

SKELTON'S *MAGNYFYCENCE* AND TRAGIC DRAMA

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Late medieval tragedy has enjoyed a significant revival of critical interest in recent years, but poetic examples of the genre, such as Lydgate's *Fall of Princes*, have drawn far more attention than dramatic instances.¹ There are good reasons for this. It is difficult to see, for example, how the doctrinal commitment of such key forms as the cycle drama and the morality play could countenance anything like the irredeemable nature of catastrophe and loss we associate with tragedy. Robert Weimann suggests that it is only after the Reformation that the self-confident representation of authority 'as a given, unitary court of appeal' gives way to evoke more divided and uncertain responses both within and without drama. Consequently, there emerges 'a previously unknown element of vulnerability in the assertion and appropriation of authority', a quality that is crucial for the realisation of a tragic theatre.² More specifically, Ruth Lunney has insisted that it is only with Christopher Marlowe's plays that a definitive break is made with the legacy of medieval drama and with its way of revealing the relationship between human and divine forms of authority. For example, Marlowe refuses to view tragic suffering as part of a cautionary moral narrative and his works abandon, Lunney suggests, the enduring imperative to provide an audience with moral guidance. Instead, Marlowe's plays represent experience stripped of any symbolic association with fundamental truths and depict the reactions of a confused protagonist whose certainty, along with that of the audience, has disappeared.³

Such forms of tragic composition seem remote from an early Tudor interlude and moral play like John Skelton's *Magnyfycence* (c.1520–1522; printed 1530) with its homiletic, not to say cautionary, narrative. The play is pervaded throughout with proverbial observations which direct understanding of what we see, perhaps most signally, Measure's statement of its core moral teaching: 'Measure is treasure'.⁴ Yet even this key perception is not elaborated as clearly as we might expect by the more complex and, in many ways, darker story the play tells. For example, Measure is, of course, personified in the play as one of its leading representatives of virtue, yet once he is expelled by the Vices, he never

returns. Surely we expect him to, in the manner of the equally neglected Virtue of Mercy in *Mankind*? This process of restoration and recovery is crucial to the mode of the moral play. It has been suggested that the conclusion of *Magnyfycence* is perfectly coherent in its own terms.⁵ Yet there is a seeming anomaly here. The play undoubtedly demonstrates the thesis that 'Measure is treasure'. It depicts the ruination of Magnyfycence once he pursues his own will at the expense of the rational principle of just proportion represented by this Virtue. Yet we witness how Measure is banished by Magnyfycence and bundled offstage by Courtly Abusyon in his disguised rôle as Lusty Pleasure: 'Hens, thou haynyarde, out of dores fast!' (1725). This causes Magnyfycence to vomit and then to exclaim: 'But is the horson gone? / God gyve hym a myscheffe! Nay, nowe let me alone' (1729–30). Myscheffe is indeed making his way towards the world of the play, on the heels of his companion Dyspare, but his attentions are directed towards Magnyfycence rather than Measure. The anticipation that this drastic moral misjudgement will be corrected and that Measure will be reinstated is surely natural? Yet we see no more of this Virtue and hear only a little of the value he represents. Similarly, the conspirators who have secured his removal and despoiled Magnyfycence remain at large.

The off-key quality of this crucial moment of resolution provides one reason for suspecting that the sermonising aspect of the morality play was not entirely to the author's taste. Perhaps we should expect this in the terms suggested by Jane Griffiths' recent argument that Skelton's poetry is characterised by its fluid and transformatory energy and that this is often exercised independently of external sources of authority.⁶ This approach helps in taking a further step in the reinterpretation of the play. If Skelton's engagement with the imperatives of morality drama diminishes towards the play's conclusion, is this because another possibility is beginning to attract his imagination: in brief, the experience of a tragic theatre focusing on the unmitigated anguish of the protagonist and articulated through lament? This was certainly the implication of Willard Farnham's suggestion that the play takes 'a long step towards tragedy' and this is still, it seems to me, a powerful intuition.⁷ Yet defining what the tragic consists of in *Magnyfycence* remains uncertain, and I would like to suggest how we might consider this issue again. This approach also invites us to reconsider whether *Magnyfycence* is so remote from the conflicted and morally questioning responses to political authority we associate with later vernacular tragic drama.

