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University of Leeds
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Deconstructing Skelton: The Texts of the English Poems

A. S. G. Edwards

John Skelton (c. 1460-1529) is the first English poet whose works were disseminated in significant forms in both manuscript and print during his lifetime. The extent to which the decisions to publish his works in a particular medium were considered ones cannot be finally resolved; but it seems probable that in such respects they were deliberate, determined by the nature of a particular poem's subject matter and/or Skelton's sense of its potential audience.

That publication was for Skelton a circumstance driven by occasion goes some way towards accounting for the curiously ad hoc nature of the early printing history of his poems. Unlike such contemporaries as Hawes¹ and Barclay,² Skelton does not appear to have had any stable relationship with a particular publisher, but found it necessary to deal with a number of different ones over time, from Wynkyn de Worde, who printed two editions of the *bowge of courte* in [1499] (STC 22597) and [c. 1510] (STC 22597.5), and also probably printed *Elinor Ruming* [1521] (STC 22611.5), to Richard Faques (to whose relationship with Skelton I will turn shortly), to John Rastell who printed *agaynste a comely coystrowne* [1527?] (STC 22611) and *dyuers balettys and dyties solacyous* [1528?] (STC 22604), and to Richard Pynson with whom the sequence of printed editions during his lifetime concludes with *A replycacion agaynst certayne yong scolers* [1528] (STC 22609). There is no evidence that the manuscript transmission of Skelton's poems was any more systematic. They occur in contexts that vary from the random—scribbled, for example, on the flyleaves of printed books, or extracted in manuscripts otherwise devoted to other subjects—as well as in fuller forms in larger compilations, albeit still of a miscellaneous kind, like John Colyns' so-called commonplace book,³ or the 'Welles anthology',⁴ or in de luxe household collections like British Library, Royal MS 18 D. II, a manuscript in which

Skelton's early poem on the death of Henry Percy, fourth earl of Northumberland forms part of a larger celebration of the Percy family's achievements.⁵ But there is no surviving evidence of contemporary attempts to assemble Skelton's poems systematically or extensively in manuscript. In general, it is hard to be sure of the extent to which Skelton achieved any distinctive identity through manuscript circulation. Apart from Royal 18 D. II, only the spacious layout of BL, Cotton MS Vitellius E. X, a copy of *The Garland of Laurel*, now fragmentary, suggests an inclination to produce any of Skelton's separately circulating poems in a relatively elaborate form.

The picture of such early circulation in both manuscript and print is necessarily incomplete. Much has doubtless been lost. There is, for example, a tantalizing entry in the notebooks of the eighteenth-century antiquary, Thomas Hearne, in which he describes 'two Leaves, cut out of some old Book, on one side of w^{ch} verses, in old English, ad Patrem, filium & Spiritum Sanctum, by Skelton the Poet Laureat, perhaps written by his hand [. . .]'.⁶ And the flurry of posthumous printed editions that appeared in the twenty or so years immediately after his death testifies to commercial attempts to satisfy a continued demand for Skelton's verse. Some of these posthumous editions are of considerable textual interest since they constitute the earliest surviving forms of a work: for example, the c. 1530 edition of *Magnificence* by John Rastell (STC 22607), or Richard Kele's 1545 edition of *Why Come Ye Nat to Court* (STC 22615). In addition, it is clear that these posthumous editions do not represent the full extent of Skelton's appeal in the years after his death. Rastell's inventories of the late 1530s show evidence of several editions of his poems now lost.⁷ It is futile to speculate on how these lost editions would affect the editing of Skelton. But they do serve to remind us of the irretrievable loss of possibly crucial stages in the early transmission of his works and thus of some of the difficulties that any attempt to establish his texts must confront.

Clearly any attempt to examine the text of Skelton's verse must consider issues of some complexity to do with the forms of its transmission and the relative authority with which these forms can be invested. Hence the use of the term 'deconstructing' in my title. I use it in a literal sense to suggest that the texts of some of Skelton's English poems warrant re-examination in ways that will require the dismantling of the forms in which they have been permitted to exist for a very long time.

To be precise since 1843. In that year Alexander Dyce published his two-volume edition of *The Poetical Works of John Skelton*. It is appropriate to say a little about Dyce. He was born in 1798, and after early flirtations with both the law and the cloth he established himself as one of the prolific and distinguished editors of the first half of the nineteenth century. His main interest was dramatic literature: he produced editions of, among others, Peele, Middleton, Webster and Shakespeare, with a kind of metronomic efficiency that nonetheless demonstrated considerable scholarly acumen. He died in 1869 and the old *DNB* pays tribute to his 'deep and varied learning, his minute accuracy, and his nice discriminations [. . .]. So long as the best traditions of English scholarship survive his name will be respected'.⁸

