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John Skelton's "Agenst Garnesche": Poetic Territorialism, at the Court of Henry VIII

Victor I. Scherb

University of Texas at Tyler

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John Skelton's 1514 flyting "Agenst Garnesche" has been subject to little critical scrutiny. This neglect can perhaps be attributed to the fact that Christopher Garnesche's contribution is missing, but it is also characteristic of the relative neglect accorded to the flying as a genre, a neglect that has also colored the interpretation of many of Skelton's more abusive poems. One critic, for example, has dismissed the poem as being "nothing but personal abuse of a particularly virulent type ... adorned with a singular collection of epithets and incomprehensible allusions, which serve only to befog and irritate the reader." One way others have defended Skelton from such charges


has been by appealing to the generic constraints of the flyting and its possible relationships to the French *tenson* or the humanist *invectiva*. But while these considerations are important to any informed interpretation of the poem, they threaten to reduce it to a merely literary exercise, instead of seeing these traditions as part of the complex court contexts that produced the poem. A more profitable line of approach is to locate the poem within the courtly environment and within the context of Skelton's poetic career.

A flyting, as a public contest between rival poets, acts to affirm poetic identity much as public combat acts to reaffirm chivalric and heroic identity. Ward Parks has observed that the "flyting, in heroic epic and many other settings, seems to be associated with fighting." With formal rules and often occurring under the immediate supervision of the king, it ritualizes social violence and intergroup rivalry in much the

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6H. L. R. Edwards, *Skelton: The Life and Times of an Early Tudor Poet* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1949), 151: "The flying had at this time quite definite rules. It was a literary duel, in four rounds, between a challenger and a defender. Each had the right to appoint a second. . . . The challenger began by reciting his first piece; his object being to overwhelm his antagonist with every conceivable insult that came to hand. They did not need to be true, provided only they were pungent enough. The defender then replied in kind. The duel continued in this way until each of them had taken the floor four times. Finally the audience was invited to decide, in the Scots phrase, 'quha got the war.'"
same way that tournaments—themselves an important fixture at both
James IV's and Henry VIII's courts—or the courtly love games do. It
is, despite its ludic element, at once an individualistic and public
enterprise, and Skelton's flyting represents his attempt to respond to
and define himself in opposition to a wide array of personal and cul-
tural currents at court in 1514. 8

Being a dialogue, a flyting requires two speakers directing their
attacks at one another, usually in a public place such as a hall. In
a broad sense, flytings signify noisy quarrels or arguments, "a flyter"
being "roughly synonymous with a scold." 10 According to Priscilla
Bawcutt, Dunbar and his Scottish contemporaries "coupled flyting
with other forms of 'bad language,' such as cursing and swearing, and
associated it with fishwives and 'carlines' on the streets of Edin-
burgh." 11 In their more formal, courtly form, flytings were contests,
rhetorical games whose purpose was to determine who was most
worthy of being the court's poetic spokesman. 12 The setting of court
flytings could be portentous, for they were sometimes performed in
the king's presence, as was the 1579 flyting between Alexander Mont-
gomerie and Hume of Polwarth. This contest—with young King
James VI of Scotland as judge—had as its symbolic prize the bardic
chair in the "chimnaye nuike." 13 Such contests could thus literally
define a poet's spatial and social relationship to the center of courtly
power—to the monarch himself.

1 John Stevens, Music and Poetry in the Early Tudor Court (London:
Methuen, 1961).
2 Helen Stearns, "John Skelton and Christopher Garnesche," Modern
3 Parks, 45, 39.
4 Priscilla Bawcutt, Dunbar the Makar (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992),
222–23.
5 Bawcutt, Dunbar, 223.
7 Helena Mennie Shire, Song, Dance and Poetry of the Court of Scotland
under King James VI (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 80.
Skelton's "Agenst Garneche"