One way to develop this interpretation is to examine how *Magnifycence's* treatment of the concept of 'measure' contrasts with its expression in *Mankind*. In the latter play, we find its importance couched in the same proverbial terms by Mercy: "Mesure is tresure" ... Measure yowrsylf ever. Beware of excesse'.⁸ Yet *Mankind* has nothing like Skelton's expansive interest in the scope of this virtue in both its spiritual as well as its temporal aspects. This is because the personification of Measure embodies the play's interest in the classical principle of temperance and it provides Skelton with a means to extend his moral concerns to political questions.⁹ This has further consequences for the kind of play Skelton is composing. Firstly, the calamity that ensues from *Magnifycence's* abandonment of temperance involves a disturbingly protracted experience of desolation and lament; it also involves not only the protagonist's moral error but the political dereliction of the commonweal. Secondly, this catastrophe possesses an intractable quality marked not only by Measure's failure to return but also by the inability of the Virtues to make comprehensive moral sense of its implications. In this respect, I will suggest that Farnham's perception was correct and that Skelton is beginning to open up the dilemmas of political life to tragic reflection.

Temperance has been long been noted as one of Skelton's presiding interests in *Magnifycence*. In his influential edition of the play for the Early English Text Society, R.L. Ramsay suggested that Skelton was indebted to Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* for his central quality of 'magnificence' construed as the liberality of the great.¹⁰ But Ramsay also suggested that this should not overshadow how deeply the play was shaped by Aristotle's accompanying emphasis on temperance; the latter provides 'very nearly the plot of the play'.¹¹ I'd like to consider, very briefly, the elements of Aristotle's account before returning to Skelton's treatment of this idea in *Magnifycence*.

For Aristotle, it is the pleasures of the body that are the concern of temperance. It involves those objects of desire that gratify sensations of taste and touch and whose indulgence gives scope for licentious gratification; the latter 'attaches to us not as men but as animals' or it results in living like children 'at the beck and call of appetite'.¹² In the sphere of pleasure, excess not deficiency is the only consequence of the failure to manage the passions and it leads one either to desire the wrong object or to enjoy the right object with abnormal intensity. Similarly, in the grip of intemperance one feels pain in an absurd way: in relation to bodily pleasures which are denied. Hence, the temperate man does not

enjoy pleasures violently nor is he distressed by their absence. He desires moderately that which is conducive to health and within his means and he trains himself not to resist pleasure but, as Thomas Elyot captures this quality: '[he] desireth the thing which he ought to desire, and as he ought to desire'.¹³ If, for Aristotle, the only worthwhile aim in life is to attain what is admirable, our appetites 'should be moderate and few, and should in no way oppose the rational principle'; they should be governed as a tutor would a child.¹⁴

'Cultivate sobriety and temperance' (*sobrietatem et temperanciam cole*), counselled Skelton in the *Speculum principis* he prepared in 1501 during his own tutelage of the young Tudor princes Arthur and the future Henry VIII.¹⁵ This virtue proved to be of continuing imaginative interest to him in his subsequent works, even if the poet himself was not always successful in following all of his own counsel.¹⁶ Skelton's understanding of temperance could have been enriched by many sources, both including and deriving from Aristotle's *Ethics*. Reflection on this virtue was widespread in subsequent forms of classical and Christian ethical writing. The popular pseudo-Aristotelian treatise *Secreta Secretorum*, for example, contained a compendium of classical and Christian wisdom on temperance: 'by the wiche a man keypyth and holdyth mesure in ettynge and drynkyng ... and from all Surfetys hym keypyth in al his dedis and Syggynges [*sayings*].¹⁷ This had a particular bearing upon the conduct of a prince who should follow its strictures even when alone: 'Be neuer the more hardy to done amyse, be-cause that thou arte alone by thy-Selfe, and no man Seth the ... ffor Sumtyme euery man Is absent to the, but thou art al tymes presente to thy-Selfe'.¹⁸