These qualities are reflected in his edition of Skelton. This seems to have been an unusually long meditated work. Wordsworth, himself an admirer of Skelton, wrote to Dyce in January 1833 to ask about progress, so one must assume that the conception of the edition considerably antedates that point.⁹ When it finally appeared a decade later it was clear that the wait had been justified. Dyce's edition was by any standards an extraordinary achievement. It presented for the first time a comprehensive canon of Skelton's poetry, together with *dubia*; it was based on an examination of all the known early prints and manuscripts and was supported by careful commentary. It is a testimony to that achievement that nothing to surpass it has appeared in the subsequent history of Skelton studies. All collected editions of Skelton henceforward were based on Dyce, although there have been a few separate editions of individual works.¹⁰ I say this notwithstanding the most important subsequent such edition, John Scattergood's *John Skelton: The Complete English Poems*, which pays tribute to Dyce in its preface,¹¹ and which seems to have used Dyce's text as setting copy, sometimes down to its misprints.¹² Although Scattergood's edition is a considerable advance over its predecessor in its annotation, its textual basis is still Dyce. And hence it is Dyce's text on which modern critical discussions have been based, either directly or indirectly.

That nearly all forms of modern scholarship on a major early modern writer should be grounded on an edition now over one hundred and fifty years old can be seen as evidence of its lasting value, or to the textual incuriosity of most subsequent students, or possibly both. The time may be at hand for some assessment of the textual bases of Dyce's edition to determine the extent to which it reflects in an appropriate way the evidence of Skelton's text.

A fundamental problem in any such examination is the question of transmission: the determination of the relationship, and hence the relative authority of the various surviving forms of each of Skelton's texts. I begin with a brief but much anthologized poem, 'Manerly Margery Milk and Ale'. This describes an exchange between a clerk and a serving girl, in four five-line stanzas, the first three with a two-line refrain, the final one with one of four lines. Until recently it was known only in a single witness, BL, Additional MS 5465, fols 96v-9r, the Fayrfax manuscript, a famous collection of Tudor music. But I recently identified another version in manuscript, copied on the flyleaf of a copy of a Caxton edition of the *Dictes and Sayeingis of the Philosophres* in Trinity College, Cambridge.¹³ This includes one completely new stanza and a number of variants of arguable superiority to the Fayrfax version. It may also be the earliest surviving copy of any of Skelton's poems. I print this new stanza below:

ye play full play ye breke my net bend
qwat hav I Rouselit yov criste it for fende
ye ware vs ye tere vs ye seldom vs a mend
yett suffer good maisters & som what god wyll send
I haytt such harskaldes at nothyng wyll spend

The following lines appear at the corresponding point in BL, Additional 5465:

Iwiss ye dele uncurtesly
what wolde ye frompill me now fy fy
what and ye shal be my piggesnye
be Crist ye shall not no no hardely
I will not be japed bodely (15-19)

The discovery of such a new version is simply the benefit that time confers on a later generation of editors. But its implications are of interest, especially as they apply to this new stanza. How is it to be accounted for? How is its canonicity to be established? And how is it to be accommodated into the existing text of Skelton's poem?

No ready answers present themselves to such questions. There are no secure stylistic criteria by which its authorship can be established. The version in the Fayrfax manuscript is set to music, a medium in which Skelton had

evident interest. This suggests something about the social environment in which a form of the poem may have circulated: that is, to be sung for a listening audience. But there seems no obvious transmissional hypothesis that can demonstrate that one form of the poem derives from the other. Indeed, the recognition of such an environment adds, rather than diminishes the difficulties of formulating any explanation that can ascribe both versions confidently to Skelton. For poems circulating within such social environments are susceptible to appropriation by unauthorized hands.¹⁴ The most reasonable assumption might be that what survive are forms of the same lyric perhaps adapted to fit different occasions; and that both are possibly, but not certainly, by the same author. An assumption of the retrievability of a single text from the surviving evidence would serve to construct an entity that does not exist, that somehow accommodated, for example, the unique stanza of 'Manerly Margery' into the British Library version to produce a conflated text. But, as I have already suggested, there seem no secure grounds for following this assumption. The surviving versions lack the evidence of transmissional clarity that would make this a proper way of proceeding. The variant forms of 'Manerly Margery' suggest that the circulation of Skelton's occasional verse does not invariably justify presenting it as a single critically edited text.