Studies by H.L.R. Edwards and Greg Walker suggest that Skelton's position at court was an unusually precarious one, especially given Skelton's prickly personality. Repeated attempts to ingratiate himself with his former pupil, Henry VIII, had met with only qualified success and some criticism, which had prompted Skelton's energetic poetic defenses of himself and further attempts to attract royal attention. Seen from this perspective, the flying "Agenst Garneche" suggestively reveals Skelton's situation in 1514 as he defends himself from charges that he is a lowly born outsider, and as he attempts to position himself near the center of court power. To reassert his position, Skelton repeatedly insists on the ties between himself and Henry, flaunts his nationalism by naturalizing the flying, and urges his own education and poetic calling, while at the same time emphasizing the threat that Garneche represents to the moral environment of the court and to the ideal of true poetry itself. When examined as a product of its courtly environment, Skelton's flying becomes a forceful attempt by the laureate poet to articulate and defend his poetic territory.

It would be reductive, however, to see Skelton as responding to Garneche in a crude court power struggle. To do so ignores the

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14See Edwards, Skelton; Greg Walker, John Skelton and the Politics of the 1520s (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988). Some of the critical implications of this, particularly as they apply to the formation of the English literary tradition, have been drawn out by Andrew Hadfield, Literature, Politics and National Identity (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 23-50.


16Richard Halpern has explored territorialism in Skelton's poetry, especially as it relates to "Ware the Hawk" and Phyllyp Sparowe: The Poetics of Primitive Accumulation (Cornell: Cornell University Press, 1991), 112-13, 123.
generic constraints of the flyting and its national and international aspects. The flyting is by definition a poetic exchange of invective, but it is not necessarily a serious one. In other words, the actual insults hurled at one another by the opposing poets might bear only a slight or skewed relation to objective reality. Nevertheless, a real struggle for social and poetic prestige may underlie an exchange of what Bawcutt calls “aggressive play,” even if the poets are on friendly terms. The voicing of “strong animosities, cultural and personal,” seems particularly likely in the courtly, social, and politicized arena of Skelton’s poem.17

Skelton’s primary interlocutor in the poem is a man whose poetic productions are unfortunately lost to us—Christopher Garnesche himself. Skelton figures him as the “Challenger” in this verbal combat, but the historical Christopher Garnesche was hardly an upstart. His family had a long pedigree, by Henry VIII’s reign having been settled in Norfolk and Suffolk for more than two centuries. The offspring of the union between Edmund Garnys and the daughter of the mayor of Norwich, Christopher would have spent his childhood in the household of his father at Roos hall in Suffolk or at Hasketon hall in the care of the Brewes family.18 His family was thus of moderate importance, and his fortunes rose rapidly under Henry VIII; Garnesche appeared first as a Gentleman Usher at court in 1509, and he quickly received a profitable wardship, a marriage to a rich widow, an appointment as the sergeant of the King’s Tents during the siege of Tournai, and, finally, a knighthood in September 1513.19 In 1514 he was involved in preparations for Princess Mary’s short-lived marriage to the elderly Louis XII, and he was, in fact, probably already preparing to go abroad (which he did on 29 August) when the flyting occurred in the late summer of 1514.20