R.L. Ramsay was correct, therefore, to identify Skelton's engagement with Aristotle, or at least this aspect of Aristotelian tradition, as a crucial element in the play's composition, despite subsequent attempts to diminish or disparage its importance.¹⁹ The play's language is steeped throughout in the discourse of temperance and it defines its key political concern. In *Magnyfycence*'s opening dialogue between Felycyte and Lyberte, the former insists that 'By lyberte is done many a great excesse; / Lyberte at large wyll oft wax reklesse' (53–54). The only solution to this is continence: 'That lyberte be lynkyd with the chayne of countenance [*continence*] ... with countenance your corage must be croppyd' (44, 46). This undisciplined impulse within Lyberte is immediately confirmed by his own claim that he is 'pryvylegyd from lawe' and 'To lyve under lawe, it is captyvte' (68, 75), a misconception that returns later in the play to afflict Magnyfycence. At

this stage, however, any potential conflict is resolved by Measure who finds the median point between these two poles that will conjoin and temper their best qualities. It is important to note the power given to Measure as a ruling principle at the outset: 'measure shold have domynyon', this property declares forcefully of himself, receiving immediate assent from Felicity: 'Yes, questyonlesse, in myne opynyon; / Measure is worthy to have domynyon' (120, 126-7). More importantly, Measure is embraced by Magnyfycence who agrees to subordinate his own authority to its regulation:

That Measure be mayster us semeth it is syttyng. 176

For measure is a meane, nother to hy nor to lawe,

In whose attemperaunce I have suche delyght

That measure shall nevere departe from my syght. 188-90

'By measure eche thyng duly is tryde' (244) declares Magnyfycence. This includes, amongst other qualities, the exercise of language, a medium that we see variously manipulated and misshapen as the play's Vices — Clokyd Colusyon, Courtly Abusyon, Foly, Counterfet Countenaunce, and Crafty Conveyaunce — join Fany to dominate the stage. Skelton chooses to locate the corruption of Magnyfycence offstage so that his re-entry into the play has tremendous significance after this long ascendancy of the Vices. Yet, he does foreshadow what will happen in a crucial dialogue between Fany and Magnyfycence at the outset of the play: 'I wyll not say that ye shall prove a fole', the former quality warns Magnyfycence, 'But ofte tymes have I sene wyse men do mad dedys' (301-2). This is just before Fany (disguised as Largesse) presents Magnyfycence with the forged letter of testimonial with which to insinuate himself into his service. We have already witnessed Largesse's attempt to assert that he, not Measure, is the property that should define worldly authority: 'without largesse noblenesse cannot rayne ... without largesse worshyp hath no place' (265, 267). Fany/Largesse begins to erode Magnyfycence's sense of proportion, suggesting that it is only through the quality that he represents that Magnyfycence will become truly recognisable to himself and to others. 'Largesse stynteth all maner of stryfe,' he insists, and seizes the opportunity presented by Magnyfycence's reservation that 'largesse is not mete for every man' by agreeing: 'No, but for you grete estates / Largesse stynteth grete debates' (367, 369, 370-1). The Vice exploits Magnyfycence's sensitivity to his public reputation. He has heard 'men talke' that he would 'excede in noblenesse / If you had with you largesse' (374, 376-7). Now Measure

begins to be spoken of in a less exalted idiom by both Magnyfycence — ‘Yet mesure is a mery mene’ (380) — and, more boldly, by the Vice: ‘Measure is mete for a marchauntes hall, / But largesse becometh a state ryall’ (382–3). It is with this statement that Fanny/Largesse secures his entry into Magnyfycence’s service and the dominion of the Vices begins.

