

A CRITICAL COMPANION TO JOHN SKELTON

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Edited by
Sebastian Sobeki and John Scattergood

D. S. BREWER

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In memoriam
John A. Burrow
(1932–2017)

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Abbreviations

- CEP* John Scattergood, ed., *The Complete English Poems of John Skelton* (Liverpool, 2015)
- LW* David R. Carlson, ed., 'The Latin Writings of John Skelton', *Studies in Philology* 87:4 (1991): 1–125
- MED* Hans Kurath *et al.*, eds, *Middle English Dictionary* (Ann Arbor, MI, 1956–2001)
- ODNB* *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* online edition (Oxford, 2008–)
- OED* *Oxford English Dictionary Online* (Oxford, 2000)
- STC* A. W. Pollard *et al.*, eds, *A Short-Title Catalogue of Books Printed in England, Scotland, and Ireland and of English Books Printed Abroad, 1475–1640*, 2nd edn (London, 1991)

Conventions

All references to John Skelton's English works are to John Scattergood, ed., *The Complete English Poems of John Skelton* (Liverpool, 2015), abbreviated as *CEP*, cited by section (in lowercase Roman numerals) and line. Capitalised Roman numerals refer to the numbering of Skelton's English works in *CEP*. References to Skelton's Latin writings are to David R. Carlson, ed., 'The Latin Writings of John Skelton', in *Studies in Philology* 87:4 (1991): 1–125, abbreviated as *LW*. If notes or commentary from these two editions is cited, the abbreviations *CEP* and *LW* are used.

Short forms of citation for secondary works are given parenthetically in the text to author, citing author's surname and page of work. Where more than one work by an author appears in the list of works cited, the appropriate year of publication precedes page references; works by one author within the same year are distinguished by lower-case letters following the year. These citations are keyed to the list of Works Cited at the end of the chapter in question.

Individual primary works follow the same pattern, except that line numbers instead of page numbers are given. Where appropriate, book or chapter divisions precede the line or page numbers.

Skelton's Voice and Performance

ELISABETH DUTTON

Many of John Skelton's poems appear to be the result of expansion, addition and revision, often across many years: they accrue envoys, epilogues, epitaphs and dedicatory epistles. As a poet who both performs and repeatedly revises and expands his poems, Skelton, Seth Lerer has argued, builds a poetic world infused by 'the fluidity of manuscript revision and public performance' (Lerer 1993: 199). The poet apparently adapts and adds to his poems as he observes his audience's responses, the real-world audience affecting, and to some extent effecting, the fictional creation.¹ Revision is facilitated by dissemination of the poem either in performance or in manuscript: some of Skelton's poems were printed, and there is evidence that he took interest in seeing certain poems disseminated in this way – that he circulated other poems in manuscript therefore makes his choice perhaps pointed (Edwards 2008).² It is possible, as W. R. Streitberger has argued, that Skelton performed some of his poems in court ceremonies or festivals, and he was certainly involved in producing court performances of various kinds (Streitberger 2008). Only one play by Skelton survives, but there were others,³ and at least two further works now lost may have been pageant disguisings, a highly performative 'mixed' genre combining song, dance, poetry and martial display with drama: Skelton also certainly wrote a devotional poem, *Vexilla regis*, that 'he devysed to be displayd' (Streitberger 2008: 25–6). This chapter explores the ways in which Skelton deploys voices and creates audiences in his poems, and insists on and facilitates his poems' performance.

Many of Skelton's poems include performative elements that might nudge them in the generic direction of 'drama.' Most obviously, the polyvocality which structures poems such as *Phyllyp Sparowe* and *Speke Parott* requires that some type of 'performance' be created in order for the reader to receive the poems' meaning: if *Phyllyp Sparowe* were read aloud, then the words of Jane Scrope and of Dame Margery would be distinguished either through the use of

- 1 Susan Schibanoff argues that Skelton's audiences must perform what Skelton narrates in the text (Schibanoff 1986).
- 2 Particularly telling, perhaps, is the example of the *Garlande of Laurell*, which, although ultimately printed, depends for its frame of reference on the sort of coterie readership expected of manuscript (Boffey 2008).
- 3 In the *Garlande of Laurell* Skelton lists the plays he has written as *Achademios*, *Vertue* and *Magnyfycence*.

different readers or, more likely, by a single reader putting on different voices.⁴ When the poem is received silently on the page, readers must 'hear' different voices in their heads in order to understand that poem's structure. That one of the voices must sing increases the sense of performance: the spacing between the syllables of the Latin liturgical words and phrases suggest the *mise-en-page* of plainsong, and Skelton even deploys musical notation – 'Fa, re, my, my' (5).

