

**MEET FOR MERCHANTS?**  
**Some Implications of Situating Skelton's *Magnyfycence***  
**at the Merchant Tailors' Hall.**

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This article will be concerned with whether we can place John Skelton's *Magnyfycence* within a particular literary community, and how we might interpret the play as a whole within the framework of Skelton's poetic career.<sup>1</sup> One of the most intriguing questions about Skelton — intriguing because, as with many of the questions we ask about this most mercurial of poets, there is no final answer to it — is which literary community or communities he really belongs to. Whom did he think of as the natural audience for his writing, and how radically did this community alter over the course of his life? Such concerns link back to the question of whether he is better viewed as an insider or an outsider at court, and are perpetually complicated by what Paula Neuss refers to as Skelton's protean qualities as they are manifested in both his life and his writing.<sup>2</sup>

What we know of his occupational history tends to reinforce the impression of Skelton as the quintessential man of letters: someone who can simultaneously be connected to the academic, courtly, and clerical communities — the environments which traditionally spawned writers in the Middle Ages. As translator, royal tutor, scholar, courtier, priest, King's Orator, and Poet Laureate, Skelton's early career shows him taking the natural path of any man wishing to pursue a literary vocation in the early Tudor period as that vocation was understood by men of his social background. And he in turn was clearly impelled by a sense of this vocation throughout his lifetime, defending and extending the rôle of the poet in his own writings. However, in spite of — or perhaps because of — his belief in the importance of his work to the English literary canon, Skelton can also seem an isolated figure from his contemporaries at court: men like Stephen Hawes and Alexander Barclay, and the continental courtier-poets such as Bernard André. Whereas, as David Carlson argues, the relationships amongst the younger humanist circles and the new company of courtier poets represented by Wyatt and Surrey were generally supportive, we have an ominous lack of evidence for Skelton's good relations with his poetic contemporaries a generation earlier.<sup>3</sup> Skelton's early career parallels that of André, the official poet of Henry's reign, in a number of respects, but he never mentions him; and the 'less well-defined'<sup>4</sup>

body of vernacular makers to which Skelton belongs is, in Carlson's eyes, only a group at all in the sense that Skelton, Barclay, and Hawes were all 'similarly situated in the Tudor literary system'.<sup>5</sup> We do not know whether Skelton and Hawes were ever friendly, but Skelton and Barclay engaged in a literary spat over Skelton's *Phyllyp Sparowe* in the early years of Henry VIII's reign. Neither Barclay nor Hawes nor men like André appear in Skelton's company of great poets in the *Garland of Laurell*, though he does choose to include contemporaries like the French writer Robert Gaguin.

Despite this apparent isolation from his fellow poets at court, we can identify a variety of social groupings which seem to have provided an immediate audience for Skelton's poetry from his appeals to certain communities of readers within his work. Closest to a coterie, perhaps, are 'the lettred men'<sup>6</sup> he addresses in his addition to *Phyllyp Sparowe*. Maybe these belonged to the set of university acquaintances he sometimes dined with, and included men like William Ruckshaw, whose authority he defers to in his lament for the Earl of Northumberland, or Robert Whittington, who sided with him in the Grammarians' War. Another potential coterie audience for Skelton's poetry exists in the circle of aristocratic ladies centred around Elizabeth Howard which provides a supportive reception for his achievements in the *Garlande of Laurell*. Attempts at reconstructing Skelton's readership base or bases from the manuscript and print contexts of his work further extend our notions of the kind of readers his first audience might have comprised. As A.S.G. Edwards points out, Skelton's choice to publish some poems in manuscript and some in print form suggests he had a range of reading communities in mind for his poetry and may have employed different production and circulation methods accordingly.<sup>7</sup> With the printed poems, especially, it is likely there were strategic reasons behind his use of particular printers at different times. Similarly, the variety of manuscripts in which his poems are preserved also indicate his ability to attract a variety of audiences at different points in his career, ranging from his inclusion alongside William Cornish and William Peiris in BL MS Royal 18 D 2, a lavish compilation owned by the Percy household (the latter two contemporaries of Skelton's are both associated with a courtly and noble audience) to the political satires which survive in BL MS Harley 2252, the commonplace book of the London mercer John Colyns.<sup>8</sup> The wildly disparate images of Skelton that emerge after his death reveal just how multi-stratified these reading communities may have been. His success in reaching a wide audience — by reputation if not

through his poetry — is attested in the folk memories of him as a satirist and popular jest-book figure.

