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### **Killing Authors: Skelton's Dreadful *Bouge of Court***

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#### **KEYWORDS**

**Death of the author, Roland Barthes, John Skelton, *Bouge of Court*; readerly trust**

#### **ABSTRACT**

John Skelton's *The Bouge of Courte* represents the death of the author. The audience represented from within the poem practises a Barthesian reading, whereby its members happily enjoy (at least when it suits them) the free play of meanings, without reference to authorial intention. *The Bouge of Courte* reveals the authorial experience of such a readerly world from the inside; it produces the death of the author through suicide. And so in the second, and final, section I argue that an ethical response to the poem is inseparable from the attempt at understanding the living authorial "residue." A reformist impulse does survive in this poem, but it does so only through the interpretive choices made by its readers.

Wynkyn de Worde's "publication of Skelton's *Bouge of Court*, c. 1499, marks the first appearance in print of any substantial poem by a living English poet."<sup>2</sup> How ironic, then, that the first living poet to be published in England should represent himself, in this very poem, as committing suicide. The texts are also published anonymously. No sooner does the living author achieve the immortality of print than he is stripped of his name and attempts to kill himself.

Of course authors have fictionally "died" long before Roland Barthes' essay, "The Death of the Author,"<sup>3</sup> but few so strikingly as Skelton's Drede in *The Bouge of Courte*, written between 1480 and 1498, in Skelton's first period of court association, before his removal to Diss.<sup>4</sup> At the end of the dream sequence, and almost at the very end of the poem, the ship-borne Drede (unequivocally a poet), sees his enemies approach in a nightmarish rush, grabs the ship's handrail, and attempts to hurl himself overboard. Not only this, but there is no formal divide between the voice of Drede (speaking from within the dream) and that of the narrator-poet (hereafter "the poet") who frames the dream with Prologue and Epilogue: both poet and Drede are indifferently the "I" of the poem—it is the poet's nightmare as much as Drede's. We can see how these two figures, really one, are merged syntactically in the penultimate stanza, as dream merges seamlessly into Epilogue:

And as they came, the shypborde faste I hente,

And thoughte to lepe; and even with that woke,

Caughte penne and ynke, and wroth this lytell boke. (lines 530-32)<sup>5</sup>

The poem thus ends with a spectacular death, the represented death of its own author. But, my reader might object, the poet, as distinct from Drede, *is* writing: the act of the epilogue is to assert the presence and coherence of the authorial act outside the nightmarish dream. If this is true, then the author here hasn't really "died" at all; his "death" through dread is only the terrible shadow-play of nightmare, whereas in waking life he is confidently writing.

But is he confidently writing? What he is recounting is, after all, the experience of Drede: the movement away from the dream to the solidities of waking rational life turns out to be recursive, right back into the very nightmare experience of dread, silence and suicide. Dreams and poems (as Freud and many late medieval poets understood) are closely related experiences, which make similar hermeneutic demands on their "audiences"; isn't this the point that Skelton is making in his last stanza?:

I wolde therwith no man were myscontente;  
Besechyng you that shall it see or rede,  
In every poynte to be indyfferente,  
Syth all in substaunce of slumbryng doth procede.  
I wyll not saye it is mater in dede,  
But yet oftyme suche dremes be founde trewe.  
Now constrewe ye what is the resydewe. (lines 533-539)

If it is the case that dream and poem are merged, and that Drede and poet are merged, then are we not left with the same possibility I have already raised: that

the poem is no more, or less, than the nightmare of the dream, just as evanescent, just as frightening, and just as ruthlessly efficient in doing away with authors?

What is the “resydewe” of this poem: court satire, or simply the inability to produce court satire? Is this a text in which the author’s position is wholly subsumed in the fear from which he is trying to escape, by suicide? Is there any difference between the discursive conditions represented from *within* the poem (i.e. the impossibility of speaking), and those *of* the poem itself? If the poet’s voice is as much subject to the powerful undertow of fear as Drede’s, then what can be said by either Drede or the poet to recenter the poet’s voice? If Drede holds true to his name, then the very possibility of political satire is neutralized, since personification allegory is iterative; personified concepts can, after all, only repeat their name’s semantic range, and so Drede can only be frightened. There is only so much he can say (which will wholly consist of saying what he can’t say). Drede (and therefore the poet) is effectively a “dead,” or at best a dying poet.<sup>6</sup> Satire is by definition devoted to reform, but a dreadful satirist can reform nothing, since a dreadful satirist is no satirist at all.

So the question I put, and attempt to answer, in this essay arises from the response required of us by the poem’s last line: “Now constrewe ye what is the resydewe.” What is the “resydewe” of *The Bouge of Courte*, the irreducible truth behind the poem’s coding? In my first section I argue as strong a case as I can to persuade you that the author is effectively dead here, or, as I say, at least making his last gasps. This is a serious idea – *The Bouge of Courte* underlines just how

serious it is. But it is also an extremely frightening idea – the audience represented from within the poem practises a Barthian reading, whereby its members happily enjoy (at least when it suits them) the free play of meanings, without reference to authorial intention. *The Bouge of Courte* reveals the authorial experience of such a readerly world from the inside. And so in the second, and final, section I argue that an ethical response to the poem is inseparable from the attempt at understanding the living authorial “residue.” A reformist impulse does survive in this poem, but it does so only through the interpretive choices made by its readers. The very layout of the poem in de Worde’s editions of both (?)1499 and (?)1510 thrusts this decision upon us,<sup>7</sup> since the poem’s apparently authorial explicit “Thus endeth the Bowge of Court” is set together with, indeed seamlessly elided with in the later edition, the printer’s colophon: “Enprinted at Westmynster By me Wynkyn the worde” [sic].<sup>8</sup>

