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Some Slighted Poets: I: John Skelton, 1464-1529

JAMES DONELAN

CLASSIFYING minor poets would seem to be one of the occupational hazards of the litterateur. As a critical posture it is somewhat like flagpole-sitting for it leaves the critic so very exposed. He may on other occasions, for instance, call Wordsworth a cad, or say of Milton that "he writ no language," or deny Shakespeare any or every possible virtue (even that of ever having lived), and all this without unduly ruffling the critical climate. But let him label one poet "minor" and he has opened Pandora's box! For the surprising truth is that the critic seems least sure of himself on the lower slopes of Parnassus, among the poets "who bide our question"; for here

'Tis with our judgments as our watches; none
Go just alike, yet each believes his own.

This is understandable. For one thing, we all have our favorite obscure poet, the subject, perhaps, of our M.A. or Ph.D. thesis, or a poet chosen from some dusty anthology simply because Mr. Eliot once said that *every* poetry reader should have some such poet-friend; or, for so the gods work, the author of some little volume taken along by mistake on a long train ride. (How much we read on trains we wouldn't read elsewhere!) But whatever the reason for the alliance, we must admit of a very irrational sensitivity to the word "minor" where our own particular poet-friend is concerned. The critic may call him a

“symbolist” or an “imagist”; or, if he chooses, “baroque”, “rococo”, or even “decadent”; but never, never may he call him “minor”.

This is only half the hazard. For the critic who sets out to write about minor poetry *qua* minor not only exposes himself to much literary name-calling (“philistine”, “dilettante”, “bourgeois”, and more recently “new” and “beat”) but no matter how brilliant or discerning, he can never be sure of his position. One immediately thinks of Dr. Johnson’s list of literary howlers; his judgment, for example, on John Donne and the Metaphysicals: “instead of writing poetry they wrote only verse.” Or of Professor Saintsbury’s estimate of John Skelton: “the doggerel of talent or almost of genius.” Or of the generation of critics who would grant Gerard Manly Hopkins hardly that much. At a time when at least two of the above poets are considered “great”, such critical judgments as these make undergraduates snicker. And yet it is hardly fair to blame critics for tumbling into pitfalls they couldn’t possibly have seen. How could Doctor Johnson have known, without reading T. S. Eliot, that he was living in a period of “dissociated sensibility”? Or Professor Saintsbury that the poets of the thirties would one day make John Skelton famous? Actually there is nothing that the critic can do about these ironic reversals of literary history except to keep in mind that in assigning grades to poets discretion is the better part of criticism: “launch not beyond your depth but be discreet.”

Admittedly it would be better if critics never attempted such categories and took their poetry where they found it, distinguishing only the good from the bad. But should this happen, hundreds of thousands of college text books and “outline histories” in America and the Philippines (in England such items are non-U) would never be written and untold academic tragedies result. So we can feel quite certain that critics will go on (as I shall in a moment) dividing literature into categories of primitive and decadent, healthy and morbid, beat and unbeat, major and minor, or what you will. For those who feel compelled to use the latter category and would care to avoid

the pitfalls mentioned above I should like to offer several observations for safe conduct which I have observed in critics who have more or less successfully written about "minor" poets.

I

The first rule for safe conduct is one of those simple things that, like the wheel, takes genius to discover: never define what you mean by "minor poetry". For example, after announcing his title, "What is Minor Poetry,"¹ Mr. Eliot somewhat surprisingly begins: "I do not propose to offer, either at the beginning or at the end, a definition of 'minor poetry'."

The advantages of this tactic are too obvious to stress. However, its use is not for everyone, because what Mr. Eliot does propose is to discourse on the advantages of reading what we, for our part, shall decide is minor poetry. Its successful use, therefore, would seem to require a nice balance of genius and clairvoyance. Professor Donner, on the other hand, in his article on "The Significance of Minor Poets",² chooses to define minor poetry. Minor poetry, he tells us, is written by "those who have not, like the very great, revealed what Signor Vivante calls the creative moment, the feeling of the presence of the infinite resources, the unlimited potentialities of the spirit, those poets, in other words, who have not communicated a sense of man's greatness." Those poets, in other words, being everyone except Dante, Shakespeare and the Psalmist! Surely if this is what definitions lead to, Mr. Eliot chose the better part. And so shall we.