A number of Skelton's works which, like *Magnyfycence*, deal with politically sensitive themes fulfil Arthur Marotti's definition of coterie verse as a kind of poetry that invokes intimate relations between the author and his intended audience, repelling the casual or uninitiated reader with its obscurity.<sup>9</sup> *Magnyfycence* by comparison is remarkably free of riddles. It does not make too many demands on its audience's erudition or decrypting skills, and if it assumes some level of knowledge of the court in its political topicality it contains this modestly enough within the machinery of moral allegory. *Magnyfycence* is not *Mankind*, but the lessons he learns can be transferred to him and as such the play remains open to a general audience while simultaneously gunning for a politically astute one. If we accept that the play derives much of its topical significance from the expulsion of the minions at court, then the likelihood is that *Magnyfycence* was written in 1519 or just after: a period when Skelton was living in London, retiring, in Chaucer's footsteps, to a house in Westminster. It also occurs at the start of what may have been a new phase in his career and one in which he may have been attempting to access new readerships.

The gap between *Magnyfycence*'s composition and its publication in 1530 soon after Skelton's death suggests that the play was composed on request or commission for a particular audience in London before its transfer to print. Some knowledge of the play's first audience would thus be helpful in determining its socio-literary environment. The two possibilities suggested by John Scattergood and others are a merchants' guild-hall or a noble household.<sup>10</sup> I will be exploring the first of these at more length here.

The scope of Skelton's dramatic canon (insofar as we can reconstruct it from his comments in the *Garlande of Laurell*) suggests his willingness to write for more than one kind of audience. If his list in the *Garlande* is to be believed, he also composed a comedy, *Achademios*, which was perhaps intended for a collegiate audience, and pageants of some kind which seem to have been performed at one of the Percy castles.<sup>11</sup> If *Magnyfycence* was designed for a guild-hall performance then the audience might have been less intimate than that of a noble household, though neither setting need suggest a fully homogenous social grouping. Those who have argued for this possibility point to references in the text which would make such a setting plausible. As well as the London topography in *Magnyfycence*, we have the characters addressing the audience generically as 'syr's'.<sup>12</sup>

However, this need not suggest that the audience was of a single class. (In Henry Medwall's *Fulgens and Lucrece* the players refer to the spectators as 'syr',<sup>13</sup> but we know that if it was played in the archbishop's palace at Lambeth, his audience would have comprised noblemen, churchmen, lawyers, and married women.)<sup>14</sup> Fancy's comment that 'Measure is mete for a merchants' hall'<sup>15</sup> would work well as a compliment to a mercantile audience as well as being a general, ironic statement about measure as the rightful concern of parsimonious merchants, not monarchs — a statement to which the play itself gives the lie. Most interesting, however, is Magnificence's comment: 'Ye have eaten sauce, I trow [that is, you have been too forward or rude: 'been saucy' in modern idiom], at the Taylors Hall'.<sup>16</sup> This seems a pointed allusion to the Merchant Tailors' Hall in Threadneedle Street.<sup>17</sup> The Tailors, who had recently acquired their politically significant prefix of 'Merchant' from the King, owned a large chamber known as Tailors' Hall from the early fifteenth century which they used for business and banqueting.

None of these references prove that the play was actually performed there or even that it was definitely intended for a mercantile audience. As there is a gap in the archives of the Merchant Tailors' Guild from 1485 to 1544 we cannot ascertain whether *Magnyfycence* or other plays were performed in the hall in these years. However the Tailors' Hall was one of the best-appointed in London for large-scale entertainments and was often chosen for civic celebrations by the city government and borrowed by other guilds for their own events. As such it would be a plausible environment for the staging of Skelton's interlude, either by the Tailors or another such community.

What we know of the history of the Merchant Tailors makes them a viable institution for hosting such a play. The Tailors were a major livery company whose fortunes had been steadily improving since their formation in the fourteenth century. A significant proportion of their members had become dealers in cloth and other goods in the fifteenth century, encroaching on the territory of the mercers and cloth workers and leading them to petition Henry VII to change their name to the Merchant Tailors in 1503 — a move which caused widespread annoyance (a grudge, as the city aldermen put it)<sup>18</sup> amongst the other guild companies. The wealth of the Tailors collectively, and in the case of a number of their members in particular, was substantial at this time. This together with their interest in education would have made them attractive as a source of social and financial support for men of letters. The wealth of Stephen Jenyns, for

