The English Poets

JOHN SKELTON

THE COMPLETE ENGLISH POEMS

Edited by JOHN SCATTERGOOD

THE ENGLISH POETS

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John Skelton

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Introduction

No editor can be completely certain about what Skelton wrote. Only two of his works are extant in holograph versions - A Lawde and Prayse Made for Our Sovereigne Lord the Kyng from Public Record Office MS (TR) E. 36/288, and the dedicatory Latin verses in Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, MS 432 fols. IV-3V. And the list of Skelton's works given by Occupacyon in the Garlande of Laurell, lines 1170-476, creates almost as many problems as it solves. It is true that it helps to confirm Skelton's authorship of some pieces. But it is far from authoritative. It does not aspire to completeness; it seeks to give only 'sum parte of Skeltons bokes and baladis with ditis of plesure'. Moreover, because of its date of compilation, it can provide no evidence for anything written after 1523. Sometimes, as in lines 1188-90 on Speke Parott, the description of the poem is not very accurate. Sometimes a disproportionate amount of attention is given to what seem to us comparatively unimportant works and little or no attention to those which seem important: Collyn Clout and Elynour Rummynge, for example, are treated as 'trifels' (1235). Possibly the most useful part of Occupacyon's list is the information it provides about some thirty 'lost works'. A few items mentioned in it, such as the 'tratyse . . . callid Speculum Principis' (1228-9), which were unlocated by Skelton's early editors, have been traced. But its arbitrary incompleteness and the whimsical, playful tone of the list do not inspire confidence that this is a sober record of what Skelton actually wrote: it may, in part, be a parody of this sort of list of works, and some of the pieces which editors (including this one) refer to as 'lost works' may never have existed. In one way at least the list is demonstrably misleading: it refers to certain poems, now lost, by generic titles (such as 'Wofully Arraid' or 'Vexilla Regis') and poems on these subjects which have consequently been attributed to Skelton seem not to be his.

^{1.} On Skelton's handwriting see particularly William Nelson, John Skelton, Laureate, 1939, Appendix v (pp. 245-6).

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Each of Skelton's early editors contributed both to the establishment of the canon and to its confusion. Henry Tab (for whom Richard Lant printed Certayne Bokes in c.1545) collected Ware the Hauke and three nationalistic outbursts dating from 1513 against the Scots and the French, none of which appears in Occupacyon's list; but he also included several unauthentic poems on religious subjects as well as the elegy for Edward IV. John Stow (who is almost certainly the 'I.S.' for whom Thomas Marshe printed Skelton's Workes in 1568)² added to what Tab had assembled: among authentic items he included the Northumberland elegy, the lament for the city of Norwich, the eulogies for the tombs of Lady Margaret Beaufort and Henry VII, the mock epitaph for Bedel and Against Venemous Tongues, information about the last of which he may have obtained from John Bale's Catalogus (1557-9), which mentions it;3 but Stow also included as Skelton's The Boke of Three Fooles which on examination proves to be three chapters of Henry Watson's translation (c.1508) of Brant's Narrenschiff. It is fairly clear that Skelton's reputation in the latter part of the sixteenth century as a witty and often scurrilous jester was sufficient to ensure that a number of unauthentic pieces were attributed to him: Angel Day, for example, in The English Secretorie (1586), preserves five lines expressed in an unfortunately over-elliptic way supposedly written by Skelton in support of the Prioress of Margate, whose mill stream had been dammed up by the Abbot of St Albans:

> Humbly complayneth to your high estate, The Lady Prioresse of Margate: For that the Abbot of S. Albones did stoppe With two stones and a stake her water gappe. Helpe, Lord, for God sake.⁴

Marshe's edition of 1568, which was reprinted in 1736 and 1810, became, with all its faults and omissions, the standard text of Skelton. But authentic works, not in Marshe, were coming to light: Bishop Thomas Tanner knew of the *Speculum Principis* in 1748;⁵ James Nasmith mentioned the translation of Diodorus Siculus in 1777;⁶ and Thomas War-

- 2. See William Ringler, Studies in Bibliography, VIII, 1956, 215-16.
- 3. Scriptorum Illustrium Maioris Bryttanie Catalogus . . . Basle 1557, 1559, pp. 651-2.
- 4. See J.G. McManaway, Notes and Queries, CXCVI, 1951, 134-5. 'Margate' must be Markyate, eight miles north-west of St Albans.
 - 5. Bibliotheca Britannico-Hibernica, 1748, p. 676.
- 6. Catalogus Librorum Manuscriptorum . . . , 1777, p. 362 (Item CCLVII 1). He also knew and printed the dedicatory Latin verses to the Chronique de Rains, p. 400 (Item CCCCXXXII).