I am acutely conscious that this essay does not explicitly situate Skelton’s poem within traditions of authorship contemporary with the poem. It calls instead for an ethical response to the work of authors, as if that response, and the concept of the author, were ahistorical. I do not believe for a moment that the concept of the author is ahistorical, but I do believe that late medieval court poetry is a locus in which one tradition of authorship easily recognizable to us, that of potentially pathological author under censorship (and pathological *because* under censorship), comes into view.<sup>9</sup> The authorial precariousness of

Tudor court poetry is partly a matter of organizational shifts within court; partly of political centralizations; and partly a matter of correlative shifts in discursive practice.<sup>10</sup>

## I

A very brief theoretical frame sets the ethical and hermeneutic issues into larger perspective. Every hermeneutic tradition reveals a particular set of power relations between the different loci from which textual and interpretative authority derive. The history of textual interpretation (in Biblical, legal and literary traditions, for example) is made up of a wide spectrum of different answers to the question as to where authority is to be located. But even within this wide spectrum of possible answers, the main currents of Anglo-American and French literary criticism in the latter half of the twentieth century were all agreed, curiously, on the banishment of one source of authority, the author. Despite their divergences, significant critical traditions each proscribed authors from the realm of critical discussion, and different centres of authority in the literary commonwealth have instead assumed the function of authors: the formal unity of texts (New Criticism), conventional codes (Structuralism), the textual community of readers (Reader-response Criticism), discursive formations (Foucauldian analysis), the unconscious (psychoanalytic criticism), and the differential instability of signifying systems themselves (Deconstruction) all conspired to keep discussion of authors well out of critical parlance.

The fact of literary authority was certainly preserved by these movements (even in the case of Deconstruction), but in each case displaced from its etymological source, the author, who was told to leave.<sup>11</sup> Sometimes he or she was sent packing merely by the cold shoulder of labelling author-talk as “naive,” but when we review this series of movements at a glance, we notice that antipathy to discussion of authors was in fact a passionately held point of principle in each case; the Barthian metaphor of death signals the deadly seriousness (in an otherwise playful writer) with which the question of authorship is held.<sup>12</sup> Barthes’ word “death,” in fact, doesn’t seem willing to register the real extremity of his position, since it is more the case that Barthes is executing the author, rather than simply observing him or her pass away. A genteel snub won’t do here – what’s required is nothing short of revolutionary violence.

In his celebrated essay Barthes in fact describes the author’s death in a variety of ways, with quite different implications for how it actually happens. He begins with a philosophical point, which suggests that writing is a kind of voluntary suicide, since the moment an event « est raconté, à des fins intransitives, et non plus pour agir directement sur le réel, c’est-à-dire finalement hors de toute fonction autre que l’exercice même du symbole, la voix perd son origine, l’auteur entre dans sa propre mort, l’écriture commence” (61) (“...is narrated no longer with a view to acting directly on reality but intransitively, that is to say, finally outside of any function other than that of the very practice

of the symbol itself...the voice loses its origin, the author enters into his own death, writing begins" (142)). This scenario, in which the author conveniently does the work of dying, soon gives way to another, in which the author clearly requires a certain help in putting himself to death: in his discussion of linguistics, Barthes says that this science "...vient de fournir à la destruction de l'Auteur un instrument analytique précieux, en montrant que l'énonciation dans son entier est un processus vide....le langage connaît un "sujet," non une "personne"" (63) ("...has recently provided the destruction of the Author with a valuable analytical tool by showing that the whole of the enunciation is an empty process... language knows a "subject," not a "person" (145)). This sentence leaves it unclear as to who is to wield the precious "*instrument*" for "destroying" the author, but the fact that a tool is required suggests that the author's death is to be something more than passive, painless suicide.

After a few accounts of the funeral festivities ("Having buried the author..." (146); "Once the author is removed..." (147)), discussion of the author's death is underwritten not by the language of suicide, but rather by that of revolutionary execution: Barthes says that "literature," by refusing to assign a secret, ultimate meaning, "libère une activité que l'on pourrait appeler contre théologique, proprement révolutionnaire, car refuser d'arrêter le sens, c'est finalement refuser Dieu et ses hypostases, la raison, la science, la loi" (66) ("liberates an anti-theological activity, an activity that is truly revolutionary, since to refuse to fix meaning is, in the end, to refuse God and his hypostases —



reason, science, law" (147)). The final sentence is a rallying call to the guillotine: "...nous savons que, pour rendre à l'écriture son avenir, il faut en renverser le mythe: la naissance du lecteur doit se payer de la mort de l'Auteur" (67) ("...we know that to give writing its future, it is necessary to overthrow the myth: the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author" (148)). Barthes published this essay in 1968; the Ayatollah Khomeini, who himself later also developed an interest in the death of authors, was briefly in exile in France in 1978. That the Ayatollah was reading Barthes at the time is of course unlikely, despite the common interest.

I'd like this theoretical introduction, however brief, to direct the turn of this essay: Skelton's text is valuable in this context precisely because it represents exactly the championing of the free play of readerly meanings at the expense of the author's life. The poem is acutely aware of the ways in which authors can indeed be killed, certainly metaphorically, and possibly literally. The procedures of this "murder" will, as I say, be the subject of the first part of this essay.

Whereas for Barthes (championing the reader's new found power) the death of the author is the occasion for celebration, Skelton, however, represents the same experience from the point of view of the victim, the author. The pressure of this authorial perspective directs discussion in the last section.