example, who founded Wolverhampton Grammar School, was estimated at £3,500 in 1522/3.<sup>19</sup> Thomas White, another member of the Company, who founded St John's College, Oxford, was reckoned to be the richest man in London in the 1550s.<sup>20</sup> The Tailors were quite able to hire musicians and players of various kinds to provide entertainment at important occasions in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, and the records which survive before and after the period of *Magnyfycence* show that they often did so. The later history of the Company in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries demonstrates their propensity to patronise art and scholarship both inside and outside their ranks. The Company archives record the awarding of a pension to the antiquarian John Stow, a Merchant Tailor 'who taketh much paynes in wryting of Chronicles and matters of Antiquities'<sup>21</sup> and a handout to another member, John Ogilby, in acknowledgement of a gift to the Company of his translation of Virgil and Aesop's *Fables* 'for his encouragement'.<sup>22</sup> Stow, it will be remembered, was responsible for the first edition of Skelton's collected works in 1568; he certainly owned Skelton manuscripts and another Merchant Tailor, John Ryche, may have done.<sup>23</sup> Members of the Company commissioned, and perhaps generated, poems for civic and royal ceremonies after the Reformation. As part of the entertainment arranged by the Tailors to mark the election of Thomas Rowe to the mayoralty in 1568, the clerk recorded some verses to be spoken at a pageant and others to be written about it 'if it shalbe thought good'.<sup>24</sup> When James I feasted at the hall in 1607, another laureate poet, Ben Jonson, was asked to provide a series of dramatic speeches on the occasion.<sup>25</sup>

Collaboration between individual writers and guilds for ceremonial purposes was fairly common in the medieval period, as is evidenced in a variety of pageants and mumblings which allowed both guilds and writers to enter into a public dialogue with the leaders of their communities. Such occasions offered opportunities for probing or reinforcing the nature of the social relationships that sustained them. John Lydgate had led the way for Skelton in this respect in the previous century, and his example may have provided a rôle model for the collaboration of an official 'laureate' writer and a London guild. However, if *Magnyfycence* was occasioned by a formal visit to or from the King or intended to be played in his presence we would expect some allusion to it, as in the case of Skelton's flyting *Agenst Garnesche* which was either circulated or performed at court for the amusement of Henry VIII and his courtiers. It is hard to imagine that the play as it stands could be played in front of the King without controversy.

Attempts made to accommodate a royal audience in a later interlude, *Wealth and Health*, are quite revealing in this respect. This interlude, composed around 1554/5 in T.W. Craik's estimation, is clearly derived from Skelton's play and the printed version of it that we have shows it was intended for performance before the Queen.<sup>26</sup> In essence it presents us with a shorter and simplified form of *Magnyfycence* without its central character. Here it is Wealth, Health, and Liberty who are imposed upon by the thieving Vices, Ill Will and Shrewd Wit, to whom they trust the governance of their household. The play begins with a friendly debate between Wealth and Health, in which Wealth describes himself as the necessary companion of the Queen and her council, and also claims a place for himself beside men of the law and 'ioly rych marchaunts'<sup>27</sup> (suggesting, perhaps, that some of these people were in the audience). The Vices exhibit the same kind of behaviour that the Vices in *Magnyfycence* do; they swear and quarrel with each other and reveal their true intentions in private to the audience. Additional humour is provided in the part of a drunken Fleming called Hans, a character who appears to have developed from a joke in Skelton's play about 'a Flemynge hyght Hansy'.<sup>28</sup> Health, Wealth, and Liberty are rescued by a single virtue, Good Remedy, who makes it clear that he is acting under the jurisdiction of the Queen and in accord with her purposes. Pains are taken to disassociate the Queen's actions from the success of the Vices at court and the impact of the play is unified by a strong current of nationalism absent from Skelton's interlude. So the existence of *Wealth and Health* as a parallel to *Magnyfycence* is interesting in that it suggests that Skelton's play was regarded as easily transferable to a courtly setting, but not without some adjustments made to accommodate a royal audience felt necessary by its anonymous writer.

Working on the hypothesis that *Magnyfycence* was intended for the Merchant Tailors as opposed to a mercantile setting per se, we should ask what — if anything — this would add to our reading of the play. In terms of the environment of the performance it would suggest a sizeable audience. If it was performed in the Tailors' Hall at their own request, the most likely setting for it would be the annual feast of the Fraternity of St John the Baptist, the association from which the Tailors derived.<sup>29</sup> A large turnout for the fraternity's feast was to be expected as it was the highlight of their social calendar. The Company was one of the largest of the London livery companies: the freemen attached to it numbered around 3,000 in the 1560s, compared to around 900 in the 1460s.<sup>30</sup> Visitors and honorary members would also be invited to the feast, and these could have

