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 Review by Raymond-Jean Frontain
 

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Griffiths, Jane. *John Skelton and Poetic Authority: Defining the Liberty to Speak*. Oxford English Monographs. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006, 225 pages.

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“What could be dafter / Than John Skelton’s laughter?” asks a giddy Robert Graves in a poem titled “John Skelton,” in which he juxtaposes Skelton’s bumptious festivity with the decorum and ponderous Latinity of Graves’s poetic *bete noir*, John Milton. “But angrily, wittily, / Tenderly, prettily, / Laughingly, learnedly, / Sadly, madly, / Helter-skelter John / Rhymes serenely on, / As English poets should.” As part of his homage to Skelton, Graves adopts the “skeltonic” meter for which the early Tudor poet remains famous five centuries after his death in 1529: short, heavily rhymed lines that careen madly forward with an energy that threatens to exhaust the reader. As Graves’s 1927 poem indicates, Skelton is best remembered— with the possible exception of Robert Herrick— as the great English poet of festivity. He is the madcap country parson who dared to take on Cardinal Wolsey in a series of devastating satires and was saved from the prelate’s anger only by donning a protective motley in his verse, and by his shrewdly taking refuge in Westminster cloister.

Jane Griffiths offers a radically different perspective on Skelton, presenting him as a poet who shrewdly experiments with various sources of authority, thus anticipating Spenser’s, Jonson’s and Milton’s attempts to fashion themselves as their society’s arbiter of taste and/or morality (“self-crowned laureates,” in Richard Helgerson’s phrase). By tracing Skelton’s evolving concept of “unpremeditated utterance” as “central to his redefinition of the poet’s authority,” Griffiths locates in the early sixteenth century the shift from inspiration (which comes from without the poet) to imagination (with comes from within) as the primary source of the poet’s authority— a shift that, in *Poetic Authority* (1984), John Guillory located as occurring in the late seventeenth century— and makes regrettable the absence of any discussion of Skelton in Robert Weiman’s *Authority and Representation in Early Modern Discourse* (1996). Skelton emerges from Griffiths’ study as a poet

who needs continuously to negotiate or reconstitute his source of authority in order to write.

I was most impressed with Griffiths' chapter on *Speke, Parrot*, which makes significantly different use of the background of the "Grammarians' War" than existing scholarship has. The poem's "political and linguistic concerns prove to be intimately connected," Griffiths demonstrates. For Skelton, grammarian William Horman's manner of instruction created "an audience unable to appreciate the urgency of Parrot's apocalyptic warnings. Horman's teaching methods are thus figured as one of the threats to the kingdom, and Parrot's apparently fragmentary speech proves to be the binding force that connects his two objects of attack" (79-80). Griffiths posits a far more sophisticated relationship with the reader on Parrot/Skelton's part than even Stanley Fish has allowed.

Needless to say, Griffiths' provocative readings invite challenges. I am, for example, uncomfortable with her reading of *Bowge of Court* as a narrative concerning Skelton's anxiety over "the poet's capacity to feign and deceive" (56). Her reading twists and turns like a slinky toy descending downstairs, getting where it wants to go only through the most laborious of mental gymnastics. While I cannot offer a better reading of the details that she isolates, hers sounds forced to me. Likewise, I regret that she passes over *The Tunning of Elynour Rummyng* so quickly. Obviously, no theory of any poet has to accommodate every one of that writer's texts, but Griffiths' reader must wonder why so major a poem as *Elynour Rummyng* should take so little part in "defining the liberty to speak," which Griffiths argues is the central aim of Skelton's canon.

Still, this is the most illuminating study of Skelton to emerge in decades, and as significant a contextualization and reinterpretation of a Tudor writer as Lorna Hutson's *Thomas Nashe in Context* (1989). Implicitly it insists that Skelton's poems be consulted alongside Spenser's October eclogue and Sidney's *Apologie* in analyses of Renaissance attitudes towards poetry. And perhaps of greatest interest to Skelton scholars is the success with which Griffiths challenges Greg Walker's readings of Skelton's work in terms of the politics of patronage, for she establishes Skelton as a far more independent thinker than Walker allows.

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