These lines focus our attention on the survival of variant versions of poems ascribed to Skelton. The verses to celebrate the English victory over the Scots at Flodden in 1513 provide another example of this tendency. There are two forms of these verses associated with Skelton, the longer of which seems to be an amplification of the shorter. The shorter, titled *A ballade of the scottysse king*, was published by Richard Faques in [1513] (STC 22593). The earliest surviving edition of the longer version, *Against the Scots*, is dated [1545?] (STC 22594),¹⁵ but must have been first published close in time to the events to which it alludes, possibly again by Faques. The texts are verbally related and if one accepts that both are by Skelton,¹⁶ they provide further testimony to his tendency not be content with a single version of a text but to see it as potentially adaptable to differing circumstances that cannot be readily recovered. Perhaps as more details of the victory emerged Skelton was prompted to capitalize on the circulation of the earlier poem by producing a more detailed account of the English triumph.¹⁷ Such an impulse to amplification is hardly surprising, especially in occasional verse that may have struck a popular chord. And Dyce and other editors do print both poems separately. But they may provide a little further weight to a view that Skelton's

verse cannot necessarily be edited under a controlling assumption that there is a single form of the text of a work to be recovered through collation and comparison of variants.

Such an assumption goes to the procedural heart of Dyce's edition and its modern followers. The form of Skelton's oeuvre we find in these editions is one shaped in ways that, at times, crucially ignore the implications of available textual evidence to construct a single form of the text that lacks authority. We find this tendency evidenced in its most extreme form in the poem we now call *Speke Parrott*.¹⁸

As it is printed by Dyce and later editors this poem forms a satire on Cardinal Wolsey, in 520 lines, largely in rhyme royal stanzas. The textual situation, as reflected in the surviving witnesses, is rather more complex than this form of presentation indicates. *Speke Parrott* survives in two forms, in part in manuscript, in BL, Harley MS 2252, fols 133v-40, which includes lines 1-56, 225-520, that is, about 350 lines out of 520. This version can be dated to the 1520s; hence it was copied in Skelton's lifetime.¹⁹ There is also a series of printed versions of the poem, the earliest of which is dated c. 1545 (STC 22598-600); these versions include lines 1-232, 265-9, 274-7. That is, out of a total of 241 lines, these editions provide about 175 lines not in the manuscript. This form of the text appears only in witnesses that all significantly postdate Skelton's death in 1529.

It is unusual to find the forms of a poem so closely corresponding to the mode in which they have been transmitted, manuscript or print. There is little overlap of content between those parts of the text in these different modes. Only the opening fifty-six lines, and seventeen lines from the middle parts of the poem are common to both the manuscript and printed forms of the text. In fact, *Speke Parrott* as we are accustomed to read it in modern form does not exist in the witnesses to its text. The first time these witnesses were merged into a single entity is in Dyce's edition. He notes that the manuscript 'has supplied much not given in the printed copies' (II 1), but offers no hypothesis for the poem's transmission nor any rationale for the form of text he has constructed, one that creates a single entity out of manuscript and printed forms that have only a small amount of material in common.

It is perhaps unsurprising that Dyce felt the poem he had constructed to be 'very obscure' (II 338). Nor is it unsurprising that subsequent critics have followed him in acknowledging the poem's difficulties. Indeed, responses to it show even the best of Skelton's critics to poor effect. Some have actually

noted the textual situation and drawn conclusions of varying degrees of pessimism from it about the possibility of discussing the poem. But that has not inhibited them from doing so.

For example, William Nelson, in his pioneering study, gives a concise summary of the textual problems here. He then concludes: 'For convenience, the poem as a whole may be split into two gross divisions, the first including the text as it appears in the printed version, the second consisting of the added matter that appears only in the manuscript.'²⁰ He does not explain what the benefits of such 'gross divisions' are, nor why he establishes the order he does when the manuscript part is actually earlier in date. A. R. Heiserman takes a more pessimistic view of the textual situation here: 'Today, most of *Speke Parrott* is nonsense to the critic and a stumbling block to the historian.'²¹ He does go on to note 'the curious bibliographical [*sic*] state of the text' and to observe that 'no bibliographical [*sic*] analysis of the texts has yet been published'.²² But this observation comes in the middle of an analysis of the poem that runs to more than sixty pages (pp. 126-89). Stanley Fish characterizes this as 'Skelton's most baffling poem' and discusses the textual problems it poses which he numbers among difficulties 'which would seem to render any reading provisional'.²³ But in spite of this he feels that 'a more or less satisfactory reading of the poem becomes possible' if it is approached through 'the psychology of the speaker'.²⁴ In the most recent discussion of the poem's textual states F. W. Brownlow draws this conclusion:

The evidence, interpreted economically, shows that *Speke Parrot*, having begun as a clearly shortened piece of work, proceeds, like several of Skelton's poems, simply to grow, and the two versions allow us to see it at a stage in its growth.²⁵

He then argues that the different parts of this poem should be printed in reverse order.²⁶ The logic of this is not easy to grasp. What is striking about the two forms of the poem is their relative lack of overlap, a circumstance which seems to suggest less a 'growing' poem than one in which a small body of shared material was redeployed for different purposes. Obviously there is a difference here from the textual situation in the Flodden poems where there is clear verbal evidence of a relationship between the two versions that points to the likelihood that one is an expanded form of the other. In *Speke Parrott* it is the lack of relationship between the two portions of the poem beyond the

opening lines that is striking. There seems no textual or bibliographical justification for printing both forms as one—or in reverse order.