included men from other craft guilds and the city government as well as representatives of the clergy and nobility.<sup>31</sup> Records of pewter vessels ordered by the Company tell us that twelve hundred sets of vessels were required for the Tailors' feast in 1454, giving us some sense of the scale of the dining arrangements. Although we do not know much about the kind of menus the Tailors envisaged for their celebrations in Skelton's era, the accounts of a Marian guild at St Margaret's Church, Westminster, of which Caxton, Wynken de Worde, and others in the publishing trade were members, records the menu for a comparable banquet: 'kept and holden at the Archbishop of York's place'<sup>32</sup> in 1489. Payments are recorded for a pipe of red wine; a hogshead of claret, barrels of ale; nine turbot, and the 'portage and bote-hire'<sup>33</sup> costs in transporting them; scores of chickens, geese, capons, conies, and swans; thirty two pike-fish, a whole sheep, three gallons of honey, half a bushel of grapes, and 18 lb of raisins among other things. Payments to labourers for two nights' watchings are listed, presumably to ensure that none of the victuals were stolen.<sup>34</sup> A performance of some kind is also indicated in the payment of seven shillings to 'the pleyers for a pley'.<sup>35</sup> The fact of payment suggests that this play was performed by a travelling company of players, or maybe those attached to a noble household, who had been hired specially for the occasion.

Judging from an inventory of the Tailors' effects in 1512, the physical conditions of the performance would have given the actors a variety of areas to play from.<sup>36</sup> The hall would have been matted and boarded, and laid out with trestle tables at the feast with the high table set up for the master, wardens, and important visitors at one end and the servants' quarters at the other. More interestingly, perhaps, it would also have provided the occasion for an opulent display of the Company's wealth. All of the gold and silver plates and goblets bequeathed to the Company by past masters, wardens, and other patrons and benefactors would have been brought out to celebrate their prosperity and advertise it to visitors.<sup>37</sup> If this was the setting in which the character of Wealthful Felicity appeared, we can see how his prologue on the relationship of wealth, wisdom, and fortune would have been pertinent to the occasion. The question of 'where wonnys welthe?'<sup>38</sup> ('where does Wealth dwell?') could be humorously deflected to the gold and silver around them in Liberty's reply that he and Wealth were appointed to meet. The notion that wealth is indicative of wisdom would obviously have been an attractive one for such a company. The business of stewarding wealth wisely was an important

one for any mercantile company, and the Tailors were proving particularly adept at it in Henry's reign.

The personification of wealth as a character may have been thought appropriate for interludes designed for a mercantile audience. A diminutive Wealth, a part intended for a dwarf (or perhaps a boy-player), appears to deliver a prologue in front of an audience of Edinburgh merchants and townspeople in an early-sixteenth-century fragment known as 'The Manner of The Crying of Ane Play', composed around the same time and sometimes attributed to the Scots poet Dunbar. This Wealth jokes that his ancestors were giants; that he himself has been banished from the city for a long time but is returning now with his companions, Welfare, Wantonness, and Play. In celebration of this, he invites the merchants in the audience to 'Addres yow furth with bow and flane / In lusty grene lufraie'<sup>39</sup> ('Make yourselves ready to go out with bow and arrow / In joyful green livery') for the May-time games. Wealth makes a series of fantastical, regional, and politically savvy jokes designed to amuse his company: he says he cannot be in the same country as the King of France, for example, a topical allusion to events of 1509. Dunbar here assumes a variety of shared concerns in his civic and mercantile audience and an interest in public affairs. Skelton's Wealthful Felicity was not a dwarf as far as we know and his speech seems much more serious in intention, but he, too, ruefully acknowledges that in this world 'welthe and felicite is passynge small'.<sup>40</sup>

Measure, Wealth, and Liberty were all characteristic concerns of the London mercantile community, as Alistair Fox notes.<sup>41</sup> Measure may be a moral virtue, but it also typified the kind of skills which merchants relied upon on a daily basis. Wealth and Liberty are more ambivalent (as Liberty declares, 'I am a virtue if I be well-used').<sup>42</sup> All three have a foot in the material as well as the abstract world, allowing the play to be read as a materialistic fable of how to keep wealth and happiness, although the moral implications of endangering one's soul through misgovernance and despair would not have been lost to the audience. In this light, Fancy's comment that 'Measure is mete for a marchauntes hall'<sup>43</sup> would not only provide a compliment to the Company, but implicitly suggests that the merchants were regulating their own affairs better than their monarch was his. This was probably true. Like the King's household, the livery companies had their own sets of ordinances and regulatory bodies and tended to be strict with those members who flouted them.<sup>44</sup> If we take the play as offering us a covert comment on the necessity of the King learning

to manage his own household, Henry could very well take a leaf from the merchants' books.