17Bawcutt, Dunbar, 226.
18Stearns, 519–22.
19Edwards, 147.
20Edwards, 147–51.
Skelton admits the steady upward arc of Garnesche's career when he warns the younger man that "Thowth it be now ful tyde with the, / Yet ther may falle soche caswelte / Er thaw beware" (5.120–22).\textsuperscript{21} Such an acknowledgment highlights the frustration that Skelton may have felt with his own career, even as it also invokes the world of precarious court politics that characterizes some of Skelton's other works, such as The Bowge of Court and Magnyfycence. Garnesche's relations with the royal household, in fact, were rather more intimate than Skelton's. Although Skelton had been Prince Henry's tutor from 1498 until 1502, after Prince Arthur's death and Henry's rise in status to heir apparent, Skelton no longer had a position at court. Skelton had resided in his rectorship at Diss from about 1504 to 1512, and even his 1513 poem on Flodden field, "Against the Scots," was probably composed there.\textsuperscript{22} While Garnesche had accompanied Henry and his royal poet, Carmeliano, to France, Skelton had remained at home.\textsuperscript{23} Skelton's styling of himself as the queen's (rather than the king's) orator in early editions of "Against the Scots" as well as his repeated defenses of himself illustrate his uncertainty about his relation to Henry at this time. In his 1512 poem Calliope Skelton boasts of his Tudor livery and golden embroidery, but, as Walker observes, by 1513 there seem to have been people at court who "were now openly critical of his verses."\textsuperscript{24} His attacks on King James (who was Henry's brother-in-law) caused some "waywardly to wrangle / Against this my making."\textsuperscript{25} As Walker insists, by 1514, while "the major Court commissions were passing elsewhere, the 'King's Orator' was being called on to enter into an undignified bout of name-calling with a Court officer."\textsuperscript{26} Thus although Skelton

\textsuperscript{22}Edwards, 140–42.
\textsuperscript{23}Edwards, 137–40.
\textsuperscript{24}Walker, Politics, 46.
\textsuperscript{25}Skelton, "Unto Divers People."
\textsuperscript{26}Walker, Politics, 47.
had succeeded in being recalled to court, his situation was anything but secure and called for Skelton to assert himself strongly as a royal, patriotic, and scholarly poet.

Garnesche's success and the precariousness of Skeleton's own position may explain some of the poetic strategies that Skelton employs in "Agenst Garnesche." Skelton himself seems conscious of the flying's indignity, aware that "My study myght be better spynt" (5.176) on other activities, but it was just such uncertainty that made it particularly pressing for Skelton to defend his position as a "laureate" poet, one who naturally belongs near the king.

In order to occupy his position there, however, Skelton had to defend himself from attack. The poet's most vulnerable point was his comparative lack of social status. Although Garnesche's sections of the flying have been lost, we can detect many echoes of it in Skelton's defense of himself. Garnesche had apparently accused Skelton of being mad, "scallyd" (5.116), worthy of Tyburn, "overthwart" (5.136), and a "lorell" (3.14), but the most insistently repeated charge (or at least the one that Skelton seems to have felt the most keenly) was that Skelton was, socially and poetically, a knave. Even in the tonally dignified first section of the poem, Skelton repeatedly asks Garnesche about his authority "to cale me knave" (r.7, 14, 21, 28, 35). Skelton further accuses Garnesche of "beknaving" him (1.9) and of disparaging his ancestry (5.63). According to Skelton, Garnesche shows little

Occasionally, literal territory could be involved in the rise and fall of poetic fortunes. After the death of James IV at Flodden, Skelton exults over how Dunbar lost both his poetic subject and his estate at a stroke:

Pardy, ye were his homager,
And suter to his parlyament.
For your untruth now are ye shent
Ye bore yourselfe somewhat to bold;
Therefore ye lost your copyehold.
Ye were bonde tenet to his estate;
Lost is your game; ye are checkmate.
("Against the Scottes," 122–28)
imagination beyond this one charge: “Wyth, ‘Knave, syr, knave, and knave agenne’, / To cal me knave thou takyst gret Payne” (5.r9–20). Skelton’s defensive, reiterated focus upon this particular line of attack suggests that it was a sore spot for Skelton, who was not of noble birth, but anxious for court preferment. Although attacking the ancestry and background of one’s opponent was a conventional gambit in the flyting, we can see that it was also an approach Garnesche was quite right to belabor.

Garnesche’s manifest success and relatively high social position made it necessary for Skelton to couch his attacks in the formula, “By the King’s Most Noble Commandment,” a statement with which he ends four of the five sections of the poem. As part of his careful strategy of self-presentation, Skelton here insists on his proximity to a king who is seen as the fount of linguistic authority, even as the poet transfers the ultimate responsibility for the potentially dangerous invective of his satire to Henry. The poem becomes a means of reidentifying himself with King Henry and his inner circle, a group that Skelton may have felt increasingly alienated from following his attacks on King James. Skelton thus partly bases his claim to poetic authority on King Henry himself and on the privileged access of the orator regis to the king.

