Edward, Hall's Chronicle, London, 1809, p. 696.

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the sixteenth century read Wolsey into the whole poem, that a satire upon a general condition became a satire upon a single individual.²⁴

Heiserman reminds us that some of the passages in "Colin Clout"

no doubt allude to some of the details of Wolsey's life; but the critic must realize at the outset that the evils which Wolsey manifests are themselves as significant as the Cardinal himself, that 'Colin Clout' is not merely an attack on Wolsey but on the clergy, the nobility, the heretical laity, and the disorder of the times. To miss this point is to miss the art and meaning of the poem.²⁵

To sum up then: Skelton saw very clearly where the Church in England was going. The Bishops were proud and arrogant and neglectful of all the duties that marked them shepherds of their flock. The lower clergy, following in their wake, became lax and self-indulgent. Religious men and women were laying aside the promises made in their vows and were steeped in worldly desires. Lethargy hung over the church in England like a pall. In his attempt to bring the evils to light, Skelton called on

the prelates for a renewed assurance of their faith years before the Council of Trent enjoined it in grave assembly.²⁶

We can only wonder why his words spoken so loud and clear

24 Berdan, J.M., Early Tudor Poetry, p. 198.

25 Heiserman, A.R., Skelton and Satire, p. 197-8.

26 Gordon, I.A., John Skelton: Poet Laureate, p. 110.

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carried so little weight. But he was nothing daunted by the apparent unfruitfulness of his protagonist Colin Clout. It only made him keener to use "Parrot", who was his "own dear heart" and his "dear darling", to initiate a more bitterly pointed attack on the "filthy Gorgon", as he calls Wolsey at the height of his denunciation of him.

"Speke Parrot" the second of the Wolsey trilogy, is a conundrum to most of the critics. Heiserman attempts to show what the poet has done. The two main traditions of anti-court satire: the letter and the allegorical dream-vision, Skelton had mastered. Now he experiments further.

One could attack the absurdities and sins of the times simply by constructing a rhymed sermon; or one could leave out the prayers and the biblical allusions of homilectic complaint and compose a plain chant against the outrages of the day; or one could compose a set of what appeared to be nonsense verses which included cryptic allusions to contemporary villains; or one could combine homily, chant and nonsense verse by pretending to write a 'prophecy' like St. John's or Merlin's. In 'Speke Parrot' Skelton tried to use all these methods - and something new besides. What survives is the wreck of his intentions. 'Speke Parrot' is a "boke" which includes 237 lines of apparent nonsense babbled by a parrot, an absurdly long series of envoys which extend and defend the parrot's babbling, a cryptically obscene song, and a set of formal complaints against the reader and his times.²⁷

There are some "lucid" passages, he goes on to say, among the many "fabricated" allusions, but today most of the poem

27 Heiserman, A.R., Skelton and Satire, p. 127.

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is "nonsense to the critic and a stumbling block to the historian."

John Berdan's was the earliest attempt to show that Parrot is not "nonsense". He cleared much of the confusion regarding the poem and says that Skelton's satires "mean something definite",²⁸ and that his contemporaries must have seen this meaning clearly. He quotes Koelbing as follows:

'Speke Parrot', preserved in a greatly mutilated condition, is the most incoherent of all his poems, and, in parts, absolutely unintelligible.²⁹

Berdan counters this by saying that Skelton amused himself by putting all possible hurdles before his meaning: if the reader objected, he could say that all the casual gibberish, the foreign language, the allusions were only forms of "parroting". Definitely there is a hidden meaning and the metaphor and allegory are a protection for Parrot, as seen in such lines as: "Let every man after his merit take his part" (l.207) as if Skelton understood that all readers could not be expected to comprehend equally well what he

²⁸ Berdan, John M., "On the Dating of Skelton's Satires" in PMLA, xxix, 1914, p. 500.

²⁹ Koelbing, A., Zur Charakteristik John Skelton's, Stuttgart, 1904, p. 123-27, quoted by John Berdan in "Speke Parrot: An Interpretation" in MLN, Vol. xxx, p. 140.

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was trying to say. The poet repeats the idea in "L'Envoy Primere":

For who looketh wisely in your workes may find
Much fruitful matter.
(11.298-99)

and later:

For truth in parable ye wantonly pronounce,
Languages divers, yet under that doth rest
Matter more precious than the rich jacounce,
Diamonde, or ruby, or balas of the best.
(11.363-66)

Berdan also feels that "Speke Parrot" is not actually a satire against Wolsey but rather a running commentary on the events of 1517-18. And Parrot is not keen for change; he is a conservative and the

interest of the present solution is that it shows Skelton not as a reformer and not as a radical,³⁰

but one who praises the good things of the past and wants to hang on to them, at the same time accepting what he sees good in the present.

Nelson, on the other hand, calls it "an obscurely written satire against Wolsey"³¹ in which the poet,

³⁰ Berdan, John M., "Speke Parrot: An Interpretation", in MLN, Vol. 30, p. 144.

³¹ Nelson, William, "Skelton's Quarrel with Wolsey" in PMLA, 1936, p. 377.

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builds a wall of metaphor and allegory and which proves a formidable obstacle to the comprehension of the reader today.³²

He continues with an analysis of the structure of the poem. He finds two gross divisions: the first, a satirical attack upon the new academic trends, and secondly, a critical review of contemporary evils the like of which have never been seen "syns Deucalion's Flodde". The fact that Wolsey is addressed in the three envoys "under a highly virtuous name" makes Skelton's sarcasm much more obvious. This critic continues by saying that he believes that whereas the first part achieves some "semblance of unity", the second can scarcely have been intended as part of the whole:

It is simply a series of more or less discreet envoys or afterthoughts appended to the poem itself in the fashion of the three Latin pieces added to "Why Come Ye Nat to Courte?" and like those pieces finding place by virtue of its compatability in purpose with the poem preceding it.³³

For L.J. Lloyd, the figure of Wolsey stands out plainly for all to see. But he feels that Skelton is a poor critic, for never do we receive from him a true picture of the man. So one-sided is his opinion that he neither sees, nor allows others to see, the Cardinal's efficiency, his

³² Nelson, William, "Speke Parrot" in PMLA, Mar. 1936, p. 59.

³³ _____, John Skelton: Laureate, p.184.

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drive, his energy, his internal policy, of which such men as Thomas More could not complain. But,

in the main, his picture is a gross caricature and bears very little real relation to its subject. It is like some grotesque and savage cartoon But it undoubtedly represents the opinion of the majority.³⁴

Gordon shares the same opinion calling "Speke Parrot" a baffling poem and that under Parrot's cloak

Skelton continues the attack on the Cardinal, and by almost every device known to satire, innuendo and frontal attack, cryptic oracular utterance and direct charges, he lays bare the weakness of Wolsey's policy.³⁵

The Cardinal has engaged in "so myche consultation almost to none entente"; he has founded a Greek "chayre" at Oxford so that the old learning is passé and

Plautus in his comedies a child shall now rehearse,
And meddle with Quintilian in his 'Declamation',
That petty Cato can scantly construe a verse.
(11.179-81)

He is wilful, a time-waster, an eclipser of the king, and even, it is whispered about, might be a traitor if it suited his need: "Quod magnus est dominus Judas Scarioth" (1.133). Gordon goes farther to note that:

The form of the poem is ingenious and shows amazing originality. Here in the first few years of the sixteenth century is Skelton writing

34 Lloyd, L.J., John Skelton, p. 102.

35 Gordon, I.A., John Skelton: Laureate, p. 156.

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in the idiom of the twentieth..... His method of writing in 'Speke Parrot' is disconcertingly close to that of T.S.Eliot and Ezra Pound, and emphasizes the allusive bias of the mind of Skelton.³⁶

Finally, Stanley Fish gives a detailed, line-by-line analysis showing that Parrot can sustain a "multi-level interpretation": he may be Skelton, the poet (as distinct from Skelton the man); or he may be everyman, intensely aware of all that is not immutable; and on the narrative level he may be Psittacus.³⁷ The poem poses a problem concerning the evils of the day, but we have only Skelton's attitude. Says Fish:

In a way the poem fails, for it offers no solution to the problem it poses - the endemic advance of evil; it merely proclaims a disposition (Skelton's as well as Parrot's) to continue a difficult and perhaps hopeless rearguard action with whatever means (unidentified in the text) are available.³⁸

The poem returns to the form of the rhyme-royal stanza. The first five stanzas are slightly reminiscent of

36 Gordon, I.A., John Skelton: Laureate, p. 156.

37 Nelson, W., John Skelton, p. 183.

38 Fish, S.E., John Skelton's Poetry, p. 175. This critique of the poem extends from pages 135 to 175 and shows more than any other that "Speke Parrot" is a "spiritual autobiography" in which we hear the voice of the poet calling upon us to be "soldiers in the legion of good."

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the "Bowge of Courte" in the fanciful and colorful description of Parrot. Every detail of the bird's qualities receives attention, and in the daintiness and lightness of mood and sound it recalls the same touches in "Philip Sparrow". By the time we have reached the invocation:

Christ save King Henry the Eighth, our royal king,
The red rose in honour to flourish and spring!

With Katherine incomparable, our royal queen also,
That peerless pomegranate, Christ save her
noble grace!

(ll.34-37)

we are soothed into thinking that this poem is going to be different. Such a learned bird as this parrot who can speak Greek; "mew and cry" in Latin, Hebrew, Araby and Chaldean; learn "douce French"; agree in Dutch and Spanish; chatter in "castiliano"; trust himself in Turkey and Thrace and quote Horace from memory, will surely have something worthwhile to say. But in stanza eight we are jolted into Skeltonic reality:

But reason and wit wanteth their provincial
When wilfulness is vicar general.
(ll.53-54)

and in feigned horror, the poet says:

Haec res acu tangitur, Parrot, par ma foy;
Taisez-vous, Parrot, tenez-vous coy!

And the "hush-hush" criticism that follows has been examined and cross-examined by many a Skelton scholar.

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It is interesting to note the similarity of thought and word sequence between the final general lament that closes "Speke Parrot" and the little poem "The Manner of the World Nowadays" that is attributed to Skelton in Henderson's latest edition of the poetry. Although we are told that "part of this poem may be by another hand",³⁹ we are confident that either the ideas of "The Manner" are all Skelton, or that such ideas were quite general and ran rampant between the periods of 1512 and the writing of "Speke Parrot". In either case, the litany of evils in both is borne out by historians of the period and thus the historicity of Skelton's poetry of this period is strengthened. Sermons had no effect:

So much preaching,
Speaking fair and teaching,
And so ill believing,
Saw I never. (11.133-36)⁴⁰

So much noble preaching, and so little amendment (1.445)

The poor and needy were not cared for:

So many poor
Coming to the door
And so small succour,
Saw I never. (11.93-96)

³⁹ Poems, n. p. 133.