Would we then be justified in interpreting the play as an expression of mercantile anxiety at Henry's profligacy as Fox suggests? Possibly, but the recent history of the Merchant Tailors problematises a reading of the play as a vehicle of political dissension if they were the intended audience. The political and professional ambitions of the Tailors had caused controversy in the city for years, precipitating a deadlock between the City and the monarch in the early sixteenth century in which the King took the Tailors' part against the civic government. In January 1503 Henry VII had granted the Tailors what were felt to be excessive freedoms to fix their own ordinances and to call themselves the Merchant Tailors. This made them deeply unpopular with the City. Attempts by the city government to overturn the grant to the Tailors by offering a bribe of £5,000 to the King were not successful, and met with efforts to bring the whole livery system under central administration. Both before and throughout the ensuing crisis, the Tailors can be seen to enjoy the special favour of the King who protected their rights and took a hand in promoting them in the city council. Henry VII in fact forced the appointments of Merchant Tailors in 1506 and 1508 (the appointments of William Fitzwilliam and Stephen Jenyns, as sheriff and mayor respectively) which caused more resentment in the city. The *Great Chronicle of London* records how at this time:

In the Cyte grewe many grudges & displeasurs among pe Cytyzns,  
Soo that the worshypfull ffelyshyppys as the mercers Grocers  
drapers fishmongers & Goldsmythys malignyd and dysdaynyd sore  
the ffelyshyp of the Taylors ...<sup>45</sup>

In 1512 (after Henry VIII's accession) the Tailors were the only company that opposed the sending of a petition to the King for the repeal of the Act for Gild Ordinances in an effort to put the livery companies under the jurisdiction of the mayor and aldermen. The Tailors evidently had the ear of the King or somebody close to him because a special proviso guaranteeing their identity as merchants was signed by the King to protect them if the new measures got through. Therefore the Tailors had an interest in keeping on the good side of the King and we can assume that they were reasonably conversant with court politics.

This brings us back to the question of exactly what impression Skelton was hoping to make with *Magnyfycence* and how wide an audience he wanted to reach with it. If he intended the King to know or hear about

the play, either as a means of offering him tutorly advice or in justification of his actions in purging the Privy Chamber, then the performance of *Magnyfycence* in the Tailors' Hall would have offered him a public stage for it. The Tailors had been particularly assiduous in cultivating ties with the rich and powerful in the previous century, and it was this as much as their individual success in trade which had resulted in a marked growth in their size, wealth, and influence. The list of honorary members gained for their fraternity from the late fourteenth to the early sixteenth century encompasses just about everybody who was anybody in late medieval England. Members accrued from 1469 to 1510 include the Bishops of Exeter, Rochester, and Durham; the Dukes of Norfolk, Bedford, and Buckingham, and several lords; a stellar assortment of clerics and courtiers, and men of central government as well as royalty.<sup>46</sup> While these men may not have attended meetings of the fraternity in person, they certainly took an interest in them. Some provided presents and goodwill gestures as was customary on such occasions, contributing to the entertainment by sending their own musicians or players.<sup>47</sup> Given the prominence of the Tailors in the sixteenth century, we can assume the audience at their feasts would have included men of influential standing both outside and inside their ranks. Members of the guild generally staffed the Great Wardrobe and others were often recruited for occasions of state. There is an interesting note concerning the feast of 1503 preserved in the city records where we are told that due to the fierce resentment felt against the Tailors in the city government, the alderman elected to boycott their feast but reversed their decision on hearing that foreign ambassadors were going to be there.<sup>48</sup> This all underscores the impression that if *Magnyfycence* had been intended for the Tailors, it would have been played with the assent — or at least the knowledge — of the Tudor establishment and perhaps showcased to foreign visitors.

In conclusion, if *Magnyfycence* was performed in the Tailors' Hall either at the request or encouragement of the Tailors themselves (which, given their history, is feasible) it would almost certainly have attracted a reasonably large, wealthy, and influential audience. While it is unlikely that Skelton's play would have taken the same shape if the King had been present, the probability is that it would not have been staged on the Tailors' behalf if they deemed it to be in any way a threat to their own good relations with him. Certainly the picture of an audience of guildsmen revelling in 'their own daring and impudence'<sup>49</sup> in staging a play deemed subversively critical of the King would not fit the Tailors Guild; so

imposing such a setting on *Magnyfycence* has certain implications for our reading of the play.