So far as I know, no one has considered the codicological evidence that suggests that the manuscript version reflects some form of booklet circulation, even if it is not constituted as a booklet in the manuscript itself.²⁷ Folios 133-40 of Harley 2252 are copied by a different hand from those of the preceding texts and its outer leaves were originally blank. It clearly represents therefore some contemporary form of circulation for Skelton's poem and therefore has some claim to an autonomous identity within Skelton's own lifetime. Clearly the posthumous printed editions offer another version with less obvious claims to authority.

It is not easy to hypothesize a situation in which the poem could have become split into two parts through transmission unless one assumes once again some form of versioning in which the opening part of the poem was employed to some different/related/unrelated purpose from the rest. The poem is, of course, an occasional satire, and while Skelton may have engaged in some form of adaptation or revision it is also possible that someone else used part of it for emulative variation or elaboration, possibly in the hope that it might be ascribed to Skelton since a version by him on this subject was already circulating. But, leaving aside the attributional question, there seem no grounds for conflating two quite distinct texts into a single poem, and then using that version as a basis for critical study. The proper course would seem to be to print both forms separately. The durability of Dyce's construct indicates the unwillingness of generations of literary critics to confront the implications of the textual evidence for this poem.

The questions of textual integrity that *Speak Parrott* raises can be explored again in a more difficult problem, one which no-one hitherto seems to have even felt to be an issue. It occurs in *The Garland of Laurel*. *The Garland* is again a poem that survives in both manuscript and print versions. The manuscript version is in BL, Cotton Vitellius E. X, fols 208r-25v, possibly dating from the 1520s; the print is a contemporary edition by Richard Faques, *the garlande or chapelet of laurell* [1523] (STC 22610). Thus it is the only one of Skelton's major poems that may survive in both manuscript and printed forms from Skelton's lifetime. But the manuscript contains only a fragmentary text of the poem, now lacking lines 246-720 and from lines 1136 to the end. The passage that concerns me here occurs only in Faques' edition.

It begins at line 1261 and is an interpolation that appears in the course of the lengthy enumeration of the canon of Skelton's own works (lines 1170ff). This portion of the poem is composed in rhyme royal stanzas. In the course of the enumeration Skelton mentions 'Of Phillip Sparrow the lamentable fate' (1254). Immediately after this point the poem breaks off to incorporate part of the text of *Philip Sparrow* itself, hence shifting into short couplets or Skeltonics, before then reverting to the rhyme royal stanza otherwise used for the rest of the main text of this part of the *Garland* and continuing the list of Skelton's works. The interpolated lines correspond to lines 1261-1372 of *Philip Sparrow*, the ending of the poem, which is described in the earliest surviving printed text as 'an addicyon'.²⁸

Why should this poem be singled out for such extended rehearsal here when no other of Skelton's works are? Some critics have linked the lengthy quotation to an earlier postulated quarrel between Skelton and Alexander Barclay to which Barclay seems to allude in his translation of the *Ship of Fools* in 1509,²⁹ shortly after the generally assumed date of composition of *Philip Sparrow*.³⁰ But it is hard to see what purpose would be served by adverting to such a quarrel nearly fifteen years later, nor how this passage bears on it directly in the context of autobiographicaly in which it occurs.

The positioning of this passage as a supplementary ending or 'addition' in *Philip Sparrow* itself obviously makes it possible that it could have been detached in transmission from the main text. If so, then it may also be possible to see its presence in *The Garland of Laurel* rather differently from the way it has been presented editorially as a seamless part of the *Garland*.

A couple of further points may be relevant. The *Garland* was published by Faques, who had previously published at least one of Skelton's Flodden poems in 1513. This earlier poem appears to have been Faques' first foray into printing verse and he did not do a very good job of it: there are frequent errors which testify to a lack of expertise in printing verse. Indeed, he published very little other verse before returning a decade later to the *Garland*. Hence, his handling of the text might again reflect some general uncertainty about how to properly treat a poem in a number of different verse forms.