The second rule is more difficult though more necessary: never indulge in mentioning poets by name. Here Professor Donner and Mr. Eliot agree. Professor Donner tells us that "which among the English poets are major and which minor I shall not attempt to decide here." And of course Mr. Eliot eschews all such classifications. However, this rule is not quite

¹ T. S. Eliot, 'What is Minor Poetry'; *ON POETRY AND POETS* (London: Faber and Faber Ltd., 1956), p. 39.

² Henry W. Donner, 'The Significance of Minor Poets'; *ENGLISH STUDIES TODAY*, edited by C. L. Wrenn and G. Bullough (Oxford University Press, 1951), p. 36.

so easy to observe as it appears, and it is not surprising that both of our critics stray from the narrow path. The nature of their fall shows us how insidious this whole matter is. Mr. Eliot on the single testimony of *The Vanity of Human Wishes* declares Samuel Johnson a great poet. Professor Donner, though implying the minor status of several poets, uses the phrase "minor poet" to describe only one poet: Samuel Johnson.

When you find it impossible to avoid naming poets, rule three comes into play: never use the terms "major" or "minor" at all. This is a straightforward little rule and needs no explanations. Mr. Gerald Bullett in his introduction to *Silver Poets of the Sixteenth Century*³ shows us how to use it: "The word *silver* in the title of this volume where *minor* might have been expected marks its editor's resolve to distinguish without disparagement and to admire without extravagance." (How Doctor Johnson would have liked the roll of that sentence!) Care should be taken, however, in conjuring up titles. A word like "silver" too readily suggests its counterpart, "golden". It is not surprising, therefore, that a few years after Mr. Bullett wrote, Professor Lewis came along and promoted some of Mr. Bullett's *silver* poets to *golden* and demoted others to *drab*.⁴ Somehow in the intervening six years their silver must have tarnished. One can hardly blame the undergraduate for thinking that all this smacks of literary nominalism.

There are several other helpful little ploys which hardly merit the dignity of inclusion in our canon, of which I shall mention only one by way of example. The essence of this ploy is to so word your definition or discussion of minor poetry as to leave the back door open to a bit of innocuous, page-filling digression. Note how gracefully Mr. Eliot does this:

The most direct approach [to minor poetry] is by considering the several kinds of anthologies of poetry; because one association of the term "minor poetry" makes it mean "the kind of poems that we only read in anthologies". And incidentally, I am glad of an opportunity to say something about the uses of anthologies because . . .

³ SILVER POETS OF THE SIXTEENTH CENTURY, edited by Gerald Bullett (London: Dent and Sons Ltd., 1947), p.v.

⁴ C. S. Lewis, ENGLISH LITERATURE IN THE SIXTEENTH CENTURY EXCLUDING DRAMA (Oxford at the Clarendon Press, 1954), p. 64.

Mr. Eliot's "because" goes on for some four or five pages. This might well be called the "red-herring" ploy, or how to write about minor poetry without actually writing about it.

II

However, it is time we stopped talking about pitfalls and and started falling into a few. The title of this article makes it quite evident that I have chosen to apply rule number three and that this choice has been necessitated by the unavoidable fact that I want to talk about individual poets. However, to be quite honest about it, there is another reason for not using the term "minor". It is simply that I consider some of the poets that I shall talk about to be "major" (though which ones I can't say now for that would be violating rule three).

But why the term *slighted*? As to the *fact* of the slight I shall leave you to your own research. You might start with yourself. What do *you* know about William Langland, John Skelton or John Gower, to mention a few of our "slighted" poets? My own investigations would lead me to expect that if you are an English "major" or an English M.A. candidate or even a college English teacher, the odds are very much against your being able to do more than recognize the above names and roughly estimate their *floruit*. This should not surprise or embarrass anybody. The story of most foreign, or non-English speaking, students' contact with English literature can be summed up by the phrase, too little and too late. The English schoolboy before he reaches his teens has begun to read the ballads, the *Ancient Mariner*, some of Yeats and Arnold; at fifteen he has read part of Skelton, Herrick, the *Mabinogion* and, of course, substantial portions of Shakespeare, Milton, the Neo-Classicists and the Romantics; and while still in the equivalent of our third-year high school he has read the *Canterbury Tales* (in Middle English), the *Faerie Queene*, Browne, Taylor, Auden, Eliot, Spender and Lewis, to give a rather sporadic sampling. (If you don't mind feeling almost illiterate, consult the reading list set down for the various high-school levels in the English Association's Pamphlet No. 21, *English Literature in the Schools*.) To keep the contrast in perspective one must

remember that the English schoolboy at this period is by no means "majoring in English." Until the end of his Sixth Form (roughly, fourth-year high school) his English literature studies are only a part of his general education and a mere propaedeutic to further study on the collegiate level.