Intriguingly, the process of creation of '*the boke of Phyllyp Sparowe*' is presented not as composition but as 'compilation':⁵ this suggests a process of collecting extant utterances, rather than creating new ones, and insists on polyvocality, while at the same time implying a derivative status for Skelton's poem.⁶ In fact, this is clearly an under-estimation of Skelton's creative process: it does offer some insight into the rich web of literary and liturgical allusion that comprises the poem, but *Phyllyp Sparowe* quotes directly and extensively only from the liturgy of the Office for the Dead. Catullus fundamentally informs the poem, but is echoed rather than quoted at length – and expanded, interpolated and translated from Latin verse into English skeltonics.⁷ In the vernacular, Marian lyric is briefly cited:

O mayden, wydow, and wyfe,
Of what estate ye be,
Of hye or lowe degre,
Great sorowe than ye myght se,
And lerne to wepe at me!

(53–7)⁸

but the creative re-contextualisation is absurdly parodic, almost blasphemous, since it forces the reader to compare Jane, holding her dead sparrow, with the Marian pietà. Conventionally, in medieval poetry, citation lends authority to the compiler's work, but in *Phyllyp Sparowe* it serves more to undermine the compiler's apparent aspiration to seriousness. Skelton's 'Jane' narrates her own creative process in a whimsical but also illuminating scene: she takes her sampler and begins to sew the image of her sparrow, thinking that the 'representacyon / Of his image and facyon' might bring her 'pleasure and comferte', 'solas and sporte' (210–18):

But whan I was sowing his beke,
Me thought my sparrow did spek ...

4 For biographical details about the historical Jane Scrope see Scattergood 2014: 160–1.

5 The poem is headed: 'Here after followeth the boke of *Phyllyp Sparowe* compyled by Mayster Skelton, poete laureate' (60).

6 It is also possible that the term 'compyled' draws attention to the fact that the poem grew by accretion, and that this was known by Richard Kele, who printed the poem in c. 1545 and may have been responsible for the heading that calls the poem a compilation (Scattergood 2014: 161).

7 On the Catullus poem that 'sets the tone' for *Phyllyp Sparowe*, and other influences including poems by Ovid, Martial and Statius, see Scattergood 2014: 158–60.

8 Compare Brown 1958: IX, lines 6–9.

Saynge, 'Mayd, ye are in wyll
 Agayne me for to kyll!
 Ye prycke me in the head!
 With that my nedle waxed red,
 Me thought, of Phyllyps blode.
 Myne hear ryght upstode,
 And was in suche a fray
 My speche was taken away.

(219–29)

Jane's conventionally female work of art, imitating life through needlework, is interrupted when the 'fictional' bird she creates challenges the processes by which, after death, his real world is fictionalised as it is memorialised. Or perhaps, art has imitated life so perfectly as to resuscitate it – since both the late bird and the sampler are of course poetic creations anyway, such an event is possible. The sparrow's words, accusing Jane of wanting to kill him again, blasphemously invoke the idea of re-crucifying Christ (Hebrews 6:6), an idea that was also central to polemical attacks on the Catholic mass. In response, Jane's needle turns blood-red – the syntactical positioning of 'Me thought' allows ambiguity as to whether it is only in her thought that the needle grows bloody, or only her opinion that the blood is Phyllyp's. In either case, the eucharistic echoes are absurd and the physiological response is real: Jane's hair stands on end, and – significantly – she loses her power of speech. The artistic creation has paradoxically struck its creator dumb. All she can now do is pray '*A porta inferi*', in borrowed words, using the Office for the Dead.⁹

Is Skelton's message that a real sparrow is always greater than any work of art? That the poet cannot escape his creation? Or that poetic creation is inevitably parasitic both of real life and of the words of others?¹⁰ It is difficult to say, but a dramatic moment is presented in which the audience/reader observes Jane, the creator, suddenly herself made the audience of an animated scene: the image of her dead sparrow becomes an actor, with actions and lines, and suddenly there is a play within a play. Jane is bewildered to find herself thus repositioned by an image come to life, and her response is dramatised, shown in action and word: as she narrates of herself, 'I kest downe that there was, / And sayd, "Alas, alas, / How commeth this to pas?"' (230–2). The refuge she then takes in the prayers for the dead enables her to pin her sparrow back into the textual fixity from which he has disconcertingly stepped out; she prays for the soul of her sparrow that is 'Wryten in my bede roule' (242).