While we cannot be sure of the personal relationship between the two, one epithet hurled by Skelton at Garnesche suggests that, at the very least, Skelton saw Garnesche as a representative of a dangerous court type, an accusation that the laureate poet could use to reassert his ties to Henry. If Garnesche could call him a knave, Skelton could respond with the cry “Huf, a galante, Garnesche” (2.16). Furthermore, Skelton accuses Garnesche of “haftynge” (3.38) and, in the closing lines of the last bout, Skelton addresses Garnesche by the name “Harvy Haftar” (5.164). Skelton here assumes his audience’s knowledge of one of his earlier poems (ca. 1502) by aligning Garnesche with the vicious,
riotous lout from the *Bouge of Court*. The character from the earlier poem is an interesting one: he is the only vicious character who immediately recognizes Drede—the protagonist—as a poet, and the only one implicitly to compete with Drede at his poetic profession, as Harvy sings snatches from a number of popular songs. He acts, in effect, as the inversion of the true laureate court poet. A liar and flatterer rather than a truth-teller and prophet, as a moral guide he is the opposite of what Skelton felt a court poet should be.

There may be some historical basis for Skelton's abusive characterization of Garnesche. Edwards, for example, calls Garnesche "a finished specimen of the Early Tudor *rutterkin*—the contemporary gallant" and classes him among the group of "minions" who surrounded Henry VIII from 1515 to 1519 when they were unceremoniously removed from court. Walker has recently argued that *Magnyfycence* chronicled just these events. Drede's description of Hafter as "leaping, light as lynde" and one whose "throat was clear and [who] lustily could fayne" prefigures the description of Garnesche in the later *flyting* if only by providing a social and poetic category in which to place

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31 Dickey, 245-46. For Dickey, *The Bouge of Courte* is essentially a meditation on the acquisition of poetic authority.

32 Edwards, 147. Garnesche, however, does not seem to have suffered the same fate as the other minions. We find his house at Greenwich being occupied by the entourage of Charles V during the emperor's visit to England in 1522 (see Albert Rey, *Skelton's Satirical Poems in Their Relations to Lydgate's Order of Fools, Cock Lorel's Bote and Barclay's Ship of Fools* [Bern, 1899], 10).

Garnesche. Although Garnesche does not quite qualify as one of the Frenchified courtiers described by Edward Hall, Skelton accuses Garnesche of having gotten

... of Gorge with gaudry
Crimsin velvet for your bawdry.
Ye have a fantasy to Fanchyrche strete,
With Lumbardes lemmanns for to mete, ...

(5.39-42)

Garnesche’s ostentatious and even grotesque finery, his whoring, and his riotous living indicate that Skelton saw Garnesche as similar to those who, a few years later, would be the king’s wasteful and destructive minions. It may be no accident that we find Hafter among a list of court vices in “Why Come Ye Nat to Court?” dating from 1522. The continuity is suggestive, for it implies that Skelton consistently presented himself as the king’s bulwark against shifting groups of riotous and dissolute courtiers, a poetic strategy that here seems designed to reinforce the ties between himself and Henry.

