RICE UNIVERSITY

Skelton's Perspective: The Maner of the World

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A THESIS SUBMITTED
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
Master of Arts

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Houston, Texas
May 1966
ABSTRACT

JOHN SKELTON'S PERSPECTIVE: THE MANER OF THE WORLD

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The popular and still current picture of the poet John Skelton--scholar, satirist, priest and rogue--is little more than a "superficial epitome-effigy" of the man as he appears in his poetry. At the center of his work is a serious, orthodox purpose and perspective which may be discovered by examining several of his most characteristic works.

The group of religious poems which precede his entrance into Holy Orders provide a sufficient basis for the statement that there is in Skelton's work, as there is in most medieval poetry, a core, kernel, or "pyth" of faith and devotion to the Church, which in Skelton becomes a devotion to truth. This strain may be traced through poems representative of his attitude toward all aspects of the world with which he is familiar, a world which encompassed a wide range of humanity, from court nobles to peasants. He uses his satire as a weapon against the evils he finds gnawing at the roots of all levels of society.

An early poem, The Maner of the World Now A Dayes, serves as a framework to the body of Skelton's work, since it incorporates the themes of most of his later poems. In Elinour Rumming and a group of early secular lyrics, which are poems in the tradition of medieval grotesquerie, Skelton attacks the vices of women; in The Bowge of Courte he points
out the folly of that august gathering; Colin Clout walks a middle line between the apparent corruption within the Church, especially the bishops, and the equally apparent error of the heretical, "reforming" element. Skelton's long-time enmity to Thomas Wolsey, Cardinal and Chancellor of England, is expressed in several poems, of which Why Come Ye Nat to Courte? is the most explicit. In all of these, Skelton comes back again and again to what he considers a bad and worsening situation, the "maner of the world."

Finally, at the end of a lifetime as an "uncomfortably unorthodox" thorn in the side of those at whom he directed his satire, Skelton affirms his dignity as a poet and defends his right to take his place beside philosophers and theologians as protector and defender of the truth. He sees himself as vates, prophet, and this function is the source of his perspective. A Replycacion records what has already been found in Skelton's other poetry—the dedication of his life and work for one purpose: to reveal to itself the "maner of the world," and to convince its inhabitants that

We have exiled veritie.
PREFACE

My purpose in this essay is to examine John Skelton's attitude toward the "maner of the world," under the four categories into which his work may be roughly divided: the peasantry, the Court, the Church, and Thomas Wolsey. I have therefore concentrated upon those poems which I consider to be most representative of each of these aspects. For example, *Why Come Ye Nat to Court?* has been emphasized rather than *Speke, Parrot* because much of the latter poem is concerned with an attack on the New Learning; also, it contains many uncertain allusions and obscure references, the investigation of which is beyond the scope of my topic. References to the sections dealing with Wolsey are included whenever appropriate.

Following the example of Stanley Fish (*John Skelton's Poetry*, New Haven, 1965) I have not concentrated upon *Magnificence* for several reasons: 1) as morality play or interlude, it stands apart from Skelton's "popular" poetry and requires techniques of examination separate from the concerns of this essay. Extensive research on its sources and historical position in the development of the morality play has been done by A. R. Heiserman (*Skelton and Satire*, Chicago, 1961) and William O. Harris (*Skelton's Magnificence and the Cardinal Virtue Tradition*, Chapel Hill, 1965); 2) as Harris has shown ("Wolseyan Satire Re-examined," pp. 12-45),
the allusions to Wolsey are tenuous and in many cases non-existent; 3) as an example of Skelton's criticism of the Court, the Bowge of Court is more satisfactory; although it is also allegorical in one sense, it is more concerned with the reality of the situation than Magnyfycence with its idealized, abstracted qualities.
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INTRODUCTION

One of the ways in which the reading public protects itself from dynamic influences is that of circulating a picturesque legend about him accompanied by some poster-like pictorial image and an easily memorized cliche, slogan, or quotation. Acquaintance with this superficial epitome-effigy dispenses one from the effort of reading the collected works of the writer thus represented, whose living essence from then on is hidden from view and becomes less and less known to posterity.

The happy union of scholar, teacher, priest and poet in the personality of John Skelton gave to English literature one of its most colorful, interesting and least understood figures. His place as the outstanding poet of his age, a strange period of transition between medieval and Renaissance modes of thinking, behaving and writing, cannot be questioned; what can be disputed, and has been often, is whether there is any value in being merely conspicuous and whether Skelton has other claim to greatness.

The popularity or unpopularity of a poet depends to a great extent upon the times in which his critics live. In his own day, although his popular audience was great, Skelton was considered by some to be "uncomfortably unorthodox"; during the next two centuries his work was "outside the pale of polite literature," and he was reduced to a "rude, rayling rimer," a "beastly" person who "would have been a writer without decorum at any period." It is only recently, in
the early part of this century, that his work has had any noticeable revival or excited more than a little critical interest; unfortunately, he is still being misunderstood. Skelton does not fit comfortably into the history of English literature, and his very originality is often a handicap to the study of his work. He is too far ahead of the Medieval tradition and too far behind the Renaissance; three hundred years as a misfit, says Ian Gordon, brought him finally to "that inglorious scrap-heap," Disraeli's Curiosities of Literature where he is found among other oddities.

The apocryphal Mery Tales which circulated during Skelton's lifetime did much to form what is still the picture most people have of Skelton—coarse, ribald, rebellious. The mystery surrounding large periods of the poet's life lends just enough credibility to the Tales to justify their continued popularity. The actual personality of Skelton also seems to have contributed to the confusion. One of his contemporaries remarks that his "talke was as he wraet;" the implication would seem to be that the satirical vein was present even in his conversation—witness his knack for involving himself in quarrels with his rival Garnesche, the Dominican friars, his parishioners and Cardinal Wolsey. Skelton seems always to have been a flamboyant figure, "esteemed more fit for the stage than the pew or pulpit." Dyce even finds one early biographer asserting that Skelton composed the Tales himself for the members of the court. Even if this were so, knowing Skelton as he appears in most of his
poetry, it would be an even stronger reason to take the Mery Tales as tall tales:

"Skelton stalks through his own pages with egotistical panache, flouting his laureate's robe...quarrelling, laughing, swearing, blasphemously devout, a master of polyglot abuse and political allegory, equally at home in an alehouse, a country rectory, or the King's Court."

The mistaken assumption that has perhaps best served to propagate the portrait of "mery Skelton" is that he was a reluctant priest, a rebel associated in spirit with the Protestant reformers. Very little of this is true; the rebel in Skelton stems from a genuine desire for reform—in the Court, the Church, and society in general. The particular reforms which he believed necessary, moreover, are similar to those urged by poets such as Langland: they come from within the Church to reinforce her structure, not from without, to tear it down.

It is highly questionable that as a priest Skelton was less than faithful to his calling. One fact which is often overlooked in treatments of Skelton is the extreme latitude of thought and speech permitted the clergy of his time. Beginning with the political songs of the Mendicant friars, and growing in volume through the later Middle Ages, there is a steady stream of satire and complaint from the clergy, all directed against the same attitudes and abuses as Skelton's verse, all with a similar purpose. "Lydgate, particularly in his minor verse, Hoccleve,...and Henryson, Dunbar, Gavin Douglas and Lyndesay...all thus express the follies and empty
vanity of Life, and cry as with one voice,—'Dies mali sunt.' seven In Skelton, however, the message is often obscured, and this is where the difficulty lies. The deliberate crudeness of the popular Skeltonic is not the colloquial simplicity of Langland's verse, for instance, and does not have the same ring of sincerity or authenticity. One cannot forget that Skelton is court poet turned satirist. The "atmosphere of the contemporary pulpit" also seems to be lacking in Skelton, even for a scholar directly concerned with searching out the religious note: "The very backbone of moral purpose in satire seems at last to be breaking...the Realist all too soon becomes a ribald and a cynic.8

What is easily forgotten in such comparisons is the disparity of the writers' backgrounds. Skelton is not a country cleric nor a vernacular poet by nature; he is a learned scholar and member of a highly sophisticated Court. When he begins writing verse in "common language," therefore, he is departing from his inclinations as a classicist and from a style of polished lyricism more in keeping with his "public" character. It is not difficult to see why his associates at court were doubtful of his purpose, or why he could come to be warily regarded as unorthodox.

The early doubt of Skelton's serious nature has been filtered down to succeeding generations of critics, and the "modern" attitude might be described in this manner:

The legendary "mud-slinging hedge-priest" was largely spawned from the Merie Tales and later given a fresh boost by the modern enthusiasts who hoisted
him into prominence again during the Gay Twenties. Their gravest error was to applaud his obvious blasphemies without understanding the deep, all-pervading religious faith which alone gave such blasphemies meaning or proportion.10

This attitude is reflected in an early poem of Robert Graves, who takes Skelton for his master:

I now delight
In spite
Of the right
Of classic tradition
In writing
And reciting
Straight ahead
Without let or omission
Just any little rhyme
In any little time
That runs in my head.11

Skelton himself gives warning to the reader that all is not as it seems, at the same time hinting of a solution, in these lines from Colyn Cloute:

For though my rhyme be ragged
Tattered and jagged,
Rudely rayne beaten,
Rusty and moughte eaten,
If ye take well therewith
It hath in it some pyth.12

What is the "pyth?" The answer may be discovered by an examination of some of Skelton's most characteristic works, through which it becomes evident that Skelton is unquestionably orthodox and that one concern, man's relation to truth, lies at the center of his poetry.
I. SUMTYME WITH SADNES

In 1498 Skelton the courtier became Skelton the priest. Although it is possible that his entrance into holy orders was suggested by Lady Margaret, grandmother to his young pupil, it is not likely that he was forced to do so. At this time the poet was at the peak of worldly success. Renowned as a scholar and laureate in his own country, praised by Erasmus as "unum Britannicarum literarum lumen,"¹ and enjoying the patronage of England's ruling family, Skelton was a man with little left to accomplish. Nevertheless he decided, for reasons not recorded, to enter the priesthood. There is no evidence to indicate the presence of any sort of pressure, except the kind of disillusionment with his surroundings and dissatisfaction with the "world nowadays" that produced The Bowge of Courte.

On the other hand, there is some evidence of a real respect for the religious life on Skelton's part, which although not strictly factual is better proof than none at all: the group of religious poems which precede his entrance into Holy Orders.² They are as simple and straightforward in sense and tone as the satires are complex and ambiguous; Skelton displays a faith and devotion to his Church and his calling which he never again expresses in such explicit, strong and certain terms. Although the impersonality of these religious lyrics, in comparison to Skelton's satiric
works, has been noted and explained as part of medieval tradition, more characteristic of the age than of the man, it is still true that these poems are markedly different from his other poetry in a way which should attract other critical notice than mere categorizing. They appear closely spaced within a particular period of time when the poet would naturally be concerned more with dogma and doctrine as they affect him personally than with abuses and corruption as they appear in other men. If only for these reasons, this group of poems should not be so easily discounted as impersonal, traditional, or "Appollonian."