This does not explain why Faques would have been able to interpolate part of the text of one poem into another. Once again, speculation is all that is possible. We have, in fact, no early complete edition of *Philip Sparrow*: the earliest is [1545?] (STC 22594) and no text of it survives before that included

in the *Garland*. Yet, the allusion to it in the *Garland* makes clear that the composition of *Philip Sparrow* must antedate its inclusion in that poem:

Of Phillip Sparow the lamentable fate,
The dolefull desteny, and the carefull chaunce,
Dyvysed by Skelton after the funerall rate;
Yet sum there be therewith that take grevaunce
And grudge therat with frownyng countenance;
But what of that? Hard it is to please all men;
Who list amende it, let hym set to his penne. (1254-60)

Possibly Faques himself had published an earlier edition of *Philip Sparrow*. If so, it would not be difficult to imagine circumstances in which, in a not very efficient printing house, with little experience of printing verse, materials might become incorrectly conflated, not least if loose sheets of more than one work by Skelton were in close proximity. It may be that the presence of *Philip Sparrow* in the *Garland* is the result of some fortuitous interpolation of extraneous material that happened to be circulating within the printer's orbit rather than as a deliberate reiteration here by Skelton of part of another poem. None of the other works enumerated by Skelton in the *Garland* is treated in this way.

A factor that bears on the possibility of erroneous interpolation is the number of lines from *Philip Sparrow* in the *Garland*. There are a hundred and sixteen (lines 1260-1375). This number is readily divisible to form either a single leaf, in double columns (58 lines to a page, 29 to a column), or a bifolium, in single columns (29 lines to a page). Hence these lines form a distinct unit that could have been intercalated into existing materials that may themselves have been rather messy. (The *Garland* seems to have been composed over a considerable time, probably beginning in the 1490s, and in different verse forms, circumstances that could have added to problems of dealing with printer's copy in a house unaccustomed to handling complicated verse texts.)

It is obviously unfortunate for the argument I seek to make that Faques' printed edition has the only complete version of the *Garland*. Only three quires of the manuscript version in BL, Cotton Vitellius E. X survive, each of six leaves, now folios 208r-25v; one can infer from the amount of text these contain that four further gatherings of six leaves have been lost, that is, twenty

four leaves, two quires (B-C) containing the missing lines 246-720, two (F-G), containing the missing text from lines 1136 to the end.

The missing quires B and C contained 475 lines, or an average of 237 lines to a quire. The number of lines per quire tends to go down during the transcription of the poem. The scribe was never disposed to compress his text anyway; the layout throughout is quite spacious. The number of lines to a page varies from eight (fol. 222v) to twenty four (fols 210r-v, 223r), with generous spaces allowed for headings. With one exception (fol. 220r) the text is copied in single columns.

The complete version of the text as printed by Dyce comprises a further 513 lines from line 1136. If one assumes two quires of six leaves have been lost that would mean that there would an average of 256 lines to a quire; that is, significantly more than occur in any previous quire in spite of the evident tendency towards fewer lines to a quire as the manuscript proceeds. If, however, one assumes that the Philip Sparrow portion was not there, that is lines 1261-1374, the total number of lines drops to about 400, a number that could be readily accommodated into two six-leaf quires.³¹ Even if one assumed that the short *Philip Sparrow* lines would have been written in double column and hence accommodated into smaller space it would have been a tight squeeze to get onto a single leaf and hence unlikely to occasion very much reduction in overall space.³² This argument is obviously speculative, constrained by the paucity of evidence. But it may suggest that the text of the *Philip Sparrow* portion of the *Garland* needs to be treated with some caution and warrants more discussion than it has yet received.³³

If, as I have argued, a number of aspects of Skelton's text have been given misleading appearances in the modern forms in which they have been represented for us, what needs to be done to replace Dyce with a version of Skelton's poetry that more accurately reflects the textual evidence provided by the surviving witnesses to his corpus? What might a new edition of Skelton's verse look like?

At the heart of the textual issues are two matters that need to be grasped more clearly than they have been that will necessarily affect the presentation of the text. One is the issue of textual intractability: as I have suggested, some of what are termed 'works' by Dyce are actually variant forms that were welded into single entities hundreds of years after their creation in ways that seem at odds with the textual evidence. These variant forms are different in kind from either the local variations that inevitably occur in manually

transmitted texts or the larger scale divergences evident in the multiple forms of a work like *Piers Plowman*. They seem to demonstrate instead an intermittent disposition on Skelton's part to adapt materials for different circumstances now no longer recoverable and that these materials cannot be fruitfully compressed into a single text. The general thrust of my arguments is clearly that the idea of critical editing, insofar as this presupposes a belief in the recovery of a single, final intention may not be applicable for some of Skelton's poems.

If one allows such poems to retain their distinct, multiple identities the text will become a lot messier. Variant forms of a text, like those for the lyric 'Mannerly Margery', simply stand separately without any attempt to reconcile them into a single entity. A poem like *Speke Parrott* would have to be printed in a way that reflects both of its textually indeterminate states. It may be that the status of the final part of *Philip Sparrow* warrants reconsideration, if, as may have been the case, it enjoyed circulation separate from the larger text.