Many readers will not know *The Bouge of Courte*, and might require the one further preliminary of a plot summary: in autumn the poet thinks of writing poetry in the tradition of the ancients, but is unable to begin (lines 1-28); he

sleeps and dreams that he sees a ship, which is discovered to be full of royal merchandise; the owner is Dame "Saunce-Pere" and the royal merchandise consists of this lady's favour. Saunce-Pere's lady-in-waiting, Danger, accuses the narrator of arrogance, and is told, on request, that the narrator's name is Drede. Drede tells Danger that he wants some of the ship's wares, at which point Danger leaves him disdainfully. Another, more kindly lady (Desire) approaches, who encourages Drede to speak up for what he wants, and gives him the jewel of "Bone aventure." He is to seek the favour of Fortune, which he promptly does, along with the other "merchants" who have come on board (lines 29-126). The rest of the dream sequence is recounted as a series of encounters between Drede and his "companions," respectively Flattery (Favell), Suspicion, Hervy Hafter, Disdain, Riot, Dissimulation, and Deceit. Each of these encounters is prefaced with a monologue by Drede, and the sequence concludes with Drede's attempted suicide and the poet's writing of the poem when awake (lines 127-532); there follows a short conclusion, in which the poet addresses his readers (lines 533-539).

## II

In the traditions of classical and medieval satire within which Skelton is writing, dread is often presented as the experience of the satirist. This is true, for example, of *Piers Plowman*, where Conscience (a supposedly courageous voice) is

represented as unwilling, through fear, to push his case to its end (“*culorum*” means “conclusion”):

The *culorum* of this cas kepe I noght to shewe;  
On aventure it noyed me, noon ende wol I make,  
For so is this world went with hem that han power  
That whoso seith hem sothest is sonnest yblamed. (B.3.280-83)<sup>13</sup>

We also find the same kind of thing being said in the intelligent early fifteenth-century satirical poem, *Mum and the Sothsegger* (*Keeping Mum and the Truth-teller*). As soon as the truth-teller opens his mouth, he is hushed by Mum, who advises political expediency through silence. The truth-teller insists that he should speak out, despite the fact that many others don't through fear; there are many potential truth-tellers, he says,

But the king ne his cunseil kunne not mete with thaym,  
But cleerly the cause I knowe not for sothe  
But dreede of the deeth dryveth thaym thens,  
Or elles looste of thaire likerous life uppon erthe. (lines 125-28)<sup>14</sup>

In Skelton's own poetry we find the same constraint on speaking, dread, defined as the inevitable experience of the satirist.<sup>15</sup> At the end of his *Colin Clout*, for example, he imagines the voices of his powerful enemies:

Howe darest thou, daucocke, mell?  
How darest thou, losell,  
Allygate the gospell

Agaynst us of the counsell?

Avaunt to the devyll of hell!

Take him, wardeyn of the Flete,

Set hym fast by the fete!

I say, lieutenaunt of the Toure,

Make this lurdeyne for to loure. (lines 1160-68)

All these poems that represent dread as the characteristic experience of the satirist nevertheless manage to overcome fear and to speak out. Their voice is represented as being situated outside, and as bravely addressing the court.<sup>16</sup> In *The Bouge of Courte*, however, Skelton makes a critical shift from the conventions of court satire, by placing the voice of the satirist as within the court, subject to the same desires as those he might be satirising.<sup>17</sup> Instead of being the uplandish, “boistous” (or uncouth) satiric figure, Skelton’s narrator is subject to the desire for courtly advancement, the “bouge,” or pouch of court – that’s why he’s on board.<sup>18</sup> The discursive conditions of court life are represented from within.

If this is so, can the poem gain any purchase on the conditions of court life to attack or satirise it? Or does the poem, in the way of personification allegory, simply re-iterate the dreadfulness of Drede’s condition? I first consider the case that the poem remains wholly marginal in its discursive timidity.

The Prologue begins with a chronographia of autumn, a low point of the year. The lowness of the season spills over, or at least characterises, the narrator's own position as a writer, unable as he is to begin. He recalls the skill, the freshness and the courage of a presumably classical and late medieval tradition of broadly satirical poetry:

I, callynge to mynde the great auctoryte  
Of poetes olde, whyche, full craftely,  
Under as coverte termes as coude be,  
Can touche a troughte and cloke it subtylly  
Wyth fresshe utteraunce full sentencyously;  
Dyverse in style, some spared not vyce to wrythe,  
Some of moralyte nobly dyde endyte. (lines 8-14)

Like Henryson's *Moral Fables*, then, *The Bouge of Courte* begins with praise of a moralizing, allegorical tradition of authoritative poetry. Unlike Henryson, however, Skelton declines to place his own poem in this tradition. No sooner is the tradition defined than the narrator declares his incapacity to contribute to it. Ignorance, he says, advised silence, "my penne awaye to pulle" (l.21), and not to attempt what is beyond his capacity. To do so would be to incur a threat:

But of reproche surely he maye not mys  
That clymmeth hyer than he may fotynghe have;  
What and he slyde downe, who shall hym save? (lines 26-28)

As it is posed here, this threat seems rather limited, simply a matter of having

committed a poetic indiscretion by attempting more than one is capable of. Failure would incur embarrassment, and the threat of embarrassment provokes silence.<sup>19</sup> But is the silence simply the product of poetic discretion? The terms Skelton uses to define the threat of embarrassment suggest not only a poetic, but also a political threat that hangs over the writing of poetry. The reference to climbing higher than one has footing might, for example, recall Wyatt's slightly later poem of the 1530s about shaky footing (i.e. his Senecan "Stand whoso list, upon the slipper toppe / Of courtes estates..."), which describes that kind of courtier who

death grip'th right hard by the crop

That is much known of other, and of himself, alas,

Doth die unknown, dazed, with dreadful face.<sup>20</sup>

The threat registered by Skelton is, it seems to me, both poetic and political: by failing to write courageous, morally forthright satire, Skelton equally fails to join an ancient poetic tradition in which poets, or at least some of them, "spared not vyce to wrythe."