Skelton refers to his religious lyrics as "devoute medytacyons" and "contemplacyouns," and informs us that they occupy part of his time "both nyght and day," the part given over to "sadnes" rather than to play. It is questionable whether the personal element is entirely missing from these poems. Graves sees the lines in Woffully Araid as "emotionally aflame;" it is only because he attributes this emotion to Skelton's love for his Muse rather than his God that Graves cannot account for the last stanza where "the flame dies down again, and flickers out in ecclesiastic homily." The speaker in the poem is not just a descriptive narrator but Christ himself, and his pain and sacrifice are those with which the poet is now intimately involved as priest, no matter how careful he is to remain separate from them in his character as artist.
Wofffully araid,
   My blode, man,
   For the ran,
   It may not be naid;
   My body bloo and wan,
Wofffully araid.

Thus nakyd am I nailid, 0 man, for thy sake!
   I love the, then love me; why slepist thou? awake!
Remember my tendir hart rote for the brake,
   With panys my vaynys constraynd to crake;
   Thus toggid to and fro,
   Thus wrappid all in woo,
   Whereas never man was so.

Off sharpe thorne I have wore a crowne on my hede,
   So paynd, so straynd, so rufull, so red;
   Thus bobbid, thus robbid, thus for thy love ded,
   Unfaynyd, not deynyd my blod for to shed.

Skelton involves the reader directly in the Crucifixion
as both victim and executioner, forcing him by use of the
first person narrator to feel the suffering of Christ, yet
reminding him constantly of his opposite role as man. In
addition to this technique, which is still a part of fif¬
teenth century tradition, Skelton adds a sensuality of
imagery and a pattern of rhyme, assonance and alliteration
which gives evidence of a growing concern with style as a
vehicle of thought. In later "Skeltonics," he will use
similar techniques for an entirely different purpose.

The last stanza, which does not fit Graves's picture
of Skelton the Muse-worshipper does fit that of Skelton the
newly-consecrated priest:

Deyr brother, noo other thyng y off thee desyre
   But gyve me thyne hert fre to reward myn hyre:
   Y wrought the, I bought the from eternal fyre;
   Y pray the array the toward my hyght empyre,
   Above the oryent
   Wheroff y am regent,
   Lord God omnipotent,
Wyth me too reyn yn endlys welthe;  
Remember, man, thy sawlys helthe.

The sense of brotherhood with Christ as well as the compelling "Gyve me thyne hert fre," though applicable to all men, are especially in keeping with the spirit of the religious life; they are certainly not the sentiments of an unbeliever or a skeptic.

If the charge of "impersonal" is to be directed at any of Skelton's religious poems, it is more justly applied to the three invocations To the Father of Heaven, To the Seconde Parson, and To the Holy Gooste. Here Skelton again uses the first person, the persona this time simply that of any prayer--man the supplicant.

O radiant Luminary of lyght intermynable,  
Celestial Father, potential God of Myght,...

Whose magnificence is incomprehensybyll,  
All argumentes of reason which far doth excede,  
Whose Deity doubtles in indyvysybyll,  
From whom all goodnes and vertue doth procede.

These lines, says Graves, leave the reader "dazzled but cold; we even suspect that Skelton has been naughtily ambiguous in his 'potential' God of might,' and in 'Whose Deity, doubtless, is indivisible.'" Besides pointing out the obvious failure of Graves to allow on the other hand a straightforward reading of "potential" and "doubtless" (full of power, free of doubt), it is also possible to take exception to his description of the poems as "dazzling but cold." In concentrating on the above lines Graves overlooks the more commonplace terms of the rest of the poem:
Myne hert, my mynde, my thought, my hole delighe
tis, after this lyfe, to see thy glorious face:

Assyst me, good Lorde, and graunte me of thy grace,
To lyve to thy pleasure in word, thoughte, and dede,
And, after this lyfe, to see thy glorious face,

It becomes clear that Skelton wishes to dazzle with his
description of God the Father in order to make stronger the
contrast between the Celestial Father and the supplicant.
Surely there is nothing cold about these lines; rather,
they are in their humble and peaceful tone both human and
appealing.

The same is true of the other two poems, in which the
same contrast is evident:

O benygne Jesu, my soverayne Lord and Kynge,...

O pereles Prynce, payned to the deth,...
   Agayne all bodely and goostely trybulacion
   Defende me wyth thy piteous woundis fyve.

O firy ferenence, inflamed with all grace,...

The thyrd Parson, one God in Trinite,...
   Agaynst all stormys of harde adversyte,
   Rescu me, good Lord, by thy preservacion.

Amen.10

Despite all that can be said about the human element, there
is still in these poems a complete adherence to the tradi-
tional forms which is unlike the independent spirit of most
of Skelton's poetry. Their sincerity is therefore still
open to question.

What seems an oddity, even a contradiction in Skelton
would not have been strange to his contemporaries and should
not be so to the modern reader with a sense of the poet's
direction in his satire. To be original or an innovator in
Church reform was a way of action conceivably open, though dangerously so, for a man of good conscience; but to be original in one's devotions—and these poems are devotional—or in one's doctrinal teaching—and these poems are doctrinal—was in the eyes of the Church close to heresy, and the thought of heresy in general always arouses Skelton's anger and his most heated language. His enmity to King James, for instance, is mainly because for him James is a heretic; he is quick to condemn Lutheranism, the schism which threatened Christendom. He regards even abjured heretics as virtually beyond the pale;

These yong heretikes, that stynk unbrent,
Whome I nowe sommon and content,
That leudly have their tyme spent,
In their study abhomynable.

The convention and orthodoxy in the prayers becomes understandable.

Another function of the priest is that of instructor in the Faith, and it is recorded by Skelton that his religious poetry was written "to be displayd." It is, like the rest of his work, within the tradition that conceives of literature as a means of propagating virtue. This line of thought brings Skelton to write Upon a Deedmans Hed. More directly concerned now with the plight of man than in the previous poems, he is still giving evidence of his morality and sincerity as a priest, as well as his didactic fitness as tutor to the prince. This poem, however, seems to be his first experiment with the style which will develop into what has come to be known as the Skeltonic, in which
he begins to break away from conventionality of form as well as from courtly sophistication.18

You're ugly token
My mynd hath brokyn
From worldly lust;
For I have dyscust
We ar but dust,
And dy we must.
It is generall
To be mortall:

I have well espyde
No man may hym hyde
From Deth holow eyd,
With synnews wyderyd,
With bonys shyderyd,
With hys worme etyn maw,
And his gastly jaw
Gaspyng asyde,
Nakyd of hyde,
Neyther flesh nor fell.
Then, by my counsell,
Loke that ye spell
Well thyys gospell:
For wher so we dwell
Deth wyll us quell,
And with us mell.19

This poem Skelton also describes as a "medytacyon," but both tone and form are totally different from those of Woffully Araid or the Invocations. The speaker this time is not the suffering Christ, nor the traditional supplicant of the prayers, but the persona of everyman, the "I" who is forerunner of Piers—or Colin—whose character Skelton will later personify as the vehicle of his satire. Early and late, the character partakes of the identity of Skelton. The lesson of mortality is one which should be apparent to every man, but also one of which he must be reminded frequently—thus the didactic purpose of the poem. The priest is still in command of the poet in Skelton, and although the
latter may claim new freedoms of style and subject, he will always remain subordinate to the first.

The medieval fascination with the horror and destruction of death in the poem,

Oure eyen synkyng,
Oure bodys stynkyng,
Oure gummys grynnnyng,
Oure soulys brynnyng

is picked up by Graves as an example of Skelton's love of the grotesque, and once again the modern poet imitates the old:

Propped against a shattered trunk,
In a great mess of things unclean,
Sat a dead Boche; he scowled and stunk
With clothes and face sodden green,
Big-bellied, spectacled, crop-haired,
Dribbling black blood from nose and beard.20

Again, it is easy to see the error in Graves's interpretation of Skelton's theme. As Douglas Day remarks,21 Graves succeeds in arousing only the emotion of disgust; he shares neither Skelton's decorum nor his meaning. It is so with anyone who would read this or any of the later Skeltonics as pieces of grotesquerie (as is often the case with Elinour Rumming) and overlook their basic statement:

We ar but dust,
And dy we must.

This theme, "all flesh is grass" as Green puts it, may be traced through every poem Skelton wrote; "(his) Gothic graveyard humours and his rattling tavern bawdry...are two sides of the same medal."22

Skelton's memento mori is still a conventional medieval poem with many predecessors and parallels, but his style is
the beginning of something new. After Skelton goes to Diss, he will use it to parody rather than imitate religious forms. **Upon a Deedmans Hed**, then, can be seen as a link between Skelton the fledgling priest and Skelton the ecclesiastical satirist. The common poetic horror of the physical aspect of death will give way to an even greater horror, real and personal, at the spiritual decay he finds around him in a clear line of descent from the Tudor court to his country parish; the new style, and the concern for man's soul, will remain the same—and thus the gap is bridged.

It is strange that throughout the history of scholarship on Skelton the group of strictly religious poems is hardly mentioned except as a means of placing the poet within the medieval tradition rather than the Renaissance, or as an oddity which must be explained away in order to preserve the picture of Skelton the skeptic and rebel. The conclusions of critics who admit the existence of the serious moral element can still be ignored as mere supposition by those like Graves, who infers from the shaky ground of "doubtless" and "potential" that Skelton is writing with tongue in cheek. This sort of criticism is the more untenable because its author has within his reach the bulk of modern scholarship on his subject.

The fictitious Skelton of the Mery Tales will not remain buried, and the decorous, "stuffy" Skelton of the religious lyrics is not as appealing a figure as the Skelton of the satires. Yet, "if we forget this Skelton, and
remember only the author of Colin Clout or Philip Sparrow, we not only lose a vital part of his creative impulse, but will, in all likelihood, be sadly at fault with our judgment on what remains."26
II. TEMPORALTE

Skelton's immediate world encompassed a wide range of humanity, from court nobles to peasants; with "all flesh is grass" sounding within him from the beginning, he uses his satire as a weapon against the evils he finds gnawing at the roots of all levels of society. In *The Maner of the World Now a Dayes* the poet records the vices of society (corresponding roughly to those of Langland's Haukyn) and adds the warning which is implicit in all of his satires: "Worse was it never!"

Outward signs of virtue, modesty in dress and behavior, are fast losing ground before pride in appearance; fashion and extravagance are the new gods. Skelton shows again and again the widening gap between interior and exterior concerns:

So many poynted caps,... 1
And so few devocions,

Such pranked cotes and sleves,... 21
And such increase of theves,

So many gay swordes,
So many altered wordes,

So well apparrelled wyves
And so yll of theyr lyves, 46

Sawe I never.

He berates the rich for failing in charity toward the poor,

So newe fashyoned daggers, 42
And so many beggers,

and the poor for failing to accept their lot in a spirit of humility and resignation:
So many empli purses,...
And so many curses,

Sawe I never.