The continuity also suggests that throughout his career Skelton struggled with the problem—particularly pressing for one who claims to be divinely inspired—of how to speak the truth at court. The conspiratorial, threatening atmosphere of the Bowge of Court, where characters continually turn words into a means of obscuring their self-serving ambition and rampaging jealousy of other, more successful courtiers, is turned inside out by Skelton in “Agenst Garnesche.” Skelton’s language brings aggression to the surface and the drama of courtier jealousy is explicitly played out, authorized not only by the “Most Noble Commandment,” but also by the flying’s generic conventions. Billingsgate language, descriptions of venereal disease,
physical ugliness, and mental and physical debility have their natural home in the flying, which effectually inverts the more dignified presentation of courtly power in other activities associated with the aristocracy. It might be seen as analogous to the noble mock tournament, such as the one held in Edinburgh in 1507 and again in 1508 in which contestants vied for the favors of a Negress. Although marked by scatology, mockery, and inverted versions of contemporary courtly prizes, the flying nevertheless remained a field where honor could be won. Inversion, far from undermining the display of courtly power in the Scottish tournaments, reinforced it and acted as an emblem of its secure possession. Similarly, in the 1514 flying, Garnesche’s participation in this relatively undignified form of aristocratic entertainment may well suggest the solidity of his court position, a position that the laureate poet could only hope to attain for himself. In opposition to Garnesche, Skelton attempts to reclaim courtly authority by displaying his ties to Henry, his patriotism, and his learning—strategies that to some degree allow him to make serious points even within what is essentially a mock-form.

The flying’s verbal weapons provide Skelton with a rich arsenal in his battle over poetic territory and, in particular, over intimacy with the king. The territorial imperative especially marks the first section of Skelton’s flying even as the social world of the poetic contest is evoked:

Sithe ye have me chalyngyd, Master Garnesche,
Rudely revilyng me in the kynges noble hall,
Soche an odyr chalyngyr cowde me no man wysch.

(1.1–3)


Skelton implicitly takes the moral high ground—he defends the sanctity of both himself and “the kynges noble hall.” Garnesche’s crime is to “bekenve” Skelton “in the kynges place” (1.9). Garnesche thus acts as a kind of mock king, but where Henry acts as the fount of nobility, Garnesche is merely the fount of knavery. Just as the hunting priest had violated Skelton’s church territory in “Ware the Hawk,” chivalric and even sacred space have been violated by this upstart knight who threatens to corrupt both the linguistic and social power tied to proximity to the king. Skelton can thus portray himself as the “Lauriate Defender” of the inviolate and quasi-sacred space surrounding the king, a space where he naturally belongs as the king’s chosen poet and, furthermore, as Henry’s former tutor.

Because Garnesche had a more conventionally defensible claim to nobility than Skelton did, Skelton had to deny Garnesche’s claim even as he had to defend his own. He does this by admitting his adversary’s knighthood, but redefining it as a literary fiction. Garnesche is “Syr Dugles the dowty” (1.8), “Syr Terry of Trace” (1.11), “Syr Lybyus” (1.17), and “Syr Topas” (1.40). These, as Robert S. Kinsman has demonstrated, are romance knights, boastful, brutish, comic, and even monstrous. Sometimes they are pagans, such as “Syr Ferumbras the ffreke” (1.15) and “Syr Tyrmagant” (1.4). Discounting Garnesche’s real genealogy, Skelton gives him a morally bankrupt literary one. Such figures divorce the social position of knighthood from its attendant ethos, a divorce, Skelton suggests, which merely articulates that already made in knightng so unworthy a knight as Garnesche.

But if Garnesche’s real knighthood can in part be seen as a fiction—that is, as a social position that fortune has thrust upon him that does

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38 On “Ware the Hawk,” see Halpern, 112–13.
not correspond to his interior merit—then his poetic prowess is wholly fictive. Skelton repeatedly insists on Garnesche’s reliance on a literary second, Gorbellied Godfrey, to aid or ghostwrite Garnesche’s part in the flyting. Although quite within generic constraints, for Skelton, Godfrey’s necessity points to Garnesche’s poetic and chivalric inadequacy. The gross materialism implicit in Godfrey’s nickname serves further to draw a boundary between his scurrilous verses and Skelton’s more transcendent poetic powers:

Lytyll wyt in your scrybys nolle  
That scrybblyd your fonde scrolle,  
Upon hym for to take  
Agennst me for to make,  
Lyke a doctor dawpate,  
A lauryate poyete for to rate.  
Yower termys ar to grose,  
To far from the porpose,  
To contaminate  
And to violate  
The dygnyte lauryate.  
(3.90–100)