However, we shouldn't allow ourselves to be discouraged by comparisons, for the situation could hardly be otherwise. For all its widespread use here, English in the Philippines is a foreign language, an acquired language whose sounds and rhythmic patterns are very different from the cadence of the native languages and intimately expressive of a culture as alien to the Filipino character and land as the "gilpcwaeth" of Beowulf or the mellow, misty autumns of Keats. This cultural barrier exists for every non-Englishman. Perhaps native English-language speakers of other national origins (Americans, Canadians, Australians, etc.) can cross this barrier, as Eliot did in one direction and Auden in the other, but even these can't take their works with them. Only an American can read the early Eliot and the late Auden as they should be read, just as the opposite is true of the English reader. For language, especially the language of poetry, is not a simple matter of grammar or vocabulary, but of language as sound-gesture, peculiarly and uniquely expressive of one culture. You have only to hear an American recite a Border Ballad or an Englishman read Damon Runyon aloud to realize this. And you have only to hear John Gielgud intone Milton's *Nativity Ode* or hear Shakespeare played at Stratford-on-Avon to know that English poetry was written for the English voice and that the sound is more than echo to the sense—it is its image.

It is not surprising then that the non-native English speaker (especially one whose culture is so many worlds apart from the Anglo-Saxon) should find it difficult to see this image clearly and that the difficulty should increase as he turns the pages back to the fifteenth, fourteenth and thirteenth centuries where an unfamiliar prism distorts that image even further. The literary pilgrim who can't sit for a pint of bitters in the pub at Burnt Norton without feeling uneasy and who feels completely out of place in the Mermaid Tavern will suffer a total

cultural blackout long before he reaches Boar's Head or the Tabard or Hrothgar's Heorot. The result is that most foreign students are reluctant to go farther back than Shakespeare and choose rather to orbit their studies around the great luminaries of the past four centuries or to dissipate their energies in criticism and contemporary literature courses, learning how to run before they have started to walk.

The sad effect of all this is to deprive the foreign student (and those whom he shall teach) of the one thing they need most if they are to really profit by their study of English literature: an insight into, and comprehensive grasp of, the integrity and unity of that literature as the vision and comment of a whole people throughout the course of their history. You may, if you wish, adopt the *fictio* of a segmented literature and select "courses of concentration" in which you improve your own use of language, obtain a scholastic degree and earn a living. But this is to sell literature short, to turn it into a glorified Berlitz course, and in a young country such as this, striving for cultural entelechy, it is to fail in your vocation as a teacher, or even as an educated man or woman.

For education is nothing other than culture considered as a discipline designed to increase the power of the adolescent to attain more fully the ends of life and, as a citizen, to contribute in some measure toward sustaining and enriching that culture. At the moment the only such discipline in most of our schools, and surely the most effective in all of them, is English literature. And as a discipline it serves much the same purpose here in the Philippines as classical studies did in the schools of the Renaissance: not as an exercise in linguistics (this is an indispensable tool, not an end) nor as training for an academic career, nor, at the other extreme, as an infallible guide to life or a source of ultimate wisdom—Faith and reason provide these—but rather as a millennial record of a great people's experience in their own quest for permanent and essential human values. This record differs from history in that it uses the medium of art to heighten the meaning and significance of that experience in order to delight and instruct the whole man.

Considered from this viewpoint, English literature is not a patchwork quilt but, to borrow a metaphor from a more sublime context, a seamless robe in which are woven the aspirations and ideals of a people and the conflicts in which these were measured up to or defected from. It is the life story of a nation—and it is more than that. Aristotle has told us that art is *mimésis*, a representation of universal and timeless truth, so that all of us, *our* ideals and *our* aspirations, are imaged in the mirror that Shakespeare holds up to Nature. This is the knowledge that makes men free, the art which Cicero tells us “pertinent ad humanitatem”.