This dialogue is crucial because it allows us to grasp how Magnyfycence will be corrupted offstage. We see how Fanny insinuates himself into favour by the steady erosion of Measure’s influence; the status of this virtue is questioned, redefined, and supplemented so that its scope and significance is steadily reduced. This constitutes the principal way in which the Vices cultivate the aspiration of Magnyfycence to become fully sovereign. There can be no doubt about how they view Measure, ‘that foule freke’ (657), and this is put most graphically by Fanny: ‘In faythe, Mesure is lyke a tetter / That overgroweth a mannes face, / So he ruleth over all our place’ (543–5).

More disturbingly, it is when Magnyfycence returns and delivers his long speech ‘alone in the place’ (sd at 1456), that we witness how far he has recoiled from the regulation of Measure; he is now unable to judge anything by its norms, including his own qualities. If temperance demanded, as the *Secreta Secretorum* reminds us, that it shape even the ways in which we are present to ourselves, Magnyfycence has abandoned all restraint in his mode of self-understanding. He exalts himself above the power of Fortune as ‘a prynce perlesse,’ a ‘man most of myght’ (1471, 1493) in an alliterative idiom reminiscent of the grossly intemperate Herod from the cycle drama:

For nowe, syrs, I am lyke as a prynce sholde be;
I have welth at wyll, largesse and lyberte.

Fortune to her lawys can not abandune me;
But I shall of Fortune rule the reyne.

I fere nothyng Fortune perplexyte.

All honour to me must nedys stowpe and lene;

I synge of two partys without a mene.

I have wynde and wether over all to sayle;

No stormy rage agaynst me can pervayl.

1457–65

Subsequently, Magnyfycence’s jubilant survey of those past figures of imperial dominion (and of tyranny) that his own power now exceeds is both alarming and comically inept, as in his ludicrous claim that ‘Nor Cesar July, that no man myght withstande, / Were never halfe so rychely

as I am drest' (1482–3). In this extravagant display of *libido dominandi* the scale of his misjudgement both of himself and of others is exposed: 'Surely it is I that all may save and spyll' (1478).²⁰ It is with this episode of tyrannous self-assertion that the mood and imperatives of *de casibus* tragedy begin to unfold in *Magnifycence* and to hold increasing sway over the dramaturgy of the moral play.

Skelton's portrait of a prince whose sovereignty is realised through intemperance does not remain focused, however, solely on its solipsistic or self-pleasuring aspect; it also discloses the interactions that sustain this as well as its broader social repercussions. 'Welcom, Pleasure,' he declares to Lusty Pleasure (the disguised Courtly Abusyon), 'to our magnifycence', a term that now resonates with new and unwelcome connotations of excess (1516). The Vice adopts the inflated terminology of this 'prynce of great myght', praising Magnifycence's 'electe utteraunce' and enchanting him, in turn, with the ornate sycophancy of his courtly language: 'Mary, your speche is as pleasant as though it were pend' (1545, 1533, 1538). The word *pleasure*, and cognate terms like *pleasant* and *please*, begin to be shared between them as the Vice concentrates on the best way 'your appetytes to sharpe and adresse' (1549). This culminates in his verbal portrait of a 'lusty lasse' with whom Magnifycence can enjoy the prospect of 'carnall delectacyon' (1559, 1547):

The streynes of her vaynes as asure Inde blewe,
 Embudded with beautye and colour fresshe of hewe,
 As lily whyte to loke upon her leyre,
 Her eyen relucenent as carbuncle so clere,
 Her mouthe enbawmed, dylectable and mery,
 Her lusty lyppes ruddy as the chery —
 Howe lyke you?

1553–9

'Wyll ye spende ony money?' to achieve this, asks Lusty Pleasure (Courtly Abusyon); 'Ye, a thousande pounde', Magnifycence replies, 'That on suche a female my flesshe wolde be wroken [gratified]' (1570, 1566). In Aristotelian terms, Magnifycence now personifies the intemperate man whose desires obstruct access to the knowledge of virtue that he possesses: 'he may "have" it — perhaps in the sense that *afterwards* he can fully appreciate it — while at the same time it is prevented by the emotion from coming into consciousness'.²¹ This poor regulation of sensual appetite and fiscal restraint on Magnifycence's part is given immediate political consequence because it also makes him susceptible to the corrupt counsel