⁴⁰ Ibid. Throughout this contrast the short lines are from "The Manner of the World Nowadays", p. 133 and the long lines are from "Speke Parrot", p. 305-07.

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So much calling on, and so small taking heed; (1.164)
 So little care for the common weal, and so
 much need. (1.166)

the abundance of law-breaking, in spite of the many laws:

And such increase of thieves.

(1. 23)

So many news and knackes,
 So many naughty packes.

(11.57-8)

So many laws to use
 The truth to refuse,
 Such falsehood to excuse.

(11.81-3)

So many a vagabond
 Through all this lond,
 So many in prison bound.

(11.121-23)

So many complaints, and so small redresse;

(11.463-4)

So many thieves hanged, and thieves never the less;
 So much 'prisonment for matters not worth a haw;
 So many papers wering for right a small excess;
 So much pillory-pageants under colour of good law;
 So much turning on the cuck-stool for every gee-gaw;
 So much mockish making of statutes of array -
 Since Deucalion's flood was never, I dare say.

(11.470-76)

But the bitterness and the climactic denunciation against Wolsey that is to be found in "Speke Parrot" is nowhere to be found in the early poem. In the intervening ten years, Skelton has cast aside many of his riddles and has come out to do battle in the open. There can be no doubt of the target in such lines as:

So many bulls of pardon published and shewed;
 So much crossing and blessing, and him all beshrewed;
 Such pole-axes and pillars, such mules trapt with gold -
 Since Deucalion's flood in no chronicle is told.

(11.515-18)

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It is possible that too much emphasis has been placed upon the satirical nature of the poem, to the detriment of other equally important elements. Without setting aside the blows against Wolsey and the Church, we see also in "Speke Parrot" a witty tribute to the "popinjay royal" himself. As Nelson has pointed out, Psitaccus in the Geneologia Deorum of Boccaccio, is transformed into a parrot so that the wisdom and virtue for which he was venerated will last eternally. "Parrot's" attributes, then, as enunciated by Skelton are the poet's own: at least this is what he wants us to think:

Parrot is no stammering stare, that men call a starling
 But Parrot is my own dear heart and my dear darling.
 (11.210-11)

The apparent conglomeration of Parrot's talents, then, up until now so mystifying, so muddled and so obscure, is really the photographic image Skelton had of himself and needs only to have the jig-saw pieces fitted properly together to give us the same effect. Parrot - and the poet - is a linguist, a scholar; he is a student of the classics, the Bible, Canon Law, philosophy. His learning is broad and does not confine itself to the inconsequential and unimportant arguments that merely waste one's time:

Some argue secundum quid ad simpliciter,
 And yet he would be reckoned pro Areopagita;
 And some make distinctions multiplicita,
 Whether ita were before non, or non before ita,

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Neither wise nor well-learned, but like hermaphrodita
 Set sophia aside, for every Jack Raker
 And every mad meddler must now be a maker.
 (11.160-66)

But he is no "mad meddler" and when he commands: "Let
 Parrot have liberty to speak" his words carry weight for
 they arise from the "paedagogio sacro" of the poets.

The poet is a master of rhythms and he uses them
 with great variety in this poem. The short syllables in the
 descriptive words of the introductory stanzas catch the
 effect of the dainty tripping about of the "goodly bird,
 the pretty popinjay":

My little legges, my feet both feat and clean,
 I am a minion to wait upon a queen.
 (11.18-19)

No wonder then, that parrot is at home with the ladies and
 "with them goes to school." But he is quick to tell us that
 he is not just "pretty" but that he is learned too, and when
 he lists his talents given to him by Dame Philology, the
 metre undergoes an effective change. Now, long syllables
 emphasize the importance of the gifts:

My lady mistress, Dame Philology
 Gave me a gifte, in my nest when I lay,
 To learn all language and it to speak aptly.
 (11.43-45)

Then, quick as a flash - even in the same stanza - Parrot
 prances about again:

An almond now for Parrot, delicately drest:
 In salve festa dies, toto there doth best.
 (11.48-49)

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As in "Philip Sparrow", there is a thread of music running through; however, here there are no echoes of the liturgy but of fragments of popular songs, as: "Over in a whinny, Meg!" and "Ho, hostler, fetch my horse a bottle of hay!" And then in contrast to these are the driving long syllables of vituperation in such lines as:

Against frantic frenzy there dare no man say nay,
For frantiness and wilfulness, and brainless ensemble,
The neb of a lion they make to trete and tremble.
(11.419-425)

and the climactic and ponderous chant tone of the final ten denunciatory stanzas.

Thus a great deal more is to be found in "Speke Parrot" than satire against Wolsey and the realm: the unique use of diction, metres which have the beat of driving energy, popular appeal through the addition of songs currently on the lips of the "Colin Clouts" who will sing along with the Popinjay royal. That much of the poem is "incomprehensible" to the twentieth century, should not cause us to question its power at the time of writing. Had it not been powerful, had it not achieved its end - even though only circulated privately - it is not likely that the concluding third of the trilogy would have had the force of "Why Come Ye Nat To Courte?"

It is almost unbelievable that Skelton would have had the courage that it must have taken to have asked this

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question in such outspoken terms and

in the most incisive satire he ever wrote, a thousand of the most scathing lines ever addressed to any statesman.⁴⁰

The content, then, is an open attack on Wolsey and his policy and little can be added to the excellent analyses made by such critics as Nelson,⁴¹ Gordon,⁴² and Kinsman.⁴³ In his biography of Wolsey, Pollard makes copious references to the Cardinal from this poem. But it is an interesting and rewarding experience to go farther and examine the techniques that Skelton uses to make this such a powerful satire.

The title itself is arresting and requires some explanation. The court in Tudor times was an important part not only of the king's palace and the queen's suite, but also of the dukes' and lords' manorial castles. The lesser courts were modelled on the royal "council" and gradually there grew to be little difference between the "council" that was called and the "counsel" that was invited.

⁴⁰ Gordon, I.A., John Skelton: Poet Laureate, p.37.

⁴¹ Nelson, W., "Skelton's Quarrel with Wolsey" in PMLA, 1936, p. 377-98. Also: John Skelton: Laureate.

⁴² Gordon, I.A., John Skelton: Poet Laureate.

⁴³ Kinsman, R.S., "The 'Bush' and the 'Fox' in Skelton's 'Why Come Ye Nat to Courte?'" in PQ, Vol. xxix, 1950, p. 61-4.

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Frequently the king would choose special groups or special men for expert advice; the group gradually developed into the "privy council" and the individual expert into the "secretary of state." But at the flick of a finger, any or all of these men could be excluded from the king's deliberations. Pollard says:

We have seen Wolsey suggesting that even the lord high treasurer might be permanently excluded; a man's favour or influence was gauged by whether he came to court or not.⁴⁴

The fact of the question awakens our interest. "Why are you not coming to the court?" says the poet to the nobles:

All noblemen of this take heed,
And believe it as your Creed.
(11.1-2)

And after four hundred lines of "Creed" he shouts the question again in order to begin his sharpest and most pointed attack on the Cardinal. But he approaches this climactic point step by step: reason has been banished, noblemen fall, age is reckoned as "dotage", money is wasted recklessly, "Will, will, will, will, will!" doth rule and while it does all is "warse and warse." And why? "Will" corrupts foreign relations and breaks down internal policies. "Will" lies in the lap of luxury, observes no fasts, keeps the people in ignorance. "Why don't you object?" says

⁴⁴ Pollard, A.F., Wolsey, p. 106.

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the poet. "Why come ye nat to courte?":

To what courte?
To the king's courte
Or to Hampton courte?
Nay to the kinges courte.
The kinges courte
Should have the excellence,
But Hampton Courte
Hath the preeminence,
And Yorkes Place,
With my lordes Grace!
(ll.399-408)

There the blows are certain and there is no doubt as to the target.

In a few words of preface, Skelton uses the familiar image of the mirror and modifies it with "relucent" the connotation of which puts a spot-light on the image. And "all Prelates and Presidentes" who look upon it will be struck with a sorry sight: "sadly to look upon." Then he announces that what he has to say will be "devised in English" and with the exception of twelve very short Latin insertions, seven of which occur towards the end of the poem, the whole satire is in the vernacular.

The "courte" image in the title is sustained in the first twenty-eight lines by the triple call-to-order, each separated from the other by almost equal sections of Skeltonics. The first rhyme-run of twelve lines is in "-ence" and the force of that strong syllable is directed towards the climactic denunciation:

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Reason is banished thence,
 And also Dame Prudence,
 With sober Sapience.
 (11.12-14)

Whereas this first listing concerns the state of justice in general, the second becomes more particular and its ten lines in rhyme-runs ending in "-usion" and "-all" warn the noblemen that they "may fall" because of the "abusion" and "confusion" in the realm. For the third time he says: "believe it as your Creed" for:

Haec vates ille,
 De quo loquuntur mille.
 (11.29-30)

He the "vates" - the divinely inspired poet - will be listened to by thousands. Thus, says Gordon, "he is a satiric poet of the people."⁴⁵

Noteworthy is the fact that the poem is singularly free of biblical and classical allusions, there being only one or two of each. Up until this time Skelton has leaned heavily upon both. But "Why Come Ye?" is peppered with references to the political and religious situation in England from 1521 to 1523. The first definite date comes within the first one hundred lines and alludes to Wolsey's presence either at the Field of the Cloth of Gold in 1520 or at Calais in 1521:

⁴⁵ Gordon, I.A., John Skelton: Poet Laureate, p. 162.

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There hath been much excess
 With banqueting brainless,
 With rioting reckless,
 With gambolling thriftless,
 With spend and waste witless,
 Treating of truce restless,
 Prating of peace peaceless,
 The countering at Calais
 Wrung us on the males.
 Chief Counsellor was careless,
 Groaning, grudging, graceless.
 (11.68-78)

The "majestic interview" of 1520 took place in Val Dore and the Cardinal took care that the physical preparations, though costly, would match the name:

All his preparations suggested that the occasion would be a display of English mercantile might, as the invasion of France had been eight years before. He summoned his artificers and set them to work on plans and structure no less elaborate than those required for an invasion.⁴⁶

Thomas More called these campaigns "the spending of many a fair penny"⁴⁷ and lamented the poverty and destitution they brought upon the English poor.