Our study, therefore, of English literature in the Philippines should be more of an integrated effort to comprehend the whole *élan vital* of that literature. It should, in other words, be less scientific and more humanistic in that more emphasis should be placed on literature as the deposit of culture than as an expression of style or language. It should also be less analytic and more synthetic, so that more time is spent reading the authors and less reading the critics. It should give us some pause to note that there are no literary “do-it-yourself” or criticism courses in the English universities. This doesn’t mean that there shouldn’t be. But since criticism is an act of judgment on the facts and values of an object as a record of experience, it would seem that it can be properly exercised only by one who can see that experience in its totality, and in literature this means seeing the experience in its cultural context. This is, in a general way, the philosophy of education that supports the Oxford-Cambridge system, and I suppose that what I am ultimately saying is that here in the Philippines our approach to literature should be more English and less American. Again, this is not to disparage the American system, but it does seem odd to me that we should take such a roundabout approach to English literature when a direct route is open. Why, for example, does one look almost in vain for British literary periodicals in our college and university libraries, so generously provided with American publications? Wouldn’t a more rounded diet be healthier? It is not that the American critic lacks insight into English literature—though he does seem to

rely more on *Wissenschaft* than intuition—but simply that in writing about it he lacks one advantage the Englishman enjoys—it is not his story, and even, it appears at times, not his language.

Finally, in our study of English literature there should be fewer *slighted* poets. This does not mean indiscriminate anthologizing. A slight implies that something of merit or worth or deserving respect has been ignored. The slighted poets we shall deal with in this series of articles are surely worth our attention and study, both for what they say and how they say it, for each one contributes in a significant way to the great English experience.

III

As you walk into the Divinity School at Oxford or up the stairs to the great hall of Cardinal Wolsey's college, which is called Christ Church today, amid so much that expresses the grandeur and arrogance of the man whose dream it was, the eye inevitably rises, as the Gothic artist intended it should, to the delicate finery of the great fan-vault. This is the flowering of a rococo spirit that flourished in England during the reign of the Tudors. It is also a symbol of the end of an era that died with Wolsey, the last of the great churchmen to rule beside the throne of England, and the end of a tradition that embraced men like Chaucer, Langland and Gower. It is at this turning point in history that we meet John Skelton. It is fitting that he should be here for he so perfectly expresses the flux of the cultural moment. At times his poetry is as orthodox as the Psalms that were sung in the chapel on the far side of Christ Church cloister; at other times we hear a strange kind of off-beat tone, a type of verbal jazz out of harmony with his own time and strangely consonous with our own. Thus Skelton, who was so much of his age as to be laureate of three great universities (Oxford, Cambridge and Louvain), in a sense stands outside it and defies classification.

The literary period between Chaucer and the second half of the sixteenth century is often spoken of as the ebb tide of English literature. One might say of Skelton that he stood at

the quiet slack where the tide ceases to roll out but has not yet started in. Chaucer and the Age of Faith were far behind, Shakespeare and the Age of Man far ahead. In golden Florence the new humanists were reviving the glory and grandeur that was ancient Rome. The *quattrocento* witnessed the work of Ghiberti, Donatello and Da Vinci and the birth of Raphael and Michelangelo. But only a few men in the north, like Erasmus and More and Colet, as yet looked south for inspiration. Actually, English architecture didn't need it. In Henry VII's chapel at Westminster (1512) and King's College Chapel at Cambridge (1515) it would reach its supreme achievement and after that at least keep its self-respect for another century. But in the world of letters it was otherwise, for the English language was suffering from the growing pains that English architecture had gotten over in the twelfth century. Many of the poets who had lived on in the spirit of Chaucer, men like Lydgate, Hoccleve and James I, were dead before Skelton started to write. So, too, was Malory. The language itself was confusion compounded and all sense of rhythm and metre seems to have been lost. Only the primitive and the unsophisticated seemed capable of vigor: the ballads, the religious carols and the miracle plays. Otherwise the literary scene lay like a great ploughed field, lonely and fallow before the next spring planting. This is Skelton's milieu, when "it seems impossible for the English poet to clear his mouth of pebbles or his brow of fog." One wonders what Chaucer or Shakespeare would have made of it, if it had not been too late for one and too early for the other. But in the instance of John Skelton, who was not a genius and at best only a sometime poet, too much should not be expected.

Then why read him? Perhaps it is well that reasons should be given, for of all our "slighted" poets John Skelton is surely the one least likely to be missed, and in beginning our study with him we are not leading from strength. But in our effort to see English literature clearly and to see it whole men like John Skelton are invaluable. For Skelton is, *par excellence*, a man of his age, "the last and peculiarly brilliant representative of a great tradition, a man standing at a decisive turning point

of English culture and English history.”⁵ And he is something more. For there are others of his contemporaries, Barclay, Hawes or Lydgate, who might serve as prototypes of the times, men in whom we could see the paralysis of humor and harmony that set in among the poets who mistook Chaucer’s chaff for wheat and let the grain fall on barren soil. Skelton serves for more than that, for he is not only a full-fledged poet of the aureate tradition but in part of his work a type of Melchisedech, who comes upon the scene anointed but unexplained. In these off-beat poems we find a compact, contrived simplicity alien to the times and hear a prelude of things to be: an interest in words that will later engage the Elizabethan, a dramatic expression of personality that will characterize Wyatt and Surrey, some of the conversational spontaneity of Donne and some first-rate intuitions into the technique of poetry. And last but not least, Skelton is the one poet of that period whom we can still read with pleasure.