The possibility that *Magnyfycence* was written for another merchant community must also be considered. Its themes might well have appealed to men like John Colyns, the mercer whose common-place book preserves texts of the satires *Speke Parott* and *Collyn Clout*. The Mercers were certainly interested in literature, but did not have a hall of their own until the sixteenth century and were engaged in building a hall for themselves from 1517 onwards, around the time *Magnyfycence* was composed.<sup>50</sup> Looking in more detail at Skelton's reference to the Tailors' Hall in the text, if it was intended for that environment it would seem to function as a humorous double entendre in which the eating of sauce at the feast and the eating of sauce as a metaphor co-inhere. Such word-play would not be unusual for Skelton, and in the context of this scene it could be read as a further compliment both to the prosperity and good judgement of the Tailors as one of the hubristic put-downs with which Magnificence dismisses Wealthful Felicity's request to be ruled by Measure. (Significantly, perhaps, in the other Skelton reference we have to 'eating sauce' in *The Bowge of Court* the accusation is directed towards the dreamer, who resembles the poet, and it also seems undeserved.)<sup>51</sup> But it would also be possible to read the same comment as being directed *against* the Tailors for the amusement of a rival guild. Such a reading would work best if the play was being performed at a different location so that Magnificence could then allude to the Tailors' Hall as a likely place to have picked up such impudent manners. If the Tailors themselves were perceived as taking too many liberties in recent years a joke along these lines might well have appealed to their longstanding rivals such as the Skinners or the Drapers.<sup>52</sup>

Finally, we might consider whether the afterlife of the play has any light to shed on its origins. The publication of *Magnyfycence* in 1530 immediately after Skelton's death suggests the play had value for a wider audience than that intended for its inaugural production. Its first printer (probably Rastell) describes the play as 'a goodly interlude and a merry'<sup>53</sup> which rather undermines any sense of its political controversy, but perhaps deliberately so. The existence of *Wealth and Health* as an interlude inspired by Skelton's play further ensures that *Magnyfycence* retains that essential ambivalence characteristic of Skelton by leaving itself open to more than one kind of audience and reading. On the one hand, it demonstrates that much of the raw material of the older interlude was viewed as applicable

and entertaining for a gathering at the royal court in the 1550s, indicating that Skelton's play had not come to be perceived as a byword for subversion. On the other, in view of the fact some alterations were deemed necessary as a result of the queen's presence and executed in such a way as to radically alter the impact of the play as a whole, it does suggest that Skelton's play was originally intended for a different environment. But ultimately whether this was a noble household or a livery company's hall, Greg Walker is probably right to stress that the interlude was never a vehicle for popular dissidence, but remains a genre for the privileged: an élite form of drama that attracts an élite audience 'at the centre of political affairs'.<sup>54</sup>

Skelton's own description of *Magnyfycence* in the *Garlande* (c.1523) indicates that the characterisation of the courtly Vices were the most memorable part of the play for him and/or his audience. Here he describes *Magnyfycence* not as a pageant or interlude, but 'a notable mater'.<sup>55</sup> Another indication that he viewed it as a substantial work can be found in his comment that much 'dowbleness'<sup>56</sup> of the world would be revealed to the viewer/reader 'who pryntith it wele in mynde',<sup>57</sup> which again suggests that he was expecting — or hoping — to cultivate a discerning audience within the ranks of a more general one. This need not imply that he anticipated that his ideal readers/viewers would all be drawn from a single homogenous social grouping, however, and the play is certainly not exclusive in its themes and interests in this sense. In his depiction of worldly duplicity, Skelton expresses a sinister side of court life that would have resonated with some of his contemporaries at court; one which the next generation of Henrican court poets, trapped in the corridors of power, would internalise in private lyrics. Perhaps at the end of the day a mercantile audience could afford to be more generous in the kind of lessons it drew from the King's behaviour.

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## NOTES

- 1 I would like to thank Professor John McKinnell for reading a first draft of this paper and suggesting the reference to Dunbar.