Sins of the flesh are becoming commonplace, even acceptable—men are giving in more and more to their baser desires without thought of the spiritual consequences:

So many cockolde makers,...
And so many peace breakers,

So many maidens with child
And wylfully begylde,

So many women blamed
And rightuously defaimed,
And so lytle ashamed,

Sawe I never.

The people are negligent both in the care of their own souls and those of their neighbors. Sloth in religious duties is common;

So many good sermons,
And so few devotions,

Taking so littel care
Howe the soule doth fare,

Sawe I never.

A man's word has little value:

So many falsely forsworne,
So many lawes to use
The truth to refuse
Such falsehead to excuse,

Sawe I never.

As he nears the end of the poem, Skelton no longer describes only the indications of vice, but begins to call them by name. He says, in effect, "Here are all the capital sins accepted as commonplace!"
So much wrath and envy, Covetous and gluttony, And so little charitie, Such treachery, Simony and usury, Poverty and lechery, More envy and lyers Sawe I never.

Skelton the courtly lyricist can no longer sing of "myrth and play," for the "welth of England gon," the people "wo begone" have need of a different sort of tune. Over and over in the poem Skelton points to what he believes to be the main difficulty, and one which it is within his power as priest and poet to remedy.

We have exiled veritie... The truth to refuse... All England decayes.

Truth, the true "welth" of England, has been exiled: "The spiritual saith they have none."

Both the image and the language of the final stanza are similar to the last passus of Piers Plowman where there is nobody left to defend the besieged castle of Unity, with Truth gone and Contrition wounded and poisoned by Friar Flatter. The answer of Langland, and that of Skelton, is not to defend but to attack—not to cower within a Unity that is inwardly falling apart, but to search actively for Truth to strengthen its foundations. There is that note of hope—that Truth can be found—but still Skelton's speaker adds a note of warning and a recommendation for reform:
God is neither dead nor sicke;
He may amend al yet,
And trowe ye so in dede,
As ye beleve ye shal have mede.
After better I hope ever,
For worse was it never.

The poem was written at Diss where for some time spiritual anger had been fermenting in Skelton—"a vast, all-embracing rage at the abuses and changes which he saw as threatening both his society and his Faith." The tendencies in his society which he records in The Maner of the World become the targets of his later satires. By using the earlier poem as a point of reference, the "pyth" of the later ones may be better understood.

The group of early secular lyrics which was written either during his student days at Oxford or his first years at court, is directed especially against women of the sort "rightuously defaimed/ And so lytle ashamed." In these lyrics Skelton attempts to join "the voice and diction of the unsuccessful courtly lover to the low humor of the betrayed-serving-maid ballad;" the result is a revelation of the courtly tradition as "perfumed coarseness (far worse than unadorned coarseness)," and the negation of the simple boisterousness of the country ballad. The poet's aim, as usual, is to get at the truth of the matter.

Betrayal is the common theme of the poems. In "Womanhood, Wanton, Ye Want" the charge is vanity and promiscuity. The lady is lacking in virtue—"plente of yll, of goodnes skant;" she has betrayed her former lover, discarding him for a richer man. Still, although "proud as a pohen" in
her new finery, she does not pretend to be honest or virtuous; and so, for her boldness, she remains at the end of the poem "farly swete." The woman in "The Auncient Acquaintance, Madam" on the other hand, seemingly above reproach, is shown to be less than what she seems; the "good horseman" for whom she betrays her husband is only a blacksmith; the husband himself, who is first described as a "jentyll knight," turns out to be the traditional cuckold. In return for her misrepresentation of herself she receives only a sarcastic admonishment to "warke more secretly"; the tone is censorious.

The derogatory, mistrustful attitude toward women was one side of the common medieval tone, but when Skelton deals with it he deserts his medieval models for his own observations of real humanity; that is why the poems seem to have in them so much of the personal element. The female characters he creates in the early lyrics are grotesques of the same sort as Elinour Rumming. There is physical loathing involved, and the humor is sometimes a little too bitter to be enjoyed. Skelton is looking into the ugly face of the "world now a dayes" and he does not like the vision.

In The Tunning of Elinour Rumming the picture of a morning in a low country ale-house adds support to this view. The poem (which is divided into passus) owes much to Langland, from whose portrait of Gluttony Skelton seems to have taken his form, and the poets' purposes are similar, although Skelton's figures are less abstract. One quarrels with the statement that Skelton is being "morally neutral." It
is not a motionless canvas, nor a purely objective record of reality. Skelton, like Langland, intends to focus his attack on a point beyond his characters; he is aware of the essential humanity of his scene as well as the truth that lies behind it. It is easy to miss the moral content of the poem because of its subtlety, but it is unquestionably present in the character of the customers and the differences in the items brought to barter:

Some for very nede  
Layde downe a skeyne of threde,  
And some a skeyne of yarne;  

Fyrst one wyth a ladell,  
Another wyth a cradell,  
And wyth a syde sadell:  

Some brought theyr husbandes hat,  
Some podynges and lynkes,  
Some trypes that stynkes.  

Nobody dares to enter the ale-house empty-handed:

Elynour swered, Nay,  
Ye shall not beare away  
My ale for nought,  
By hym that me bought!

Her speech "does not merely contrast the bargains which men and women strike, with that which Christ struck; it brings them disquietingly, revealingly together." Skelton uses this ironic juxtaposition frequently in his satires. In the Bowge of Court, for instance, liars swear upon their "trouthe" and avaricious Fortune-seekers greet Drede with "God save you!" In Colin Clout (lines 76, 130) the bishops are contrasted with Christ as shepherds who fail to tend their sheep and Wolsey's banquet-table, by implication, with the simple food blessed by Christ.
Skelton condemns in the poem the immediate sins of gluttony, vanity, carelessness and the disruption of order. The wives who leave their husbands, children and households to come to the alehouse are guilty, as are the pleasure-seeking maidens and the aging bawds. They have forsaken the virtues of gentleness, moderation and modesty which should characterize their sex. His "racy" description of Elinour, which prefaces the poem, is reminiscent of Chaucer's description of the Wife of Bath: "she was somdel deef, and that was scathe/...Boold was hir face, and fair, and reed of hewe./...Cat-toothed was she soothly for to seye." (Prologue, lines 446, 458, 468) The Wife's long acquaintance with the "olde daunce" is similar to the trade of Elinour Rumming, which results in a portrait which is a reminder of human transience with its aura of age and decay.12

The description of Elinour is also similar to the more sober portrait of Gluttony found in a sermon by Thomas More, "The Four Last Things":

If God would never punish gluttony, yet bringeth it punishment enough with itself; it disfigureth the face, discouloreh the skin, and disfashioneth the body; it maketh the skin tawny, the body fat and flabby, the face drowsy, the nose dripping, the mouth spitting, the eyes bleared, the teeth rotten, the breath stinking, the hands trembling, the head hanging, and the feet tottering.13

However grotesque it may be, Skelton's picture is accurate; "the ugly side of Elinour Rumming is simply an honest reflection of the poverty and primitiveness which were the staple of life for a rural peasantry in England at that time."14
The poem is a prime example of the manner in which the legend of Skelton has been augmented over the years. The common approach to *Elinour Humming* is summed up by Berdan: "The reader has the unwilling conviction that descriptions written with such gusto show a familiarity with disreputable resorts unexplained in a scholar and an enjoyment of them undesirable in a Churchman."¹⁵ One need only remember that the scholar is now a rector whose life is committed to the care of the people he describes, and that his conduct is in no way unusual for his time: "he can, with a racy toughness still permitted to clerics, give an unrivalled genre picture of female topers."¹⁶

Another more admiring critic remarks, "Skelton was no more easily disgusted than Chaucer...there is no moral obliquity in question; he merely accepted, with a laugh, the monstrous richness of experience."¹⁷ He adds, however, that "Skelton was not always in this frame of mind; far from it. Indeed, at the end of this very poem he claims it is an objective lesson for the drunken sluts who may read it."¹⁸ Although he is reluctant to believe that Skelton intends his closing remarks in Latin to be taken seriously, Edwards does admit that beneath the "farce" there is some realization of the punishment for gluttons. There is always the tendency to agree with Graves that Skelton must have been on the friendliest of terms with the likes of Elinour or Manerly Margery;¹⁹ it is no wonder that of all his works this one seems to be the most consistently detrimental to
his reputation.

On the other hand, the sort of women treated in some of Skelton's other lyrics are of a different breed—nobler, less accessible. For example, in the *Garlande of Laurell* Skelton addresses compliments to gentlewomen—in the literal sense of the word. The poems range in tone from the colloquial,

> By saynt Mary, my lady,
> Your mammy and your dady
> Brought forth a godeely babi!

...to the innocence of

> Far may be sought
> Erst that ye can fynde
> So corteis, so kynde
> As mirry Margarete,
> This midsomer flowre,
> Ientyll as fawcoun
> Or hawke of the towre.

...to the grave and courteous address to Isabell Knyght:

> It is not my custome nor my gyse
> To leve behynde
> Her that is both womanly and wyse.

These lyrics are characterized by simplicity, dignity, and discipline, in contrast with the rough handling of Elinour. They celebrate an ideal of womanhood which, along with the condemnation of the coarser side of femininity, constitutes a balanced view which is typical of Skelton's attitude toward his subjects; for instance, in *The Maner of the World* both rich and poor receive their share of criticism, and in *Colyn Cloute* the laity are admonished as well as the bishops. In his insistence upon Truth, Skelton must necessarily consider both sides of every question.
The indictments of The Maner of the World and Elinour Rumming are not intended to apply only to the common people. The proper function of a court at the turn of the fifteenth century was still that of guiding and ruling the populace of England; the functions of Church and State were not yet clearly separated, and the court existed (ideally) as a microcosm of the realm, the center of order and the seat of virtue. Upon first contact with the Tudor court, Skelton discovers instead the failures of society not only reflected but magnified and carried to extremes. The Bowge of Courte may be read as a record of that disillusionment, but to be satisfied with so simple an interpretation is to underestimate the poet.

The first four stanzas of the poem contain conventional incipits which Skelton turns to his own purpose. In fixing the time astrologically, for instance, he is able through his choice of season to hint at the purpose of the poem. It is autumn, the season of slow decay and corruption which promises only the barrenness and hardship of winter. Luna, the moon, is "full of mutabylyte" and this instability is reflected in the "foly" and "unstedfastnesse" of the world she governs. This description parallels neatly the figure of Fortune and her court as they appear later in the dream vision. It is also the season when the red planet Mars is in conjunction with the moon; their combination is "decidedly threatening." The threat is not directed especially against the poet, however; the juxtaposition of the first
two stanzas would seem to indicate that, on the contrary, it is the poet who aligns himself with the warlike element:

The tyme when Mars to werre hym dyde dres;
I, callynge to mynde the greate auctoryte
Of poetes olde, whyche full craftely,
Under as coverte terms as coude be,
Can touche a trouth and cloke it subtyly...

I was sore moved to aforce the same.