This diversified quality in Skelton’s work suggests a division for our study. We shall first consider his traditional work and the importance of that tradition, then his own peculiar use of rhyme and metre called “Skeltonics”, and finally his lyrics, which are more conventional yet still difficult to classify.

IV

It is quite to be expected that Skelton should have continued in the tradition of his predecessors, and that influence is readily perceptible in a large portion of his poetry. You might, for example, read his three prayers to the Trinity:

O radiant luminary of light interminable,
Celestial father, potential God of might . . .

Much of the *Garland of Laurel* is written in this heavy, brocaded language, linked by rhyme royal:

Princess most puissant, of high pre-eminence,
Renowned lady above the starry heaven,

⁵ THE COMPLETE POEMS OF JOHN SKELTON, edited by Philip Henderson (London: Dent and Sons Ltd., 1948), p. xi.

All other transcending, of every congruence,
 Madam regent of the sciences seven,
 To whose estate all nobleness must lean,
 My supplication to you I erect
 Whereof I beseech you to tender the effect.

This is heavy going and "nothing is here for tears" when we realize that Skelton is the last of this tradition. Yet the tradition itself must be understood if we wish to appreciate the organic development of English literature.

Elizabethan literature, for example, is strongly influenced by this tradition. When Faustus on the brink of hell phrases his prayer in Ovid's language, "O lente, lente, currite noctis equi!" or snatches a saving bit of doctrine from Averroes:

O soul be changed into little water drops
 And fall into the ocean—ne'er be found,

or when in the midst of an impassioned paean of revenge Hieronimo can pull a saying of Seneca from the air and cap it with a nice paradox:

Fata si miseros iuvant, habes salutem;
fata si vitam negant, habes sepulchrum . . .
 Therefore will I rest me in unrest
 Dissembling quiet in unquietness,

and finally when to Richard's

Vouchsafe divine perfection of a woman
 Of these supposed evils to give me leave
 By circumstances but to acquit myself

Lady Anne replies:

Vouchsafe defused infection of a man
 For these known evils but to give me leave
 By circumstances to curse thy cursed self,

we recognize in the balanced phrases and clauses, the antithetical statements, the long running similes, the metaphors and word-play and latinate vocabulary, the characteristics of rhetoric and a concept of poetry that goes back to Skelton and

the late medieval poets. True, there were other influences on the Elizabethans: the thousands of translations of the classics, the study of Latin grammar, the tremendous interest in the literature of the Romance languages; but none of these played so important a part in shaping the rhetorical pattern of early Elizabethan dramatic poetry as its relationship to medieval poetry, or rather, for they seem to have been the same thing, to the medieval concept of rhetoric.⁶

Strange as it may seem, the art of rhetoric which Cicero had once properly defined as *ars bene dicendi* became for all practical purposes the *ars poetica* of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, so much so that the terms "rhetorike" in English and "rhetoriqueur" in French became synonymous for "poetry" and "poet". In classical times rhetoric was the art of persuasive public speaking and concerned itself with judicial, deliberative and occasional oratory. The rules evolved by the rhetoricians governed the entire task of the speaker, from the gathering of materials to actual delivery, and, in the *Ad Herennium*, a popular handbook on rhetoric erroneously thought by the Middle Ages to have been written by Cicero, these rules are set down in five steps: *inventio*, *dispositio*, *locutio*, *memoria* and *pronunciatio*. The ancients kept a healthy balance among these five qualities and did not limit the term rhetoric to *dispositio*, or what we would today call "style". But the poets of the Middle Ages upset this balance and the result is largely a story of the deterioration of the rational quality of rhetoric, which as the urgency and opportunity for public debate decreased became more and more ornamental. As a result Aristotle's and Quintilian's works on rhetoric were almost completely neglected and the *Ad Herennium*, which neatly catalogued and defined figures