And More was not the only questioning mind in the realm. To emphasize this fact, Skelton makes effective use of the rhetorical question - a continuation of the same device in the title. There were many questions to be asked in the England of this time but, as the poem indicates, there were no answers forthcoming. For example, Lord Dacres and

⁴⁶ Ferguson, C., Naked to Mine Enemies, p. 247.

⁴⁷ Chambers, R.W., Thomas More, p. 167.

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the Duke of Albany have signed a treaty, but as for the whereabouts of the Scots: "Wot ye whither they went?", to which question the obvious answer is "No!" "What newes, what newes?" asks the poet. What hear ye of Lancashire? of Cheshire? of the Lord Rose? of the Scottish king? of Burgonions? of the Spaniards' onions? of Mutrell? of our Grand Council? and the most provocative question of all, in the face of which all the others grow pale: "Why come ye nat to courte?" No one has the answer for any of these except the great Wolsey. In his position he is able to hold up the law courts so that

even the Duke of Suffolk appeals to Wolsey on behalf of a servant on the ground that the poor man is not able to sue against Lord Dacres or abide the long process of the law.⁴⁸

Wolsey issues the king's commands, so that when he charged the young Percy not to "resort" to the company of Anne Boleyn unless he wanted to incur the "king's high indignation,"

the bumbling old Earl of Northumberland came down from the north country and handled his son right severely, ordering him to obey the king's command.⁴⁹

48 Pollard, A.F., Wolsey, p. 82.

49 Ferguson, C.W., Naked to Mine Enemies, p. 333.

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The Cardinal commands all

Suits and supplications
Embassades of all nations.
(11.411-12)

And cares not a

Straw for Law Canon,
Or for the Law Common,
Or for Law Civil!
(11.413-15)

"As he wills" becomes a password and if anyone crosses him
in his will, he issues an order:

'Warden of the Fleet,
Set him fast by the feet!
(11.421-22)

Then, 'Have him to the Tower,
Sannz aulter remedy!
Have him forth, by and by,
To the Kinges Bench!'
(11.426-29)

So clever is he at ruling

That the kinges mind
By him is subverted -
He hath in him such faith.
(11.436-37, 442)

In contrast with the scorn he piles upon Wolsey, Skelton never lacks in loyalty to his sovereign, even though he makes it plain, as in the preceding lines, that he disagrees with Henry's policy of seeming to give in to Wolsey on every count. This suave and magnetic Cardinal seems to have cast a spell on the king and conditions are so bad that Skelton says:

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I pray God save the King!
Wherever he go or ride
I pray God be his guide!
(11.390-92)

It is not the king who is guilty of the high taxation but
his chief minister who "beareth the king on hand." Wolsey
it is, not Henry, who orders

That he must pill his land
To make his coffers rich.
(11.450-1)

And above all, it is the "noble" and "kinde" monarch who is
the "chief ground" of Wolsey's prelacy and preferment,

That set him nobly
In great authority.
(11.511-12)

and that he would not have been able to have the position

Had not our Prince be
Royal Henry the eight,
Take him in such conceit.
(11.546-48)

And as he prays for grace that the king may know the "falcon
from the crow", it is as if he realizes, in spite of his
anger, that sooner or later Henry VIII will know the differ-
ence and as soon as he does, Wolsey's days will be numbered.
For this reason the poem is filled with solemn warnings:

But yet beware the rod
And the stroke of God.
(11.1136-37)

I would he were gone;
For among us is none
That ruleth but he alone.
(11.991-3)

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It is ironic that it was not until after Skelton's death that Henry received the "grace" to know "the wolfe from the lambe" and the "Red Hat with his lure" came to his shame and downfall. His final words:

'Master Kingston, I see the matter against me
how it is framed; but if I had served God as dili-
gently as I have done the king He would not have
given me over in my gray hairs.'⁵⁰

are a last underlining of his power exerted in England during his life and described by Skelton in the trilogy of satires directed against him. The poet's victory was posthumous but his battle had been won!

The imagery throughout is forceful in its simplicity. As in "Colin Clout" it is the language of the people. Wolsey is so clever that he is compared to a "wily mouse"

That can build his dwelling house
Within the cattles ear.
(ll.751-52)

Wool merchants will be so heavily taxed that

My lordes Grace will bring
Down this high spring,
And bring it so low
It shall not ever flow.
(ll.946-49)

Skelton has Wolsey making devils to quake "like a fire-drake"; he "grins and he gapes" like "jack'napes"; he puts

⁵⁰ Burton, Edwin, "Wolsey" in the Catholic Encyclopedia, Vol. XV, New York, Appleton, 1912, p. 686.

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off the king's servants "like Mahound in a play". In turn, he is the "kinges darling", his "sweet heart-root", a "subtle Slim Sly", a "coot".

By good use of contrast, the poet makes the magnificence of "my Lord of Canterbury" even more hateful. He is the head of the church in England but he was not like Saint Peter, who

Had a poor mitre
And a poor cope
When he was create Pope,
First in Antioche.
He never did approach
Of Rome to the See
With suche dignitie.
(ll.1138-44)

Another good example of the same device is the poet's salute to Wolsey's office of Bishop with the first line of the great hymn "Ecce Sacerdos Magnus". But this Bishop is "magnus" because he "will 'head us and hang us!" And contrast is strengthened by sarcasm in such an example as:

Our barons be so bold
Into a mousehole they wold
Run away and creep,
Like a meiny of sheep.
(ll.288-91)

The rhyme in this poem is reduced mainly to couplets or triplets except when the poet becomes extremely angry, sarcastic, anxious or beset by any such emotion. Then the rhyme-runs extend from seven to twelve or thirteen lines, much longer than those found in "Colin Clout" where the

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same technique was used. The couplets are particularly sharp in their aim, as in speaking of Wolsey's ancestry the poet says:

✓ And his base progeny,
And his greasy genealogy,
He came of the sang royall
That was cast out of a butcher's stall.
(11.498-501)

As Skelton began this poem, he asked the question: "Why Come Ye Nat to Courte?" and within the framework of the twelve hundred lines that follow he gives his answer. At first, what he had to say seemed much like a continuation of the criticism of "Colin Clout" - general enough - but it is not long before the power of "Speke Parrot" is transferred to these new lines and with it he lays his cards on the table. In full view of all who want to see, he itemizes Wolsey's sins and failings. Though some dub this name-calling it can hardly be only this, since so many of his contemporaries felt the same way.

To look back over the trilogy is to find a series of general failings reported by Colin; allusory, hinted-at evils from the "beke bent" of Parrot; and straightforward enumeration of the Cardinal's sins in the question that comes through no intermediary but through the poet himself. Words are hurled with deadly aim; they are no longer a thesaurus of indignation as in the flytings against Garnesche

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or the "Tunning of Elinour Rumming". He drives with a force that is almost incomprehensible in a man of his years. His sincerity cannot be doubted and he handles his subject as if to expose the king's chief minister were his sole mission in life. When he hates Wolsey for his self-assumed power; when he despises the nobles for being "hen-hearted cuck-holdes"; when he calls down God's blessing on a king who has been completely taken in, he is equally in earnest. At the same time, the dazzling use of words, the dash of metre, the wit in the puns and the allusions, constantly remind us that his breathless rhymes and lines were to him a rewarding piece of work which gave him a sense of delight to complete.

Historically, too, the trilogy is of importance for it gives us, through the poet, the tone of the times:

These were the feelings of the people of London - indignant, bitter, and ready to catch at any slanderous attack to augment their hatred of the Cardinal It catches the popular temper and expresses it in the decisive terms that a London public would - and did - appreciate.⁵¹

In literature, the satires are a landmark for there has been nothing quite like them until Skelton's time. Says Gordon:

⁵¹ Gordon, I.A., John Skelton: Poet Laureate, p. 166.

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'Why Come ye Nat to Courte?' has all the elements of good satire - unity of object, precision of attack, intensity, sincerity and that clarity so characteristic of the Renaissance and so seldom present in the tangled obscurities of mediaeval allegory.⁵²

The Wolsey poems were never printed in the lifetime of either Skelton or the Cardinal. However, having become acquainted with the urgency of them, we may be sure that Skelton circulated them in manuscript form. If Wolsey knew about them, why did he not have the poet punished? Men had lost their heads for much less. Perhaps the Cardinal realized that the Laureate had come too perilously close to the mark and to expose Skelton might mean exposure for himself. Or, maybe the poet decided that he had been over-courageous, and in fear of losing all permitted himself to be quietly encouraged to go to sanctuary at Westminster. Whatever happened, "Why Come Ye Nat to Courte?" is the last word against "my lord's Grace", and the end of the trilogy opens into the final chapter of the life of John Skelton, Laureate Orato. Reg.

⁵² Gordon, I.A., John Skelton: Poet Laureate, p. 167.

CHAPTER SEVENTHE POET WHO LIVES

As the last chapter of Skelton's career unfolds, he has reached the age of sixty-three, statistics tell us, and for a Tudor gentleman, this was a ripe old age. For all these years he had lived fully - sometimes even dangerously - always throwing himself completely into the work, or pleasure, at hand. After he had completed his "Wolsey trilogy" he had apparently "left town", though it is not known whether this was a move of necessity or the acceptance of an invitation from the Countess of Surrey, his patron.

During the writing of the satires, he may have been "living in Sanctuary in Westminster".¹ Some would go further and say this with certainty:

No Protestant attacked proud prelates more savagely than Skelton, and he had to spend several years in sanctuary at Westminster because of his daring attacks on Wolsey.²

Whatever his whereabouts from 1520 on,

somewhere about 1523, Skelton journeyed up north to Yorkshire, as the guest of the Countess of Surrey at her castle of Sherriffhutton . . . the Countess, who was the wife of Thomas Howard, was Skelton's friend and patroness.³

1 Henderson, P., Ed., Poems, Intro. xviii.

2 Myers, A.R., England in the Late Middle Ages, p. 238.

3 Lloyd, L.J., John Skelton, p. 123.

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Sherriffhutton was the typical mediaeval castle: built of stone, defended by walls and ditches, equipped with many rooms, chief of which was the large central hall. Since Skelton's audience consisted of the Countess and her "bevy" of ladies, the poet probably devised his "goodly conceit" for the pleasure of the "gentlewomen all" to be read in one of the smaller rooms reserved for the Countess's court.