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ton in the 1780s spoke of Magnyfycence and the Garnesche flytings, and claimed to have seen a play called the 'Nigramansir', now 'lost', in a 1504 print by de Worde. Alexander Dyce's two-volume edition of 1843 used Marshe extensively, but augmented the canon with what had been more recently discovered, and added items he had himself located most notably, the lyrics from Dyvers Balettys and Dyties Solacyous and the Replycacion. Dyce's, the first critical edition of the poems, became authoritative; in fact it has not yet been replaced. Yet it soon became clear that other authentic poems were extant of which Dyce had no knowledge: while his edition was being printed W.H. Black located the holograph version of A Lawde and Prayse Made for Our Sovereigne Lord the Kyng8 and in 1882 John Ashton found a copy of A Ballade of the Scottysshe Kynge. It also emerged, principally through the researches of Friedrich Brie, that several pieces which Dyce had confidently ascribed to Skelton were, at best, of doubtful authenticity. From time to time. other anonymous fifteenth- and sixteenth-century poems have been ascribed to Skelton, usually because they bear a resemblance to a 'lost' work in the Garlande of Laurell: the normally sceptical Brie, for example, in 1919 fancied he had identified one of the poems to 'Mistress Anne' and the 'Recule against Gaguyne', but these attributions have not been generally accepted. 10

The twentieth century's more stringent demands in ascertaining authenticity have somewhat reduced the Skelton canon, which at the moment stands as established in 1967 by Robert Kinsman and Theodore Yonge. ¹¹ It is not impossible that works at present 'lost' or unidentified may be discovered, or that works at present considered authentic may be rejected from the canon. ¹² Recently, moreover, Nan C. Carpenter has raised the interesting possibility that Skelton may have occasionally collaborated: she considers a poem by William Cornish, which is included in Marshe's 1568 edition of Skelton, and speculates that 'the style of the poem varies greatly, and some lines sound remarkably like Skelton'. ¹³ Such a suspicion, however, falls short of proof, and, in the

- 7. History of English Poetry, 11 360-63.
- 8. For an account of the finding of this item and a text see Alexander Dyce, The Poetical Works of John Skelton, 1843, I ix-xi.
 - 9. Englische Studien, XXXVII, 1907, 1-86.
 - 10. Archiv, XXXVIII, 1919, 226-8.
- 11. John Skelton: Canon and Census, Renaissance Society of America: Bibliographies and Indexes No. 4, 1967. I am much indebted to this work.
- 12. Of the items currently accepted as genuine perhaps the evidence in favour of No. XXII, A Couplet on Wolsey's Dissolution of the Convocation at St Paul's, is least secure.
 - 13. Comparative Literature, XII, 1970, 157-72.

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present edition, only those items considered authentic by Kinsman and Yonge have been accepted. Poems of doubtful authorship, even though once considered to be by Skelton, have not been included.¹⁴

The poems are arranged chronologically, in so far as it is possible to determine the chronology of Skelton's works. To some poems Skelton himself assigns a date either in conventional form or according to his private chronology, begun probably when he entered the Tudor royal service in October or November 1488; some may be precisely dated on internal evidence; but about some, for example the lyrical pieces collected as Dyvers Balettys and Dyties Solacyous and Agaynste a Comely Covstrowne, there is little or no evidence apart from style (though these poems are conventionally dated 'c.1495-1500'). Moreover, the chronology of those poems to which a date can with some confidence be assigned may be complicated by other factors. It is clear that Skelton revised and re-used material. Sometimes he re-used material quickly: Agaynst the Scottes, composed shortly after 22 September 1513, includes as lines 91-180 a revision of A Ballade of the Scottysshe Kynge, hastily composed and published less than a fortnight earlier. On the other hand, the Garlande of Laurell, issued as a whole on 3 October 1523 and given its final form shortly before this date, makes use of various lyrics written in the 1490s and of a defence of Phyllyp Sparowe written in 1509 or shortly afterwards. What is more, in his topical poems, Skelton follows the development of events: the envoys to Speke Parott, for example, seem to have been added separately, at intervals, as the political situation changed. So it is sometimes more appropriate to assign a date to parts of a poem than to the whole.

My aim has been to present an annotated critical text of all of Skelton's English poems. A brief descriptive list of his Latin poems, and references to editions of them, may be found in an Appendix. Since there is no edition of Skelton generally accepted as authoritative – Dyce's misses out some poems Skelton wrote and includes others he did not write; Kinsman's is designedly a selection – I have consulted again the original authorities, and have sought to establish the texts of Skelton's English poems afresh. The earliest text of a poem is usually chosen as the copy-text. If the copy-text is emended the original reading (except where it is a simple mis-spelling) is included in the Notes, where appears also a selection of the more interesting variant readings. Some Latin passages are badly garbled and require extensive emenda-

^{14.} These are listed and discussed by Kinsman and Yonge, op. cit., pp. 16-32, as are Skelton's 'lost works' and those rejected from the canon as spurious.