The battle array of Mars is paralleled by that of the poet, whose weapon is language. It is as though, for a moment, he puts himself in the position of the gods who "smyle halfe in scorne" at the "maner of the world." However, it is impossible for the Dreamer to remove himself this completely from his subject, since he himself is part of it. He would like to "nobly endyte" morality and condemn vice, as greater poets have done, but Ignoraunce advises him not to write; he has too high an opinion of himself and presumes more skill than he possesses. This advice causes the Dreamer to doubt himself, and so, as he falls asleep, "Up and down my mynde was drawen and cast."

The same sort of doubt is instilled into Langland's Dreamer in a parallel incident, just before he falls asleep to dream of Fortune:

_Multi multa sciunt, et se ipsos nesciunt._

However, there is a contrast between Langland's Dreamer and Skelton's, who turns the problem over in his mind and finally must force himself to rest "and to lye downe as
soone as I me dreste." The line echoes the reference to Mars in the first stanza, and it is not certain that Skelton's dreamer needs the lesson of Drede to resolve his anxiety; rather, the dream provides a means of demonstrating his poetic powers. At its end, the poet "caughte penne and ynke, and wrote this lytyll boke." The hesitation and the anxiety have disappeared.

The meaning of Drede is difficult to define. Since it seems to be the practice of critics to interpret the word to fit their respective theses, the subject is eminently open to debate. Fish sees Drede echoing such sources as the Romance of the Rose ("abasshed, and in gret fere/...Of everything that she may see/ Drede is aferd, wherso she be.") or Lydgate's Temple of Glass where the word comes to have a theological meaning, wanhope or despair.27 For this reason it is "disturbing" to the critic that Drede should be the name of Skelton's hero. It is difficult to support such an interpretation within the context of the poem.

Drede's first impression of the Bowge, "a shyppe, goodly of sayle,...her takelynge ryche and of hye apparayle," is an attractive rather than a fearful one. The ship is "fraghted with plesure," and Drede "wolde not dwell behynde." He finds himself, once aboard, within a large crowd of suitors; the first inkling of danger that he has is the cryptic motto of the Bowge:

\[ \text{Garder le fortune, qui est mavelz et bone!} \]

Logically, the first person Drede encounters is Daunger.
His dialogue with her does not display "great fear of everything," but rather great curiosity. He answers her questions forthrightly,

What is thy name? And I sayde, it was Drede.

What movyd the, quod she, hydder to come? Forsoth, quod I, to bye some of youre ware.

Daunger's "glome" and "daynnous" stare leave Drede "ston-dynge as a mased man;" he has not foreseen hostility. Although it carries suggestions of fear, this is still not the face of deep anxiety or despair, but the same that Skelton employs in other poems: the figure of Piers, or man the seeker of Fortune. This interpretation is supported by numerous parallels with Langland:

Both poems oppose the notion of false, ephemeral reward to true eternal reward; both oppose false, fickle words to true speech; and both connect false rewards and false speech with courts. Both works use the device of the dream-vision and allegory, and both construct an action designed to reveal the true nature of Mede-Bowge.28

It is not necessary that Drede's fear be greater than that of any man in his situation; it is only necessary that he be innocent of the true nature of the Bowge;

an action built upon a journey of discovery which ends in defeat would require a protagonist who had something to learn and something to lose. Drede is the conventional quester who learns what the reader is to learn (that courts harbor folly and sin), and whose murder turns the reader against the objects of the satire.29

Besides learning the true nature of the court, Drede learns the true nature of Fortune, and in this experience, whether he wins or loses his place in the Bowge, he is most like the Dreamer of Piers Flowman.
Fish's view of Drede leads him finally to the statement that Drede, whom he equates with the Dreamer, learns nothing from his experience. If this is true, then the Dreamer has no reason to record the vision, or even to suggest that it may be valuable. The character of Drede obviously does incorporate something of the character of the Dreamer, in that both are literary figures. This element, however, is not crucial to the progress of the action, and its overemphasis can lead to misinterpretation.

The courtiers mistrust Drede, it is true, but not especially because he is a poet. Rather, they are intimidated by his habits of honesty and candor and his suspicion of their actions which is evident from the beginning of the voyage: "Under hony ofte tyme lyeth bitter gall." The inhabitants of the Bowge "hate for to dele with Drede." His curious, probing nature is what they fear most. Suspycyon advises Drede that

The soveraynst thynge that ony man maye have,
Is lytell to saye, and moche to here and see.

This is precisely the manner in which Drede conducts himself. For this reason he is accused by both Favell and Harvy Hafter of being "connynge." Although his name suggests fear and doubt, Drede can also stand for timidity or courtly naivete; perhaps he is best taken simply as a figure of heightened awareness, who is drede-ful to himself and to the others because he perceives the true nature of his situation.

In his representation of the characters he meets, Drede points out the falsity of their behavior. Like the people
in *The Maner of the World* the courtiers are serving a temporal rather than a spiritual Fortune. This results in a vanity of speech and dress and a laxity in conduct which are improper to all men and are exemplified in the figures of Harvy Hafer and Ryotte. All the courtiers call upon God to witness the truth of their deceitful speech, and each greets Drede with some form of "God save you!" It is the good fortune of Drede to perceive the irony in their speech, and this perception is the heart of the satire and the key of the Bowge:

> As me thoughte, he ware on hym a cloke,  
> That lyned was with doubtfull doubleness;  
> Thenne I beheld how he dysgysed was.  
> I dempte and drede theyr talkynge was not good.

Each of the courtiers swears that he is a "playne" man and that his advice is sound, "by my trouthe." The ironic contrast reflects the same technique Skelton used in *Elinour Rumming*; even more strongly than in *The Maner of the World* the accusation is made that we have exiled veritie. Truth cannot live on the Bowge, where there is not to be found one good man, and neither can Drede. In Langland, the Dreamer asks for guidance in knowing what is true and false; he is told to look at Falsehood and Flattery and their companions, but instead he sees Mede. In Skelton, the order is reversed; in the beginning Drede is searching for Fortune but in doing so discovers that she is represented by Favell and his companions, who are false. In both cases Mede—
Fortune—has been corrupted and perverted by those who surround her with deceit, the enemies of Truth.

If the primary object of satire in the *Bowge of Courte* is the absence of Truth, the question of Drede's fate at the end of the vision is irrelevant. His last impulse is to escape the Bowge and its falsity and on this impulse the Dreamer wakes to record his vision. The absence of a "happy ending" for Drede as well as the Dreamer is disturbing to some critics. If Drede is read only as Doubt or Fear this is understandable, since his "doubts" would be confirmed rather than resolved. In comparing Skelton's work with that of Dunbar, whose work is that of "explicit, lyrical, undramatic satire," Heiserman gives credit to the opposing characteristics of Skelton, whose work is implicit and dramatic.

There is nobody aboard the Bowge to advise Drede to

> Hald God thy freind, evir stafill bi him stand,  
> And will the confort in al misaventur.34

In fact, if there were the poem would be less satisfactory as a dramatic piece of satire. For the same reason, it cannot happen that a good man comes sailing by to pluck Drede from the sea; the court represents the "world now a dayes," and the implicit comment must be:

> Worse was it never!
III. SPIRITUALTE

"There is nothing subtle about the poetry of Colin Clout. Skelton charges like a rhinoceros."¹ This description of the poem is as exaggerated in its implications as the opposite view that the poem is a complex philosophical expression of the inadequacies of the human situation by a hero faced with the unresolvable question of the dilemma of his own existence.² The most accurate perspective, as usual, lies somewhere between the extremes. The first comment implies that the poem is simple, unstructured, and easily comprehended; the adjectives are inaccurate. Colin Clout³ is by no means a simple poem.

The Latin epigraph at the beginning sets the tone and provides a framework for the poem:

Quis consurget mecum adversus malignantes?
aut quis stavit mecum adversus operantes
iniquitatem? Nemo, Domine!²

In its context, the question of Psalm Ninety-three (Vulgate; King James' version; Ninety-four): follows a plea for justice:

Lord, in thy divine vengeance stand revealed! Judge of the world, mount thy throne and give the proud their deserts!
Must it be the sinners still, Lord, the sinners still that triumph?

In the psalm, the question, "Who will stand by me?" is immediately answered: "It is the Lord that helps me." Colin's answer, however, is "No one, Lord!" Through this juxtaposition Skelton introduces the complexity of his
character. The questioner of the psalm is, on one level, the just man who condemns the evil that he finds in the world, and he is speaking to the Lord. On this level, Colin represents the traditional figure of the honest plowman, Piers, the rock, upon whose integrity justice depends; he is also the rustic figure of David, shepherd and singer of songs. "No one, Lord!" is thus a statement that there is no other good man to be found to aid him in his struggle for Truth.

However, Jerome remarks that the speaker of the psalms is frequently ambiguous; in his exigesis of Psalm Ninety-three he says that the questioner may also be the Lord himself, inviting man to join him in the fight against evil. "No one, Lord!" may then be read as man's answer to the Lord; all men, including Piers and Colin, are imperfect. Colin thus from the beginning assumes the role of Everyman who is virtuous and a sinner; even Colin, although he may point out the misdeeds of men, cannot hope to assume alone the burden of their remedy. As in The Maner of the World, God is necessary to effect the cure. In exhorting the people and the prelates to reform Colin includes himself in their number. This view is given additional weight by R.S. Kinsman, who shows that Colin represents the traditional idea that vox populi equals vox Dei. The theory that the power of rule comes from the people allows Colin as their spokesman to attack the corruptions of both Church and State and allows Skelton to insert into the poem implied standards
of conduct. The speaker of the psalm thus sheds light on the speaker of the poem who, like Langland's Piers, is Colin and Christ, plowman and poet, sinner and just man, the voice of the people and the voice of God.

From the psalmist's cry for vengeance and the sobering note of the answer, Colin begins his speech with a complaint. Whether or not he speaks in exalted language or plain, the result will be the same.

And yf that he hyt
The nayle on the hede,
It standeth in no stede;
The devyll, they say, is dede,
The devyll is dede.

35

There is no one to fight the evil in the world because there is no one who admits the existence of evil within himself,

Or els they wolde se
Otherwyse, and fle
From worldly vanyte,
And foule covetousnesse,
And other wretchednesse,
Pyckell falseness,
Varyableness,
With unstableness.

40

The faults of man in general are still the same as they appeared in The Maner of the World and The Bowge of Courte. In Colin Clout, however, Skelton is reaching further toward what may well be not the source of the faults, but the source of an increasingly relativistic attitude toward sin. What are the people to believe, he asks, when the leaders of their Church, which represents Truth, allow its denial? Colin spares neither the "spiritualte" nor the laity in his accusations,

For, as farre as I can se,
It is wronge with eche dege:
For the temporalte
Accuseth the spiritualte;
The spirit all agayne
Both grudge and complayne
Upon the temporall men;
Thus eche of other blother
The tone agayng the tother
Alas, they make me shoder!