⁶Actually, to fully understand the poetry of this period a second and more repulsive feature of late medieval verse should be studied: its frightful metre. However, there is no sense being sadistic about this, for such a study is not very rewarding. Though English poetry never quite got over its adolescent courtship of Lady Rhetorick (it actually became a valuable experience) it did grow out of its awkward stage and by the time the Elizabethans came on the scene the Muses had stopped stumbling and had learned to dance. And they are dancing still.

of speech, became the vade mecum of the medieval writer. We have only to look at Hawes' description of Lady Rhetorick surrounded by "mysty vapours" and "fragrant fumes" to realize how essentially the concept of rhetoric had changed. Rhetoric now meant style and style was understood as the ornamental adjunct of thought. But what is more important is the shift of emphasis in the application of rhetoric. It concerned itself less and less with public oratory and more with the process of poetical composition. A glance at Geoffrey of Vinsauf's *Poetria Nova* or John of Garland's *Poetria* tells us that *Ars Rhetorica* had become *Ars Poetica*, though these two authors were not to exert any significant influence until Skelton's era. We wonder what Cicero or Aristotle would have made of this sixteenth century description of their "ars bene dicendi":

Then above Logyke up we went a stayre
 Into a chambre gayly glorified,
 Strowed with floures of all goodly ayre,
 Where sate a lady greatly magnified . . .
 Her goodly chambre was set all about
 With depured mirroures of speculacyon
 'The fragrant fumes dyde well encense out
 All mysty vapours of perturbacion;
 More lyker was her habytacion
 Unto a place which is celestial
 Than to a terrayne mansion fatall.
 Before whom I did kneel down,
 Saying, O Sterre of famous eloquence,
 O gilded goddess of the high renown,
 Enspyred with heavenly influence
 Of the dulcet well of complacence,
 Upon my mynde with dewe aromatique
 Dystyll adowne thy lusty rhetorick.

Judging by Skelton's prolific outpouring of aureate poetry it would appear that Lady Rhetorick must have dunked him in that "dulcet well". Fortunately, and directors of M.A. and doctorate theses can thank their lucky Muses for this, much of this work has been lost. Yet to give Laureate Skelton his

due, it would seem that his heart wasn't always in his work and that much of what he wrote was hack work dashed off to meet the demands of his official position (though the office of laureate in Skelton's day was not quite so official as we tend to think of it). Happily for us he occasionally threw off Caliope (the name of his official poet's robe) and went off on a poetic binge writing his helter-skelter Skeltonics, as we shall see later. But not all his traditional poetry is dross. Occasionally he takes a hackneyed convention and brings it to life.

The best example of this is found in the *Bouge at Court* (literally, free-loading at the royal table), a poem well set in the established tradition yet possessing real poetic value. Though in idea (a satiric exposé of corruption in high society) and in form and technique (a dream allegory in rhyme royal) highly conventional, the poem nevertheless quickens once the *Bouge of Court* (allegorized as a ship) sets sail. The hero, Drede (Timidity), goes to sea in search of Fortune but soon comes into conflict with seven "full subtyll persons" who comprise Fortune's retinue. These are, of course, the vices that thrive in high places, Deceit, Flattery, Suspicion, etc. Skelton had the Tudor court in mind but the types he creates are timeless and familiar and can be met today at any Madison-Avenue-type cocktail party. Suspicion approaches Drede and says:

'Ye remember the gentleman right now
 That communed with you, methought a pretty space?
 Beware of him, for, I make God avow,
 He will beguile you and speak fair to your face.
 Ye never dwelt in such another place,
 For here is none that dare well other trust—
 But I would tell you a thing an I durst!

'Spake he, i'faith, no word to you of me?
 I wot, an he did, ye would me tell.
 I have a favour to you, whereof it be
 That I must show you much of my counsel.
 But I wonder what the devil of hell
 He said of me, when he with you did talk!
 By mine advice use not with him to walk.'

The description of Desdayne and Riot are equally well done and recall Langland's Vices, but the best poetry in the poem is found in the lines that project the mounting tension and uneasiness (C.E. Lewis calls it "Kafka-like") which the hero feels as he watches the others standing about, whispering and nodding in his direction. Drede finally leaps overboard, the dream ends and Skelton with tongue in cheek says that "oft-times such dreams be found true."

Speke Parrot is Skelton's only other traditional poem worth mentioning. Its lines remind the modern reader of the stream-of-consciousness technique and nonsense poetry, but there is method in Skelton's nonsense for he is satirizing the power politics of court and takes refuge in a word maze. What are we to make of this?