⁹ For detailed analysis of the use of the Office for the Dead in this poem, see Brownlow 1979.

¹⁰ J. L. Austin, in defining 'performativity', sought to distinguish between serious, substantial speech acts in the real world and fictional, literary utterances that were derivative, 'parasitic': this distinction has been repeatedly challenged, importantly by Judith Butler, who highlighted gender performance as an aspect of the way we 'act' our identities. Inevitably, illuminating the ways in which people perform identity has implications for the way we think about the relation between performance and the 'real' world. For a succinct discussion of these debates, see Loxley 2007.

Although the possessive pronouns marking 'my sparrow' and 'my bede roule' make it clear that the vernacular here is in Jane's voice, it is not certain who is performing the Latin phrases interspersing Jane's words. At the poem's opening the liturgical Latin is apparently chanted by Dame Margery, so it perhaps seems logical to assume that this continues to be the case in spite of the fact that here, exceptionally, a narrative frame might imply that it is Jane:

The best now that I maye
 Is for his soule to pray:
 A porta inferi,
 Good Lorde, have mercy
 Upon my sparowes soule

(237–41)

Perhaps the intended effect mirrors the process by which liturgical recitation offers words on behalf of those present, rather than only those speaking. As Jane appropriates the prayers for the dead spoken by Dame Margery, they become hers, in an act of spiritual, as opposed to dramatic, performance.

In *Phyllyp Sparowe*, since the *mise-en-page* does not make explicit any change of speaker, the reader must discern changes of speaker from content and context.¹¹ Furthermore, Skelton in *Phyllyp Sparowe* includes no explicit *narrative* speech markers, such as 'she says' or 'Margery replies'. In other poems, such as *Elynour Rummynge*, by contrast, speakers are introduced with often detailed descriptions of their appearance and action, and their words are marked with explicit narrative speech markers:¹²

There came an old rybye;
 She halted of a kybe,
 And had broken her shyn
 At the threshold comyng in,
 And fell so wyde open
 That one might se her token.
 The devyll thereon be wroken!
 What neded all this be spoken?
 She yelled lyke a calfe!
 'Ryse up, on Gods halfe,'
 Sayd Elynour Rummynge,
 'I beshrew the for thy cummyng!
 And as she at her dyd pluck,

11 For an account of medieval conventions of speech marking, see Moore 2011. Moore argues that medieval texts 'use reported speech in shifty ways and stylistically employ indeterminacy in a manner that can enrich the aesthetic or rhetorical effect of the language' (p. 17).

12 Of course, modern convention would mark speech through punctuation, but quotation marks are far from an established convention in Skelton's time: see Moore 2011, chapter 1. I use the term 'narrative speech markers' to denote verbal cues as opposed to punctuation.

'Quake, quake' sayd the duck
In that lampatrams lap.

(492–506)

The introduction of this old woman as a 'rybye', a rebec, prepares the reader for the obscene suggestiveness of the 'duck' in her 'lap'; this obscenity is then heightened by the description of the woman exposing herself as she falls. Although 'old rybye' is a far from neutral epithet, the third-person narrative is itself unremarkable until the obscenity draws an apostrophe from the narrator, who apparently objects both to his subject matter, on whom he calls the devil's revenge (408), and to his own narrating of it (499). This is one of many moments in *Elynour Rummynge* of Skelton's 'mocking imitation of the minstrel intrusion of medieval oral verse' (CEP: 421, notes to lines 1–3). Even contained within the poem's narrator there is polyvocality – or at least bi-vocality, as the narrator seems to be in two minds about telling his tale. In this context, the narrator's apostrophe seems to add to the sense of noise and chaos: the old woman now cries out like a young cow, Elynour demands that she stands up and then curses her, the duck that the woman is carrying starts quacking, and on top of all this the narrator seems present at the scene, cursing and thus causing the devil, too, to be present. It is a moment of comic drama, in the general sense of the dramatic: the narrator creates for the reader a scene that can be (imaginatively) seen and heard. But that sense of drama rests entirely in the hands of the narrator, who controls his 'speakers' with 'she said' and 'the duck said' and directs the reader where – or perhaps where not – to look.