The description of Garnesche’s “scrybe” acts as a mirror image of Skelton’s own self-portrayal. Lacking Skelton’s university learning, he is merely a “Doctor dawpate” who is unable to ascend to the realms of philosophy and poetry of the inspired Skelton. The language of pollution also figures prominently in the passage. The words “contaminate” and “violate” assert Skelton’s exalted role as the defender of the sacred space surrounding the king, a territory Skelton protects from the spatial and linguistic contamination Garnesche represents.

Against this carefully constructed, hyperbolically demonized figure of Garnesche, Skelton presents himself, the true poet. The source of Skelton’s poetic authority does not lie in mere titles, however, and in this sense Skelton assumes the title of laureate merely as the external sign and recognition of an intrinsic worth that makes him a fitting
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orator regis. Skelton has other sources to vouch for his claim to the poetic territory surrounding the king and to validate his self-presentation:

What eylythe the, rebawde, on me to rave?
A kynge to me myn habyte gave
At Oxforth, the universyte,
Avaunsid I was to that degre;
By hole consent of theyr senate,
I was made poete lawreate.
To cal me lorell ye ar to lewde;
Lythe and lystyn, all bechrewde!
Of the Musys nyne, Calliope
Hath pointyd me to rayle on the.

(5.79-88)

The passage conflates university degrees with royal and heavenly appointments. All are parts of Skelton's carefully constructed literary persona and designate him as worthy to defend the king's royal hall against a poetic interloper such as Garnesche. Poetic language, royal language, and classical and divine learning are linked in the relation between Skelton and Henry. As Skelton boasts, "The honor of Englond I lernyd to spelle, / In dygnyte roiall that doth excelle" (5.95-96). The king learned not only language from Skelton, but the poet also

... yave hym drynke of the sugryd welle
Of Eliconyss waters crystallyne,
Aqueintyng hym with the Musys nyne.

(5.98-100)

Thus the king's own poetic voice, even his own language, is inextricably bound up with Skelton's own career and poetic voice. Divinity, royalty, and rhetoric all stake Skelton's claim of access to the king's person and his language.

"McGoldrick, 70."
If Skelton uses the flying specifically to interrogate his position at court and fashion himself in opposition to Garnesche, it is equally true that the laureate also addresses the literary genre in which he writes—the flying itself. Critics have suggested that this flying is a conscious attempt by Skelton, made at Henry VIII’s initiative, to imitate the Scottish “Flyting of Dunbar and Kennedie.” Whether Henry suggested the contest with this motive in mind or not, Skelton seems to have been familiar with the earlier poem. Friedrich Brie has listed numerous parallels that suggest, at the very least, the Scottish poem was on Skelton’s mind in 1514. Skelton thus not only had to respond to Garnesche in order to solidify his own court position, but also to surpass and appropriate his literary model.

Skelton does this by employing a strategy of self-conscious Anglicization and, furthermore, by emphasizing the social threat Garnesche represents. Rather than Galloway, Ireland, Berwick, and Edinburgh—locales that figure in the series of charges and counter-charges that the two Scottish poets hurl at one another—Skelton locates Garnesche in Suffolk, Calais, and London. Rather than locate himself—as Walter Kennedy does—as related by blood to King James, Skelton instead insists on his own linguistic and poetic relationship to the

