

John Skelton: The Career of an Early Tudor Poet. John Scattergood.
Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2014. 432 pp. €55.

“Skelton is a difficult poet and scholars engaging seriously with him need all the help they can get,” writes John Scattergood (15). In this thoroughly magisterial volume, Scattergood, Skelton’s best recent editor, provides much of the help that the next generation of scholars will need. Indeed, with the recent appearance of a revised version of his classic Penguin edition of Skelton in the Exeter Medieval Texts and Studies series (now published by Liverpool University Press), and with the critical weight and heft of this book, Scattergood has reinforced his position as an essential reference point for work on this challenging and intriguing author. He is a reassuringly knowledgeable and surefooted Sherpa through the complex terrain of Skelton’s long writing career. Scattergood acutely and insightfully referees and distills the critical heritage on Skelton but also maps out the direction of travel for future critics. Together with Douglas Gray’s recent discussion of Skelton as a satirist (*The Phoenix and the Parrot: Skelton and the Language of Satire* [2012]), this book resets the critical debate on Skelton.

Skelton had the misfortune to be the last poet of medieval England. He died in the late 1520s, just at the point when the new courtier poets Wyatt and Surrey were about to signal a distinctively Italianate direction in English literature. But Skelton was himself deeply ventriloquial of many aspects of the New Learning (and deeply critical of other aspects). Much of Skelton’s output is given over to waves of satire, both Juvenalian and Menippean, railing against the evils of the age. Yet in keeping with his satirical calling (“If I’m telling the truth why don’t you believe me”), he also seems to have had a highly developed sense of his calling as an inspired priestly poet and prophet, a *poeta theologus* in the line of humanist *vates* from Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio onward. As Scattergood argues, Skelton’s imagination is notoriously eclectic. His essentially associative way of thinking characterizes much of his output. Skelton was generically promiscuous, moving quickly, easily, and often unpredictably between modes of writing, and often collocating together within individual poems’ apparently conflicting levels, registers, and styles of discourse.

Scattergood is unusually acute in being able to detect and analyze these shifts of tone and genre. In addition to the very high quality of his close readings, Scattergood frequently offers illuminating insights into the intellectual and cultural contexts and archives in which the poet's works were being written. For example, Scattergood shows the deep knowledge of, and indebtedness to, the writings of Lydgate that underpins much of Skelton's poetry written in the service of the state. But he also moves with authority and conviction between codicological and cultural analyses of contemporary household books and learned discussions of the intellectual context of the Grammarians' War. Particularly notable is his ability to engage with the intertextual overlaps between Skelton's productions and the poems found in contemporary mercantile poetic collections, such as the Welles Anthology. But Scattergood displays extensive literary, linguistic, political, and documentary knowledge that consistently penetrates and clarifies the meaning and the purpose of Skelton's texts.

Each chapter is full of good things: sharp perceptions, illuminating readings, elegantly argumentative contextualization. The chapters on *Magnificence* and on the Grammarian's War are particularly good examples of Scattergood's ability to bring his scholarship and command of the field to bear in elegant and light-footed interpretations. Scattergood moves effortlessly through discussions of medieval alliterative poetry, Lydgate, English humanism, classical satire, Tudor civic culture, and even Pink Floyd to produce a multifaceted tour de force that engages with and listens carefully to Skelton's many poetic voices. At the end of this remarkable book (415–16) Scattergood summarizes the nature of Skelton's political identity. He discusses Skelton's creative exploitation of poetic tradition, his mastery of generic forms, his linguistic resourcefulness, and his inventiveness and creativity. Scattergood shares many of these talents and at the end of his account we have a much clearer understanding of what he describes as Skelton's "unique but uneasy place in the English poetic tradition" (416). This book is now the place to start when studying Skelton.

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