If we can imagine *Elynour Rummynge* being performed, it would perhaps be most appropriately performed by a single comic actor skilled in putting on voices: the vivid sense of place, person and action that is the source of the poem's exuberance is the narrator's creation. Such a style of performance is perhaps particularly effective for a comical poem with obscene content, since the narrator can humorously perform his shock at his own material. The English fabliau *Dame Sirith* is thought to have been performed by a narrator actor in this way: it includes narrative speech markers – 'thus he bigon', 'Quod this wif' – although it also includes character cues in its *mise-en-page*, marking the Clerk's speeches with a marginal 'C', the Wife's with 'V' (Uxor) and so on.¹³ Copied around two centuries before Skelton's time (c. 1272–83), and telling a story that is similar only in its obscenity and its trope of female deceit, *Dame Sirith* is far from being directly connected to *Elynour Rummynge*; however, it is a sign of a possible tradition of poems comically performed by a single narrator, a tradition that can easily be imagined as appropriate to Skelton's poem. *Dame Sirith*, on the other hand, can also be successfully performed by an acting troupe.¹⁴ *Elynour Rummynge* would less easily be adapted in this way, for the simple reason that the proportion of character speech is much

¹³ The text is preserved in Bodleian Library, MS Digby 86; see Bennett and Smithers 1968: 77–95. The editors describe the performative reading by one Vitalis, who mimed and put on different voices (Bennett and Smithers 1968: 78–9).

¹⁴ John McKinnell demonstrated this when he directed the 1995 Durham Medieval Players production in a double bill with *Calisto and Melibea*.

lower, and Skelton's narrator has the lion's share of the 'lines'. Nonetheless, we can imagine that Skelton's poem would have offered the opportunity for virtuoso performance were it to be read aloud. Lerer sees public performance as central to Skelton's creation of a 'narrative self' who is 'actively reading, speaking, writing, and re-writing' (Lerer 1993: 199).

The presence of explicit narrative speech markers, of 'she-said-he-said', can contribute to a sense of performativity where 'spoken' by a foregrounded narrator with a distinct character; however, the reader, or the modern reader at least, may perceive these narrative speech markers as indicating non-dramatic genre: in plays we would expect rather that each speaker is indicated only by their character name as a speech cue, marking each of their speeches in the *mise-en-page* but not, of course, voiced. However, this was not always the case in medieval and early modern drama: stage directions could include narrative speech cues even where these were rendered unnecessary by the presence of character cues. So in Henry Medwall's humanist play *Fulgens and Lucrez*, written in the 1490s and printed between 1510 and 1516, the stage directions, though uneven, often combine direction with narrative voice: for example, '*Et exeat Gayus Flaminius, et dicat B*' [Let Gayus Flaminius exit, and B shall say ...] (685 sd), in which the '*et dicat*' is entirely unnecessary given that B's speech is marked with his name; the '*dicat*' is similarly unnecessary in the wonderfully evocative '*Et scalpens caput post modicum intervallum dicat*' [And, scratching his head, let him a little later say ...] (1779 sd).¹⁵ In the vernacular scriptural drama, too, there are stage directions of a strongly narrative character: for example, in the *Mary Play* of the N-Town manuscript, copied c. 1463–7: '*Here Joachym and Anne, with Oure Lady between hem beyng al in whyte as a childe of iii yere age, present here in the Temple; thus seyng Joachym ...*' (270 sd).¹⁶ In these cases the stage directions feature phrases that create a sense of a narrative voice for the *reader*, but when the text is performed these stage directions are of course unvoiced and so the *audience* is unaware of any 'narrator'. Since the manuscript of N-Town was possibly copied for a devotional reader (Granger 2009: 2), and since *Fulgens and Lucrez* was printed and therefore presumably also read, it is possible that these narrative stage directions were added specifically for a reading, rather than watching, public; however, the plays were almost certainly at some point also performed, so this is far from certain.¹⁷ What can be stated is that the now-conventional form of stage directions was far from established in the Tudor period,¹⁸ and therefore *on the page* Skelton's readers probably had a much more fluid sense of the distinction between 'drama' and 'poetry.'