When we look to the action of the dream, we can see that the poet's fear certainly is political. The narrator is not only a poet in the Prologue, but in the dream, too, he is presented as a skilful, learned, cultivated poet. But in each case where he is so characterized, the characterization is made by figures who wish to undermine, rather than bolster, the narrator's confidence as a poet. Praise of a poet's skill in the dream appears simply as a strategy to undermine the powers of

poetry. The first address to the narrator is by Favell, or Flattery. It opens in this way:

Noo thyng erthely that I wonder so sore  
As of your connyng, that is so excellent;  
Deynte to have with us suche one in store,  
So vertuously that hath his dayes spent;  
Fortune to you gyftes of grace hath lent:  
Loo, what it is a man to have connyng!

All erthely tresoure it is surmountyng. (lines 148-54)

In this encounter, as in all others, Drede himself does not speak; Flattery's praise of "connyng" serves, in fact, to silence and neutralize knowledge. The "great auctoryte / Of poetes olde" is here evacuated of any force or power to resist corruption, largely because the very strategies of "olde poets" are more skilfully commanded by Flattery himself than by Drede.<sup>21</sup> For it is Flattery who promises to be "playne," and who assures Drede that he can "cracke" a "bolde worde"; but of course these professions of satirical courage only cloak a truth (that Flattery won't be plain) subtly. Flattery insinuates himself with Drede first by praising him as a scholar, and then by planting fear in Drede's mind, by saying that he, Favell, is on Drede's side against those who wish to overthrow him.

Hervy Hafter, too, approaches Drede by reference to Drede's activity as a poet: "me thynke ye make a verse, / I coude it skan and ye wolde it reherse" (lines 244-45). Poetry is, interestingly, felt to be covert activity, but so covert that

Drede doesn't, of course, "rehearse" what he writes – he's too afraid. Poetry is in no way reformist, since it never sees publication. And finally Dissimulation also approaches Drede by praising the power of book-learning and the skill of poets. From the envious, he says, the literate poet need fear nothing:

I knowe your vertu and your lytterkture

By that lytel connyng that I have.

Ye be malygned sore, I you ensure,

But ye have crafte your selfe alwaye to save.

It is grete scorne to se a mysproude knave

With a clerke that connyng is to prate.

Lete them go lowse them, in the devylles date. (lines 449-55)

Once again, the power of poetry to preserve a space for identity and integrity is here championed in such a way as to dissolve that power altogether. What Dissimulation really celebrates is the remarkable power of the ignorant, or at least of those who care nothing for learning. The virtues of the "poetes olde" - their "craft" (meaning both skill and power), and their ability to disguise the truth with "coverte termes" - are here in the possession of the enemies of poetry.<sup>22</sup> And Drede's enemies deny Drede's own possession of the power ("vertu") and skill of poetry even as they praise him so lavishly for it. As the word "literature" (line 449) is first used in something like its modern, literary critical sense, it is revealingly mangled and neutralized.<sup>23</sup> As with printed



authors, so too with literature: they are under threat even as they come into focus.

So poetry, then, is represented from within the poem as having no autonomous power to resist or denounce corruption; the discursive conditions of court life, as they are represented, would seem entirely to disallow the space of integrity preserved by “the grete auctoryte / Of poetes olde,” who could “touch” a truth “full craftely.” Here “craft” is not deployed by the poet, but rather by his enemies.

This invasion of the space of poetry and of the poet is manifest in the very form of the poem. As I mentioned earlier, the narrative is constructed out of a series of encounters, in which different court types address Drede. Characteristically, Drede himself does not reply in these addresses; they are not dialogues, since the voices of the corrupt court types wholly invade and eclipse Drede’s own voice, entirely silencing him. But, you might object, Drede does speak in the poem: he speaks to us, in the interim periods between the encounters. That is true, but his narration of what happens turns out to report *other* voices, to report what his perceived enemies are saying about him. This is a world in which private identity is largely, or wholly, a matter of public reputation. This is implicit in the formal presentation of Drede’s voice: whenever we are alone with him, we are not privileged with the private, intimate voice the monologue promises; instead the voices of others invade the private voice of Drede, and fatally erode any sense of coherence and integrity in that private

voice. After Favell passes from Drede, for example, we are left alone with Drede as our private narrator: "than thanked I hym for his grete gentylnes" (l.176); we expect to be in the presence of Drede alone, but, on the contrary, Drede relates how he sees Favell meet Suspicion, and, he says, "I drewe nere to herke what they two sayde." Then follows the reported conversation, of which I cite a part here:

"In fayth," quod Suspecte, "spake Drede no worde of me?"

"Why? What than? Wylte thou lete men to speke?"

He sayth he can not well accorde with the."

"Twyst," quod Suspecte, "goo playe; hym I ne reke!"

"By Cryste," quod Favell, "Drede is soleyne freke!" (lines 183-87)

Drede's persona is, as I say, invaded by other voices, and constituted by his public reputation. Paradoxically, it is the very fact that Drede's being is wholly public property that renders Drede so lonely, a "soleyne freke" [solitary fellow].