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of Lusty Pleasure (Courtly Abusyon) concerning the rightful prerogatives of authority:

What so ever ye do, folowe your owne wyll,
Be it reason or none it shall not gretely skylly;
Be it ryght or wronge, by the advyse of me,
Take your pleasure and use free lyberte ... 1595–8

Here no man what so ever they say,
But do as ye lyst and take your owne way. 1603–1604

By rendering himself immune to counsel and open only to flattery, Magnyfyence accepts that manifest forms of ‘abusyon’ — the pursuance of will and appetite and the purposeful defiance of law — are, in fact, the attributes of ‘a pryncely pleasure, and a lordly mynd’ (1627). It is a further symptom of his self-delusion that he is so readily inducted by the Vices into the pleasures of theatrical deception and rôle-play: to feign poisoning, for example, so as to incriminate those who have displeased you (1609–18). He demonstrates immediately how adept he has become in this craft by pretending with Colusyon (disguised as Sober Sadnesse) to adjudicate his false petitioning for Measure only to sanction the final rejection of this Virtue. As David Bevington has noted, it is in this sequence that Skelton is at his most politically daring, as the play reveals Magnyfyence undergoing ‘a tyrannical loss of control,’ becoming an active agent of evil who is ‘aware all the while of what he is doing’.²² The play is also attentive to the impact of this upon the commonweal as the protagonist joins those ‘noble men’ who ‘Out of all measure themself to enryche; / No force what thoughe his neyghbour dye in a dyche’ (1747, 1751–2). Furthermore, Magnyfyence’s ‘joy without mesure’ can only be secured, according to the counsel of Collusion, by the reckless bestowal of expenditure upon his favourites: ‘Plucke from an hundred, and gyve it to thre’ (1781, 1775). This degeneration on Magnyfyence’s part reaches its nadir when he engages in a nonsensical dialogue with Consayte (the disguised Foly) where language disintegrates into absurdity.

It is at this point that Skelton shifts the register of the play in an equally daring way to explore another aspect of *de casibus* tragedy: the experience of desolation and lament. As Magnyfyence undergoes the terrible visitations of Adversity and Poverty, ‘beten downe and spoylyd from all his goodys and rayment’ (sd at 1875), the consequences of his actions are revealed through a sustained sequence of lament.²³ In these passages,

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PLATE 3a: Courtly Abusyon (George Gandy), with Magnyfycence (Roger Dalrymple) and Clokyd Colusyon (Ben Morgan)

PLATE 3b: Courtly Abusyon looks on as Clokyd Colusyon pretends to join Measure (Johanna Devereaux) in pleading with Magnyfycence

Photos © James Cummings

the intemperate ruler is levelled for his poorly lived life and the violence he has done to his own nature is laid bare. The transformation in the way *Magnyfycence* is addressed by Adversity and Poverty is deeply shocking — ‘Vyle velyarde’ (1878, ‘old man?’), ‘losell’ (1880, 1886, ‘scoundrel’), ‘lurden’ (1887, ‘rogue’), ‘captyfe/caytyfe’ (1946, 1950, 1954), ‘this carcasse’ (1964) — as he is exposed, ‘naked as an asse’ (1893), to the remorseless logic of moral and material retribution: ‘He knewe not hymselfe, his harte was so hye ... / Somtyme without measure he trusted in golde; / And now without measure he shal have hunger and colde’ (1888, 1894–5). This shameful experience is compounded by the return of the jeering, wrangling Vices who relish the abject spectacle they have created. For *Magnyfycence* this elicits mourning rather than penitence:

Where is nowe my welth and my noble estate?
 Where is nowe my treasure, my landes, and my rent?
 Where is nowe all my servauntys that I had here a late?
 Where is nowe my golde upon them that I spent?
 Where is nowe all my ryche abylement?
 Where is nowe my kynne, my frendys, and my noble blood?
 Where is nowe all my pleasure and my worldly good?
 Alasse my foly! Alasse my wanton wyll!
 I may no more speke tyll I have wept my fyll. 2055–63