In his only surviving play Skelton sets up a prince, Magnyfycence, who is a political being not unlike the reigning Henry VIII, and also an allegory, and who as a character in the drama must find out the meaning of the word

¹⁵ See the edition in Walker 2000: 305–48.

¹⁶ See the edition in Walker 2000: 166–95.

¹⁷ Bodleian MS e Musaeo 160 preserves texts that are presented as 'treatises' to be read and, through emendations and marginalia, as plays to be performed. See Davidson 2007: chapter 6.

¹⁸ On stage directions and narrative see further McJannet 1999.

that names him, which is also the name of the play in which he appears. Vices corrupt the prince by exploiting his tendency to ‘take a word at face value, responding as if its mere occurrence guaranteed the presence of the quality to which it refers’ (Griffiths 2006: 71). *Magnyfycence* is allegorical, a morality play, but at the same time it challenges the conventions of morality play because allegorical drama rests on a device that looks very like that of Skelton’s vices: an actor is given the name of an abstraction and transparently embodies that abstract quality; the presence of that actor then does indeed ‘guarantee the presence of the quality’ named. Here the name given does not correspond with the reality of the embodiment. Skelton’s vices give themselves false names and *Magnyfycence* is taken in by them: for him, the morality play breaks down. The audience has seen the vices choosing their false identities, and is able to see their utterances as fictional, parasitic, by contrast with a ‘real’ world that is nonetheless itself contained within the drama. *Sad Cyncumpeccyon* explains: ‘A myrroure incleryd is this interlude, / This lyfe inconstant for to beholde and se’. Skelton’s creation is neither entirely separate from life, nor at all parasitic on it; rather it reveals it. Or, as *Adversyte* says: ‘For though we shewe you this in game and play, / Yet it proveth eyrnest, ye may se, every day’. The difference between the fictional world and the real one is that the former can ‘show’ what the latter must ‘prove’: what is revealed playfully by the dramatic performance is the same as what is proved in earnest by the audience’s observations of the real world beyond the play (2524–5 and 1948–9).

In *Magnyfycence*, the stage directions range from the fulsome and narrative to the sparse and, occasionally, the absent. In the play’s opening scene no direction is given for the entry of Lyberte, but he is apparently not onstage for Felicity’s opening speech. Elsewhere, by contrast, entrances are marked with full description of the action that must accompany them:

Hic ingrediatur Fany properanter cum Crafty Conveyaunce, cum fame multo adinvicem garrulantes; tandem viso Counterfet Countenaunce dicat Crafty Conveyaunce.

[Here let Fany enter quickly with Crafty Conveyaunce, talking a lot, chattering by turns; at last, having noticed Counterfet Countenaunce, let Crafty Conveyaunce say ...]

Cra. Con. What! Counterfet Countenaunce!

(493sd–494)

Possibly the second half of this stage direction, ‘tandem ... dicat Crafty Conveyaunce’, might help the reader, as opposed to the actor or audience member, to understand the relation between the action of Crafty Conveyaunce as he recognises Counterfet Countenaunce and his line. However, the narrative ‘*dicat*’ is, strictly speaking, unnecessary, given the character cue and given that Crafty Conveyaunce’s line names its addressee. Similarly, this time in an English stage direction, we can observe the intrusion of a narrative ‘and sayth’ that is unnecessary for both reader and actor:

Here cometh in Crafty Conveyuance poyntyng with his fynger, and sayth

Cra. Con. Hem, Colusyon!

(777sd–778)

If we imagine a continuum of performativity that would place a poem at one end and a play at the other, then the sense of narrative voice created by the 'dicats' and 'and sayth', while entirely unsurprising in Tudor drama, perhaps moves *Magnyfycence* and *Elynour Rummynge* closer together on this continuum than modern generic sense might expect.