- 2 *Magnificence* edited Paula Neuss (Revels Plays; Manchester and Baltimore: Manchester UP and John Hopkins UP, 1980) 9.
- 3 David Carlson 'Skelton and Barclay, Medieval and Modern' *Early Modern Literary Studies* 1 (1995). This article is published online at: <<http://extra.shu.ac.uk/emls/01-1/carlskel.html>>.
- 4 Carlson 'Skelton and Barclay'.
- 5 Carlson 'Skelton and Barclay'.
- 6 Phyllyp Sparowe in *John Skelton: The Complete English Poems* edited John Scattergood (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1983) line 1361. All quotations from Skelton are from this edition, but I have modernised the spelling of the characters' names.
- 7 A.S.G. Edwards 'Skelton's English Poems in Print and Manuscript' *Trivium* 31 87–100. On Skelton's city readership see also John Scattergood 'The London Manuscripts of John Skelton's Poems' in *Regionalism in Late Medieval Manuscripts and Texts* edited Felicity Riddy (York Manuscripts Conferences 2; Cambridge: Brewer, 1991) 171–82.
- 8 For a discussion of this manuscript in particular see Carol Meale 'The Compiler at Work: John Colyns and BL MS Harley 2252' in *Manuscripts and Readers in Fifteenth-Century England: The Literary Implications of Manuscript Study* edited Derek Pearsall (Cambridge: Brewer, 1983). For a discussion of mercantile literary culture see Carol Meale 'The Libelle of Eglyshe Polycye and Mercantile Literary Culture in Late Medieval London' in *London and Europe in the Later Middle Ages* edited Julia Boffey and Pamela King (Westfield Publications in Medieval Studies 9; London: Centre for Medieval and Renaissance Studies Queen Mary and Westfield College, 1995) 181–228.
- 9 Arthur F. Marotti *John Donne, Coterie Poet* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1986) 19.
- 10 See John Scattergood's article 'Skelton's *Magnyfycence* and the Tudor Royal Household' *Medieval English Theatre* 15 (1993) 44. Scattergood discusses both possibilities here, and inclines towards the idea that it was performed in a noble household. Alistair Fox and Greg Walker have argued that the play was performed before a mercantile audience. See Alistair Fox *Politics and Literature in the Reigns of Henry VII and Henry VIII* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989) 239–40; and Greg Walker *Plays of Persuasion: Drama and Politics at the Court of Henry VIII* (Cambridge UP, 1991) 88–9.
- 11 *The Garlande of Laurell* lines 1184 and 1383.
- 12 *Magnyfycence* line 1896.
- 13 *Fulgens and Lucrez* line 2, in *The Plays of Henry Medwall* edited Alan H. Nelson (Cambridge: Brewer, 1980).

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- 14 *The Plays of Henry Medwall* edited Nelson, 19.
- 15 *Magnyfycence* line 382.
- 16 *Magnyfycence* line 1404.
- 17 Threadneedle Street was formerly known as Broad Street in medieval London.
- 18 Quoted in Matthew Davies and Ann Saunders *The History of the Merchant Taylors' Company* (Leeds: Maney, 2004) 86. The original source can be found in the City of London Record Office (CLRO) *Repertories of the Court of Aldermen* 1, fols 122 and 129. Throughout this article I shall be referencing Davies' chapters on the early history of the Tailors before the reign of Elizabeth I.
- 19 Davies *History of the Merchant Taylors* 93. Davies notes that this figure is probably an underestimate given that the bequests of cash alone in Jenyns' testament amounted to over £2,600.
- 20 Davies *History of the Merchant Taylors* 66.
- 21 Charles Matthew Clode *Memorials of the Guild of Merchant Taylors of the Fraternity of St John the Baptist in the City of London and of its Associated Charities and Institutions* (London: Harrison, 1875) 185. Clode also compiled a history of the Tailors: *The Early History of the Guild of Merchant Taylors of the Fraternity of St. John the Baptist, London, With Notices of the Lives of Some of Its Eminent Members* 2 vols (London: Harrison, 1888).
- 22 Clode *Memorials* 187.
- 23 Scattergood 'London Manuscripts' 177.
- 24 Clode *Memorials* 119.
- 25 Clode *Memorials* 149 and 154. The note recording this decision states that: 'Sir John Swynnerton is entreated to conferr with Mr Benjamin Johnson the Poet, aboute a speeche to be made to welcome his Majestie, and for musique and other inventions which maye give likeing and delight to his Majestie by reason that the Company doubt that their Schoolmaster and the Schollers be not acquainted with such kinde of Entertainments' (Clode *Memorials* 149). In this case, the commission seems to have been settled informally in personal discussion. It also suggests the crafting of the speeches on such occasions was seen as the province of established poets.
- 26 See T.W. Craik 'The Political Interpretation of Two Tudor Interludes: *Temperance and Humility* and *Wealth and Health*' *Review of English Studies* NS 4: 14 (1953) 98-108. Although it was first printed in 1557, judging from the Stationers' Register, it exists in a very badly printed version from the time of Queen Elizabeth: *A Transcript of the Registers of the Company of Stationers 1554-1640* edited Edward Arber, 3 vols (London: The Stationers' Company, 1875; reprinted New York: Peter Smith, 1950) 1 22. It was reprinted for the Malone Society: *Wealth and Health* (Malone Society Reprints; London: [printed

