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 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<sup>1</sup> meditation in English covenable,<sup>2</sup> in sentence, commendable, lamentable, lacrimable, profitable for the soul.*

Your ugly token  
 My mind hath broken  
 From worldly lust;  
 For I have discussed,  
 5 We are but dust  
 And die we must.

It is general  
 To be mortal;  
 I have well espied  
 10 No man may him hide  
 From Death hollow-eyed  
 With sinews wyderéd<sup>o</sup> *withered*  
 With bones shyderéd,<sup>o</sup> *shattered*  
 With his worm-eaten maw  
 15 And his ghastly jaw  
 Gaping aside,  
 Naked of hide,  
 Neither flesh nor fell.<sup>o</sup> *skin*

Then, by my counsel  
 20 Look that ye spell<sup>o</sup> *study*  
 Well this gospel,  
 For whereso we dwell  
 Death will us quell  
 And with us mell.<sup>o</sup> *mix*

25 For all our pampered paunches  
 There may no fraunchis<sup>o</sup> *franchise*  
 Nor worldly bliss  
 Redeem us from this:  
 Our days be dated  
 30 To be checkmated  
 With draughtes of death  
 Stopping our breath;  
 Our eyen<sup>o</sup> sinking, *eyes*  
 Our bodies stinking,  
 35 Our gummes grinning,  
 Our soules brinning.<sup>o</sup> *burning*

1. Spiritual.

2. Suitable: "in sentence": in meaning.

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  
 45 To the dyne° dale *dark*  
 Of bootless bale<sup>3</sup>  
 Nor to the lake  
 Of fiendes° black. *devils*

But grant us grace  
 50 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.*<sup>4</sup>

ca. 1498

### To Mistress Margaret Hussey

Merry Margaret,  
 As midsummer flower,  
 Gentle as falcon  
 Or hawk of the tower;<sup>1</sup>  
 5 With solace and gladness,  
 Much mirth and no madness,  
 All good and no badness;  
 So joyously,  
 So maidenly,  
 10 So womanly  
 Her demeaning  
 In every thing,  
 Far, far passing  
 That I can endite,<sup>2</sup>  
 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.  
 20 As patient and as still  
 And as full of good will  
 As fair Isaphill;<sup>3</sup>  
 Colyander,  
 Sweet pomander,<sup>4</sup>  
 25 Good Cassander;<sup>5</sup>  
 Steadfast of thought,  
 Well made, well wrought,  
 Far may be sought  
 Ere that ye can find  
 30 So courteous, so kind  
 As merry Margaret,  
 This midsummer flower,  
 Gentle as falcon  
 Or hawk of the tower.

1495, 1522

1523

*From Colin Clout*<sup>1</sup>

[THE SPIRITUALITY VS. THE TEMPORALITY]

And if ye stand in doubt  
 Who brought this rhyme about,  
 My name is Colin Clout.  
 50 I purpose to shake out  
 All my conning<sup>o</sup> bag, *learning*  
 Like a clerkly hag,<sup>2</sup>  
 For though my rhyme be ragged,  
 Tattered and jagged,  
 55 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,  
 60 It is wrong with each degree.  
 For the temporality<sup>o</sup> *laymen*  
 Accuseth the spirituality;  
 The spirituality again  
 Doth grudge and complain  
 65 Upon the temporal men;  
 Thus, each of other blother<sup>o</sup> *babble*

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 pre-eminently "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<sup>o</sup>  
70 The Church is put in fault;  
The prelates been so haut,<sup>o</sup>  
They say, and look so high  
As though they wouldè fly  
Above the starry sky.

*haste*

*haughty*

c. 1523

1530