Of course, all of the stage directions cited above include considerably more than 'dicat' and 'and sayth': they contain also directions for action. Occasionally, stage directions are, at least in part, redundant in terms of directing action or allowing a reader to imagine that action, since they describe action implicit in spoken lines; more often this is not the case, and the stage directions are vital for directing action. To give two examples from *Magnyfycence*, again one in Latin and one in English:

Hic ingrediatur Foly quatiendo crema et faciendo multum, feriendo tabulas, et simila

[Here let Foly enter shaking his bauble and doing many things, rattling clappers and such things.]

(1042 sd)

This stage direction gives information that is not available from the play's lines. It signals that Foly is a conventional fool, with a fool's bauble that has bells that can be shaken: this is essential information since, though other characters' costumes are described within the lines, there are no such costume comments for Foly. The lines also contain no comment on Foly's rattling clappers, so this information is only available from the stage direction, though it is the lines, and not the stage direction, that tell us that Foly is also leading a dog: 'What pylde curre ledest thou in thy hande?' (1054).

After the entrance of Adversyte:

Magn. Alas, who is yonder that grymly lokys?
 Fan. Adewe, for I wyll not come in his clokys.
 Magn. Lorde, so my flesshe trymblyth nowe for drede!
*Here Magnyfycence is beten downe and spoyled from all his goodys
 and rayment.*
 Adv. I am Adversyte, that for thy mysded
 From God am sente to quyte the thy mede.

(1873–7)

Although Adversyte's lines describe generally *Magnyfycence*'s sudden deprivation of all material comfort, and although he explains that he is sent to give *Magnyfycence* the punishment he deserves, it is only the stage direction that explicitly states what happens to the fallen prince. Intriguingly, it does not even specify the agent of this beating and despoiling: since *Fansy* apparently leaves ('Adewe', 1874), only *Magnyfycence* and *Adversyte* are onstage at this point

– why does the stage direction not specify that Adversyte beats and despoils Magnyfycence? An intriguing possibility is that this is not a stage direction at all, but a narrative comment, describing the state to which Magnyfycence has been brought, and marking this moment as the moment at which the battering that the prince has suffered has taken its full effect. ‘Here’ is therefore not ‘at this moment’, but ‘by now’, or ‘by this point on the page’. The point at which Magnyfycence is stripped of his fine clothes is important, because his restitution will be both brought about and signalled by Redresse, or ‘Re-dress’. Just as some ‘stage directions’ include unnecessary narrative ‘and sayth’, so other stage directions look more like narrative description, the voice of a narrator, rather than an aid for an actor.

So the stage directions and *mise-en-page* of Skelton’s play, *Magnyfycence*, can sometimes look like narrative or poetry, and Skelton’s poems can sometimes look like plays. In the case of *Speke Parott* the reader is assisted by character cues for ‘Galathea’ and ‘Parrotte’ that create some resemblance to the *mise-en-page* now conventionally associated with drama; this is also true of *The Bowge of Courte*, which is a dream vision, a form epitomised by many works of the Ricardian poets, and one which shares suggestive characteristics with allegorical drama. In the person of the dreamer, the dream-vision stages its own audience: the dreamer sees and hears, and must interpret, figures that are presented as creations independent of his own conscious powers, like actors performing as distinct agents. Leigh Winser went so far as to argue that *The Bowge* was written to be acted (Winser 1976; Russell 1980); in fact, though dramatic performance would illuminate some aspects of the text, it would present problems for others.

Firstly, one of the most important differences between drama, performed by multiple actors, and either the dramatic reading by a narrator in different voices or the reception of a text on the page, is the dramatic possibility of silent presence. A reader will be aware of the presence of a character at a scene only if that character either speaks or is spoken about in that scene. But the audience of a play can be aware of a silent presence – indeed, a character onstage but not speaking can exert a powerful influence on a scene. Staging *The Bowge* would require some interpretive decisions that might limit the unsettling ambiguities that Skelton creates in relation to characters ‘real’ and ‘imagined’: for example, *Dyssymulacyon* points out to Drede a straw man: ‘Naye, see where yonder stondeth the teder man! / A flatorynge knave and a false he is, God wote’ (484–5). This mysterious figure neither speaks nor acts – the only evidence for his existence is the vice’s speech; it is therefore possible that he is nothing but a trick of – or more precisely here a trick played on – Drede’s mind. Drede later acknowledges a degree of subjectivity in his awareness of figures around him: ‘*Me thoughte* I see lewde felawes here and there / Came for to slee me’ (528–9, italics mine). Although ‘me thoughte’ could be simply a conventional trope of the dream vision, drawing attention to the perceptions of the dreamer as the medium by which the reader receives the vision, in this context it seems more forceful, because the operation of the vices on Drede has been largely to create in him a paranoia that might easily lead to him ‘seeing things’ in the modern, sceptical, sense. As Griffiths notes, ‘Favell and Suspecte have only