- Chiswick Press,] 1907) and can also be accessed online at the Gutenberg Project: <<http://www.gutenberg.org/etext/17270>>.
- 27 *Wealth and Health* line 92.
- 28 *Magnyfycence* line 328.
- 29 The dinner was customarily held on 25 June. 24 June was the church's Feast of the Nativity of St John the Baptist on which the new Master and Wardens of the Company were elected: Davies *History of the Merchant Taylors* 31.
- 30 Davies *History of the Merchant Taylors* 35. These figures are estimates. The dining capacity of the contemporary hall built on the site of the medieval one is given as 300 on the company's website <<http://www.merchanttaylors.co.uk>>, but this is taking modern fire regulations into account.
- 31 For a useful account of the practices of medieval guilds and fraternities in this respect see Gervase Rosser 'Going to the Fraternity Feast: Commensality and Social Relations in Late Medieval England' *Journal of British Studies* 33 (October 1994) 430–46.
- 32 *A Caxton Memorial: Extracts from the Churchwarden's Accounts of the Parish of St. Margaret, Westminster, Illustrating the Life and Times of William Caxton the First English Printer 1478–1492* edited Theophilus C. Noble (London: Wyman, 1880) 20.
- 33 *Caxton Memorial* 22.
- 34 *Caxton Memorial* 22.
- 35 *Caxton Memorial* 22.
- 36 A copy of the 1512 inventory for the Hall and other rooms and a list of the fraternity's valuables at this time can be found in Clode *Memorials* 84–92.
- 37 Davies *History of the Merchant Taylors* 31.
- 38 *Magnyfycence* 22.
- 39 'The Maner of the Crying of Ane Play' is reprinted as 'Harry, Harry, Hobbillschowe' in *William Dunbar: Poems* edited James Kinsley (Oxford UP, 1958) 102–107. The quotation above is taken from lines 139–40 of this text.
- 40 *Magnyfycence* line 21.
- 41 Fox *Politics and Literature* 239.
- 42 *Magnyfycence* line 2102.
- 43 *Magnyfycence* line 382.
- 44 The Merchant Tailors' ordinances, ratified in 1507, are preserved in Guildhall Library MS 34004, initially compiled c.1510 by the Company's Clerk, Henry Mayour. They include, among others, an ordinance 'for theym that myse ordre theymself in the presence of the Maister or Wardeyns' in acting 'presumptuously obstinately rudely and without reverence' in such company.

- 45 *The Great Chronicle* edited A.H. Thomas and I.D. Thornley (London: George Jones, 1938) 366–7. An ineffectual form of revenge on behalf of the City can be traced in the later history of Fitzwilliam. The other companies in the city government elected him to the shrievalty again in 1510 on the grounds that his previous appointment was not legitimate — a move that was clearly meant, and taken, as a personal insult. Fitzwilliam refused to submit to the authority of the City, and found a protector in Wolsey in his subsequent battle with the Mayor. See further Davies *History of the Merchant Taylors* 87. A detailed account of the relations between the King, the Tailors, and the rest of the City in this period can be found in Helen Miller ‘London and Parliament in the Reign of Henry VIII’ *Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research (BIHR)* 35: 92 (1962) 128–49.
- 46 A list of the most prominent of the honorary members was given to James I in 1607 and is reprinted in Clode *Memorials* 155–8. Many notable figures lower down on the social scale but not included in this list also became honorary members. These included knights, esquires, gentlemen, royal officials, members of the King’s household, and prominent townsmen from other livery companies. For a discussion of the Tailors’ ‘extraordinary recruitment’ policy see Davies *History of the Merchant Taylors* 20–22.
- 47 Davies *History of the Merchant Taylors* 32
- 48 Davies *History of the Merchant Taylors* 86. The primary source for this can be found in CLRO *Repertories* 1 fol. 135.
- 49 Fox *Politics and Literature* 239.
- 50 For a history of the Mercers’ Company see Anne F. Sutton *The Mercery of London: Trade, Goods and People 1130–1578* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005) 72–4. Sutton conjectures that before their Hall was built they met in members’ houses, churches, and Mercer-owned pubs like ‘The Tumbling Bear’ in Cheapside, depending on the nature of the gathering. Their records tell us they used a room at the Church of St Thomas of Acre for their annual feasts from 1391 onwards.
- 51 *The Bowge of Court* lines 72–75.
- 52 The Drapers also had a history of staging entertainments of various kinds at their Hall and engaged some notable writers to write pageants for them in the early seventeenth century (including Anthony Munday, himself a member of the Company). See Penelope Hunting *A History of The Drapers’ Company* (London: Drapers’ Company, 1989) especially ‘Feasts and Entertainments’ 75–88.
- 53 The title page of the F print of *Magnyfycence* (Cambridge University Library AB. 8 46) is reproduced as the frontispiece in Paula Neuss’ edition of *Magnyfycence*: see note 1.
- 54 Greg Walker *Plays of Persuasion: Drama and Politics at the Court of Henry VIII* (Cambridge UP, 1991) 28.

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- 55 *The Garlande of Laurell* line 1192.
- 56 *The Garlande of Laurell* line 1197.
- 57 *The Garlande of Laurell* line 1196.