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42 Edwards, 150; Walker, Politics, 47.
44 Such a desire may well explain the rather provincial character of the flying, with its few non-native allusions and its sparse use of Latin. Skelton, after all, had another alternative available to him to answer Garnesche: the humanistic *inventiva*, but Skelton does not seem to have availed himself of the opportunity it offered (see A. R. Heiserman, Skelton and Satire [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961], 285; Laurentius Valla, Opera Omnia, ed. Eugenio Garin, 2 vols. [Torino: Bottega d’Erasmo, 1962], 1: 366–89).
true fount of nobility: Henry VIII. Skelton in fact avoids attacking Garnesche's ancestry (as Kennedy attacks William Dunbar's and Garnesche apparently attacks Skelton's) and instead attempts to empty Garnesche out of noble authority by pointing to his childhood sojourn as a kitchen page. Surpassing the crude account Kennedy supplies of Dunbar's seasickness, Skelton associates Garnesche's mouth with the anus and excrement (3.54, 62, 5.46). In Skelton's portrayal of him, Garnesche represents more of a threat to King Henry's moral and physical health than ever Dunbar or Kennedy did to King James. For Skelton, Garnesche’s mere presence is potentially dangerous and defiling. Kennedy's account of Dunbar's seasickness is refigured in Garnesche's stinking breath, which, instead of being a product of his own vomit, makes others evacuate their stomachs:

When Garnyche cummyth yow amonge
With hys brethe so stronge,
Withowte ye have a confectioun
Agenst hys poysond infeccioun,
Els with hys stynkyng jawys
He wyl cause yow caste your crawes,
And make yourer stomake seke
Ovyr the perke to pryk.

(3.150–57; cf. 2.78–84)

Garnesche’s poisonous words are reduced to literally noxious air, their physical and semiotic significance precisely complementing one another. The mocking tone of the charges cannot quite mask the seriousness of what is at stake for Skelton. Bad breath was in fact considered both a carrier and sign of disease, and the king's health, both physical and moral, had direct consequences for the body politic. Being orator regis meant access to the king and—at least in Skelton's mind—the power to speak

for the king as his authorized voice, using the power that inheres in the king’s English. Garnesche’s “poetry,” Skelton suggests, is the product of a diseased body and mind that represents a danger to King Henry, to his subjects, and to the King’s English.

The depravity with which Skelton associates Garnesche is thus potentially treacherous and destructive: “Your sworde ye swere, I wene, / So tranchaunt and so kene, / Xall kyt both wyght and grene” (3.137–39). These are more than personal threats, however, for where Kennedy and Dunbar had been mere court poets, Garnesche had real military and diplomatic responsibilities. In France the preceding year he had been keeper of the king’s tents and thus responsible for the maintenance of the king’s insignia and his colors of white and green. Those tents housed the bodies of the king’s subjects as well as of the king himself. The tents were each nominated by a separate name, frequently an aristocratic or royal symbol. Thus we find names like “The Flowerdeleyce,” “The Whytehart,” “The Lyon,” and “The Reederoose and the Whyte” alongside the names of other tents less poetically related to the king’s household such as “The King’s Master-cook’s hall for stoore for the Kynges mowthe.” Garnesche was in a very real sense responsible for the maintenance of the king’s dignity and person. The danger Garnesche represented was also significant to Skelton because Skelton himself wore the king’s livery of white and green. The destruction of the king’s livery hurts not only the royal person, but also all those maintained by it including the laureate poet himself.

Skelton engages many different adversaries in “Agenst Garnesche”: Garnesche himself, Skelton’s own precarious position at court, and the earlier Scottish flying. In doing so he tries to force into being his own eminently defensible poetic territory, one marked by talent, education, and access to royal authority and language. Such an endeavor was, inevitably, a tricky business as Garnesche was Skelton’s social

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superior and one in some ways responsible for the very royal body that
Skelton posits himself as defending. To the extent that this poem did
not (as far as I know) increase the number of Skelton's court commis­
sions or halt the rise of Christopher Garnesche at court, Skelton's poem
must be judged a pyrrhic victory at best. For the modern reader, how­
ever, "Agenst Garnesche" provides an intriguing entry into the world of
court politics and poetry early in Henry VIII's reign, one that resonates
with something of the vigor of Skelton's most powerful court poems.*

*A shorter version of this paper was originally presented at the 1994 con­
ference of the Rocky Mountain Medieval and Renaissance Association at
Jackson Hole, Wyoming.
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