to imply the existence of animosity or conspiracy to bring it into existence' (Griffiths 2006: 62). Would this mean that staging the play would require the straw man and 'lewde felawes here and there' to be realised in the sinister presence of silent actors, or not? Performance requires that the question about the 'real' or 'imagined' nature of these figures be resolved, though Skelton seems deliberately to have left it open. 'The absence of any external reference points allows (the vices) to function according to a model directly opposed to the allegorical one, in which language is not mimetic, but creative' (Griffiths 2006: 62): dramatic presentation insists on external references, most obviously the presence or absence of an actor's body, and so undermines the vices' – but also Skelton's – project.¹⁹

A further example suggests *The Bowge of Courte* is best received on the page. The final vice to address Drede, the figure whose words cause him to leap overboard, is disguised beyond Drede's recognition. His words ring with religious and legal reference, and though he threatens to murder the other vices, his hand is stayed by fear of the truth – that 'mordre wolde come oute.' (524). He does not name himself, and Drede cannot name him: it is only his character cue that tells us this figure, who represents the ultimate state of corruption that might afflict Drede, is Disceyte. If the text were performed, the audience would have no way of perceiving the identity of this figure, and so would never have confirmation of the conclusion of Skelton's argument.

Griffiths refers, in her discussion of *The Bowge of Courte*, not to character cues but to 'section headings', and this certainly signals readerly engagement with *The Bowge*; however, the arrangement of the characters' names in the poem is much more consistent with dramatic character cues than division of the poem into sections. Firstly, under each of the names of the vices, the only words are those spoken in the first person by the named vice: there are no narrative interventions, no 'he-said-she-said', and no descriptions of action. Secondly, the exception to this is Drede, under whose name appears all the narrative, told by a first-person narrator who is observing the actions he describes. Also under the name 'Drede' are passages in which vices speak, but in these cases there *are* narrative interventions: "“In fayth”, quod Suspecte, “spake Drede no worde of me?”” (183). The heading 'Drede' appears repeatedly to mark verses in a narrative voice: whereas it might be possible to argue that the headings 'Favell' and 'Suspycyon' mark the sections in which Skelton deals with these vices, the 'Drede' headings, which look the same, cannot function in this thematic way, and so it seems doubtful that 'section headings' accurately describe these appearances of character names, any more than they may be considered fully dramatic speech cues.

¹⁹ In some cases (for example the appearance of Banquo's ghost in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*), some characters onstage apparently do not see an apparition that other characters and the audience do see. This may make the audience suspect that they are looking through one character's eyes, at a ghost produced by that character's imagination. However, the question of whether or not these ghosts are theatrically present – represented by an actor, for example – must still be resolved for a performance.

The mixed effects of the *mise-en-page* are possibly the result of Skelton's shifting of genre. The poem as a whole is called a 'lytell treatyse' in its heading, and the first 126 lines form an initially conventional dream-vision frame: the poet tells us about the time and place that he received the dream, employing astrological reference to signal that it is autumn, and specifying that he lies down to sleep at a particular house – 'Powers Keye', in the port town of Harwich. Unsurprisingly, he then sees a ship, though the subjectivity of the vision is marked by 'Me thoughte': this is a dream boat. He watches merchants boarding the ship to trade, and observes, enigmatically, that they are 'Fraghted with plesure to what ye could devyse' (42). The vague but tempting pleasure, and the subjectivity of 'your' devising, which draw attention to the world of the reader/dreamer observing the ship, inspire the dreamer to move in the opposite direction, from observer of his dream to participant in it: he 'puts' himself 'in prece', among the crowd.

Once inside his own dream, the dreamer does not recognise anyone, but an anonymous man begins to define the scene for us:

'Maysters', he sayde, 'the shyp that ye here se,
The Bowge of Courte it hyghte for certeynte.

