

MEET FOR MERCHANTS?
Some Implications of Situating Skelton's *Magnyfycence*
at the Merchant Tailors' Hall.

Elizabeth Evershed

This article will be concerned with whether we can place John Skelton's *Magnyfycence* within a particular literary community, and how we might interpret the play as a whole within the framework of Skelton's poetic career.¹ One of the most intriguing questions about Skelton — intriguing because, as with many of the questions we ask about this most mercurial of poets, there is no final answer to it — is which literary community or communities he really belongs to. Whom did he think of as the natural audience for his writing, and how radically did this community alter over the course of his life? Such concerns link back to the question of whether he is better viewed as an insider or an outsider at court, and are perpetually complicated by what Paula Neuss refers to as Skelton's protean qualities as they are manifested in both his life and his writing.²

What we know of his occupational history tends to reinforce the impression of Skelton as the quintessential man of letters: someone who can simultaneously be connected to the academic, courtly, and clerical communities — the environments which traditionally spawned writers in the Middle Ages. As translator, royal tutor, scholar, courtier, priest, King's Orator, and Poet Laureate, Skelton's early career shows him taking the natural path of any man wishing to pursue a literary vocation in the early Tudor period as that vocation was understood by men of his social background. And he in turn was clearly impelled by a sense of this vocation throughout his lifetime, defending and extending the rôle of the poet in his own writings. However, in spite of — or perhaps because of — his belief in the importance of his work to the English literary canon, Skelton can also seem an isolated figure from his contemporaries at court: men like Stephen Hawes and Alexander Barclay, and the continental courtier-poets such as Bernard André. Whereas, as David Carlson argues, the relationships amongst the younger humanist circles and the new company of courtier poets represented by Wyatt and Surrey were generally supportive, we have an ominous lack of evidence for Skelton's good relations with his poetic contemporaries a generation earlier.³ Skelton's early career parallels that of André, the official poet of Henry's reign, in a number of respects, but he never mentions him; and the 'less well-defined'⁴