There are several theories as to the actual time of writing. According to Miss Stearns, the poem was written in early spring. She suggests this conclusion from what she calls internal and external evidence. First,

the weather was warm enough to permit Skelton
to indulge in a nap in the forest.⁴

shown by the fact that he says:

That, me to rest, I leant me to a stumpe
Of an oak, that sometime grew full straight.
(ll.17-18)

Whiles I stood musing in this meditation,
In slumbering I fell and halfe in a sleep;
(ll.22-23)

It seems impossible to believe that the poet meant us to accept this literally. As a matter of fact, if we go to the literal meaning, he says quite definitely that he "leant",

⁴ Stearns, Helen, "The Dating of the Garland of Laurel", in MLN, xliii, 1928, p. 314.

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he "stood in the frithy forest", he "stood musing." Nowhere does he allude to warm weather and he tells us, though in a purely conventional way, that the oak against which he "leant" was one:

Whose beauty blasted was with the boysters wind,
His leaves lost, the sap was from the rind.
(ll.20-21)

Her second point based on "internal" evidence is that:

the Countess and the ladies present to Skelton
a garland; therefore it is not written earlier than
April.

Now with regard to the "garland" that is described within the framework of the poem, Skelton does not seem to have in mind a coronet of laurel leaves, as one might think from the title of the poem. When he describes Phoebus's crown, he says quite clearly that it is a "coronal of laurel leaves." Of his own "laurel", it is worked "with silk and gold", it is "wrought", it is "devised". And when he appeared before the other poets, he tells us he saw Newton

Devising in picture, by his illustrious wit,
Of my laurel the process every wit.
(ll.1075-76)

and heard the others exclaiming that:

When they saw my laurel richly wrought,
All other beside were counterfeit they thought
In comparison of that which I wear.
(ll.1082-84)

Of this worke they had so great delight,
The silk, the gold, the flowerets fresh to sight,
They said my laurel was the goodliest
That ever they saw, and wrought it was the best.
(ll.1097-90)

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Furthermore, in the lyric to "Mistress Jane Blennerhasset" the poet says that she has

Small flowers helped to set
In my good chapelet.
(ll. 946-47)

The Old French and Middle English word "chapelet" is the diminutive of "chapel" which means a headdress or cap, and is derived from the Low Latin "cappa" which could indicate a special covering for the head indicative of some degree or honour. Compare this idea with the symbolic picture of the poet as found on the first edition of the "Garlande of Laurelle" and we realize at once that the laurel "leaves" have no significance. Under these circumstances the evidence for "April" is slight.

The third point made by this critic concerns the astronomical evidence given in the first stanza:

Arecting my sight toward the zodiac,
The signes xii. for to behold afar,
When Mars retrogradant reversed his back,
Lord of the year in his orbicular,
Put up his sworde, for he could make no war,
And when Lucina plenary did shine,
Scorpione ascending degrees twice nine.
(ll. 1-7)

She states that:

with the help of the Astronomy Department of
Yale University who proved that Mars retrograded
in April, only in 1523,⁵

5 Stearns, H., "Dating of Skelton's Garlande",
p. 316.

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her theory is proven conclusively.

Both Nelson and Edwards disagree with Miss Stearns' theory and produce facts that prove her wrong:

The most significant thing in this bundle of astronomical knowledge is 'Mars retrogradant'. Mars retrogrades once every twenty-five years and one-half months approximately (the interval between retrograde periods is not constant).⁶

and according to a calculation done for Professor Nelson, Mars "reversed his back" on December 3, 1520, and January 22, 1523. As the "Garlande" mentions both "Colin Clout" and "Speke Parrot", the latter date 1523, must be correct.

H.L.R. Edwards sets the date a little earlier, because a calculation done for him places the beginning of Mars' reversal around January 14 or 15; and the moon was full on January 2, 1523.⁷ As Skelton writes in the first stanza that "Lucina plenary did shine", there seems to be no doubt about the January date. Certainly this calculation gives more meaning to the final verse of the "Garlande" which seems to be a New Year's wish:

Then to the heaven spherical upward I gazed,
Where I saw Janus, with his double chere,
Making his almanac for the new year;
He turned his tirikis, his volvel ran fast:
Good luck this new year! the old year is past.
(11.1374-78)

⁶ Nelson, W., John Skelton: Laureate, p. 191.

⁷ Edwards, H.L.R., "The Dating of the Garlande of Laurelle" in PMLA, liii, 1938, p. 608-09.

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There is little wonder that the wish has in it a touch of warmth, for the Sherriffhutton milieu must have had in it the same warmth. Here he had the security of being with his friends the Howards; the comparative comfort of the great hall with its blazing log fire and its beautiful tapestries; the peace of mind this provided to one so lately disturbed by the fear and unrest of Westminster. In this light, the opening stanzas exude some of this feeling. "In place alone", Skelton looks back over a turbulent career which calls forth the thought:

How often fortune varieth in an hour,
 Now clear weather, forthwith a stormy shower;
 All thing compassed, no perpetuity,
 But now in wealth, now in adversity.
 (ll.11-14)

His melancholy, though expressed in purely conventional terms, seems rather human and real. He is "deply drowned in this dumpe" and stands beside a "stumpe" lately stripped by the "boysters wind". The forest of which this tree was once a part is now only "frithy" and its floor has become "ensoaked with silt of the miry wose."

From here on the framework of the "Garlande" is the mediaeval dream-vision, and Skelton uses the gimmicks of meditation upon the hartes and hindes of the forest, his deep musing on the surroundings, and either his imagination

Or of humours superflue, that often will creep
 Into the brain by drinking over-deep,
 (ll.32-33)

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to get to the vision as quickly as possible.

The narrative element is straight-forward enough. The poet envisions "a passing goodly" pavilion in which the Queen of Fame is talking to Dame Pallas,⁸ and the subject of their conversation is the poet himself. Dame Pallas has requested a place for Skelton in the Court of Fame but the Queen is loath to comply with the request. However, if the poet will "redress" the idleness of which she has heard, then at least she will hear "what he hath done." Dame Pallas asks that Aeolus the trumpeter "blow a blast with his long breath extended" in order to summon all the poets in her retinue. At the noise of the "bararag" the poet sees "a thousande thousande on a plumpe." Led by Phoebus "lamenting Daphne" comes the parade of the ancient Greek and Latin stars, then the Italians, and last Gower, Chaucer and Lydgate. The three bring him to the Court of Fame and here Skelton takes the opportunity to describe in detail the palace. Having been appointed "pronothary" by Lydgate, the

⁸ "Pallas is renowned as Minerva the goddess of wisdom, war and the liberal arts and was able to bestow the gift of prophecy. It was the duty of almost every member of society to implore the assistance and patronage of a deity who presided over sense, taste and reason." (Lempriere, Classical Dictionary) This was the goddess who was seeking Skelton's election to the "Court of Fame". When we consider the qualities for which she was noted, it is more than a coincidence that these same qualities are the ones to which Skelton laid claim; as a matter of fact a number of critics mention the note of prophecy in the Wolsey trilogy.

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poet is introduced to Occupation, the "regestory" of the Court. At this point, Skelton has two other momentary visions: first, that of the field of all nations; second, that of the garden.

The second scene of the "Garlande" takes place in the "goodly chamber of estate" of the Countess of Surrey. She and her guests are busy embroidering Skelton's laurel, and Occupation suggests that the poet compose complimentary poems to each one present. He does; and then, proudly invested in his "chapelet", he presents himself before the Queen. "She looked haughty, and gave on me a glum," says Skelton. But at any rate, she asks him to make known his accomplishments. He does, and at the end of the "Boke of remembrance" all present can hardly wait to shout "Triumph." The noise of the shouting brings him to himself. He makes his New Year wish, and a dedication and an envoy close the poem.

Some critics dub Skelton's lengthy descriptions as irrelevant digressions. However, they are interesting from several points of view. The "riche palace" of the Queen of Fame takes us back many years to a very early courtly poem: "Knowledge, Acquaintance, Resort" in which the poet makes use of the rich colour of jewels to describe his lady. From this poem one stanza reads:

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The topaz rich and precious in virtue;
 Your ruddies with ruddy rubies may compare;
 Sapphire of sadness, enveined with Indy blue;
 The polished pearl your whiteness doth declare;
 Diamond pointed to rase out heartly care;
 'Gain surfeitous suspect the emerald commendable;
 Relucent smaragde, object incomparable;

The same conventional description appears when Skelton describes the palace of the Queen: the ground was paved with "turquoise and chrysolite", the pillars were "embossed of beryl", the palace gates of "elephant's teeth";

Of diamonds pointed was the rocky wall;
 The carpettes within and tapettes of pall;
 The chambers hanged with clothes of Arras;
 Envaulted with rubies the vault was of this place.
 (11.466-69)

The "postes" were "embullioned with Indy blue"

Englazed glittering with many a clear story;
 Jacinths and smaragdes out of the florth they grew.
 (11.472-73)

As the "poursuivants" press forward to see the Queen, Skelton throws in little details about their conduct and appearance. These are the same "courtiers" whom we met in "The Bowge of Courte" and "Magnyfycence". They desire news:

With, how doth the north? What tidings in the
south?
 The west is windy, the east is metely wele.
 (11.490-91)

As usual, not all of them have a right to be there, and of these false faces:

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Some shewed his safe-conduct, some showed his charter
 Some looked full smoothly, and had a false quarter.
 (ll.496-97)

But all came with a purpose - evil or otherwise:

Some came to tell truth, some came to lie,
 Some came to flatter, and some came to spy.
 (ll.503-04)

One among the crowd, Occupation "Fames Registry" is given
 to Skelton as a "sovereign accessory" to while away the time.
 She does this by leading him through the two visions. The
 detail in both cases is good, and this for a purpose.

Skelton lets us know through Occupation's command:

let us somewhat find
 To pass the time with, but let us waste no wind,
 For idle janglers have but little brain:
 Words be swords and hard to call again.
 (ll.559-60)

that he has a choice to make between the "field" with its
 "innumerable people" - haskardes, ribaldes, dicers, carders,
 "false forgers of money", "pope-holy hypocrites", fawning
 flatterers; and the "garden" where birds sang, crystal
 waters flowed, fish whose "scales ensilvered against the
 sun-beams" swam, and the laurel tree, the olive and flowers
 grew in profusion. Here was always a song - its theme:
 "How wrong was no right and right was no wrong".