Since he seems to be qualifying his attack upon the bishops, these lines place Colin in the middle of the two groups, between the authority of the Bishops and the factual observations of the people. This "dilemma" is explained by Heiserman as an unsuccessful attempt to fuse two heroes, the neutral reporter and the searcher for truth, and by Fish as a successful poetic expression of the workings of a troubled soul torn between the two "truths" available to him. There is nothing inconsistent in being both a neutral observer and a seeker of truth. Colin is neutral only in that he is open to the factual evidence of both sides—he is committed to the defense of Truth, and for him it is a singular term. The words of the psalm echo in the poem: some of the Bishops are indeed guilty and corrupt, "crush(ing) down the people and afflict(ing) the land," but the people are only too eager to point to the faults of the bishops as an excuse for their own: "Shall there be no end to the prating, the rebellious talk?" Colin's view is neither a mock-defense of the clergy nor a one-sided defense of the people; he sees Truth on both sides. Because he has an affinity to both groups as a minor cleric, he tries to see both in the light of a single standard: "The Lord looks
into men's hearts and finds there illusion." (Ps 93:11)

Although the poem seems at first glance rambling and unstructured it is in fact very deliberately designed. Colin's criticism breaks down into several movements, building up to the exposure of one figure in particular who embodies all of the evils with which the speaker is concerned. The first half of the poem consists of three parts, the first two being a general condemnation of the clergy (lines 75-495) in which two main points are made. First, the bishops have failed in their duties to their lesser clergy. Instead of serving as exemplars of virtue, they are models in vice. They are concerned with promotion rather than service, and because of their actions the rest of the clergy are confused:

And whyles the heedes do this, 115
The remenaunt is amys
Of the clergy all,
Bothe great and small.

The bishops feed at the King's table instead of feeding their sheep; they indulge the flesh instead of cultivating the spirit. Worst of all, in Colin's eyes, they do not enforce learning among their subordinates—it is a scandal that priests "bestiall and untaught" are responsible for the spiritual welfare of the people,

Yet take they cure of soules, 235
And woteth never what thei rede,
Paternoster, Ave, nor Crede;
Nothynge devoutly prayde;
Theyr lernynge is so small.

The fault lies with the bishops for neglecting their education;

For that they are not opposed
By iust examinacyon
In connyng and conversacyon;
They have none instructyon
To make a true constructyon.

Secondly, the bishops have failed in their duty to the
laity and the cloistered religious. They are more concerned
with secular show than with spiritual worth:

With golde all betrapped,
In purple and poule belapped;
Some hatted and some capped,
Rychely and warme bewrapped,
God wot to theyr great paynes,
In rotchettes of fyne Raynes;
Whyte as morowes mylke.

The contrast to the bishops' finery is reminiscent of the
Maner of the World:

Their neyghbours dye for meate.

Like the characters in the other poem, too, the bishops are
guilty of false speech:

Men say ye are tonge tayde,
And therof speke nothyng
But dyssymulyng and glosyng.
Wherfore men be supposyng
That ye gyve shrewd counsell.

They cannot be trusted, and the mistrust is confirmed by the
fact that they are allowing monks and nuns to be dispossessed
of their monasteries--

What could the Turke do more
With all his false lore,
Turke, Sarazyn, or Jew?

The two sections of accusation are climaxed by an appeal
to Christ to support the poet, and a comparison of Christ
with the prelates:

Chryst by cruelte
Was Nayled upon a tre;
He payed a bytter pencyon
For mannes redemcyon,
He dranke eysell and gall
To rede me us withall;
But swete ypocras ye drynke,
Some men thynke that ye
Shall have penalte
For your iniquyte.

The comment upon the bishops' greed reflects Elinour's ironic swearing "by hym that me bought!" Their inverted values are the same. The threat of a "penalte" is followed by the famous "prophecy" of

A fatall fall of one
That shuld syt on a trone,
And rule all thynges alone.

The veiled reference will be repeated several times as the poem moves toward the appearance of the "one" in the second half of the poem.

Having thus treated the higher clergy, Colin next focuses his attack upon the other extreme (lines 495-594):

My penne nowe wyll I sharpe,
And wrest up my harpe
With sharpe twynkyng trebelles
Against all such trebelles
That laboure to confounde
And bryng the Churche to the grounde.

Besides the similarity to the warlike spirit of the Dreamer at the beginning of The Bouge of Courte, the image of the harp in these lines calls to mind once again the figure of the Psalmist, and the reader is reminded once again of the tone of his song:

He will punish the wrong, destroy them in their wickedness; doubt not the Lord our God will destroy them.

Within the group of "trebelles" Skelton includes both the
laity who attempt to re-interpret the doctrines of the Church, Presumynge on theyr wyt, 517
When there is never a whyt,
and those members of the clergy who would bend the doctrines to suit their own desires.

Again a "dilemma" presents itself: it is the corruption of the bishops that causes the attacks of the laity; but the attacks are wrong in themselves. Colin's answer once again is that both are wrong; the heretics wound the Church by their erroneous teaching and the corrupt clergy do the same by their bad example. Colin then provides the transition from the general complaints of the first half of the poem to the particular arguments of the second:

And where the prelates be
Come of lowe degre,
And set in maieste
And spirituall dyngnyte, 590
Farewell benygnyte,
Farewell simplicite,
Farewell humylyte,
Farewell good charyte!

To the hammer-blows of the last four lines one is inclined to add:

We have exiled veritie.

The second half of the poem consists of a series of increasingly pointed comments about the menace of one "upstarte" in particular, balanced by a series of counsels addressed to the body of bishops. Colin makes it clear (lines 595-672) that a person of poor estate,

Sodaynly upstarte 646
From the donge carte,
The mattocke and the shule,
oversteps his bounds in aspiring to high office, and his
gaining of it can only bring ruin to the structure of both
Church and State.

And upon you ye take
To rule both kynge and kayser;
And yf ye may have layser;
Ye wyll brynge all to nought,
And that is all your thought.

In this argument Skelton's concern for order is again evi-
dent; it is wrong for a man to step out of his proper place:

This is a pyteous case,
To you that over the whele
Grete lorde must crouche and knele,
And breke theyr hose at the kne.

The prophecy is repeated in terms more explicit and more
threatening:

But qui se existimat stare,
Let hym well beware
Lest that his fate slyp,
And have suche a tryp,
And falle in such dekay,
That all the worlde may say,
Come downe, in the devyll way!

Colin's attention then turns to the bishops, who are
also guilty of forsaking their proper place. He advises them
to pay attention to the grievances of the people and resume
their preaching function instead of leaving it to the clerks
and the friars who are not qualified to interpret doctrine.
If the bishops would only consent to this,

These wordes shuld be more weyd,
And better perceyved,
And thankfullerlye receyved,
And better shulde remayne
Amonge the people playne,
That wold your wordes retayne
And rehearse them agayne,
Than a thousand thousande other.
Even behind the mask of Colin, Skelton is careful to avoid the snare of criticizing doctrine as well as practice, for fear of falling into heresy: he "wyll not wade / Farther in this broke."

The most flagrant example of abuse of the bishops' role is of course that prelate who is trying to gain control of both Church and State, and the focus of the poem shifts back to him again. The warning of the prophecy is repeated a second time:

Fortune may chaunce to flyt, 996
And whan he weneth to syt,
Yet may he mysse the quysshon.

...he hathe good ure
That can hymselfe assure
Howe fortune wyll endure. 1005

Because all things worldly are subject to change, and even the most powerful of men may fall, Colin advises the bishops to

Stande sure and fast. 1073
Stande sure, and take good fotyng.

Again the psalm sounds in the poem; the "good fotyng" of which he speaks is Truth in the person of Christ. Here, after all, is the foundation of the bishops' authority and their common ground with the laity.

Still, when my foothold seems lost, thy mercy, Lörd, holds me up;...the Lord will be my defence, in my God I shall find a rock-fastness still.

Colin's final word to the bishops is a prayer that for them and for the laity Truth will prevail:

Then yf any there be
Of hygh or lowe degre
Of the spiritualte,
Or of the temporalte,
That doth thynke or wene
That his conscience be not clene,
And feleth hymselfe sycke,
Or touched on the quycke,
Such grace God them sende
Themselfe to amende.

Logically the poem should end here, upon the same hopeful note as The Maner of the World:

God is neither dead nor sicke;
He may amend al yet.

However, there are still two figures left on the scene who must be dealt with. Immediately after Colin's prayer, with its assumption that no virtuous man will deny Truth once it has been shown to him, comes the hope-shattering voice of the one man who is, by implication, not virtuous, who would silence Colin and who is finally revealed as the enemy of Truth—the voice of Wolsey:

We wyll rule and rayne
And our matters mayntayne
Who dare say there agayne,
Or who dare dysdayne
At our pleasure and wyll.

"Lo, this is the gyse now a dayes!" cries Colin. As in the earlier poem the note of hope is partially negated by the despairing comment, "Worse was it never." Therefore, says Colin, "me semeth it for the best" to put aside the pen and take refuge in

the porte salu
Of our Savyour Jesu,
Suche grace that he us sende,
To rectyfye and amende
Thynges that are amys,
Whan that his pleasure is.
Amen!
The careful structure of the poem is not the only factor that gives it unity. There is a consistent pattern of imagery comparing the Bishops with Christ, as shepherds:

they take no heed
Theyr selly shepe to fede

(they) have full lytell care
How evyll theyr shepe fare.

He is the Light, and they walk in darkness:

Ye bysshops of estates
Shulde open the brode gates
Of your spirituall charge,
And com forthe at large,
Lyke lanternes of lyght,
In the peoples syght.

He is the Truth, and the Rock which insures their sure footing, while they are weak and easily toppled. In this vein, a pointed comparison is drawn between the vacillation of the bishops and the example of Becket, who put forth a strong hand in the face of condemnation and opposition and was sustained by the Truth:

Nulla Thomam frangit injuria.

The images are commonplace, it is true, but they strengthen the relation between the psalm and the poem which is built up throughout.

The epigraph at the beginning can now be seen as the "lode starre" of the poem and an important source of its structure. As has already been seen, the tone of the psalm is maintained in the poem. The images of Christ as shepherd and rock also arise from the psalm and are drawn together in the person of Colin, who speaks in proverbial phrases and is the one stable figure in the poem because he is the
representative of Truth. He in turn is related to the Psal¬
mist; at the end of the poem Colin describes himself as a
singer of "rustica canto," and all the pieces fall into place.
Even the figure of the ship in the last lines is not totally
foreign to the sense of the psalm--St. Jerome writes in his
exigesis, "as long as we are in this world, we endure all
things together. The just man and the sinner equally suffer
shipwreck; they are equals in flesh and equals in the con-
dition of flesh." For both the Psalmist and Colin the Lord
is a refuge and a "porte salu:"

Amid all the thronging cares that fill my
heart, my soul finds comfort in thy con-
solation.