In a number of instances, another more technical issue may contribute to this messiness. This is the question of copy text. I use the term in the classic formulation of W. W. Greg's 'Rationale of Copy Text',³⁴ a formulation that has had enormous implications for the editing of Renaissance texts as well as, increasingly, those of later periods. But Greg began his career as a medievalist and at least some editions of Middle English works reveal some understanding of the methodology he advocates.

Greg's arguments relate to the choice of a base text to give form to the accidentals or non-substantive aspects of a text. In essence he suggested that it would be most sensible to choose the earliest surviving form of the text as copy text, a decision that did not mean an editor was bound to its substantive readings.

If one were to apply the implications of the argument to Skelton, his text would look rather different. For example, the final section of *Philip Sparrow*, which survives in its earliest form in the *Garland of Laurel*, antedates the next surviving version by more than twenty years. It differs significantly in orthography, offers forms that are potentially closer to the author's original, and contains a number of substantive variants.³⁵ Yet, as a textual witness it has been wholly ignored by editors of *Philip Sparrow*. Any responsible future edition of this poem must take account of its status and the authority of its readings, both accidental and substantive.

There are other instances where Dyce has ignored earlier manuscript versions in favour of later printed ones. He rejects the version of *Colyn Clout* in BL, Harley 2252, probably copied in the 1520s, seemingly on the grounds that it omits two passages, totalling about a hundred lines that appear in the earliest printed edition by Godfray ([1531?]; STC 22600.5), almost certainly produced after Skelton's death.³⁶ Yet it is possible to argue, on the grounds of general theories of copy text, that since Harley is the only witness during Skelton's lifetime it has some claim to be the basis for those portions of the copy text it can provide. One might also argue again that as a distinct contemporary version the Harley text has some claim to an autonomous status. But even if one believed that the later printed version preserved Skelton's final version of the poem, it would be proper to employ the Harley manuscript for those portions of the text it contains, that is, most of its 1265 lines, since it preserves the earliest form of its accidentals. And the effect of adopting the manuscript as copy text can be to produce a rather different sense of the poem, one that is not adequately indicated in Dyce's text. Take this passage from Godfray, with part in parallel in Harley:

Godfray

Fyckell falsenesse
Varyablenesse,
With unstablenesse
And yf ye stande in doute
Who brought this ryme about,
My name is Collyn Cloute. (44-9)

Harley

And fyckell falsenesse,
And varyablenesse,
With vnstedfastnes
And yf they stande in doute [. . .]

The claims of the readings in Harley here seem in general at least as compelling as those of Godfray's edition and possibly more so. The passages are clearly different in rhythm and in substance. It would be possible to argue that, in the case of the most significant substantive variant ('unstablenesse' / 'vnstedfastnes', 46), that Harley offers a more precisely focused reading in the context. ('Unstablenesse' lacks the heavier weight of moral opprobrium that 'vnstedfastnes' has).

Throughout, the variants between manuscript and printed versions often suggest that Harley deserves more consideration than it has received. To clarify the point I will examine a slightly longer passage:

Godfray

Or bokes to compyle
 Of dyvers maner style
 Vyce to revyle
 And synne to exyle
 To teche or to preche
 As reason wyll reche
 Sey this and sey that
 His heed is so fat
 He wottyth never what
 Ne whereof he speketh
 He cryeth and he creketh
 He pryeth and he preketh
 He chydeth and he chatters
 He prayeth and he patters (9-22)

Harley

Or bokes to compyle
 Of dyvers maner of style
 Vyces to revyle
 And syn for to exile
 To teche or to preche
 As reason wold reherse
 Say this or sey that
 Hys heed ys so fatte
 He sayeth he wott not whate
 Nor wherof he spekythe
 He cryeth he creketh
 He pryeth he preketh
 He chydeth he chatters
 He prayeth he patters

There is substantive variation in all but four of the fourteen lines (9, 11, 13, 16) and extensive orthographic variation throughout. Some of Harley's readings do seem easier than Godfray's, as when Harley reads 'maner of style' for Godfray's 'maner style' (10) or 'for to exile' for Godfray's 'to exile' (12). But at times Harley does offer a potentially superior variant as in the reading 'He sayeth he wott not whate' for Godfray's 'He wottyth never what' (17), where the direct attribution of the clause to Wolsey ('He sayeth [. . .]') gives a more direct force to the satire. More difficult is a point where Harley reads: 'As reason wold reherse', while Godfray has: 'As reason wyll reche' (14); that is, 'as reason will direct', rather than Harley: 'as reason would explain'. Obvious arguments in support of Godfray are that it rhymes with line 13 and makes acceptable sense. However, Harley also makes acceptable sense. And at other points in the poem, in lines 65, 546-8 the irregular rhyme pattern of skeltonics is not sustained.³⁷ The collocation of *reason* [. . .] *reherse* is a stock alliterative one, found elsewhere, for example, in *Piers Plowman*, B XI 415 and *Richard the Redeles*, l. 315. And *reherse* is a word that Skelton uses with some frequency elsewhere, albeit only once elsewhere in an alliterative context (*Garland of Laurel*, 840). The arguments for preferring Harley are not conclusive, of course; but it is defensible.