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tion; many passages require minor grammatical adjustments or spelling correction (which are usually not noted). The conventional abbreviations of scribes and printers are expanded without notice. The letters i/j, u/v have been given their modern values; p is rendered as th, p (on the few occasions it occurs) as p0 or p1, initial p1 as p2. Punctuation and capitalization are editorial; so, in some cases, is the word-division, lineation, stanza-division and paragraphing. In addition to including textual variants, the Notes attempt to explain allusions, difficult passages, word-play and so on, in order to make a remote and often difficult author accessible to the modern reader. The Glossary is selective but, because of the difficulty of Skelton's vocabulary, fairly extensive: it intends to list those words which, in meaning or form, are likely to cause difficulty.



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Table of Dates

Perhaps in this year John Skelton is born, probably of a northern, possibly a Yorkshire, family. He is associated with the county early in his career: in 1489 he addresses an affectionate Latin quatrain to Dr William Rukshaw, a distinguished ecclesiastic from York; in the same year he produces an elegy for Henry Percy, fourth Earl of North-umberland, murdered at Topcliffe, Yorkshire; he was perhaps a guest of the Howards at Sheriff Hutton Castle, Yorkshire, in 1495.

On 18 March one 'Skelton', who may be the poet, is recorded as about to take his B.A. at Cambridge. If he was at Cambridge (as he claims to have been) Skelton may have been at Peterhouse, where Rukshaw was a fellow in the 1460s and bursar from 1469 to 1471. Since Skelton is not recorded as having received a B.A. from Cambridge it may be that he left there for Oxford.

The title of 'laureate' (a sort of postgraduate 'degree' in rhetoric) is conferred on him by Oxford University perhaps in this year. At about this time he finishes translating *The Bibliotheca Historica of Diodorus Siculus* into English from Poggio's Latin version. In late October or early November he enters the royal service, and begins his private system of chronology.

1489 After 28 April he writes Upon the Dolorus Dethe and Muche Lamentable Chaunce of the Mooste Honorable Erle of Northumberlande.

?1490 In his Preface to *Encydos* Caxton praises Skelton for his classical learning, his skill in translation and his 'polysshed and ornate termes': 'I suppose he hath dronken of Elycons well.'

According to Robert Whittinton, the title of 'laureate' is conferred on Skelton by Louvain University.

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He receives the title of 'laureate' from Cambridge University.

Epigramma ad tanti principis maiestatem is written to celebrate Prince Henry's being created Duke of York on I November.

Probably at around this time Skelton is living chiefly in London or Westminster: he is recorded as having breakfasted and dined in Fleet Street on two occasions with John Syclyng, Master of Godshouse (now Christ's College), Cambridge. Manerly Margery Mylk and Ale and the lyrics in the two collections — Agaynste a Comely Coystrowne and Divers Balettys and Dyties Solacyous (published in about 1527) — are probably written at around this time. Skelton, in this year, perhaps visits Sheriff Hutton Castle, Yorkshire, and begins to assemble the Garlande of Laurell, incorporating some lyrics written earlier.

?1496-1501 During this period, while he is tutor to Prince Henry, Skelton writes several pedagogical works, now lost.

Skelton enters Holy Orders: on 31 March he is ordained sub-deacon, on 14 April deacon, on 9 June priest. He is attached at this time to the Abbey of St Mary of Graces, a 'free chapel royal' near the Tower of London. He is recorded as having celebrated mass on 11 November before Henry VII, who made him an offering of 20 shillings. In the autumn of this year *The Bowge of Courte* is written, and published by de Worde in the following year.

Erasmus praises Skelton as 'that light and glory of English letters'.

Skelton probably lives in London or Westminster still, where he is recorded as having dined twice with John Syclyng again. Peter Ottey, a royal chaplain, makes a complaint against Skelton at the Court of Requests on 14 May. Speculum Principis, a book of advice, in ornate Latin prose, for Prince Henry is finished on 28 August.

On 29 April 'the duc of Yorks scolemaster', who is perhaps to be identified with Skelton, receives 40 shillings from Henry VII. On 10 June Skelton is imprisoned as surety for William Guy, Prior of St Bartholomew's, delinquent in a debt.

P1503-12 During this period Skelton resides chiefly in Diss, Norfolk, where he is rector until his death. His first recorded