It is in this sequence exploring the abandonment endured by a sovereign figure that Skelton arrives at a very suggestive moment of dramatic experience. In part, this spectacle involves that drama of princely subjection that Franco Moretti suggests was so crucial to the tragic power of the premodern stage.²⁴ This presents the undoing of a sovereign who can no longer resolve the contradictions provoked by the exercise of his own authority and whose mystified condition means that he is no longer able to determine the course of history. The traditions of the moral play are habituated to recuperating such experiences of powerlessness and despair. Yet what makes *Magnyfycence* equally compelling is that this portrayal of the corporal and mental anguish of the protagonist threatens to dispel, in turn, the assurance, perhaps even the authority, of this form of drama.

It is not only that the play fails to restore Measure but also that the moral contemplation of this catastrophe by the Virtues, who redeem *Magnyfycence* from the clutches of Despare and Myschefe, also takes a tragic form. The cure of the soul offered by Good Hope and Redresse



PLATE 4a: Magnyfyence (Roger Dalrymple) vaunts
himself
Photo © James Cummings



PLATE 4b: Myschehe (Johanna Devereaux) tempts
Magnyfyence to suicide
Photo © Elisabeth Durton

depends on recognising the tragic instability of the fallen world. Redresse observes that 'Yf it be regystryd well in memory,' this 'playne example of worldly vaynglory' will teach us that 'the worlde' is 'casuall and transytory' (2513–14, 2510). This moral is promptly echoed by his companion Cyncumspeccyon who declares:

A myrroure incleryd is this interlude,
 This lyfe inconstant for to beholde and se ... 2524–5

Sodenly thus Fortune can bothe smyle and frowne,
 Sodenly set up and sodenly cast downe. 2529–30

Once the mutability of the world is clarified, one should walk warily within it: 'Thus none estate lvyng of hymselfe can be sure, / For the welthe of this worlde can not indure' (2564–5). This echoes the somewhat platitudinous advice Skelton had once offered his young princely charges in his *Speculum principis*: 'Fortune lets nothing stand stable: things long prosperous are not perdurable, harsh adversity will be unbearable; now for the better, now for the worse, always in flux: everything under the sun is mutable'.²⁵ If Nigel Mortimer is correct, this idea exercised a powerful sway over Lydgate's influential understanding of *de casibus* tragedy in his *Fall of Princes* with its 'characteristic presentation of the vulnerability of the *elati* to the vagaries of Fortune and other uncontrollable forces'.²⁶

Yet does this understanding of tragedy, especially as it is expressed by the sententious reflections of the Virtues, capture the tragic awareness created by *Magnyfycence*? The Virtues don't seem to have been watching quite the same drama as the audience, and this is understandable; after all, they've seen very little of it. There is a twist in the tale here and one that allows us to identify the play's continuing sensitivity to how the limits of authority are revealed by its presumptions. The concerns of *Magnyfycence* have been quite different to those proposed by the Virtues and their conclusions make only a partial moral sense of the play. Consequently, even those voices endowed with the conventional authority of the moral play to admonish and correct sin and error seem susceptible to incomplete judgement. This means we can consider how another, and in some respects, conflicting sense of the tragic makes itself felt at the play's conclusion. What the Virtues overlook is that the ruination that overtakes the protagonist is not the result of some innate disposition of the world under Fortune's capricious sway. Instead, it is due to particular decisions for which *Magnyfycence* is responsible; these lead both to the dissolution of his better self but also to the wreckage of the world around him. This

catastrophe is understood not only in a 'moralised' way but in terms of the failure to observe the virtue of temperance by worldly power. Magnyfyence's understanding of his mortality is indeed renewed and he learns to open himself to the redemptive power of grace (2479–98), but it is far less clear whether his worldly power can ever be restored or even whether his newly achieved humility would survive this. Redresse's concluding wish that Magnyfyence 'resorte / Home to your paleys with joy and royalte' (2566–7) seems unduly optimistic given the ruination to which that world has been reduced.