The variation between the two texts often does not differ in terms of sense. An edited version of these lines must confront the problems of choice of copy text and decisions on emendation. In general terms, it seems proper to adopt the Harley manuscript as copy text since it is earlier than Godfray's print and hence less subject to processes of regularization that may have obtained in the printing house (at least in theory). But this produces a form of the text at times rather different from that to which modern readers of Skelton are accustomed. Such a form presents an orthographically, rhythmically, and (at times) substantively distinct Skelton from that we encounter in Dyce.

The late Fredson Bowers once famously remarked that:

it is still a current oddity that many a literary critic has investigated the past ownership and mechanical condition of his second-hand automobile, or the pedigree and training of his dog, more thoroughly than he has looked into the qualifications of the text on which his critical theories rest.³⁸

The editorial incuriosity that has surrounded Skelton's poems suggests that Bowers' point still has force. But if Skelton is to be studied with any degree of seriousness some understanding of the crucial limitations of the only significant edition of his complete works is necessary. A new edition of Skelton's English poems is an important desideratum of early modern literary studies and an essential preliminary to the proper study of this most difficult poet.³⁹

NOTES

¹ See A. S. G. Edwards, 'Poet and Printer in Sixteenth Century England: Stephen Hawes and Wynkyn de Worde', *Gutenberg Jahrbuch* (1980), 82-8.

² See David Carlson, 'Alexander Barclay and Richard Pynson: A Tudor Printer and his Writer', *Anglia*, 113 (1995), 283-302.

³ Now British Library, Harley MS 2252.

⁴ Now Oxford, Bodleian Library, Rawlinson MS C. 813; see *The Welles Anthology MS. Rawlinson C. 813: A Critical Edition*, ed. by Sharon L. Jansen and Kathleen H. Jordan (Binghamton: Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, 1991).

⁵ For description of this manuscript see, most recently Kathleen Scott, *Later Gothic Manuscripts 1390-1490*, 2 vols (London: Harvey Miller, 1996), II 282-5, and the further references cited there.

⁶ *Remarks and Collections of Thomas Hearne*, ed. by C. E. Doble et al., 10 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1895-1915), IV 214; this is not noted in R. S. Kinsman, *John Skelton, Early Tudor Laureate: an annotated bibliography c. 1488-1977* (Boston: Hall, 1979).

⁷ See R. J. Roberts, 'John Rastell's Inventory of 1538', *The Library*, 6th series, 1 (1979), 34-42. The missing editions include one of 'ware the hawke' (36 [20]), a fragment of which has recently surfaced in a private collection. (I am much indebted to the owner for allowing me to examine this and for confirming the edition as Rastell's.)

⁸ *DNB*, XVI 277.

⁹ *The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth*, ed. by E. de Selincourt (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1939), p. 638.

¹⁰ By R. L. Ramsay, EETS e.s. 98 (London, 1906) and Paula Neuss of *Magnificence, Revels Plays* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1980); by F. W. Brownlow of the *The Book of the Laurel* [i.e. *The Garland of Laurel*] (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1990); by Julia Boffey of the *Bowge of Court*, in *Fifteenth-Century English Dream Visions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); and by David Carlson of the Latin Writings (*Studies in Philology, Texts and Studies*, 1991). In addition, there is a well-annotated selection by Robert S. Kinsman, *John Skelton: Poems* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969).

¹¹ *John Skelton: The Complete English Poems* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1983): '[. . .] whose magnificent two-volume edition of 1843 this book in some sense tries to replace' (p. 13). All line references are to Scattergood's edition unless otherwise specified.

¹² This point is made by F. W. Brownlow in his edition, *The Book of the Laurel*, p. 39 and n. 28.

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¹³ For text and further references see A. S. G. Edwards and L. R. Mooney, 'A New Version of a Skelton Lyric', *Transactions of the Cambridge Bibliographical Society*, 10 (1994), 507-10.

¹⁴ Contemporary evidence of this tendency to unauthorized adaptation survives explicitly in Dunbar's poem, 'Schir, I complane off iniuris' in which he protests about the actions of one 'Muris' who has 'magellit' one of his poems and presented it to James IV; see *The Poems of William Dunbar*, ed. by Priscilla Bawcutt, 2 vols (Glasgow: Association for Scottish Literary Studies, 1998), I 199.

¹⁵ It appears in *Certayne bokes compyled by mayster skelton* (STC 22598).

¹⁶ Once again, there are attributional problems. There is no early authority for assigning this poem to Skelton. He is not named in Faques's edition; nor is there any mention of either Flodden poem in his account of his canon in the *Garland of Laurel*; the earliest attribution comes in the c. 1545 edition.