In *The Bouge of Courte*, then, dialogue occurs only between Drede's enemies, not between Drede and his interlocutors. Solidarity, such as it is in the shifting world of the court, is the preserve of others. The very bases of dialogue are denied Drede, since he is cut off from any real understanding of what he is told. Understanding, like solidarity, is located outside the narrator himself. As a result, direct speech at times degenerates into scraps of conversation, hints of gossip, where the vital connections of sense are deliberately, and threateningly,

truncated. Thus Deceit, for example, falls into a code language, whose inner sense is unavailable to Drede:

But by that Lorde that is one, two and thre,  
I have an errande to rounde in your ere.  
He tolde me so, by God, ye maye truste me.  
Parde, remembre whan ye were there,  
There I wynked on you – wote ye not where?  
In *A loco*, I mene *juxta* B:

Woo is hym that is blynde and maye not see! (lines 512-18)

The gesture of intimacy here serves to underline the alienating quality of the non-communication.

Skelton as a poet more generally, it might be observed, is himself a master of the “scrap,” the truncated (non-) message. In his other satirical poems, *Speke Parrott* or *Colin Clout*, for example, he deliberately speaks through scraps of information – what the bird parrots uncomprehendingly, or what “clouds,” or bits of satirical information are drawn out of the satirist’s bag. The very rhyme is “ragged, / Tattered and jagged, / Rudely rayne-beaten, / Rusty and mothe-eaten” (*Colin Clout*, lines 53-56). But in those poems Skelton is deploying the truncated scrap as a satirical strategy, presumably protecting himself from attack and/or instilling fear in the objects of his attack precisely through alienating them. In *Bouge of Courte*, however, the narrator is the *object* of these scraps, and is not in a position to deploy them himself.<sup>24</sup>

### III

[Danger:] "What is thy name?" and I sayde it was Drede. (line 77)

Drede comes into being through his interlocutors: in response to the question of Danger (i.e. haughtiness, domination, danger), then of course Drede names himself as "Fear"; and even in my description of the poem in the previous section, I have been effectively elucidating tautologies: "Drede does not speak"; "Drede doesn't rehearse what he writes"; "the very bases of dialogue are denied Drede"; "the voices of others invade the private voice of Drede." All these statements are designed to elucidate the discursive conditions that pertain to Drede, but when we reflect on the matter, these statements are already implicit in the name "Drede" itself; they merely fill out the semantic content of the name, which itself is a product of the world Drede ostensibly describes. *The Bouge of Courte* seems to reverse the "normal" relationship that pertains between narrator and the world he or she describes: instead of the narrator being given at least theoretical priority to the world he describes, he is instead posterior to that world, a product of it, and wholly absorbed by it. The "author" disappears into the fabric of his world; for even if Drede comes into being through his

interlocutors, that very moment of coming into being is equally his undoing as an author. The author is “dead.” And, indeed, the author tries to commit suicide.

In this final section, however, we might ask ourselves whether or not there is a difference between the discursive situation represented *in* the poem, and the discursive position *of the poem itself*. It might theoretically be the case that a poem could *represent* the total evanescence of the author, but itself make powerful demands on readers to make a commitment to understanding an authorial voice and strategy. Skelton’s poem is, after all, published – we have it, which wouldn’t be the case if Skelton really were Drede.

At the end of the poem the very act of writing the text we have read is represented; whereas the narrator had been unwilling to write at the beginning of the poem, by its end there is no hesitation: “and even with that woke, / Caughte penne and ynke, and wroth this lytell boke” (lines 531-32). This decisive act of writing is coupled with the act of publishing, for in the last stanza (lines 533-539, cited above) the poet addresses the audience directly, as audience, for the first time. And for the first time, at the end of the poem, we are invited to consider not so much the poem’s represented action as the poem itself, “this lytell boke” that has just been written. The poet invites us to see in this book precisely the kind of thing that seems to have been so completely negated in the action of the dream – that is poetry, in the tradition of the ancients, as presenting a truth that requires interpretation to be understood, poetry that can “touche a troughte and cloke it subtylly ” (line 11).

Of course, even in the very act of suggesting the poem's truth, Skelton allows for the possibility of its ephemerality and insubstantiality. It's a dream, which "in substaunce of slumbrynge doth procede" (l.536); as such, the poet disavows that it is "mater in dede." We are perfectly free to dismiss the whole poem as a dream, and therefore as insubstantial. But this self-deprecatory move (so frequent in satirical dream poetry – we find it in *Piers Plowman* and *Mum and the Sothsegger*)<sup>25</sup> itself implies, of course, the substantial quality of what we have before us, and the truth of the poem, the irreducible "resydewe" that we have been asked to construe.

We are now being asked to interpret the poem as a dream poem. This might suggest that the poet's nightmare has more substance than the shadowy fictions of Drede's interlocutors. Certainly the kind of relationship implied here between poet and audience – polite, serious, knowing as it is – is quite different from every other relationship depicted within the poem's world. All those other relationships are governed by nothing more than self-interest, the "Desire" who rules the ship of court. In such a world, pledges of fidelity consistently dissolve in their very formulation. The relationship between poet and audience, on the contrary, implies the possibility that the poem, unlike the world it represents, will allow for a perspective that is at once trusting (we are gently asked to trust the poet that there is a "truth" behind the shadowy fiction of the poem), and disinterested (we are asked, indeed, "in every poynte to be indyfferente"). So the

kinds of relationship that pertain in the realm of literature are presented as being altogether different from those in the malicious world of the court.

But the premise of the trusting yet disinterested attitude we are asked to bring to the text can only be our disinterested trust in Skelton, or at least the poet-narrator, himself. And what trust can we have in him? Is there any perspective we can gain on this poem that does not collapse back into the frightening, deceptive, shifting world of the court? Might our trust in "Skelton" be no more than a new move in an endless game of fundamentally self-interested self-promotion, in which we become the victims? Authenticity might be only one more counter in the courtly game (a counter that almost all Drede's interlocutors effortlessly deploy).

