

# JOHN SKELTON

## *Selected Poems*

EDITED WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY GERALD HAMMOND

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ROUTLEDGE



## SELECTED POEMS

JOHN SKELTON was born in Norfolk, probably in 1460, and studied at the universities of Oxford and Cambridge. He was awarded the title of Poet Laureate by the university of Oxford in 1488, and by Cambridge in 1493. In 1489 Skelton was appointed court poet to King Henry VII, becoming tutor to the future King Henry VIII in 1496. An ordained priest, Skelton became rector of Diss, in Norfolk, around 1503, a post that he held until his death. He continued to be associated with the court, and in 1512 was given the title of Orator Regius by Henry VIII. His satirical attacks on Cardinal Wolsey seem to have led to him spending the later years of his life in sanctuary in Westminster. Skelton died in 1529.

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*Roam on! The light we sought is shining still.  
Dost thou ask proof? Our tree yet crowns the hill,  
Our Scholar travels yet the loved hill-side*

from 'Thyrsis'

JOHN SKELTON

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GERALD HAMMOND

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JOHN SKELTON



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## INTRODUCTION

No poet ever believed so strongly in his calling: *vates*, prophet, bard, maker—these are pallid when set against Skelton's pride in the word 'laureate'. 'Poet laureate', and the succession of poetasters who have filled that position, has debased the word for us, but in Skelton's self dramatisation it stands for the noblest of pursuits, defender of the king, of the faith, and of civilised values. Not only in his writings, but in every part of his life, right down to his dress, Skelton acted the part. One of his shortest Skeltonics is *Calliope*, written in answer to the question 'Why wear ye Calliope embroidered with letters of gold?' It seems that Skelton's creation as poet laureate to the University of Oxford was made before Henry VII, who had, as part of the ceremony given him a garment embroidered with 'Calliope'. That was c.1488; as with many of Skelton's poems it is not possible to give an accurate date to the poem *Calliope*, but from what it says it seems fair to ascribe it to the closing years of his life, some thirty-five years later. To the question why he wore Calliope, 'Skelton Laureate, Orator Regius, maketh this answer':

Calliope;  
As ye may see,  
Regent is she  
    Of poets all,  
Which gave to me  
The high degree  
Laureate to be  
    Of fame royal;  
Whose name enrolled  
With silk and gold  
I dare be bold  
    Thus for to wear.  
Of her I hold  
And her household;  
Though I wax old  
    And somedele sere,  
Yet is she fain,  
Void of disdain,

Me to retain  
Her servitor;  
With her certain  
I will remain,  
As my sovereign  
Most of pleasure.

And if the point is still not clear, the Latin version of the poem tells us plainly that Calliope is *Musarum excellentissima, speciosissima, formosissima, heroicis praeest versibus*; and her influence has reached into this century as Robert Graves' White Goddess.

The granting of the laureateship was one of the two great events in Skelton's life; the other was being made tutor to the future Henry VIII twelve years later. Henry was not then seen as the future king because Arthur was still alive; and soon after Arthur's death in 1502, Skelton, who had taken holy orders in 1488, was moved away from the court to the rich and comfortable living of Diss in Norfolk. He kept this living for the rest of his life, but from the time Henry became king in 1509 he involved himself in the major controversies of pre-Reformation England, the rise of humanist learning, the movement towards Lutheranism, and, above all, the power of Cardinal Wolsey. And chiefly on account of his enmity with Wolsey he lived out the last years of his life in sanctuary at Westminster.

This is where Calliope and all she stands for is important. Her inspiration gave Skelton total poetic licence to say what he wanted how he wanted. The range is impressive. He can address the most powerful and dangerous statesman in England as a source of syphilitic infection in *Why Come Ye Not To Court?*, or, more simply, as Judas Iscariot in *Speak, Parrot*. In *Colin Clout* he recovered the voice of Piers Plowman to show the English people, both laity and clergy, where their follies and vices were leading them. The clergy he saw

With gold all betrayed  
In purple and pall belapped;  
Some hatted and some capped,  
Richly bewrapped

Their mules gold doth eat,  
    Their neighbours die for meat.

This had led to a laity ready and eager to espouse any form of heresy, religious or political:

    And some have a smack  
    Of Luther's sack,  
    And a burning spark  
    Of Luther's wark,  
    And are somewhat suspect  
    In Luther's sect;  
    And some of them bark,  
    Clatter and carp  
    Of that heresy art  
    Called Wicliffista,  
    The devilish dogmatista;  
    And some be Hussians,  
    And some be Arians,  
    And some be Pelagians,  
    And make much variance  
    Between the clergy  
    And the temporality,  
    How the Church hath too mickle,  
    And they have too little..

In *The Bouge of Court* the court is peopled with hypocrites and psychopaths; in *The Tunning of Elinour Rumming* the South Eastern citizenry, from the emerging middle class down to the lowest peasantry, have no ambition more noble than to drink themselves into a stupor; and in *Magnificence*, for probably the first time in English drama, a king is shown how easily he may be corrupted by power and flattery. And always there is the voice of Skelton insisting that he has the laureate's right to say such things. He has the right, too, to tell Jane Scrope, the little girl whose lament for her dead pet he recounted in *Philip Sparrow*, that neither she nor her family should be offended by the poem's gradual revelation of his longing for her. In the 1480s, writing like a conventionally ponderous laureate poet, Skelton poured scorn on all those responsible for the death of the Earl of Northumberland:

Barons, knights, squires, one and all,  
Together with servants of his family,  
Turned their backs and let their master fall,  
Of whose life they counted not a fly:  
Take up whoso would, for there they let him lie.  
Alas, his gold, his fee, his annual rent  
Upon such a sort was ill bestowed and spent!