The rôle of temperance in *Magnyfyence* is significant in three respects: it helps to extend understanding of the political implications of this virtue, to reconsider the relationship between the play and later forms of tragic composition and, finally, to question whether Skelton's reputation as 'a poet of deeply conservative instincts' is altogether just.²⁷ The latter judgement is a familiar one: his works are often deemed to excoriate political and religious innovation, and his attraction to the mode and subject-matter of *Magnyfyence* can easily be seen in this light: 'He chose the morality form because its guidance of moral response is unambiguous and polemical'.²⁸ The standing of temperance in much recent critical analysis has also stressed its accommodation to prevailing norms. It has been perceived, that is, as a serviceable virtue in the Renaissance for those who sought to preserve or enhance their own authority.²⁹ In these readings, temperance is of some moment in the burgeoning discourses of Renaissance mercantilism and of empire because it is perceived as a practice or discipline that made the colonising or commercial subject more resourceful, disciplined, and plausible than his rivals. The 'continent' man is able to control his unruly or wayward appetites as these might imperil his ability to consolidate useful relationships or to seize opportunities. Yet such interpretations have also been challenged, because they tend to reinforce an attenuated understanding of temperance.³⁰ Its presence in the work of this 'conservative' writer might also qualify our attitude both to this virtue and to its exponent. Skelton's portrayal of temperance in the tragic components of *Magnyfyence* matters because it appears there in a much more critical aspect: not as a way of acquiring and enhancing social authority but as a means of accounting for and evaluating its loss.

Equally, we might set against the traditional view of Skelton's conservatism Greg Walker's recent reminder that: 'Far from being subservient, the political and social élites of the 1520s were an opinionated, quarrelsome, intellectually active bunch of men and women'.³¹ It is

instructive to consider Skelton as belonging to such a disputatious community and to see *Magnyfycence* as a contribution to this. It is equally suggestive to view the play's shocking portrayal of authority's enslavement to appetite and will as remarkably prescient of the preoccupation with tyranny that Walker also sees as pervading later Henrician writing. This involved an increasing sensitivity to the limits of traditional literary forms as well as an imperative to adapt these to engage with new political realities. Similarly, if I am correct in identifying a move towards the tragic in *Magnyfycence*, it brings the play closer in spirit to those 'tragedies of tyrants' that Rebecca Bushnell has argued shaped the Elizabethan development of the genre. The fascination aroused by such works as *Cambyses* (c.1560–1561; printed 1569) and *Gorboduc* (1561/62; printed 1565) also derived from their portrayal of the political disintegration that followed a sovereign 'giving in to excessive desire, which unseats the sovereignty of reason'.³²

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NOTES

An earlier version of this paper was given at the *Medieval English Theatre* conference at the University of Sheffield in March 2007; my thanks to John McGavin for the invitation to speak and for the many helpful comments and suggestions that this paper elicited. Thanks also to Elisabeth Dutton and players for their fine production of *Magnyfycence* presented at the conference.

- 1 See, for example James Simpson *Reform and Cultural Revolution: The Oxford English Literary History Volume 2, 1350–1547* (Oxford UP, 2002) chapter 3; Maura Nolan *John Lydgate and the Making of Public Culture* (Cambridge UP, 2005), chapter 1; Nigel Mortimer *John Lydgate's 'Fall of Princes': Narrative Tragedy in its Literary and Political Contexts* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005) especially chapter 5.
- 2 Robert Weimann *Authority and Representation in Early Modern Discourse* edited David Hillman (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996) 8.
- 3 Ruth Lunney *Marlowe and the Popular Tradition: Innovation in the English Drama before 1595* (Manchester UP, 2002) especially chapter 6.
- 4 *Magnyfycence* in John Skelton *The Complete English Poems* edited John Scattergood (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1983) 140, line 125. All subsequent quotations are from this edition.