Or might our trust in "Skelton" turn out to have rather shaky foundations? We are asked to interpret the poem as a dream poem, reasonably enough. Reading late medieval/early modern dream poetry involves trying to identify the authority figure from within the dream. Of course sophisticated poets like Chaucer will frustrate this attempt, but the frustration wouldn't exist if the invitation hadn't been made in the first place. Where is the authority figure in Skelton's dream? There isn't one, or no obvious one, at any rate. For not only does Drede's authority approach zero-point, since being Drede he can't really be said to "speak about" his experience at all; in fact it is perfectly possible that his "authority" is below zero-point, since it is easy to read the whole poem as issuing from Drede's fearful, "dredful" imagination.<sup>26</sup> Fear is the source of paranoia,

and it is possible to read the dream as a paranoid nightmare; the narrator's constant affirmations that he *seemed* to hear or see people talking about him serve to make us question whether or not he really *did* see such things ("me thought" is a constant qualifier to Drede's account). One sense of the word "drede," indeed (and one that Skelton activates) is "doubt, uncertainty."<sup>27</sup> If we were to read the poem as a paranoid nightmare, then one could argue that it becomes even more insubstantial than it at first appeared: it is not so much the case that corrupt court figures neutralise the power of poetry and poets, so this argument would run, but rather that the poet's fearful imagination actively precipitates this process of neutralization, by imagining threats where none exist. Just as Drede comes into being through his interlocutors, so too, more worryingly, do the interlocutors come into being through Drede.

And if Drede's authority *might* be below zero point, then it is: we invest a speaker with authority on the basis of confidence; once that confidence is questioned (and the doubt unable to be answered), then we remain unable to listen to a speaker or read a narrator's voice without questioning the status of their account of events.

This essay might seem to be running into trouble: I wanted to devote this section to "construing the residue" of Skelton's poem – to elucidating what is irreducible after we sift out the phantasma of fear from "mater in dede." The only possibility of making this elucidation seemed to lie in our relationship with the poet-narrator. As we are seeing now, however, that relationship can only be



constructed on infirm territory. The argument that we should seek to establish our relationship not with Drede but with the narrator of Prologue and Epilogue is no escape, since, as I argued in my introduction, Skelton goes to considerable lengths to blur narrator and Drede (and the narrator is, furthermore, long on board before the Prologue ends at l.126).

The point to which I seem to be heading in my reading is the world of the poem itself. I seem to be heading, that is, to a world in which all relationships are open to distrust: just as Drede distrusts all his interlocutors, so too do we distrust Drede; just as there is almost certainly no substance to the threats dreamed up by Drede's enemies, so too there may be no substance to the narrator's own threats; just as the last stanza is, as I argued in my introduction, recursive into the nightmare experience of dreadful distrust, so too is our own reading heading in the same direction. Paranoia is an infectious disease.

It is impossible to get around an interpretation of this poem as the fearful projection of paranoia. Does that necessarily destroy its authority? I do not think so. I am reminded of the maxim that "just because you're paranoid doesn't mean your enemies don't hate you." It's impossible to deny the plausibility of paranoia in *The Bouge of Courte*, but so too is it impossible to deny the power of the poem as a whole in expressing the experience of paranoia. The poem's power derives from the extraordinary way in which it says "I cannot say anything." The poet's voice never escapes its marginality – it is forever perched on the ship's edge, ready to jump. And precisely as such, it traces the nature of

that marginality with frightening force, brilliantly, even luridly, highlighting the pain and fear that exist at the edges of articulation, immediately before the silence of death, “dazed, with dreadful face.”

But it isn't *actually* silent: even if narrator and Drede are fundamentally similar, the single act that differentiates the narrator from Drede is the unhesitating act of writing and publication. The very fact of articulating paranoia is the first move in an attempt to locate the sources of fear; even if the poem does nothing more than articulate the experience, it has its own authority.<sup>28</sup> Whether we choose to invest the speaker with the kind of authority I am describing depends on an ethical choice as to whether we remain in a hermeneutics of a free play of meanings, or whether we aim at the minimal authorial closure to which I'm pointing. It is our decisions as readers, not something ineradicably there “in” the text, which bring an author into being.<sup>29</sup> If we do accept this minimal closure of written paranoia's own authority, however, then we must equally recognise that the author does not, as Barthes would have it, “die” at the moment of writing, but rather that he “lives” through that very act:

...the shypborde faste I hente,  
And thoughte to lepe; and even with that woke,  
Caughte penne and ynke, and wroth this lytell boke. (lines 530-532)

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<sup>1</sup> An earlier form of this essay appeared as “The Death of the Author?: Skelton’s *Bowge of Court*,” in *The Timeless and the Temporal, Writings in Honour of John Chalker*, ed. Elizabeth Maslen (London: Queen Mary and Westfield College, 1993), 58-79. I thank the publishers for permission to reprint this revised version.

<sup>2</sup> A. S. G. Edwards, “From Manuscript to Print: Wynkyn de Worde and the Printing of Contemporary Poetry,” *Gutenberg Jahrbuch* 66 (1991): 143-48, at pp. 143-44.

<sup>3</sup> Roland Barthes, “La mort de l’auteur,” *Manteia* 5 (1968): 12-17. The original text can be found in Roland Barthes, *Essais critiques IV, Le bruissement de la langue* (Paris: Seuil, 1984), 61-67, from which all citations in this essay are drawn. Further page numbers will be cited in the body of the text. The translation into English of this essay by Stephen Heath (*Image-Music-Text* (London: Fontana, 1977), 142-148) is reproduced in *Modern Criticism and Theory, a Reader*, ed. David Lodge (Harlow, UK: Longman, 1988), 167-72. The citations are from Heath, *Image, Music, Text*. Further page numbers will be cited in the body of the text.