Although its concerns are grounded in the same corrup-
tions and abuses which brought about the Reformation, the
author of Colin Clout does not stand midway between Langland
and Luther, as some would place him. The poem is written in
terms of strictest orthodoxy; the question of doctrine is
carefully avoided and heresy attacked. Skelton does not
even go so far as to suggest how legitimate reform is to be
effected; he merely puts forth a solemn plea that it be
henceforward the aim of the Church.

Neither is the poem "a bitter attack on Thomas Wolsey,
thinly curtained with the appearance of medieval class sa-
tire." Wolsey, as Heiserman has shown, is not the parti-
cular object of the satire, but only one part of its complex
system of evils; "the critic must realize at the outset
that the evils which Wolsey manifests are themselves as
significant as the Cardinal himself, that *Colyn Cloute* is not merely an attack on Wolsey but on the clergy, the nobility, the heretical laity, and the disorder of the times."16

In other words, "the maner of the world now a dayes" is still the poet's chief concern.
IV. WOLSEY

The accession of Henry VIII to the throne in 1509 created for his former tutor the vision of a new Golden Age—a vision which Skelton never quite abandoned.¹

Thomas More, too, wrote of the new Achilles in the woman's garb of his beauty, who combined the prudence of his father with his mother's sweetness and the pious zeal of his grandfather. While, away in quiet Diss, Henry's old tutor gave vent to his feelings in a simpler but more memorable image—an image from which was to spring the entire Tudor Myth:

The Rose both White and Rede
In one Rose now doth grow.²

On the other hand, the elevation of Thomas Wolsey to Cardinal of the Church in 1516 presented quite a different picture of the future of England, and shattered Skelton's hopeful dream. His worst fears were subsequently confirmed.

In 1518 Wolsey was made Legatus a Latere; "this was the first stage—quite undesigned—in the process that was to transform the Church in England into the Church of England."³ Up until this time, the interference of the papacy with the government of England had been slight. With Wolsey an active deputy in England, however, the hand of Rome was suddenly uncomfortably near. Wolsey himself considered the papacy to be the source of his greatest power; the office of Chancellor of England was merely a convenient means of exercising it. Wolsey aroused the hostility of the ordinary Englishman because of his abuses as papal legate, and the antagonism of
such factions as the legal profession by his lack of concern for a system of laws which, because he had never studied them, he never understood.

These same feelings are incorporated into Skelton's condemnation of Wolsey. The last section of *Speke, Parrot*, with its antithetical technique, could almost be a reworking of *The Maner of the World*, transferring the general criticism of the earlier poem to the particular figure of Wolsey:

> Syns Dewcalyons flodde the world was never so yll.

> So many v&cabondes, so many beggers bolde;
> So myche decay of monasteries and of relygious places;
> So hote hatered agaynste the Chyrche, and cheryte so colde;
> So myche of my lordes grace, and in hym no grace ys; So many holow hartes, and so dowbyll faces;
> So myche sayntuary brekyng, and prevylegidde barrydd;—Syns Dewcalyons flodde was nevyr sens nor lyerd.

> So myche raggyd ryghte of a rammes horne;
> So rygorous revelyng in a prelate specially;
> So bold and so braggyng, and was so baselye borne; 500
> So lordlye of hys lokes and so dysdayneslye;
> So fatte a magott, bred of a flesshe flye;
> Was nevyr suche a fffytty gorgon, nor suche an epycure, Syns Dewcalyons flodde, I make the faste and sure.

> So much prevye wachyng in cold wynters nyghtes;
> So myche serchynge of loselles, and ys hymselfe so lewde;
> So myche conviracions for elvyshe myday sprettes;
> So many bullyys of pardon pulysshed and shewyd;
> So myche crossyng and blyssyng, and hym all beshrewde;
> Such pollaxis and pyllers, such mulyys trapte with gold;—Sens dewcalyons flodde in no cronycle ys told.

> Dixit, quod Parrot.

Like Colin, Parrot is a reporter, an observer of the "world nowadays," and his refrain, "Syns Dewcalyons flodde the world was never so yll," may be taken as a paraphrase of "Worse was it never."
The most explicit statement of Skelton's case against Wolsey is found in *Why Come Ye Nat to Courte*? The accusations and allusions of both Speke, Parrot and Colin Clout appear in this poem, which repeats the warning tone of the "prophecy" and affirms the relation between poet and psalmist which was suggested in *Colin Clout*.

The first thirty lines of the poem, a preface to the body of the satire, introduce a "relucnt mirror for all Prelats and Presidents, as well spirituall as temporall." The double function of Wolsey and his twofold responsibility (and culpability) is implicit here. The important aspects of the traditional image will be among the main considerations of the poem; the pride, vanity and falseness of Wolsey will be reflected in the "mirror," and held up in the harsh light of truth for all the world to see. In this poem the poet for the first time clearly defines his function as prophet and spokesman for truth:

\[ \text{Haec vates ille,} \\
\text{De quo loquuntur mille.} \]

He lists the general faults of prelates with which he will be concerned, and they are again very much a part of the "maner of the world"; the prelates share with the laymen and religious whom they spiritually represent and temporally govern too great a concern with human respect, greed, religious sloth, lack of charity, pride, ignorance, and false speech. These faults are bad when found in the court (the model), worse in the clergy (the teacher), and worst when they
are combined in a person who is for all practical purposes
the highest of both estates.

The faults of both the "temporalte" and the "spiritualte" come together in Wolsey, and where they exist, says Skelton,

Reson is banysshed thence,
And also dame Prudence,
With sober Sapience.

Later in the poem Skelton will lament the fact that

Wyll doth rule all thynge,
Wyll, wyll, wyll, wyll, wyll,
He ruleth alway styll.

If the intellect ceases to function as superior to the will, truth, the proper object of the intellect, must be likewise "banysshed" and the shame of England is still that

We have exiled veritie.

The indignant tone of the poem is foreshadowed in the prefatory lines:

Yf ye thynke this shall
Not rubbe you on the gall,
Than the devyll take all!

Gradually that indignation gives way to an anger and passion unusual even for Skelton. It does not seem quite fair to condemn the poem on the overworked critical grounds that "it degenerates into pure personal attack." It is difficult for the modern reader to imagine the sheer horror that a man like Wolsey could inspire in a man like Skelton. As has been seen in the preceding pages, Skelton is the champion of Truth, as it should appear in the natural order of society, as it appears in the doctrines of the Church which
should be embodied by the clergy; he has seen it failing in many aspects of the world, it is true—but Wolsey represents its very negation.

It is incredible to Skelton that Wolsey has been able to advance in the Church; he is definitely one of the rank-est of the "upstartes" condemned in Colin Clout. He is vain and ostentatious,

Borne up on every syde
Wyth pompe and wyth pryde;

he is lustful, sparing neither "mayde ne wyfe," and gluttonous, ignoring even the Lenten fast:

He eateth capons stewed,
Fesaunt and partriche mewed,
Hennes, checkynges, and pygges.

He is treacherous and avaricious and worst of all, ignorant; it is hard to understand how his progress at Court has been so rapid, except that he has enlisted the aid of Favell, Harvy Hafter and their companions (lines 90-95). In Colin Clout Skelton's main plea was for the education of the clergy; Wolsey is an example of what can happen when lack of learning is carried to the extreme. Men could even forgive his low birth, Skelton says, if it was balanced by wisdom and knowledge—but Wolsey is

No doctor of devinyte,
Nor doctor of the law,
Nor of none other saw.

Even this could be softened by a proper appraisal of his faculties or a proper attitude of humility, but

proudly he dare pretend
How no man can him amende.
The contrast between Wolsey and the ideal, Christ, is made here by implication, as it has been in Colin Clout and the other poems:

But all he bringeth to nought, 447
By God, that me dere bought!

This time the "swearing" is sincere. Wolsey could not have achieved his position were it not for the failure of both the Church and the king to recognize his failings:

Have ye nat harde this, 530
How an one eyed man is
Well syghted when
He is amonge blynde men?

The main body of the poem may be roughly divided into three parts. The first section (lines 122-395) reviews the state of England under the influence of Wolsey; he sets a poor example as a clergyman. "People expect a king to be splendid and will forgive his extravagance, for he reflects their glory; but they feel very differently on the ostentation of a subject whom they regard as an upstart, and no better than themselves." Says Skelton,

He came of the sank royall, 490
That was cast out of a bochers stall.

"They dislike it most of all in a priest, as they think it incongruous with his calling." Skelton agrees:

With crownes of golde enblased
They make him so amased,
And his eyen so dased,
That he ne se can
To know God nor man.

Wolsey is equally a failure as a secular head of state. "A dictator in peace-time is disastrous because he supersedes the ordinary institutions and interferes with the structure
of society."¹¹ For Skelton, Wolsey is disastrous:

Shulde this man of suche mode  
Rule the swerde of might,  
How can he do right?

Set up a wretche on hye  
In a trone triumphantlye,  
Make him a great astate,  
And he wyll play checcke mate  
With ryall maieste.

(He) useth such abusyon  
That in the conclusyoun  
All commeth to confusyon.

A secular ruler is supposed in many ways to reflect the reign of God; even more so should a Prince of the Church. In Wolsey's case, the contrast is as stark as black on white:

A prelate potencyall,  
To rule under Bellyall  
As ferece and as cruell  
As the fynd of Hell.

Another contrast which is implicit is one which was drawn in Colin Clout between the clergy of Henry II, typified by Thomas Becket, and that of Henry VIII, typified by Wolsey. The first group were willing to die to defend the rights of the Church against the State; the latter are weak and give in easily, preferring to "spende moche of theyr share/ Than to be combred with care."¹² Wolsey, who represents the extreme of this attitude, is the antithesis of Becket.

The second section of the poem (lines 396-837) is a "direct personal attack on the cardinal's origins, crimes, sins, character, diseases, appearance, and fate."¹³ Skelton accuses Wolsey of being in league with the devil, of bewitching the king; he makes dark allusions to the fate of
another cardinal who "commyted open trayson" and for his crime

Was hedyd, drawen, and quartered, 737
And dyd stynkingly marterd.

There follows the sarcastic afterthought, typically Skeltonic,

Nat for that I mene
Suche a casualte shulde be sene,
Or suche chaunce shulde fall 745
Unto our cardynall.

The section ends with a portrait of Wolsey in hell, possessed of

A palace pontifycall
To kepe his court provynceall 810

where he continues to go about his activities as servant of Belial, the vicar of Satan.

The last main section (lines 838-1198) discusses the future of the realm and the fate of those who oppose Wolsey. Once again the warnings of the previous poems are sounded:

Where trouth is abhorde, 844

Farewell to the,
Welthfull felycite! 857

the commune welth
Shall never have good helth. 1021

Englande, the flowre
Of relucent honowre, 1035
In olde commemoracion
Most royall Englyssh nation
Now all is out of facion,
Almost in desolation.

The situation of the land, the people, the Court and the clergy is unchanged;

Worse was it never.