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- 5 William O. Harris *Skelton's 'Magnyfycence' and the Cardinal Virtue Tradition* (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1965) 95–126, 127–39.
- 6 Jane Griffiths *John Skelton and Poetic Authority: Defining the Liberty to Speak* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006).
- 7 Willard Farnham *The Medieval Heritage of Elizabethan Tragedy* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1936) 216.
- 8 'Mankind' in *Medieval Drama* edited David Bevington (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1975) lines 237–8.
9. For an account the classical concept of temperance, see Helen North *Sophrosyne: Self-Knowledge and Self-Restraint in Greek Literature* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1966).
- 10 *Magnyfycence: A Moral Play* edited R.L. Ramsay *EETS ES 98* (1908 for 1906) xxxii-xxxiii.
11. *Magnyfycence* edited Ramsay xxxv.
- 12 Aristotle *The Nicomachean Ethics* translated David Ross, revised J.L. Ackrill and J.O. Urmson (Oxford UP, 1980) 74, 77.
- 13 Sir Thomas Elyot *The Book named The Governor (1531)* edited S.E. Lehmborg (London: Dent, 1962) 209: compare Aristotle *Nicomachean Ethics*, 'the temperate man craves for the things he ought, as he ought, and when he ought; and this is what rational principle directs' (78).
- 14 Aristotle *Nicomachean Ethics* 77.
- 15 *The Latin Writings of John Skelton* edited David R. Carlson (Studies in Philology 88: 4; Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1991) 40.
- 16 For further consideration of Skelton's complex attitude to temperance, see Dermot Cavanagh 'Uncivil Monarchy: Scotland, England and the Reputation of James IV' in *Early Modern Civil Discourses* edited Jennifer Richards (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003) 146–161, especially 155–7.
- 17 'The Governauce of Prynces' translated James Yonge (1422) in *Three Prose Versions of the Secreta Secretorum* edited Robert Steele *EETS ES 74* (1898) 186.
- 18 'Governauce of Prynces' 187.
- 19 See Harris *Skelton's 'Magnyfycence' and the Cardinal Virtue Tradition*. Harris suggests that the play's inspiration derives from Aquinas and the cardinal virtue tradition, especially the key quality of fortitude.
- 20 For a detailed exploration of *libido dominandi* in medieval and Renaissance drama, see John D. Cox *Shakespeare and the Dramaturgy of Power* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1989) especially chapters 1 and 2.
- 21 David Bostock *Aristotle's Ethics* (Oxford UP, 2000) 130.

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- 22 David Bevington *Tudor Drama and Politics: A Critical Approach to Topical Meaning* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1968) 61.
- 23 For the significance of dramatic lament, see Wolfgang Clemen *English Tragedy before Shakespeare: The Development of Dramatic Speech* translated T.S. Dorsch (London and New York: Methuen, 1961) part 3.
- 24 Franco Moretti 'The Great Eclipse: Tragic Form as the Deconsecration of Sovereignty' in *Signs Taken for Wonders: Essays in the Sociology of Literary Forms* translated David Miller (London and New York: Verso, 1983) 42–82.
- 25 *The Latin Writings of John Skelton* 40.
- 26 Mortimer John Lydgate's 'Fall of Princes' 216.
- 27 Bevington *Tudor Drama and Politics* 54
- 28 Bevington *Tudor Drama and Politics* 58.
- 29 Lorna Hutson 'Chivalry for Merchants; or, Knights of Temperance in the Realms of Gold' *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 26 (1996) 29–59; Louis Montrose 'The Work of Gender in the Discourse of Discovery' *Representations* 33 (1991) 1–41.
- 30 See Jennifer Richards "'A Wanton Trade of Living?": Rhetoric, Effeminacy and the Early Modern Courtier' *Criticism* 42 (2000) 185–206; Michael C. Schoenfeldt *Bodies and Selves in Early Modern England: Physiology and Inwardness in Spenser, Shakespeare, Herbert, and Milton* (Cambridge UP, 1999) 110–168.
- 31 Greg Walker *Writing Under Tyranny: English Literature and the Henrician Reformation* (Oxford UP, 2005) 16.
- 32 Rebecca W. Bushnell *Tragedies of Tyrants: Political Thought and Theater in the English Renaissance* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1990) 9.