Skelton is charmed by the garden but wants one thing
 more: to know the name of his rival. Occupation tells him
 in the form of a puzzle and leads him to the Countess of

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Surrey. Then, once more we have an example of Skelton's attention to detail. The Countess has proposed a bit of a challenge for her "bevy of ladies":

I have contrived for you a goodly wark,
And who can warke best now shall be assayed.
(11.758-59)

That such young women could share in such a project, is understandable, for English embroidery was famous in the Middle Ages throughout Europe:

The workmanship was usually delicate and the designs were very fine; the favourite colours for the threads were gold, yellow shading to green, and white to blue.⁹

As they all sit down on the "tapettes and carpettes", Skelton takes in every detail of the scene. He is familiar with the instruments of silk-weaving and can use the proper terms, as: "sampler", "embraid" the laces, weave with "sleys, with tavelles, with hiddles well drest", "frame", "weaving pin." He is careful to note how skilfully they work and he describes their dexterity as they produce the "coronal of laurel with verdures light and dark" devised by the Countess for Skelton "her clerke". The two stanzas describing the progress of the laurel are well done:

Some to embroider put them in press,
Well guiding their glowton to keep straight their
silk,

9 Myers, A.R., England in the Late Middle Ages, p. 93.

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Some pirling of gold their work to increase
 With fingers small, and handes white as milke;
 With, Reach me that skein of truly silk!
 And, Wind me that bottom of such an hue,
 Green, red, tawny, white, black, purple, and blue.

Of broken workes wrought many a goodly thing,
 In casting, in turning, in flourishing of floweres,
 With burres rough and bottoms surfeling,
 In needle-work raising birdes in boweres,
 With virtue enbusied all times and all houres;
 And truly of their bounty thus were they bent
 To work me this chapelet by good advisement.
 (ll.557-63)

Skelton's knowledge of, and appreciation for the care and skill needed to produce the books and manuscripts of his time, are evident in the description of his "boke of remembrance" which the Queen of Fame commands him to read. He must often have held such books in his hands and marvelled at the illuminations, the golf-leaf and the binding. In Skelton's time, the work of illumination was not done by the monks alone but had increasingly come to be the work of professional illuminators. As Diss is in East Anglia, he would have used such manuscripts and his "boke" appears to be much like the work of the East Anglian school whose characteristics:

the profusion of ornament, especially in frame borders and initial decorations, with effective combinations of leaves, animals and human figures, rich and harmonious colour scheme and characterization of animal life - cats, dogs, mice and squirrels, butterflies and snails.¹⁰

10 Myers, A.R., England in the Late M.A. p. 94-95.

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sound very much like his:

The margent was illumined all with golden railles
 And byse, empictured with gressshops and waspes,
 With butterflies and fresh peacock tailles,
 Enflavoured with floweres and slimy snails;
 Envived pictures well touched and quickly.
 (11.1134-38)

The cover of the book is just as ornate and bears out the description of mediaeval books: that they had "covers of gold and enamel studded with jewels",¹¹ and that

illuminated books used in the services were bound in carved ivory or gold inlaid with jewels.¹²

The poet goes on to say that both inside and out, his "boke" was so beautiful that:

It would have made a man whole that had been right
 sickly
 To behold how it was garnished and bound,
 Uncovered over with gold of tissue fine;
 The claspes and bullions were worth a thousand pound;
 With balasses and carbuncles the borders did shine;
 With 'aurum musaicum' every other line
 Was written.

(11.1139-45)

And even if this were a very early printed book to which the poet made reference, the same loving care would have gone into its production, for we are told that the early presses used primitive techniques to produce magnificent books:

¹¹ Fremantle, Anne, The Age of Faith, Great Ages of Man, A History of the World's Culture, Time Inc., New York, 1965, p. 120.

¹² Ibid, p. 122.

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Pages were set in type by hand, inked and run off one at a time on the wooden press.¹³

Before Skelton begins his "Garlande of Laurel", he writes a poem in Latin:

Eterno mansura die dum sidera fulgent,
Aequora dumque tument, haec laurea nostra virebat:
Hinc nostrum celebre et nomen referetur ad astra,
Undique Skeltonis memorabitur alter Adonis.¹⁴

On the surface this sounds like a paeon of self-praise and has brought down upon it such phrases as, "a prolonged exercise in self-advertisement";¹⁵ a list that one must "suffer through";¹⁶ and

pure self-praise, winding up with the assertion that he is the country's Catullus, her Adonis, her Homer.¹⁷

This, indeed, is the tone of the poem. However, that the poet expects to be ranked so high in the literary history of England should alert us to the fact that within the framework

¹³ Hale, J.R., The Renaissance, The Great Ages of Man, A History of the World's Culture, Time-Life, Inc., New York, 1965, p. 94.

¹⁴ While the stars shine with eternal day, and while the seas swell, these our laurels shall be green; our illustrious name shall be translated to the sky, and everywhere shall Skelton be renowned as another Adonis.

¹⁵ Green, Peter, John Skelton, London, Longmans, Green and Co., 1960, p. 35.

¹⁶ Fish, S.E., John Skelton's Poetry, p. 186.

¹⁷ Edwards, H.L.R., Skelton: The Life and Times of an Early Tudor Poet, Toronto, Clarke, Irwin and Co., Ltd., 1950, p. 22-23.

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of this poem we should look for and assess some of his critical views on poetry in general and his own in particular. Early in the poem, the Queen of Fame makes reference to the qualities of a poet worthy of the service of Pallas: his time, he must "studiously have spent"; he must have "embusied" himself with his "whole corage" so that his work might "famously be seen." The poet must never be idle: this is the criticism:

But how it is, Skelton is wondrous slack,
And, as we dare, we find in him great lack.
(ll.62-63)

that prevents the Queen of Fame from ready acceptance of the poet into the ranks of the blessed. What is this great lack? The fact that he has abandoned "the sugared potion of Helicones well" and now

Will not endeavour himself to purchase
The favour of ladies with wordes elect.
(ll.68-69)

Through Dame Pallas, the poet counters this criticism. That he has not written of late is a virtue, for "better a dumb mouthe than a brainless skull." Rather than "gloriously polish his matter", he writes "true and plain." It is dangerous for a poet to "displease an hundred for one mannes pleasure"; "writing remaineth of recorde", so that one has a great treasure when one "writeth wisely." Criticism abounds no matter what the poet writes: "hard is to make but some

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fault be found." Many are famous but yet are not worthy of fame; but in Skelton's case the converse is true - to be proven in Occupation's reading of the "Boke of Remembrance."

The march of the "poetes laureat of many divers nations" exhibits some critical ability on the part of the poet: Homer is the "freshe historian"; Cicero the "prince of Eloquence"; Juvenal, the satirist "that maketh men to muse"; Terence the "Comicar"; full sobre Seneca; the "madde ditties" of Maximianus.

The works of Gower "that first garnished our English rude"; Chaucer "that nobly enterprised how that our English might freshly be enewed"; Dan John Lydgate, the Monk of Bury, receive more attention. They have almost everything:

With diamondes and rubies their tabardes were traced,
None so rich stones in Turkey to sell.
(ll.387-88)

but - and here we get again the idea of the importance he places upon his title - "they wanted nothing but the laurel" (l.389) Later on, in the Lines which he addresses to Chaucer, Skelton shows his keen appreciation of the use of the vernacular in good poetry:

O noble Chaucer, whose polished eloquence
Our English rude so freshly hath set out,
That bound are we with all due reverence,
With all our strength that we can bring about,
To owe to you our service, and more if we moght!
(ll.414-18)

and later, he comments on the power of words:

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For idle janglers have but little brain:
 Words be swords, and hard to call again.
 (11.559-60)

Skelton makes his words count, ironically enough, in response to Occupation's command to "create some goodly conceit" for the "ladies and gentlewomen" who are making his chapelet. As the poet sharpened his pen and invoked Minerva and Mercury, he must have concealed a smile, for he knew he had no intention of following the beaten path of "proper captations of benevolence", "with sentence fructuous and termes covenable." Although the first three poems to the Countess and her daughters are in rhyme-royal stanza, there are touches here and there that mark a step forward from the aureate tradition.

The first, to the Countess herself, is the most mediaeval in tone. He "makes reconusance", humbly and lowly after "ordered obeisance"; there is the usual listing in: "I shall both write and say, / recount, reporte, rehearse without delay"; there are the allusions to Argia, Rebecca, Pamphila and Agripina. Each stanza concludes with the chorus:

Whose passing bounty and right noble estate,
 Of honour and worship it hath the former date.

This poetic compliment together with the next three addressed to Lady Elizabeth and Lady Muriel Howard and Lady Anne Dacres are all in the same pattern: models of grace, dignity and

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formality as befitted such an occasion. But even in these aureate stanzas there is a refreshing note of change, especially in the use of such words as "lusty to look on", "my little lady", "ruddy shamefacedness". These stand out in even broader relief against such mediaeval favourites as "demure Diana", "fair Elene" and

The embudded blossoms of roses red of hue,
With lilies white your beauty doth renew.
(ll.867-68)

In the seven other complimentary poems, Skelton uses a variety of metres and forms all having in common a fragility and daintiness which appeal to the feminine personality. To Mistress Margery Wentworth, he writes twenty lines, twelve of which form the thrice-repeated thought:

With marjoram gentle,
The flower of goodlihead,
Embroidered the mantle
Is of your maidenhead.
(ll.883-86)

"Plainly I cannot glose," says he in line five. This is the only unmusical line in the whole poem, and its halting first syllable emphasizes the sweetness and sincerity of all the other words.