What is this to purpose? 'Over in a whinny Meg!
 Hob Lobin of Lowedon would have a bit a bred;
 The gibbet of Baldock was made for Jack Leg;
 An arrow unfeathered and without an head,
 A bagpipe without blowing standeth in no stead.

We have lost the key to the meaning of these lines and so no critical judgment is possible, but it is this kind of intellectual puzzle and the restless irritable mood of social protest that the modern poets have adapted to express their own dissatisfaction with society.

V

The most obvious characteristic of the second group of poems is their metre, which is so unusual and eccentric that critics have properly christened it with the patronymic "Skeltonic". Its one consistent feature seems to be its inconsistency. The beat varies from two to five a line,⁷ and the rhyme goes on and on until all possibilities have been explored. There is little to be gained in spending time on the critical problem of its

⁷ For this reason non-native English speakers, unfamiliar with normal English speech patterns and stress, find it difficult to read Skeltonics, in the original or the modern version. All the more reason, then, to work at it, for, as has been said before, sound-gesture is the key to meaning.

origin, nor, with all due respect to the scholars, would it seem necessary. The spontaneous, almost incoherent volubility of the Skeltonic seems too apt an expression of John Skelton's personality to have originated elsewhere than in the poet's own unchecked, bubbling and often vulgar vitality. This quality considerably narrows the range of emotions which Skeltonics may successfully convey and when Skelton steps outside his own backyard he loses even that "talent for doggerel" for which Saintsbury praised him. This shouldn't surprise us, for as a poetic technique the Skeltonic suffers from penury. What does surprise us, however, is that such a starved Pegasus ever gets airborne at all. We catch it at its highest flight in *Philip Sparrow*.

This delightful poem sets out "to seyn a lytel tragedie", the murder of a girl's little sparrow by Gib the Cat. The setting is, for the most part, dramatic and the poet allows us to hear the heartbroken reminiscences of Jane as she recalls her happy moments with gay little Philip:

For it would come and go
 And fly so to and fro;
 And on me it woulde leap
 When I was asleep,
 And his feathers shake,
 Wherewith he woulde make
 Me often for to wake,
 And for to take him in
 Upon my naked skin.
 God wot, we thought no sin.

Then all the dire punishments that only heartbroken little girls can think of are wished upon "all the nation of cattes wild and tame" and "on that cat specially that slew so cruelly my pretty little sparrow that I brought up at Carrow."

The leopards savage,
 The lions in their rage
 Might catch thee in their paws,
 And gnaw thee in their jaws.
 The serpents of Libany

Might sting thee venomously!
 The dragons with their tongues
 Might poison thy liver and lungs!
 The manticors of the mountains
 Might feed them on thy brains!

Finally the poet recreates in mock heroic one of childhood's memorable moments, the funeral service of a pet. The whole bird world is summoned to attend:

Some to sing, some to say,
 Some to weep and some to pray,
 Every birdie in his lay.
 The goldfinch, the wagtail,
 The jangling jay to rail,
 The flecked pie to chatter
 Of this dolorous matter;
 And robin redbrest
 He shall be the priest
 Softly warbeling . . .

As we read along we suddenly realize why the Skeltonic form pleases. Though too chaotic to be reflective and too superficial to be passionate, it is a perfect vehicle for light poetry, readily adaptable to either the whimsical gracefulness of *Philip Sparrow* or the hurried Hogarthian disorder of the *Tunning of Elinor Rumming*. Nor is this to damn with faint praise. The flighty inconsistency of a young girl's mind or the riotous bustle and chatter of blowsy women in a pub are hardly the stuff of great poetry, but it is part of the human comedy and a welcome relief in poetry as it is in life. We can't always be giant-stepping from one emotional peak to another, and, as Professor Lewis reminds us, "perfection in light poetry, perfect smallness, is among the rarest of literary achievements."

VI

Skelton's third group of poems contains some of his finest work: the short lyrics in the *Garden of Laurel*, a powerful religious lyric, *Woefully Arrayed*, and several other short poems such as *Mannerly Margery*, *Milk and Ale* and *My Darling*

Dear, My Daisy Flower, which do not quite live up to the promise of their wonderful titles. These poems are neither traditional nor Skeltonic and most likely owe their appearance of contrived simplicity to the ballad and carol, though this by no means fully explains them. Here, even more than in the Skeltonics, Skelton is writing outside his time and in his impatient and at times clumsy attempt to throw off the golden shackles of aureate verse he strikes a new, and for us, almost a familiar note.