Forty years later his final lines of terse, bare Skeltonics proclaimed his belief in the unending war which the laureate must fight:

Therefore no grievance,  
I pray you, for to take  
In this that I do make  
Against these frenetics,  
Against these lunatics,  
Against these schismatics,  
Against these heretics,  
Now of late abjured,  
Most unhappily ured:  
For be ye well assured  
That frenzy, nor jealousy,  
Nor heresy will never die.

And the Latin epigram to his last poem, *A Replication Against Certain Young Scholars Abjured of Late*, points forward sixty years to the Elizabethans' defences of poetry—it begins like this (in translation):

Infinite and beyond count are the sophists; infinite and beyond count are the logicians; beyond count are the philosophers, the theologians; infinite are the doctore, beyond count are the schoolmasters; but poets are few and rare—for all that is precious is rare.

In claiming and proclaiming such beliefs Skelton is at his most explicit, but this does not mean that his poetry is invariably strident or unsubtle. It sometimes is, but this is deliberate. The Skeltonic itself is ideally constructed for invective, so that in *Why Come Ye Not To Court?* the account of the anarchic evil of Wolsey is reinforced by the apparent randomness and unstopability of the verse form; and the only way the poem can come to an end is in a piece

of pure name calling:

Complain or do what ye will,  
Of your complaint it shall not skill,  
This is the tenor of my bill,  
A dawcock ye be, and so shall be still.

But the Skeltonic, too, could register the gentle tones of a quiet confidence in one's personal salvation, as in the way Colin Clout ends his poem after having travelled over the strife-ridden English countryside:

The forecastle of my ship  
Shall glide and smoothly slip  
Out of the waves wood  
Of the stormy flood;  
Shoot anchor, and lie at road,  
And sail not far abroad,  
Till the coast be clear,  
That the lode-star appear.  
My ship now will I steer  
Toward the port salu  
Of our saviour Jesu,  
Such grace that he us send  
To rectify and amend  
Things that are amiss,  
When that his pleasure is.

Remarkable as these two poems are they do not match *Philip Sparrow*, Skelton's finest achievement in the form named after him. Here the versatility of the Skeltonic is impressive. It ranges from the Who Killed Cock Robin simplicity of Jane Scrope's recital of all the birds who will attend Philip's funeral to the barely suppressed passion of the poet as he contemplates the little girl: innocence in the first two thirds of the poem, experience in the final third. And the parallels between the two parts make us wonder which is the greater innocence, Jane's as she remembers the way Philip used to flit in and out of her dress and press his bill between her lips, or the poet's as he longs to kiss her sugared mouth. In either case 'The matter were too nice:/And yet there was no vice,/Nor yet no villainy,/But only fantasy'. In its blurring of these extremes of the human state *Philip*

*Sparrow* looks forward to Andrew Marvell's *The Nymph Complaining for the Death of her Fawn* and William Blake's *Songs of Innocence and Experience*.

The other major Skeltonic in this selection is *The Tunning of Elinour Rumming*, and like most of Skelton's poems its fate has been to have had its complexities simplified out of existence. It is, as it has always been taken to be, a series of misogynist vignettes, showing Elinour's customers as variously stinking, half-naked, scurvy, deformed, impoverished, incoherent, and incontinent (most with a combination of these virtues), and the Skeltonic's exuberance gives the caricatures a grotesque force: 'Thither cometh Kate,/ Cicely and Sarah,/With their legs bare,/And also their feet/Hardly full unsweet;' 'With that her head shaken,/And her hands quaked—/ One's head would have ached/To see her naked;' 'There was a prick-me-dainty/ Sat like a sainty/ And began to painty/ As though she would fainty.' But there is more than merely affected distaste in Skelton's closing claim that he has 'written too much/Of this mad mumming/Of Elinour Rumming.' The clarion call to the drinking house—'Come whoso will'—is meant literally: the only bar to service is lack of the wherewithal to pay for Elinour's nappy ale, but the means of payment does not have to be money. Cicely and Sarah are the first of her customers prepared to pawn the ragged clothes they stand in for a drink; 'thus beginneth the game,' and the game is revealed throughout the poem as one of a society bent on pawning everything for drink. The list includes skillets, pots, a wedding ring, a husband's hood, spinning and weaving instruments, a good brass pan, gammon, bacon, cheese, a ladle, a cradle, and a side-saddle; and to those who have neither money nor goods to pay with Elinour ironically swears by the Lord who paid for her soul that they shall have nothing: 'Ye shall not bear away/ Mine ale for nought,/ By him that me bought!' (as in many of Skelton's poems there is a counterpoint of everyday oaths to offer a commentary on the action)—but by the poem's end even they have a prospect of liquid oblivion if they are prepared to chalk up their debt on Elinour's tally. (*Elinour Rumming* is not simply the transparent poem which C.S.Lewis held it to be: to read it is to experience the poet's alienation from a world of inebriates, and our alienation is most complete when we see the