The fact that no two of these poems conform to the same pattern, gives each one a very personal touch and one that would be particularly treasured by the recipient. He has noticed the smallest details of embroidery, for he says

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to Mistress Jane Blennerhasset:

Sith Mistress Jane Hasset
 Small flowers helped to set
 In my goodly chapelet,
 Therefore I render of her the memory
 Unto the legend of far Laodamy.
 (11.945-49)

To Mistress Isabel Pennell, whose parents perhaps he knew
 well, he is even more personal:

By Saint Mary, my lady,
 Your mammy and your daddy
 Brought forth a goodly baby!
 (11.950-52)

A few lines in this same poem:

The columbine, the nept
 The jelofer well set,
 The proper violet:
 Ennewed your colour
 Is like the daisy flower
 After the April shower;
 Star of the morrow gray,
 The blossom on the spray,
 The freshest flower of May.
 (11.959-67)

show the added grace that Skelton has acquired over the
 years, when we compare these same images used to describe
 Jane in "Philip Sparrow":

She is the violet,
 The daisy delectable
 The columbine commendable,
 The jelofer amiable:
 For this most goodly floure,
 This blossom of fresh coloure,
 So Jupiter me succour,
 She flourisheth new and new.
 (11.1049-56)

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Mistress Margaret Tylney calls forth the image of the pearl:

Of Margarite,
 Pearl orient,
 Load-star of light,
 Much relucant;
 Madam regent
 I may you call
 Of virtues all.
 (11.924-30)

while the other Margaret, Miss Hussey, is

Merry Margaret,
 As midsummer flower,
 Gentle as a falcon
 Or hawk of the tower:
 (11.981-84)

Ever the gentleman, Skelton is mindful of the fact that he has had to scorn some relative of Miss Gertrude Statham in his "interpolata satira in vatis adversarium" earlier in the poem. Now he does not leave her to the last, but turns to her to say:

Though ye were hard-hearted,
 And I with you thwarted
 With words that smarted,

at the same time she is deserving of this compliment:

Yet doubtless now ye give me cause
 To write of you this goodly clause,
 Mistress Gertrude,
 With womanhood endued,
 With virtue well renewed.
 (11.1015-22)

which is repeated three times. He adds, too, that he realizes it was:

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Partly by your counsel,
 Garnished with laurel
 Was my freshe coronal.
 (11.1031-33)

How could any young woman be long angered by such a charming man? And the charm lies in the fact that one cannot help but feel that he means every word of it. He expresses a genuine desire to please those who have gone out of their way to please him. He establishes a rapport not only with them, but also with his reader and we are inclined to agree with C.S. Lewis that:

Some of these are very good indeed: what astonishes one is the simplicity of the resources from which the effect has been produced.¹⁸

There is another reason, too, for his delightful variety of form in the lyrics. Here at Sherriffhutton, Skelton had representatives from the two types of audience familiar with the first quarter of the sixteenth century: the stately nobility and the middle class. And he cleverly appealed to them both. He commended

the Countess of Surrey in the allusive mediaeval rhyme-royal and then turned to praise the younger women in the new, graceful, direct Renaissance style.¹⁹

For this reason, among others, Lloyd calls this poem an oasis in the "desert of scorn and suspicion" and proves also that:

18 Lewis, C.S. The Close of the Middle Ages, p. 141.

19 Gordon, I.A., John Skelton: Poet Laureate, p. 72.

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the poet has after all lost nothing of his old love for the leisured and graceful poetry of his youth.²⁰

But this, too, was the form of verse which these ladies could appreciate. Furthermore, there was not the urgency that always called forth the Skeltonics. However, the young women present were not museum pieces and it is tempting to imagine that they were both intrigued and pleased by the poetic ingenuity of the complimentary poems addressed to them. This elderly scholar was still Skelton: Laureate, and it was not likely that the skill and wit of such a man would have lost control of an opportunity to make his words count.

Skelton must have been well aware that these graceful lyrics were well done, for it is at their conclusion and while they are still singing themselves through the minds of the "bevy of ladies" that Occupation tells him:

Withdraw your hande, the time passes fast:
Set on your head this laurel which is wrought.
(11.1063-64)

and a little later she

readeth and expoundeth some part of Skelton's books and ballads with ditties of pleasure inasmuch as it were too long a process to rehearse all by name that he hath compiled, etc.
(11.1144-47)

The list which extends through twenty-eight stanzas is not

20 Lloyd, L.J., John Skelton, p. 123.

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always good poetry but it does provide information which is recorded in no other place. Most of the entries are no longer extant, and the third part of the Wolsey trilogy, "Why Come Ye Nat to Courte?" is not included. It is interesting to note that one stanza each is devoted to "Speculum Principis", "Magnyfycence", "Diodorus Siculus" and "Philip Sparrow". Two stanzas describe "Mannerly Margery Milk and Ale" and whether this denotes some special personal preference or not, we do not know. The fact that it was set to a catchy tune by Cornysshie which is still available, might indicate this.²¹ All other of his works are limited to one line or two at the most.

Following the poem proper, Skelton addresses his own book - "librum suum" - in Latin and English, telling it to "Go, radiant light of the Britons, make known our songs, your worthy British Catullus." He makes a special point once more of the fact that it is in English:

Take no despair,
Though I you wrate
After this rate
In English Letter.
(11.1380-83)

Astonishing though it may be, the dedication is

To the Most Serene Royal Majesty, Likewise with
the Lord Cardinal, legate a latere.
(11.1433-35)

21 See Chapter II.

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and in a second Envoy he goes farther to remind Wolsey:

to sue for the prebend which he promised to
entrust to me some day, and give me ground to hope
for his protection - between hope and fear.

This is a new tone and a surprising one only a few months after "Why Come Ye Nat to Courte?". How had Skelton arrived at this apparent volte-face in his policy?

While the poet was enjoying the peace of Sherriffhutton, Wolsey was experiencing some of the most trying months of his career. He had provided badly for Surrey's men in France and by October, 1522, the army had withdrawn to Calais having accomplished little. The Duke of Albany and the Scots had been defeated but not by the planning of the king and Wolsey. In 1523 he had blundered again in the siege of Boulogne, and the war against France came to an ignominious end. By the winter of 1523-24,

the scene which confronted Wolsey was dark
with discouragement.²²

and one year later France fell into the hands of Emperor Charles. Now Henry exacted the debts promised by Charles the year before but no money was forthcoming. The king resolved upon the invasion of France and this required huge sums of money. The task of securing it,

22 Ferguson, C., Naked to Mine Enemies, p. 297.

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fell upon the already weary shoulders of Thomas Cardinal Wolsey. His negotiations with Louise for a new alliance with France had now to be summarily ended, the scheme of a French alliance rudely discarded, and the residual energies of a man virtually exhausted had to be turned to the frightful job of raising funds for another invasion of France.²³

Skelton would have known all this and perhaps thought that if ever there were an opportune moment to ask for consideration, this was it. And so he dedicated to this man, so late his enemy, his "Garlande of Laurel": the symbol of the triumph of his life's work. Not only was the poet seeking a peaceful asylum for his latter years, but also (and this is the usual hope of any artist) an assurance that his name would be enrolled in letters of gold in the register of Britain's poets. He must have felt that if his manuscript was accompanied by the patronage of both king and Cardinal, publication would be a certainty. He seems to have been right, for the "Garlande of Laurel" is the only one of his works to have been printed immediately upon its completion. And Wolsey must have granted the poet's request, for Skelton returned to Westminster where he remained until his death on June 21, 1529, and where there are records of his burial in the choir of St. Margaret's.²⁴

²³ Nelson, W., John Skelton: Poet Laureate, "The Last Years", p. 211 ff., and 219.

²⁴ Ferguson, C., Naked to Mine Enemies, p. 297.

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One might have expected Skelton to have spent his last six years in peace and reflection. But this would have been out of character for this lusty fighter-poet of Tudor days. Having lately enjoyed the hospitality of the Howards in whose house feelings against the Scots ran high, he followed the "Garlande of Laurel" almost immediately by an account of

How the doughty Duke of Albany Like a Coward
Knight, ran away shamefully with an Hundred
Thousand Tratling Scots and Faint-hearted French-
men, beside the Water of Tweed.²⁵

To celebrate this defeat is his first purpose in writing; the second is equal in importance: to make his king shine amid a blaze of glorious victory. Historically, Henry and Wolsey had little to do with the planning of the campaign that brought about the defeat of the Scots. But later on, came the "Amicable Loan" commanded by the king - through the agency of the Cardinal - to finance another war against France. Laymen and clergy alike, refused to pay the tax until finally Wolsey changed its name and essence to a "Benevolence in His Majesty's name." In this poem, Skelton does all in his power to sweeten the name of "his noble grace": with martial prowess like Hercules, wisdom like Solomon, loyalty like Hector of Troy. In fact, says he, his

25 Poems, p. 398.

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"learning is too small" to "recount"

All the royal sort
 Of his nobility,
 His magnanimity,
 His animosity,
 His frugality,
 His liberality,
 His affability,
 His humanity,
 His stability,
 His humility,
 His benignity,
 His royal dignity.
 (ll.445-56)

Can this be truly King Henry VIII? Perhaps Skelton feared a question like that; therefore, such complimentary speeches as these occupy nearly half the poem.

In his enthusiasm for the king, the poet does not forget that the leaders of the English army deserve some credit too. They have been brave men, and Sir William Lyle who held the fort for Surrey is a "valiant knight." Even the mention of Surrey's name inspires fear, for when Albany heard

That my Lord Admiral
 Was coming down
 To make him frown.
 (ll.55-57)

he fled. But then Albany is a "graceless wight", and Surrey is the image

Of chivalry the well,
 Of knighthood the flower
 In every martial shower.
 (ll.238-40)

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In the invectives hurled against the Duke of Albany is a more than coincidental similarity with what Surrey himself said:

By many ways I am advertised that the Duke of Albany is a marvellous wilful man and will believe no man's counsel, but will have his own opinions followed I am also advertised that he is so passionate that he be apart among his familiars, and doth hear anything contrarious to his mind and pleasure, his accustomed manner is to take off his bonnet suddenly from his head, and to throw it in the fire, and no man dare take it out, but let it be brent. My Lord Dacre doth affirm, that at his last being in Scotland he did burn above a dozen bonnets after that manner.²⁶

Skelton accuses him of falsely aspiring to the Scottish throne, murdering young James in the bargain:

How ye pretend
For to defend
The young Scottish king,
But ye mean a thing,
An ye could bring
The matter about,
To put his eyes out
And put him down,
And set his crown
On your own head
When he were dead.

(11.88-98)

He is a "proud palliard" and a "proud poltroon"; he has an uncontrollable temper: "What though ye stamp and stare?"
(1.180)

²⁶ Letters and Papers of the Reign of Henry VIII, arranged and catalogued by J.S. Brewer, London, 1876, Vol.3, Document 3405, quoted by Ferguson, p. 283.

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and furthermore:

Sir Duke of Albany,
Right inconveniently,
Ye rage and ye rave,
And your worship deprave.
(11.188-91)

The Scots come in for their share of the vituperation and Skelton's sentiments have changed little from the 1513 outbursts "Against the Scots" and "Against Dundas." Over and over again he embroiders the theme that they are:

Full of brag and boast,
And full of waste wind,
· · · · ·
Yet ye dare do no thing
But leap away like frogs,
And hide you under logs,
Like pigs and like hogs,
And like mangy dogs!
(11.208-16)

That the Scots fled from another Flodden is true, for the Scottish Earls and the Gordons refused to advance farther. But as is often the case in the Wolsey satires, Skelton has only one side of the picture. He gains nothing by this anti-climactic poem and perhaps it would have been better if he had merely uttered to himself: "May they rest in peace!" But the old Skelton couldn't resist an occasion such as this. This was his old foe and he was not content to let sleeping dogs lie.