¹⁷ For discussion of the two versions which broadly reflects this assumption, see John Scattergood, 'A defining moment: the battle of Flodden and English poetry,' in *Vernacular Literature and Current Affairs in the Early Sixteenth Century*, ed. by Jennifer Britnell and Richard Britnell (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000), pp. 62-70, especially pp. 73-6.

¹⁸ Skelton refers to it in *The Garland of Laurel* as 'Item the Popingay, that hath in commendacyoun / Ladyes and gentylwomen suche as deservyd, / And suche as be counterfettis they be reservyd' (ll. 1188-90).

¹⁹ For discussion of the dating of this part of the manuscript see the important study by Carol M. Meale, 'The Compiler at Work; John Colyns and BL MS Harley 2252,' in *Manuscripts and Readers in Fifteenth-Century England*, ed. by D. Pearsall (Cambridge: Brewer, 1983), pp. 82-103, especially pp. 95-6. I am also grateful to Dr Meale for extended private conversation about Harley 2252 and for confirming my own conclusions.

²⁰ William Nelson, *John Skelton Laureate* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1935), pp. 159-60.

²¹ A. R. Heiserman, *Skelton and Satire* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), p. 127.

²² Heiserman, *Skelton and Satire*, p. 134, fn. 16.

²³ Stanley Fish, *John Skelton's Poetry* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1965), pp. 139-40.

²⁴ Fish, *John Skelton's Poetry*, p. 140.

²⁵ F. W. Brownlow, 'The Boke Compiled by Maister Skelton, Poet Laureate, Called Speke Parrot,' *English Literary Renaissance*, 1 (1971), 3-26 (p. 7).

²⁶ Brownlow, 'The Boke Compiled by Maister Skelton', pp. 7-8.

²⁷ On booklet circulation in medieval English texts see, most recently, Ralph Hanna III, *Pursuing History* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), pp. 21-34 and the references cited there.

²⁸ This characterization is itself an indication of Skelton's typically accretive technique, his disinclination to impose upon many of his poems a single moment of closure, but rather to see the invocation of such a possibility as the prelude to a series of deferrals.

²⁹ This view is summarized by Scattergood in his edition, p. 406.

³⁰ This is generally held to be c. 1505; see R. S. Kinsman and T. Yonge, *John Skelton: Canon and Census* (New York: Renaissance Society of America, 1967), p. 11.

³¹ To posit three missing quires would implausibly reduce the number of missing lines to a quire to about 171, whereas elsewhere it never drops below 200.

³² For example, on fol. 220, the only point where short lines are written in double columns (925-53) in the manuscript, only 28 lines occupy a full page, i.e. 14 to a column. If the same layout were to be employed for the *Philip Sparrow* portion the text would run to two full leaves (four pages). It would mean that the remaining 400 lines would average twenty to a page. The pages on fols 224r-5v immediately preceding the missing part of the text have 11, 18, 17 and 14 lines respectively. The layout is too irregular to permit any confident conclusions, but the general trend to fewer lines does provide some measure of support for my hypothesis.

³³ I can, however, invoke in my support the response of one earlier reader, possibly the seventeenth-century antiquary, Elias Ashmole (it occurs in a copy of the edition of the *Pithy pleasant [. . .] workes of maister john skelton*, generally ascribed to John Stow (1568; STC 22608) in the Ashmole collection in the Bodleian Library): 'The following staves [. . .] be here displaced: as belonging to Philip Sparow by way of additions you have the afterward at the sheet U iii.' It appears in the facsimile reproduction of this copy by the Scolar Press (Menston, 1970), sig. Di^r.

³⁴ W. W. Greg, 'The Rationale of Copy Text', originally published in *Studies in Bibliography*, 3 (1950/1), 19-36; reprinted in revised form in *The Collected Papers of Sir Walter W. Greg*, ed. by J. C. Maxwell (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966), pp. 374-91.

³⁵ For example, 1261. For the] 1268. The; 1313. that] 1326. the; 1338. Of] 1351. And; 1367. that] 1375. as. (The lemma is the reading in the *Garland*; the reading after the lemma is that of *Philip Sparrow*, prefaced by line number).

³⁶ See Scattergood's edition, p. 465, where it is said the manuscript lacks lines 431-58, 479-556. In fact, this account of the missing lines is incorrect. The manuscript lacks lines 431-458, 479-559, 576-80; there are other smaller omissions, generally of a line, or couplet throughout the text in Harley 2252.

³⁷ Also (arguably) line 654; line 1037 is incomplete in Godfray.

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³⁸ *Textual and Literary Criticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1959), p. 5.

³⁹ I am grateful to Professor Julia Boffey and the readers of *Leeds Studies in English* for comments on drafts of this paper.