<sup>4</sup> For a convenient summary of the argument surrounding dating, see *John Skelton, The Complete English Poems*, ed. John Scattergood (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1983), 395. See also Jane Griffiths, *John Skelton and Poetic Authority: Defining the Liberty to Speak* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006), 56 and further references. Griffiths dates the *Bowge* c. 1488.

<sup>5</sup> All citations from the works of Skelton are taken from *John Skelton, The Complete English Poems*, ed. Scattergood.

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<sup>6</sup> For an exceptionally penetrating argument about the dead end of allegory in the context of literalist philology, and how it feels (bad), see Helen Cooney, “Skelton’s *Bowge of Court* and the Crisis of Allegory in Late-Medieval England,” in *Nation, Court and Culture: New Essays on Fifteenth-Century English Poetry*, ed. Helen Cooney (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2001), 153-67. I am very grateful to Helen Cooney for sending this article to me.

<sup>7</sup> Respectively, RSTC 22597 and 22597.5. Jane Griffiths argues the same point, with reference to the narrative shock of Drede’s attempted suicide: “By concluding on such a destabilizing note, *The Bowge of Court* fiercely startles the reader into engagement with his work.” See Griffiths, *John Skelton and Poetic Authority*, 64.

<sup>8</sup> This point is made by Anthony J. Hasler, “Cultural Intersections: Skelton, Barclay, Hawes, André,” in *John Skelton and Early Modern Culture: Papers Honoring Robert S. Kinsman*, edited by David R. Carlson (Tempe, Arizona: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2008), 63-84, at pp. 72-73. I am grateful to Kathleen Tonry for pointing me to this locus. The misprint “Wynkyn the Worde” appears only in the earlier edition.

<sup>9</sup> For medieval theories of authorship, see Minnis, A. J. *Medieval Theory of Authorship: Scholastic Literary Attitudes in the Later Middle Ages*, second edition (Aldershot, UK: Scolar Press, 1988). For the precarious position of early Tudor poets, see Colin Burrow, “The Experience of Exclusion: Literature and Politics in the Reigns of Henry VII and Henry VIII,” in *The Cambridge History of Medieval English Literature*, ed. David Wallace (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 793-820.

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<sup>10</sup> For organizational shifts within the early Tudor court, see David Starkey, “The Age of the Household: Politics, Society and the Arts c.1350 - c.1550,” in *The Later Middle Ages*, ed. Stephen Medcalf (London: Methuen, 1981), 225-90, and, with specific reference to the *Bowge of Court*, Greg Walker, “John Skelton and the Royal Court,” in *John Skelton and Early Modern Culture*, ed. Carlson, 3-18, at pp. 7-10. For the cultural centralizations and their attendant cultural disciplines, see James Simpson, *Reform and Cultural Revolution, 1350-1547*, volume 2 of *The Oxford English Literary History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), especially Chapter 5. For the shifts in discursive practice (especially the rising status of the literal sense and its attendant paranoia), see Cooney, “Skelton’s *Bowge of Court* and the Crisis of Allegory in Late-Medieval England,” and James Simpson, *Burning to Read: English Fundamentalism and its Reformation Opponents* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), Chapter 5 especially.

<sup>11</sup> I argue this more fully in James Simpson, “Faith and Hermeneutics: Pragmatism versus Pragmatism,” *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies*, 33 (2003): 215-39.

<sup>12</sup> For an intelligent account of this critical phenomenon, see Seán Burke, *The Death and Return of the Author: Criticism and Subjectivity in Barthes, Foucault, and Derrida*, second edition (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998).

<sup>13</sup> The citation is from *The Vision of Piers Plowman*, ed. A.V.C. Schmidt, second edition (London, 1995).

<sup>14</sup> *Mum and the Sothsegger*, in *The Piers Plowman Tradition*, ed. Helen Barr (London: Dent, 1993). Letter forms have been modernized. For other late medieval examples of fear of speaking, see James Simpson, “The Constraints of Satire in *Piers Plowman* and

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*Mum and the Sothsegger*,” in *Langland the Mystics and the Medieval English Religious Tradition*, ed. Helen Phillips (Cambridge: Brewer, 1990), 11-30. See also Kathryn Kerby-Fulton, *Books Under Suspicion: Censorship and Tolerance of Revelatory Writing in Late Medieval England* (Notre Dame, IND: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006).

<sup>15</sup> For an extremely useful survey of Skelton studies, see Kathleen Tonry, “John Skelton and the New Fifteenth Century,” *Literature Compass* 5 (2008): 721-39. I am grateful to Kathleen Tonry for allowing me to see this essay before publication.

<sup>16</sup> For an expert survey of curial satire, with astute arguments about the *Bowge of Court*, see Ad Putter, “Animating Court Satire,” in *The Court and Cultural Diversity*, ed. Evelyn Mullally and John Thompson (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Brewer, 1997), 67-76. See also Helen Barr and Kate Ward-Perkins, “‘Spekyng for one’s sustenance’: the Rhetoric of Counsel in *Mum and the Sothsegger*, Skelton’s *Bowge of Court*, and Elyot’s *Pasquil the Playne*,” in *The Long Fifteenth Century: Essays in Honour of Douglas Gray*, ed. Helen Cooper and Sally Mapstone (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 249-72.

<sup>17</sup> This point has been best made by Stanley Fish, *John Skelton’s Poetry* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1965), 77; Fish is arguing against the earlier argument of A.R. Heiserman, *Skelton and Satire* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), who has it that Skelton merely rearranged the stylistic possibilities of satire to attack satire’s conventional objects (Chapter 2, *passim*). Fish, instead, argues that the focus is not on the court vices, but rather on Drede himself: “we watch him rather than them; his situation (mental and physical), not their exposure, is our point of focus” (77). I agree with Fish entirely here; I register my disagreement with him below.