The need of the world is likewise unchanged; there is only
one hope left:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{God of his misery} & \quad 1041 \\
\text{Send better reformation.} & \\
\end{align*}
\]

The Church is almost certainly headed for destruction; Wolsey is as great a threat as Pharaoh, the persecutor, or Aaron, the idolater; he is one more in the ranks of her enemies:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{This maumet in like wise} & \quad 1067 \\
\text{Against the Church doth rise} & \\
\end{align*}
\]

Skelton ends the section with an explanation of what may have seemed to be inordinate anger.

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{A small default in a great lord,} & \\
\text{A lytell crime in a great astate,} & \\
\text{Is much more inordinate,} & \\
\text{And more horrible to beholde,} & \\
\text{Than any other a thousand fold.} & \quad 1230
\end{align*}
\]

Even a small failing in such a figure as Wolsey is potentially tragic; the effect of a great fault and a large crime would be such as to reduce the beholder to near incoherency in fury and despair—and this is precisely what has happened in the poem.

In the last fifty lines, Skelton goes back to the theme of his prologue, the poet as *vates*, or divinely inspired prophet. The poem has produced the same effect as the forecasting of an Old Testament holocaust and its passion can be defended on these grounds alone. Despite the wealth of invective against Wolsey as a person, Skelton is always conscious that he is attacking the Enemy of Truth in human form:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Trouthe is all to-torne;} & \quad 90 \\
\text{All our lerned men} & \\
\text{Dare not set theyr penne} & \\
\text{To plete a trew tryall.} & \quad 320
\end{align*}
\]
Truth is abhorde.

All iustycye he pretended,
All thynges sholde be amended,
He is periured himselfe.

History judges Skelton to be closer to the truth than perhaps he was aware when he warned

Beware the rod,
And the stroke of God!

The potential rebellion of the laity and the corruption of the clergy were to bear their fruit, and Wolsey was the efficient cause. The Cardinal proved that one person could rule both Church and State, and that the English church could exist separated from Rome; he had shown how the treasury could "legitimately" rob the Church; by his own personal haughtiness and dictatorial manner he made the papacy and the clergy so unpopular that the people could rejoice at Henry's later radical action against them.14 Ironically, however, Skelton failed as vates because he wrote too late; Wolsey was already in power. The kind of reform that Skelton urged in Colin Clout did not come until after the unity of Truth as he knew it was shattered forever. It was indeed true that, as he feared, "worse was it never." The Maner of the World led to chaos (as Skelton would have considered it) in the form of the English Reformation.
The sense of Skelton's dedication to something more than his art is felt and understood, at least in part, by his biographers and critics.

The respected priest, courtier and royal schoolmaster broke out into the most disrespectful verses and continued on his outspoken way... writing with the fervour of a man who had at last found a mission in life.

If what I say is right, why should I not say it? That is the key to Skelton. Truth, or what he conceives to be truth, overrides all other considerations. If there is a good to be praised, let praise flow over. If an evil exists, stamp on it, pound it down, smash it at all costs. Divine inspiration imposes on the poet the duty of destroying vice and propagating virtue.

In the end, the terms in which he sees his problem and the vision which allows him to bypass rather than solve it are such that only poet-prophets can fully share them.

The exception is Robert Graves, who once again suffers for having separated the man from his poetry. Because he is convinced from the first that Skelton is insincere in his "Appollonian" religious poems, Graves must look for another interpretation of the theme of the satires. He finds it, conveniently, in his own White Goddess. If one takes the early secular lyrics as allegories of a lazy poet's betrayal by his Muse, Elinour Rumming as a poem dedicated to the same Muse, and the Garlande of Laurell as a record of service to Calliope, quite a different Skelton emerges: "A dedicated poet...may make concessions to authority by wearing...even
a cassock, (but) he must never smother poetic principle." That is to say, Skelton could feel free to wear both a public and a private face, and therefore his religious poetry does not represent his actual convictions. If this is true, then the element of sincerity must be lacking in much of Skelton's poetry—and that is one vice of which he has seldom been accused. It may be wise to call to mind once again at this point the man who testified that Skelton's "talke was as he wraet;" the indication is strongly in favor of a Skelton with only one face.

When he appeared in his colorful court robe as orator regius, Graves says, Skelton "made a startling public avowal of devotion to the Muse-goddess." Skelton's "avowal of devotion," however, is actually a reply in light verse to the taunts of the other courtiers; the aging poet is simply defending the dignity of his calling:

Calliope,
As ye may see,
Regent ia she
Of poets al,
Whiche gave to me
The high degre
Laureat to be
Of fame royall;
Whose name enrolde
With Silke and golde
I dare be bolde
Thus for to were.
Of her I holde
And her householde;
Though I wax olde
And someele sere,
Yet is she fayne,
Voyde of disdayn,
Me to retayne
Her servitute:
With her certayne
I wyll remayne,
As my soverayne
Moost of pleasure,
Maulgre touz malheureux.  

The quietness of the poem, along with its whimsical, nostalgic tone, underlines only an affirmation of his calling.

The nature of that vocation is revealed unequivocally in another poem which was also written late in life, A Replycacion. It is prefaced by a lengthy Latin dedication to Wolsey which to some readers represents "a confession of failure as he surrenders to the enemy, dedicating with fulsome superlatives his last work to the Cardinal." If this is so, the argument for Skelton's consistency as a poet and his adherence to truth would seem to be weakened. However, a substantial case may be presented for the opposite view that the dedication is not all that it seems.

The time and circumstances of the composition of the poem have some bearing upon the effect of the dedication. According to the now generally accepted chronology of Skelton's later poems, they were composed in the following order:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Date</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Speke, Parrot</td>
<td>late 1521</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colin Clout</td>
<td>1522</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why Come Ye Nat to Courte?</td>
<td>Autumn 1522</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Calliope</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Garlande of Laurell</td>
<td>1523</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Replycacion</td>
<td>1527</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

In Speke, Parrot Skelton uses a persona who, by virtue of his unique talents, is an observer who repeats what he hears; therefore he may not be held responsible for what he says.
He also informs the reader often that he has a tendency to be a liar, or to misunderstand the facts, so that if questioned on any point he can say, "I didn't mean it." The purpose of the camouflage becomes clear in the last section when Parrot prefaces his attack on Wolsey by announcing that he will now "speke trew and playne." But "trew and playne" by this time have become, with reference to Parrot, highly questionable terms; more protective coloration is added to the voice of Skelton.

In the same fashion, the persona of Colin Clout appears as "the friend that brings you unpleasant rumors about yourself, because he feels that you should know what is being said. And, as we have all found to our sorrow, there is no reply possible. One cannot argue—he does not say that he believes what he says—nor can you object to him—he tells you with the kindest of motives. You gnash your teeth in silent fury while he exhorts you to patience." Again, Skelton avoids speaking in his own voice. In Why Come Ye Nat to Courte, however, there is no question but that the poet is speaking for himself, as plainly as he does in a poem like "Against Garnesche." He is therefore open to criticism—or worse—from the man he attacks.

From this time on Skelton writes no more of Wolsey; but close on the heels of the appearance of Why Come Ye Nat to Courte he arrives at court once again, proclaiming himself orator regius and wearing the flamboyant green and gold robes of Calliope. For the remainder of his career he capers
under Wolsey's nose, no longer attacking the cardinal but praising himself in unimpeachable terms, claiming the traditional rights of the poet. His last works, although each contains some "conciliatory" references to Wolsey, are nevertheless parts of a staunch *apologia pro vita sua*. *Calliope* ends with the firm statement that

With her certayne
I will remayne,
As my soverayne
Most of pleasure,
Maulgre touz malheureux.

The apparent poetic "surrender" in the *Garlande of Laurell*, in which he misrepresents *Colin Clout* and *Speke*, *Parrot* and omits *Why Come Ye Nat to Courte* from the canon of his work, is made on his own terms; as Fish points out, the omissions are obvious.  

In line 1456 he reminds the reader that "*quod scripsi, scripsi,*" and earlier in the poem the following lines appear as a prefatory comment:

And if so hym fortune to wryte true and plaine,  85
As sumtyme he must vyces remorde,
Then sum wyll say he hath but lyttill brayne,
And how his wordes with reason wyll not accorde;
Beware, for wrytyng remayneth of recorde;
Displease not an hundreth for one mannes pleasure;
Who wryteth wysely hath a grete treasure.

Even the plea for prebendary at the end of the poem may be taken as ambiguous; for, in *Colin Clout*, Skelton has listed the practice among the abuses in the Church:

Of prebendaries and deanes,  575
How some of them gleans
And gathereth up the store
For to catch more and more.

The dedication of *A Replycacion* may now be approached with less distaste, bearing in mind the precedents of *Calliope*
and especially the Garlande of Laurell, which for Dyce, writing in 1843, "stands without a parallel: the history of literature affords no second example of a poet having deliberately written sixteen hundred lines in honour of himself." The "fulsome superlatives" which are offensive to the modern ear are nothing more nor less than the titles due Wolsey from his various offices; in comparison with the raptures of Polydore Vergil in his dedication to Henry VIII, the "sun king," Skelton's words seem restrained, even dull. Although part of the poem is indeed a "replycacion," the latter part is another affirmation in which Skelton declares that what he has written is not only true, but divinely inspired. This includes, besides his religious lyrics, all the satires against Wolsey. It is at least possible, then, that the apparent "capitulation" of the poet may simply be a last subtle jab at the enemy in his own camp--Skelton bowing obsequiously to Wolsey with his fingers piously crossed.

In A Replycacion Skelton turns his attention away from the problems within the Church to concentrate on those without. This time the opposition to truth takes the form of heresy, the corruption, of doctrine, which arouses in Skelton an anger and use of language comparable to that found in his earlier abuse of Wolsey. The heretics are moche better bayned than brayned, bashed and baththed in their wylde burbling and boyling blode, fervently reboyled with the infatuate flames of their rechese youthe and wytlesse wantonnesse, embrased and enterlased with a moche fantastical frenesy of their insensate sensyalte, surmysed unsurely in their
perihermeniall principles, to prate and to preche proudly and leudly, and loudly to lye.\textsuperscript{15}

The original lie is what concerns Skelton most. He does not consider it a virtuous act, but "thorowe your own foly" that the heretics have recanted, only to be "laughed to skorne,/ thus tattred and thus torne." This fate is far less than they deserve, who "stynke unbrent." The last line of this section is a warning not only to the heretics but to the entire population who have been thrown into confusion, so that truth is becoming obscured:

Crye Godmercy, like frantykefoles. \textsuperscript{298}

The remainder of A \textit{Replycacion} is a statement of the credo of John Skelton, \textit{vates}, the expression of what has been the perspective of his poetry, the source of its "pyth." Skelton defends the right of the poet to take his place beside the philosophers and theologians as protector and defender of the truth. The basis for this argument is the heritage which all poets share as successors of

\begin{quote}
Davyd, that royall kyng, \\
Poete of poetes all, \\
And prophete princypall.
\end{quote}

Recalling the praise of Saint Jerome, Skelton argues that

\begin{quote}
If this noble kyng \hfill 320
Thus can harpe and syng \\
With his harpe of prophecy \hfill 345
And spyrituall poetry, \\
Why have ye than disdayne \hfill 356
At poetes, and complayne \hfill 363
How poetes do but fayne?
\end{quote}

The allusion to Jerome supports the exigesis of \textit{Colin Clout} and places the weight of the Fathers behind the treatment
of the heretics:

I have never spared heretics; I have spent all my zeal in making the enemies of the Church my own. 