To the very end, Skelton was ready to meet his enemy head-on. Earlier in his life he had written powerful

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poems directed at corruption within the church. Now, a year before his death, he sees an attack coming from without and he rises once more to meet it. All his life he had boasted of the Calliope green that his scholarship had procured for him. He had long and often saluted the learning inspired by the university. It was left to him now to lash out against "Certain Young Scholars Abjured of Late." But from the beginning he makes it clear that it is their heresy he is condemning not their scholarship. These two are "sophisticate scholars" and because of their "unreasonable errors" he laments with his Alma Mater over their heresy: "Cur lacrymaris?" Never does he blame his beloved Cambridge for the sins of these young men, but in a passage of prose he composes a crescendo of consonants that rises from a bubble of "b's" and "f's", through a torrent of "l's" and "s's", to a veritable deluge of "p's" that spit forth his venom on those who have dared, with their "little rag of rhetoric and a less lump of logic", to speak out against "Our glorious Lady.":

Howbeit they were puffed so full of vain-glorious pomp and arrogant elation, that pope-holy and peevish presumption provoked them to publish and to preach to people imprudent perilously, how it was idolatry to offer to images of our Blessed Lady, etc.

He lets fly fiery epithets at Thomas Bilney and Thomas Arthur, as earlier they flew at Wolsey. But this is no mere

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personal grievance; here he is defending the Church against a heresy about which he had warned England years before in "Colin Clout":

And some have a smack
Of Luther's sack,
And a burning spark
Of Luther's wark,
And are somewhat suspect
In Luther's sect.
(11.538-43)

He had been well aware of "Little Germany", the tavern where a group of students in theology read and discussed Luther's books from 1520 on. But the prelates had been too busy, and had failed to nip the danger in the bud. Now Skelton accuses:

Ye stringed so Luther's lute
That ye dance all in a suit
The heretics ragged ray,
That brings you out of the way
Of Holy Church's lay.
(11.150-54)

Both Bilney and Arthur had been punished but:

One of you there was
That laughed when he did pass
With his faggot in procession;
He counted it for no correction,
But with scornful affection
Took it for sport,
With heresy to support.
(11.169-75)

Later on, Skelton warns this one:

Wherefore make ye no more restraints,
But mend your minds that are mazed;

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Or else doubtless ye shall be blazed,
 And be burnt at a stake,
 If further business that ye make.
 (ll.275-79)

And in those lines we are once more witness to the accuracy with which Skelton foresaw oncoming tragedy. Thomas Arthur carried his faggot of repentance at St. Paul's Cross and was apparently sincere. The other made "further business" along with other graduates of Cambridge University, and

among these graduates, 'obscure men' indeed in the 1520's, were William Tyndale, Robert Barnes, Thomas Bilney all of whom were to be burnt at the stake.²⁷

In this poem as in others, there is this feeling of impending disaster, and in 1528 his is like the voice of "one crying in the wilderness." That he realizes this is evident in the second part of the poem which is the poet's final word.

In the Skeltonic stanzas whose sharp retorts are made to "all wayward or froward altercations that can or may be made or objected against Skelton, Laureate, deviser of this Replication", he demands:

Why fall ye at debate
 With Skelton Laureate,
 Reputing him unable
 To gainsay replicable
 Opinions detestable
 Of heresy execrable?

²⁷ Hughes, Philip, A Popular History of the Reformation, p. 150.

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Ye say that poetry
May not fly so high
In theology,
Nor analogy,
Nor philology,
Nor philosophy,
To answer or reply
Against such heresy?
(11.292-305)

Mediaeval poetry had not been the arena for exposition, for argument, for defence. These were reserved solely for prose and written in Latin. Quite clearly and logically Skelton refutes this idea, and he does so in vernacular poetry!

For his first point, he goes back to St. Jerome's praise of King David's Psalms. Because these take the reader back centuries in time, the poet cleverly uses two rhyme-royal stanzas, that when read aloud have the rise and fall of the Psalm-tone. The lyricism and "glorious poetry" of the Psalms are like to the magnificence of the ancient Greeks, and their harmony and rhythm go far beyond Flaccus, Catullus or Serenus. Skelton's justification of this belief is contained in what might well be called his "Credo".

King David the prophet, of prophetes principal,
Of poetes, chief poet.
(11.321-22)

To Skelton, "prophet" and "poet" are the very warp and woof of his poetic universe. Without the inspiration given a prophet, David could not have written "of Our Saviour Jesus

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Christ in his decachord psaltery"; without his power as poet, he could not have "harped so melodiously":

That at his resurrection he harped out of hell
Old patriarchs and prophets in heaven with him to dwell.
(ll.333-34)

His second argument makes a logical comparison with his first. This he writes once more in the short Skeltonic line, for he is now in the present and is showing that the power of poetry has transcended the centuries. If King David could warble "with his strings of such theological things", and do so with such success (we must "give faith" to St. Jerome who states this), then why should this same power be questioned in another poet? In his "Book of Good Advertisement", he has shown clearly:

How there is a spiritual,
And a mysterial,
And a mystical
Effect energial
As Greeks do it call.
(ll.357-61)

in the industry of poetry, and this effect is there, only because there is "such a pregnancy"

Of heavenly inspiration
In laureate creation,
Of poets commendation,
That of divine miseration
God maketh his habitation
In poets which excels,
And sojourns with them and dwells.
(ll.364-70)

Therefore, continues the poet, because:

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We are kindled in such a fashion
 With heat of the Holy Ghost
 (Which is God of mightes most),

our power is doubly strengthened for it is God who "doth
 lead" our pen, and this for many purposes:

Sometime for affection,
 Sometime for sad direction,
 Sometime for correction,
 Sometime under protection
 Of patient sufferance,
 With sober circumstance,
 Our mindes to advance
 To no man's annoyance.
 (11.381-88)

Skelton, then, had very definite ideas about the
 function of poetry. In Maritain's definition of poetry,
 we read that it is:

not the particular art which consists in
 writing verses, but a process both more general and
 more primary: that intercommunication between the
 inner being of things and the inner being of the
 human Self which is a kind of divination (as was
 realized in ancient times; the Latin 'vates' was
 both a poet and a diviner).²⁸

Skelton uses this term "vates" on several occasions in
 reference to himself. When he launches forth on this third
 and greatest satire against Wolsey, he announces:

Haec vates ille,
 De quo loquuntur mille.
 (11.29-30)

In answer to: "Cur tibi contexta est aurea Calliope?", he

²⁸ Maritain, Jacques, Creative Intuition in Art
 and Poetry, New York, Meridian Books, 1960, p. 3.

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writes: *Responsio ejusdem vatis.*", and in the first stanza of this same little poem, Calliope is the "vatum regina". Again, in the Latin interlude wherein he confronts his adversary "Rogerous Statham" (also contending for a place in the "Hall of Fame"), he dubs him "vatis adversarium". He realizes too, that the "vocatio" of poet is rarely bestowed and he makes this idea the very last of his poetry and of his life:

Of an infinite and innumerable number are the sophists, the logicians, the philosophers, the theologians, the doctors and the teachers; but few and rare are the poets. All that is rare is precious: therefore, I consider that poets before all are filled with the breath of the divine.
(ll.401-07)

"The Replication", then, takes on a far greater importance for the student of Skelton than the fact of its dedication in superlatives to Cardinal Wolsey, or even the fact of its "shrill, scolding verses of attack"²⁹ against the "Certain Young Scholars." This second part of his last poem becomes his "ars poetica", expressed in the verse form which is uniquely his: the Skeltonic. Those who would label Skelton "Beastly"³⁰ or coarse are those who have forgotten that:

29 Gordon, I.A., John Skelton: Laureate, p. 39.

30 Pope, A., Horatian Satires and Epistles, Ed., H.H. Erskine-Hill, Oxford University Press, 1964, p. 59.

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The function of poetry is sometimes to be ugly rather than beautiful. And poetry may deal with common colds and greasy kitchen maids as legitimately as with sunsets and flowers.³¹

Those who would accuse him of being unpolished and rough in his language and rhythms, let them remember that actually he was experimenting with the vernacular in forms and metres never yet used; let them remember too, that as early as "Philip Sparrow", he said of English:

Our natural tongue is rude,
And hard to be ennewed
With polished termes lusty.
(11.773-75)

and expresses in the same poem the wish:

Would God mine homely style
Were polished with the file
Of Cicero's eloquence.
(11.1202-04)

In spite of this hurdle, he has told the reader on a number of occasions to seek out the message between the lines of rhyme which "Colin Clout" tells us is ragged,

Tattered and jagged,
Rudely rain-beaten,
Rusty and moth-eaten.
(11.54-56)

In other words, he is filled with the "divinum flamen" - to use his own expression - but does not possess the tools or

³¹ Perrine, Laurence, Sound and Sense, An Introduction to Poetry, New York, Harcourt Brace and Co., 1956, p. 8.

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the skill of the craftsman to produce what the critic might call a masterpiece. But write he must, making use of the tools he has at hand: rhythm and sound. With these he fashions his own forms, gradually growing heedless of the fact that:

Though rhythm and sound are among the most powerful and exact means of definition the poet has at his disposal, they are too often used and relished for their own sake. This misuse is a recurring temptation to English poets.³²

Certainly the critics can point to literally hundreds of lines, especially in the satires, that show that the poet fell into this "temptation." The long lists of alliterative words, the breathless, if not endless rhyme-runs, the sheer joy of luxuriating in the mediaeval copiousness of words, can readily be interpreted as the use of words for words' sake.

On the other hand, we must beware the all-too-easy hasty judgement. T.S. Eliot has warned us against making a critical evaluation of a poem without remembering that:

What he (the poet) writes about poetry, in short, must be assessed in relation to the poetry he writes.³³

³² Kenner, Hugh, The Art of Poetry, New York, Rinehart and Co., Inc., 1959, p. 98.

³³ Eliot, T.S., "The Music of Poetry" in Selected Prose, Ed. by John Hayward, Penguin Books, Middlesex, 1963, p. 53. The third W.P. Ker Memorial Lecture delivered at Glasgow University, 24 February 1942. (Editor's note.)