The awnner therof is lady of estate,
Whoos name to tell is Dame Saunce-Pere.
Her marchaundyse is ryche and fortunate,
But who wyll have it muste paye therefore dere.'
(48–53)

This is presented as narrative, with 'he sayde' narrative speech-markers: the man could function as the authority figure of the *oraculum*, interpreting the dream vision and giving its moral, but he also appears a little like the Prologue to a play, defining the scene – particularly since he moves both the dreamer and the reader forward into the narrative with his reference to Lady Saunce-Pere. The allusion seems to call the lady into being, but we do not see her directly; rather, we see first the thronging of the crowd eager to see her, as she sits behind a fine silk curtain, and then the throne on which she sits, which shines clearer than the sun, and then we are told only that the poet has 'to lytyll connyng to report' the lady's beauty (63). So now the dreamer has himself taken back the narrator/Prologue role, and repositioned himself as mediator – here, failed mediator – of the scene for the reader/audience. But he is still also within the dream, and alarmingly is about to reveal his 'identity': Lady Saunce-Pere's gentlewoman, Daunger, asks him his name, and 'I sayde it was Drede' (77).

It is a feature of the dream vision that the narrator present himself as the dreamer, who, in the past, could not understand his dream. He is an unreliable guide to the meaning of his own text, though usually the narrator in the present has been enlightened. But here the narrator is suddenly revealed to be an allegorical character who, by definition, cannot change: how, then, can we trust the dream vision to come, since it is narrated by 'Drede'? How, too, can we trust what we have already read? Disconcertingly, some lines later we read: 'Thus endeth the prologue, and begynneth the Bowge of Court brevely

compiled'. Although the reader has already gone 126 lines into 'a lytell treatyse named The Bowge of Courte', it is only now, apparently, that the *Bowge* begins. The dream frame is explicitly defined, now, as a 'prologue': is this a literary prologue, such as Chaucer gives each of his *Canterbury Tales*, or a theatrical one? The theatrical prologue, at least in later Tudor drama, should stand outside the action of the play, presented by an actor, also 'the Prologue', who has not yet taken on a character within it (Bruster and Weimann 2004: 1–2; Stern 2009: 81–119). But the *mise-en-page* now presents us with the character cue for 'Drede', which reinforces our sense that this prologue is, in some sense at least, theatrical, and ushers in the dramatic form of the main poem.

In fact, Tudor drama offers various figures who, prologue-like, begin plays through direct address to the audience, free of fictional persona, and then become part of the drama in front of the audience's eyes. For example, the Croxton *Play of the Sacrament*, which was written some time after 1461 and copied mid-sixteenth century, opens with an actor with the character cue 'Aristorius', who tells the audience he will present the story of 'a merchant most mighty'. Two lines later in his speech has apparently become that merchant: 'of all Aragon I am most mighty of sylver and of gold' (5–7).²⁰ The 1490s play *Fulgens and Lucre*s develops an entire sub-plot – the first in English drama – out of the two nameless characters who, presenting themselves as audience members who are confused as to when the play will start, nonetheless supply the Prologue's plot summary, and introduction to the setting, characters and theme. These two men then become caught up in the action of the play, employed as servants to the two men whose suit of Lucre is the main action, and indeed they end the play, Epilogue-like, by excusing any imperfections, asking the audience to amend as necessary. Throughout, these two characters, bridging the worlds of audience and dramatic action, are unnamed: their character cues are simply 'A' and 'B', and A proves unable to tell Lucre his name.

Medwall's sources were non-dramatic: a 1428 Latin treatise by Buonaccorso de Montemagna, the *Controversia De Vera Nobilitate*, which was translated into English as *The Declamacion of Noblesse* by John Tiptoft and printed by Caxton in 1481. *Fulgens and Lucre*s too was printed, by John Rastell between 1510 and 1516, and so was perhaps received 'on the page' – but first it was presumably performed. It is perhaps no coincidence that *Fulgens and Lucre*s is almost exactly contemporaneous with the composition of *The Bowge of Court*: it is impossible to know whether or not Skelton saw Medwall's play, but it is certain that his poetry shares with it a fascination with the relationship between fictional worlds and the 'real' or 'offstage' world, and with the nature of performance.

²⁰ See the edition in Walker 2000: 212–33. This moment is discussed in Dutton 2012: 63–4.

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