Skelton is re-affirming the connection with David which was implied in Colin Clout, as well as in the enigmatic ending of the Bowge of Courte,

I wyll not saye it is mater in dede, 
But yet oftyme suche dremes be found trewe: 
Now constrewe ye what is the residue, 

and in the repeated warnings of Why Come Ye Nat to Courte?: the poet, the psalmist, the dreamer stands midway between Colin and Christ in his function as prophet, between the world of men and the world of Truth. It is his affliction and his glory to share in the nature of both and at the same time to see the terrible disparity between them.

It is Truth, then, which has been working through Skelton, at first without his full knowledge or consent (in the early lyrics about women), then through a growing awareness of the nature of his vision (Elinour Ruming, The Bowge of Courte, and Colin Clout) to a final understanding of the poet as musician and instrument and a recognition of the source of his power:

There is a spyrituall, 
And a mysteriall, 
And a mysticall 
Effecte energiall, 
As Grekes do it call, 
Of suche an industry, 
And suche a pregnacy, 
Of hevenly inspyracion 
In laureate creacyon, 
Of poetes commendacion, 
That of divyne myseracion 
God maketh his habytacion
In poetes which excelles,
And soiourns with them and dwelles.

This aspect of the poet's calling is one that will continue as long as truth lives;

For be ye wele assured,
That frensy nor ielousy
Nor heresy wyll never dye.

The question of divine inspiration versus human law is considered by both Graves and Fish, with different results. Graves insists that by postulating a higher inspiration Skelton is claiming as a poet a liberty of thought and action denied ordinary men, and freedom from their laws.17 As proof he cites a passage from Magynfyence which sets forth the same fallacious argument used by Milton's Eve:

To live under lawe, it is captyvyte:
Where dede ledyth the daunce, there is no ioy nor blysse;
Or howe can you prove that there is felicyte,
And you have not your owne fre lyberte
To sporte at your pleasure, to ryn and to ryde?18

In context, however, the lines are spoken by Lyberte in debate with Felicite; in the course of the play it becomes obvious that Skelton supports the other side.

It is clear from his charge that Wolsey prevents justice and in his condemnation of the heretics that Skelton considers both law and doctrine to be the statement of Truth; it is also evident in the poems which have been discussed in these pages that he believes order in society to be likewise an aspect of Truth. Fish, however, sees in the poems an effort by Skelton to adjust medieval concepts (the immanence of order, the divinity of poets) to his own increasing consciousness of temporal and spiritual decay in England.
Therefore, from a position of acceptance he comes to distrust temporal symbols of the eternal (institutions and laws) as well as their human agents; he retreats in his isolation to the refuge of divine inspiration alone, by implication rejecting the institutions and the laws.\textsuperscript{19}

One would like Professor Fish to point out the poems in which the transition is evident; Skelton's concern for order is the same in \textit{Elinour Rumming}, where he scolds negligent wives, and in \textit{Why Come Ye Nat to Courte} where he rails against "upstartes"; nowhere does he question the institution of the Church nor the authority of her teaching, nor even the capacity of a properly educated clergy to interpret it to the people. "Throughout his career he fought furiously for the same conservative ends. He demanded that the King rule his own land, that the Church retain its ancient prerogatives, that education keep in view its ultimate purpose, the increase of virtue and religion. Despite the pressure of events, his opinions remained stable."\textsuperscript{20}

The curse of the prophet is to be without honor in his own land, to have his message go unheeded. The comparison between Skelton and Carlyle made implicitly in the quotation at the beginning of this essay is a strangely valid one considering the three hundred-odd years which separate them. Both men shared the nature of a prophet; Skelton was honored in his own time, but his advice was not heeded; much of the curiosity and admiration excited by Carlyle in his age never led to active reform. Both men were haters of "sham" as the
antithesis of truth; both decried the disparity between the outward appearance and the inner man; both dedicated their lives and their work to revealing to itself the Maner of the World, to convincing its inhabitants that

We have exiled veritie.

For many years, and for similar reasons, both men were misjudged. Neither is "a man we have met," unless we have been fortunate enough to have become acquainted with a lion-like "prophet of Cheyne Row" or the equally formidable figure of the Rector of Diss.
FOOTNOTES

Introduction


2. These epithets are quoted by Vivian de Sola Pinto, Selected Poems of John Skelton (New York, 1950), pp. 1-2.

3. Ian A. Gordon, John Skelton, Poet Laureate (London, 1943), p. 193. Disraeli's index reads: Shoeing-horns; silhouette; silk stockings; Silli; Skelton; Sneezing; snuff-boxes.

4. "So little has been discovered about the life of this 'Poete Laureate' that subsequent criticism has repeated the Mery Tales more frequently than it has examined his verse, and the whole conception of the poetry of Skelton has been colored by the character of buffoon and playboy." (Gordon, p. 1.) Neither his "marriage" nor his imprisonment for an unknown offense can be fully documented or explained; at least part of the legend of Skelton's feud with Bishop Nicke may have arisen from the nephanda pecunia of one Johannes Shelton, a Benedictine monk attached to the Cathedral at Norwich. (Gordon, pp. 24-26) "Skelton probably had no real quarrel with the Church till he crossed swords with Cardinal Wolsey." (p. 26.)

5. The quotations are from Alexander Dyce, ed., The Poetical Works of John Skelton (London, 1843), i, p. xxx. All references to the poetry of Skelton are from this edition.


8. Owst; p. 233.


I. Sumtyme With Sadnes

1. Dyce, I, p. xxiii.

2. The dates 1475-1500 roughly cover the period of Skelton's medieval verse. (Gordon, p. 115.)


5. The quotations are from the Garlande of Laurell (Dyce, I, p. 417), lines 1418-1424.


7. Dyce, I, pp. 141-143. The problem of authorship is discussed by Gordon (pp. 115-116); there does not seem to be any longer any reason to doubt that the poem is Skelton's.

8. Dyce, I, p. 139.


10. Dyce, I, pp. 139-140.


12. The quotation is from A Replycacion (Dyce, I, p. 210).

13. "Such religious poems as Colin Clout and the Replycacion, on the other hand, deal with the externals of corruption in the Church, and about these things Skelton could feel personally indignant. But on dogma he is dumb." (Gordon, p. 117.)

14. In the Garlande of Laurell (Dyce, I, p. 417.)


16. Skelton has already been responsible for the composition of a Speculum Principis for young Henry, a "stuffy little handbook of admonitions." (Green, p. 15.)


18. That is, he has departed from the pre-Renaissance modes in which he had been working and returned to medieval models; he has also given up the smooth style of the courtier-scholar in favor of a more colloquial diction. This transition is explored in the article cited above.
23. Even such authorities as Nelson and Edwards do not mention these poems; Green and Gordon note their existence and possible importance, but no detailed study has been attempted.


25. During his feud with Bishop Nicke Skelton is accused of stealing the Bishop's best mare; he is said to have replied: "You do not remember what you wrote to me about Christ's body. I write back the same thing about your palfrey: 'Believe that you have it, and you have it.'" Graves takes this as proof that Skelton did not believe in the Real Presence (p. 25). Actually, the reply was in the form of a Latin jingle and another tradition attributes it to Erasmus, who had neglected to return the horse to Thomas More. (Edwards, p. 245.) In any case, what was obviously intended as a jest is hardly to be taken seriously.


II. Temporalte


3. Green, p. 25.


7. Fish, p. 49.


9. Gordon, p. 76.
10. Fish, p. 252.


12. Also see Holloway's comparison with the Reve's Prologue, pp. 9-10.


18. Edwards, p. 121.

19. Graves, p. 32.


24. Fish, p. 60. He suggests that the heavens are responsible for the condition of the world and therefore for the dreamer's lack of confidence in his ability as a poet.

25. Langland, Passus XII, line 2.

26. Passus XII, lines 3-4.

27. Fish, pp. 63-64.


29. Heiserman, p. 27.

30. For instance, Fish must ask the question (p. 79): "If Dread is murdered, how does he catch pen and ink and write the poem?"

31. Fish says that "Drede's real doubts leave him defenseless before the artificial and baseless sureness of the enemy." (p. 67) This does not seem to represent the tone of Drede's speeches at all.

32. Langland, Passus VIII, lines 1-10.
33. Fish states: "There is nothing satisfactory or confident in Dread's attempt to leap overboard; the Skeltonic problem is characteristically insoluble." (p. 81) "This is a poem about the absence of...faith. Dread's failure to turn from Fortune to Christ is...a measure of his spiritual aridity." (p. 79) The assumption of Heiserman that Skelton could leave the question of salvation in Christ unspoken (p. 56) seems, on the other hand, a valid one.

34. Heiserman, p. 56.

III. Spiritualte


2. I take this to be a fair summary of Fish's interpretation, pp. 54-81.

3. Dyce, I, pp. 311-360.

4. "Who takes my part against the oppressor? Who rallies to my side against the wrong-doers? No one, Lord!" The translation is Ronald A. Knox's edition of the Bible (New York, 1959), p. 517. All further Biblical references are to this text.


8. I do not agree with Kinsman ("Voices," pp. 300-301) that there are three voices in the poem, the poet, Colin, and Wolsey, and that these are the poet's lines. The figure of the Psalmist, both simple rustic and poet, effectively introduces the figure of Colin.


10. Fish, pp. 181-183.

11. For the structural outline which I am following henceforward see Kinsman, "Voices," cited above.

12. Kinsman shows that the structure is almost exactly parallel to that of a sermon of Colet; the comparison
is interesting because it shows that Skelton is at least as ordered and as orthodox as his contemporaries, and places him firmly, at least in this poem, within the "pulpit" tradition. ("Voices," pp. 291-313.)


IV. Wolsey

1. Green, pp. 24-25.

2. Edwards, p. 126.


7. See the Bowe of Courte, lines 130-140.

8. I am using Heiserman's outline of the poem, which seems to me valid. Although Fish finds little excuse for the rambling nature of the poem (pp. 208-210), I believe Heiserman's analysis of it as a typically Skeltonic reworking of the traditional form of the sirventes, popularized by the troubadors, is essentially sound. (pp. 246-270) It is true, however, that the intense emotion, the repetitive nature of the charges and their extremely topical nature do not contribute to a critical appreciation of the poem and tend to obscure its structural principles to the modern reader.


10. Ibid.

11. Ibid.


13. Heiserman, p. 266.

V. Veritie

3. Fish, pp. 258-259.
4. Graves, p. 32.
5. Graves, p. 15.
9. For example, see Edwards, pp. 247-248.
12. Fish, p. 238.
17. Graves, pp. 16-17.
18. Lines 76-80.
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