JOHN SKELTON

Upon a Dead Man’s Head

That was sent to him from an honorable gentlewoman for a token, Skelton, Laureate, devised this ghostly\(^1\) meditation in English covenable,\(^2\) in sentence, commendable, lamentable, lacrimable, profitable for the soul.

Your ugly token
My mind hath broken
From worldly lust;
For I have discussed,

We are but dust
And die we must.

It is general
To be mortal;
I have well espied

No man may him hide
From Death hollow-eyed
With sinews wyderéd\(^o\),\(^{withered}\)
With bones shyderéd,\(^o\),\(^{shattered}\)
With his worm-eaten maw

And his ghastly jaw
Gaping aside,
Naked of hide,
Neither flesh nor fell.\(^o\)\(^{skin}\)

Then, by my counsel

Look that ye spell\(^o\)\(^{study}\)
Well this gospel,
For whereso we dwell
Death will us quell
And with us mell.\(^o\)\(^{mix}\)

For all our pampered paunches
There may no fraunchis\(^o\)\(^{franchise}\)
Nor worldly bliss
Redeem us from this:
Our days be dated

To be checkmated
With draughtes of death
Stopping our breath;
Our eyen\(^o\)\(^{eyes}\) sinking,
Our bodies stinking,

Our gummes grinning,
Our soules brinning.\(^o\)\(^{burning}\)

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To whom, then, shall we sue
For to have rescue
But to sweet Jesu

40 On us then for to rue?
O goodly child
Of Mary mild
Then be our shield,
That we be not exiled

To the dyne⁵ dale
Of bootless bale⁴
Nor to the lake
Of fiendes⁶ black.

But grant us grace
To see thy face
And to purchase
Thine heavenly place
And thy palace
Full of solace

55 Above the sky
That is so high,
Eternally
To behold and see
The Trinity.

Amen.

Myrres vous y.⁴

ca.1498

To Mistress Margaret Hussey

Merry Margaret,
As midsummer flower,
Gentle as falcon
Or hawk of the tower:¹

5 With solace and gladness,
Much mirth and no madness,
All good and no badness;
So joyously,
So maidenly,
So womanly
Her demeaning
In every thing,
Far, far passing
That I can endite,²

15 Or suffice to write
Of merry Margaret

3. Irremediable sorrow.
4. See yourself in it.
1. “Falcon-gentle” was the term applied to the female and young of the goshawk; a “hawk of the
tower” was one that towered aloft, sailing high in
the air before swooping on its prey.
2. I.e., surpassing anything that I can compose.
As midsummer flower,
Gentle as falcon
Or hawk of the tower.

As patient and as still
And as full of good will
As fair Isaphill; 3
Colyander,
Sweet pomander, 4
Good Cassander; 5
Steadfast of thought,
Well made, well wrought,
Far may be sought
Ere that ye can find
So courteous, so kind
As merry Margaret,
This midsummer flower,
Gentle as falcon
Or hawk of the tower.

From Colin Clout 1

[THE SPIRITUALITY VS. THE TEMPORALITY]

And if ye stand in doubt
Who brought this rhyme about,
My name is Colin Clout.

I purpose to shake out
All my conning 6 bag,
Like a clerky hag. 2
For though my rhyme be ragged,
Tattered and jagged,

Rudely rain-beaten,
Rusty and moth-eaten,
If ye take well therewith,
It hath in it some pith.
For, as far as I can see,

It is wrong with each degree.
For the temporality 6
Accuseth the spirituality;
The spirituality again
Doth grudge and complain

Upon the temporal men;
Thus, each of other bother 9

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3. Hypsipyle, queen of Lemnos, famous for her devotion to her father and to her children.
4. Colyander or coriander is an herb supposed to soothe pain; like sweet pomander, it has a pleasant odor.
5. The beautiful daughter of Priam of Troy; she could prophesy accurately, but no one believed her prophecies. This did not discourage her; she is preeminently “steadfast of thought.”
1. In these lines, which are part of the introductory matter, Colin Clout, the narrator, introduces the theme of the whole long poem, in the characteristically jagged Skeltonic line.
2. Old scholar.
The one against the other.
Alas, they make me shudder!
For in hugger-mugger
70 The Church is put in fault;
The prelates been so haut,
They say, and look so high
As though they wouldē fly
Above the starry sky.

c. 1523 1530