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<sup>18</sup> For the low stylistic register of satire, see Simpson, “The Constraints of Satire,” esp. n. 32.

<sup>19</sup> For the theme of poetic discretion, see James Simpson, “Dante’s “*Astripetam Aquilam*” and the Theme of Poetic Discretion in the *House of Fame*,” *Essays and Studies* n.s. 39 (1986): 1-18.

<sup>20</sup> Cited from *Sir Thomas Wyatt, The Complete Poems*, ed. R.A. Rebholz (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin, 1978), 94.

<sup>21</sup> Jane Griffiths accurately goes further in arguing that the *Bouge* “disconcertingly calls into question the validity of the distinction between poetic and courtly feigning.” See Griffiths, *John Skelton and Poetic Authority*, p. 60.

<sup>22</sup> This point has been made by Anna Torti, *The Glass of Form, Mirroring Structures From Chaucer to Skelton* (Cambridge: Brewer, 1991), 112.

<sup>23</sup> For the formation and function of the “literary” in the century leading up to Skelton, see the cogent essay of Robert Meyer-Lee in this volume.

<sup>24</sup> For the larger history and instability of the satirical scrap across the fifteenth century, see the penetrating essay by Mishtooni Bose in this volume.

<sup>25</sup> See, for example, *Piers Plowman*, B.7.144-51; and *Mum and the Sothsegger*, line 1293.

<sup>26</sup> For Drede’s failure’s of authority, see Jane Griffiths, *John Skelton and Poetic Authority: Defining the Liberty to Speak* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006), 63.

<sup>27</sup> Besides sense 1 (a), “Fear, fright, terror,” *Middle English Dictionary* also lists under “drede” sense 4 (a) “Doubt, uncertainty.”

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<sup>28</sup> For another late medieval poem whose advice to princes is essentially that they have most to learn from the *emptiness* of advice poetry, see James Simpson, “‘For al my body...weieth nat an unce’: Empty Poets and Rhetorical Weight in Lydgate’s *Churl and the Bird*,” in *John Lydgate: Poetry, Culture, and Lancastrian England*, ed. Larry Scanlon and James Simpson (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006), 129-46.

<sup>29</sup> While Stanley Fish rightly argues that the focus of *The Bouge of Courte* is interior, rather than on the traditional objects of court satire, I disagree with the ending of his chapter on the poem, where he says that, given Drede’s attempted suicide, and given the inseparability of the narrator and Drede, the Skeltonic problem here is “insoluble—in later poems there will be an alternative solution—a ‘leap of faith’” (81). I think Fish restricts his reading to the represented action of the poem, rather than extending it to include the poem itself, and its relationship with us as readers. My point is that a leap of faith is required here, too (from the reader, towards the author), but the faith is of a purely ethical kind. Presumably the later, “reader-response” Fish would agree with me in wanting to extend the problematic of the poem to its relationship with its readers; but if he did so, then he would also agree that this particular version of reader-response criticism requires that we posit the existence of authors. For a critique of the pragmatism of Fish and Richard Rorty for its failure to grant any place to trust in reading and interpretation, see Simpson, “Faith and Hermeneutics.”



John Skelton's *The Bowge of Courte* (1499).  
Shyfte now therewith, let see, as ye can, In Bowge of Courte chevysaunce to make; For I dare saye that there nys erthly man But, and he can Bone aventure take, There can no favour nor frendshyp hym forsake. Bone aventure may brynge you in suche case That ye shall stonde in favoure and in grace. 100.  
She promysed to us all she wolde be kynde; Of Bowge of Court she asketh what we wold have, And we asked favoure, and favour she us gave. 120. 125. route: crowd. Thus endeth the prologue; and begynneth the Bowge of Courte brevely compyled. DREDE. THE sayle is up, Fortune ruleth our helme, We wante no wynde to passe now over all; Favoure we have toughther than ony elme, That wyll abyde and never frome us fall. The prologue to the bowge of court. IN autumn, when the sun in Virgine By radiant heat enriped hath our corn; When Luna, full of mutability, As empress the diadem hath worn Of our pole arctic, smiling half in scorn At our folly and our unsteadfastness; The time when Mars to war him did dress  
Shift now therewith, let see, as ye can In Bowge of Court chevysaunce to make; 100 For I dare say that there nis earthly man But, an he can Bon Aventure take, There can no favour nor friendship him forsake; Bon Aventure may bring you in such case That ye shall stand in favour and in grace.  
How do ye, master? ye look so soberly: As I be saved at the dreadful day, It is a perilous vice, this envy: Alas, a conning man ne dwell may In no place well, but fools with him affray! 1. "It is a bowge of court. Ceremonia aulica est." Hormanni *Vulgaria*, sig. s iii. ed. 1530. "Bouche Court. Budge-a-Court, diet allowed at Court." Cotgrave's *Dict.* "The Kings Archers . . ., had Bouch of Court (to wit, Meat and Drink) and great Wages of six Pence by the Day." Stow's *Survey*, B. vi. 49. ed.  
Here our author, in adopting the more grave and stately movement of the seven lined stanza, has shown himself not always incapable of exhibiting allegorical imagery with spirit and dignity. But his comic vein predominates." Warton's *Hist. of E. P.*, ii. 347. ed. 4to. "Bouge of Court, a corruption of bouche, Fr. An allowance of meat and drink for the tables of the inferior officers, and others who were occasionally called to serve and entertain the court.