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Now, nowhere does Skelton make a case for the beauty, the melody, or the elegance of his poetry. Nor does he maintain that it must "stir the feelings" or "consist in lofty and beautiful thoughts expressed in elevated language." But he does say that he is a "vates" and is therefore filled with the breath of divine inspiration. As he says, too, that his pen is guided by the Holy Spirit, he must have believed his "vocatio" was to shout out against the evils of his time: the high-ranking prelates - Wolsey in particular; the laxity of the clergy; the abuses in the church; the scourge of heresy. For him, these have been always very real, very near, very much "the lizard" who "lieth lurking in the grass."

This, then, being the stuff of which his poetry was made, Skelton was forced to direct his words not only to the mediaeval literati who clung to their traditional poetic themes and forms but also to a new and growing audience of the early Renaissance:

a largely uneducated but dynamic body for whom the touch of experience and actuality was the greatest proof of an author's merit . . . concerned solely with content and directness of utterance.³⁴

And so, in the breath-groups and the thought-groups of

34 Gordon, I.A., John Skelton: Poet Laureate, p. 3.

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ordinary speech and in the language of the tavern, the inn, and the highway, Skelton made a new and vibrant contribution to English literature. That he had "no real predecessors and no important disciples",³⁵ neither lessens nor heightens his place in the stream of English poetry.

In the mad helter-skelter following the death of Wolsey just a few months after Skelton's own, the evils that the poet fought to have corrected within the church burst through its very framework. He had no disciples because the need for them disappeared along with the cause he had championed. Hence, much of Skelton's poetry is for a time timely. One must make an assessment of it in the only way open: in the light of the living poet. At no time in the six periods of his life have we seen him with arms folded and watching the world go by. His qualities are the qualities of his poetry:

Energy, wit, originality, individualism; a mastery of vernacular idiom and rhythm; a capacity for direct observation . . . every quality . . . most directly at variance with the general trend of his age . . . these are what we associate with Skelton.³⁶

³⁵ Lewis, C.S., The Close of the Middle Ages in England, p. 143.

³⁶ Green, Peter, John Skelton, p. 1.

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It is interesting to see in the final chapter of the life of this vigorous laureate-poet-priest-defender of the Faith, the touches of courtliness first seen in "Philip Sparrow", the quick repartee and wit of the Garnesche flytings, the sharp vituperative notes of the early gibes against his enemies the Scots, and the battle cries against heresy first noted in "Colin Clout". Having reached almost his three score and ten, he had lost none of his energy, none of his wit, none of his power over words. In his time, and long after his time, his sincerity and openness were held suspect by centuries that were loath to admit that he had a cause. It has been left to the twentieth century to re-evaluate the living, vibrant personality of a man who like Janus "with his double chere" looked backward to the good things and forward to the better. For him, the better did not become a reality. Perhaps he was a prophet out of his time. Perhaps he was too alive in an age that was witnessing much death. But as we leave him uttering his final wish in the "Garlande": "Good luck this new year! the old year is past!", we cannot help but meditate deeply on the thought that: if John Skelton: Laureate had lived in the age of a Pope John XXIII and had experienced the rejuvenating waters of an *aggiornamento* baptism, then he might have done much to rescue his beloved Sovereign, his England, and his

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Church from the threatening tides of spiritual unrest that
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This is a doctoral study at the University of Paris. It is a general study of the poet's life and his place in English letters. The author makes a great deal of use of the studies done on Skelton until 1962.

39. Sales, Helen (Stearns), "The dating of Skelton's 'Bowge of Courte'" in MLN, lii, 1937, p. 572-4. Dates the poem in 1499 and the latest 1500. This critic maintains that it had little connection with Barclay's "Ship of Fools."

40. _____, "The Dating of the Garland of Laurel" in MLN, XLIII, 1928, p. 314-16.

From both internal and external evidence, Mrs. Sales dates the poem April, 1523.

41. _____, "John Skelton and Christopher Garnesche" in MLN, XLIII, 1928, p. 518-23.

This article reviews the background for the Garnesche flytings.

42. Salter, F.M., "Skelton's 'Speculum Principis'" in Speculum, ix, 1934.

This examines the prose instruction given to Prince Henry when Skelton was his tutor. It was useful for background for the chapter on "Creancer to a Prynce".

43. Se Boyar, Gerald E., "Skelton's 'Replycacion' in MLN, xxviii, 1913, 244-45.

Suggests that the date for this last poem is 1527, and that Skelton was trying to win back his lost reputation.

44. Skelton, John, Complete Poems, ed. by Philip Henderson, 1931 (1964) xviii-448 p.

It is from this edition of the poetry that the writer of this thesis took the quotations for the poems used.

45. _____, Magnyfycence, A Moral Play, edited by Robert Lee Ramsay, London, Trubner for the EETS, 1906 (1908), cxcvii-108 p.

The Introduction to the play and the many notes form the most extensive done so far. Until now, Ramsay's critique has formed the basis for all studies. However, Harris's new book (#21) and Heiserman (#23) have refuted a very great part of his findings.

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46. Swallow, Alan, "John Skelton: The Structure of the Poem" in PQ, XXXII, 1953, p. 29-42.

This critic suggests that in the poetry of Skelton appears the first important Renaissance break with the mediaeval tradition in poetry and uses the play Magnyfycence, the songs and the lyrics to show the poet's interest in getting the details of characterization and of the experience.

47. _____, "The Pentameter Lines in Skelton and Wyatt" in MP, XLVIII, 1950.

These two poets were following a tradition of metrics and were moving toward a full acceptance of the iambic pattern. Wyatt moves farther than Skelton and discovers the method used so effectively by the great Elizabethan and Jacobean poets.

48. White, Beatrice, "Minor Points in Professor Pinto's John Skelton" in RES, 1952, p. 199.

Miss White carefully studies Pinto's notes on "Bowge of Courte" and "Philip Sparrow" and adds about a dozen changes in the translations of the Middle English words.

APPENDIX IABSTRACT OF
JOHN SKELTON: LIVING MAN, LIVING POET¹

The vibrancy and fullness of life of John Skelton; Laureate, is evident in the poetry of each period of his life. As he moves from one milieu to the next, his work, his place of habitation and his acquaintances change, but always his response to the environment which surrounds him is complete.

He belongs to the period of the Tudor transition and from 1460 to 1529 he witnessed the last moments of the Middle Ages and the birth pangs of the Reformation. Therefore, he combines the qualities of both the Mediaeval and Renaissance cultures within whose framework he worked; but he adds also ingenuity and originality; so that he never belongs totally to either period and is sometimes completely out of time.

A great deal of scholarly research has identified persons, places and events behind many of the lines of his English poetry and his morality play, Magnyfycence. This has resulted in his being identified in the stream of English literature as a satirist. But although scholars have accused him of "firing shots" against Wolsey; of solemnly "reproving" those guilty of "capital crimes of treason and heresy" and of using the morality form for political satire and propaganda, a more vital study of his work reveals the fact that he is

1.Thesis by Sister Maris Stella MacDonald, C.S.J.,
University of Ottawa, Ottawa, Canada, 1966, 266p.

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"palpitatingly alive".

In the light of his being "alive", this thesis examines the poetry of the six periods of his life: the elegies of his studentship; the popular songs in collaboration with the court musicians; the hymns and the satire of his tutorial days at Eltham; the bristling epitaphs and the courtly daintiness of his "mock-mass" written at Diss; the flytings and the famous "Wolsey Trilogy" of Henry VIII's court; and the final "Garlande of Laurelle" produced during his temporary retirement at Sherriffhutton.

This study discovers that in every period the poetry is a projection of Skelton's love of language for its own sake: for its sound, for its beauty, for its ability to express what he wanted it to say. He was a craftsman, as is shown by the copiousness, the singing quality and the allusiveness of his verse. In the English poetic tradition, he was carrying on the traditions of the Mediaeval poets, while at the same time he was moving, through their forms, moods and methods, into the Renaissance.

When reading the poetry one cannot fail to notice that Skelton's tone, language and musical overtones are always a response to his milieu. This thesis endeavours to prove this; and in so doing, to show that Skelton was not exclusively concerned with satire, but full-blooded man that he was, he was dedicated to the writing of poetry that was alive: to the poet, to his contemporaries and to posterity.

APPENDIX II

BLESSED MAY THOU BE

Blessed may Thou be, sweet Jesus,
Qui hodie natus es nobis.

By Thy birth, Thou blessed Lord,
Is made of variance now one accord,
Therefore may we sing this word,
Blessed may Thou be, sweet Jesus,
Qui hodie natus es nobis.

Upon this high blessed day,
Jesu in His mother's arms lay,
Wherefore to Him let us all say,
Blessed may Thou be, sweet Jesus,
Qui hodie natus es nobis.

Qui hodie natus es nobis - Who today is born for us
variance - discord

This carol is marked in the manuscript for use at Christmas ("De Nativitate"). The burden and stanza are very closely linked, with many phrases in common, e.g., burden bars 1-4 and stanza bars 1-4, burden bars 5-11 and stanza bars 21-27, and burden bars 12-15 and stanza bars 14-17. As in other carols with lengthy burdens, the three-part section alone may be sung after the stanzas.¹

Although the "marching" rhythm of Skelton's poem is not present in "Blessed May Thou Be", the burden (Now Sing We, etc.), the frequent repetitions of words and phrases, and the short last three lines of each stanza which could be sung in three parts, have much in common with the music and the idea of the above. At least, this carol gives us a fairly good idea of one of the forms with which the poet Skelton was familiar.

1. Early English Christmas Carols, p. 36-7.

APPENDIX IIIFIVE TUDOR PORTRAITS¹

This Choral Suite in five movements, interprets through the medium of music Skelton's "Tunning of Elinor Rumming", "My Pretty Bess", "Epitaph on John Jayberd of Diss" Jane Scroops's "Lament for Philip Sparrow" and the "Jolly Rutterkin".

The fact that many of the musical notations state that the performance should be "allegro", "allegro pesante", "cantabile", "poco animato", etc. reinforces the idea in this thesis: that Skelton was "alive" and that he used his own musical background many times in the production of his poetry. Apparently the poet-musician collaboration of William Cornish and Skelton in the Tudor court has been found vital enough to extend itself into the twentieth century.

1. Williams, R. Vaughan, Five Tudor Portraits, A Choral Suite in Five Movements, founded on poems by John Skelton, for C. Bar. Soli, Chorus and Orchestra, Oxford University Press.