Amendment
 Were convenient
 But it cannot be
 We have exiled verity.

The tone here, so direct, precise and economical, and the note of social disillusionment, are surely reminiscent of the poets of the thirties.

At the same time, Skelton is capable of a delightful lyrical quality, as the short lyrics in the *Garland* show:

Of Merry Margaret
 As midsummer flower,
 Gentle as falcon
 Or hawk of the tower:
 As patient and still
 And as full of good will
 As fair Isaphill,
 Coriander,
 Sweet pomander,
 Good Cassander,
 Well made, well wrought,
 Far may be sought
 Ere that ye find
 So courteous, so kind
 As Mary Margaret . . .
 This midsummer flower,
 Gentle as falcon
 Or hawk of the tower.

This brings us to the question of Skelton's influence on 20th -century poetry, for it is poems like the above that have attracted the modern poet. Skelton's revival has often been compared to John Donne's and with some reason, for both are startling cases of poets coming back to life after centuries of oblivion. However, Donne's case is by far the more significant for in him the moderns discovered a poetic sensibility not only neither cribbed, cabin'd or confined by neo-classicism nor exploited by romanticism but, and this could have been otherwise, they also discovered once the veil was drawn aside that John Donne was a great poet. The discovery of Skelton was not nearly as significant on either count. Modern poetry is not much interested, if at all, in Skelton's poetic sensibility, and in this regard Skelton has had little influence on those who have imitated him: Graves, Edith Sitwell, Hopkins and Auden. What these poets are interested in is Skelton's tone and technical experiments with metre, words and rhyme. We have little time to institute comparisons but we might take just a moment to see how Auden uses Skelton's tone and technique to talk about quite different ideas (note how closely the rhythm of the following poem parallels that of *Merry Margaret* above).

O my, what keeps
 At disheartened sweeps
 Fitters and Moulders,
 Wielders and Welders
 Dyers and bakers,
 And boiler-tube makers,
 Poofs and ponces,
 All of them dunces
 Those over thirty
 Ugly and dirty

This emphasis on technique rather than on sensibility explains why Skelton's discoverers have for the most part been poets rather than critics. Skelton is a poet's poet. Moreover, as intimated above, though the modern poets are not interested in *what* Skelton is writing about, they have been attracted to his satiric spirit and attitude of social protest and, I fear, to

his lack of either profound thought or deep passion. What we miss in Skelton's poetry is any experience of man's greatness, any saving touch of humanism. It is significant that neither his age nor ours have their heroes; his because the age of the Renaissance hero was yet unborn and ours because he has vanished. Thus Skelton's age wrote no tragedies, while in our times "tragedie is to seyn a storie of hym" who goes out of the world not with a bang but a whimper, and though it can be used for much finer things, the "beat" poets find Skelton's technique ready-made for the whimper.

If this is true, then what shall we say about Skelton's value? We must admit, as we have before, that he is the least of our "slighted" poets and that much of his value is due to the unique position he occupies as a transitional poet. But this is not a value to be sneered at when we consider that the period that followed Skelton is the greatest in English literature. In addition, though at times he descends to unintelligible doggerel he has written some excellent lyrics and at least one great poem. And the man himself is worth knowing. He is not a great satirist by any means but he lacks neither courage nor sincerity and unlike the poets of the disillusioned thirties who have imitated him Skelton's criticism of society and the church is based on a sense of values—chiefly the value Christ himself put on a human soul. In *Woefully Arrayed* Christ speaks:

Dear brother, no other thing I of thee desire
 But give me thine heart free to reward mine hire:
 I wrought thee, I bought thee from eternal fire:
 I pray thee array thee toward my high empire
 Above the Orient
 Whereof I am regent
 Lord God omnipotent
 With me to reign in endless wealth:
 Remember, man, thy soules health.

Finally, if "le style—c'est l'homme même," then the man who wrote such straightforward, direct and masculine poetry should prove good company. Whatever the faults of his non-aureate poetry there are as few dull moments here as there

would be in the company of helter-skelter John himself. But all this has been said much better, and in Skelton's own metre, by one of his modern followers.⁸

What could be daffier
Than John Skelton's laughter?
What sound more tenderly
Than his pretty poetry?
But angrily, wittily,
Tenderly, prettily,
Laughingly, learnedly,
Sadly, madly,
Helter-skelter John
Rhymes serenely on,
As English poets should.
Old John, you do me good!

⁸ Robert Graves.