on the death of Henry Percy, fourth earl of Northumberland, are among his earliest poems. In the last decade of the century he was appointed tutor to Prince Henry (afterwards Henry VIII.). He wrote for his pupil a lost *Speculum principis,* and Erasmus, in dedicating an ode to the prince in 1500, speaks of Skelton as “ unum Britannicarum literarum lumen ac decus." In 1498 he was successively ordained sub-deacon, deacon and priest. He seems to have been imprisoned in 1502, but no reason is known for his disgrace. Two years later he retired from regular attendance at court to become rector of Diss, a benefice which he retained nominally till his death. Skelton frequently signed himself "regius orator” and poet-laureate, but there is no record of any emoluments paid in connexion with these dignities, although the Abbé du Resnel, author of *Recherches sur les poètes couronnez,* asserts that he had seen a patent (1513-1514) in which Skelton was appointed poet-laureate to Henry VIII. As rector of Diss he caused great scandal among his parishioners, who thought him, says Anthony à Wood, more fit for the stage than for the pew or the pulpit. He was secretly married to a woman who lived in his house, and he had earned the hatred of the Dominican monks by his fierce satire. Consequently he came under the formal censure of Richard Nix, the bishop of the diocese, and appears to have been temporarily suspended. After his death a collection of farcical tales, no doubt chiefly, if not entirely, apocryphal, gathered round his name—*The Merie Tales of Skelton.* During the rest of the century he figured in the popular imagination as an incorrigible practical joker.

His sarcastic wit made him some enemies, among them Sir Christopher Garnesche or Garneys, Alexander Barclay, William Lilly and the French scholar, Robert Gaguin *(c.* 1425-1502). With Garneys he engaged in a regular “ flyting,” undertaken, he says, at the king’s command, but Skelton’s four poems read as if the abuse in them were dictated by genuine anger. Earlier in his career he had found a friend and patron in Cardinal Wolsey, and the dedication to the cardinal of his *Replycacion* is couched in the most flattering terms. But in 1522, when Wolsey in his capacity of legate dissolved convocation at St Paul's, Skelton put in circulation the couplet:

"Gentle Paul, laie doune thy sweard

For Peter of Westminster hath shaven thy beard.”

In *Colyn Cloute* he incidentally attacked Wolsey in a general satire on the clergy, but *Speke, Parrot* and *Why* *come ye nat to Courte?* are direct and fierce invectives against the cardinal who is said to have more than once imprisoned the author. To avoid another arrest Skelton took sanctuary in Westminster Abbey. He was kindly received by the abbot, John Islip, who continued to protect him until his death on the 21st of June 1529. The inscription on his tomb in the neighbouring church of St Margaret’s described him as *vates pierius.*

In his *Garlande of Laurell* Skelton gives a long list of his works, only a few of which are extant. The garland in question was worked for him in silks, gold and pearls by the ladies of the countess of Surrey at Sheriff Hutton Castle, where he was the guest of the duke of Norfolk. The composition includes compli­mentary verses to the various ladies concerned, and a good deal of information about himself. But it is as a satirist that Skelton merits attention. *The Bowge of Court* is directed against the vices and dangers of court life. He had already in his *Boke of the Thre Foies* drawn on Alexander Barclay’s version of the *Narrenschiff* of Sebastian Brant, and this more elaborate and imaginative poem belongs to the same class. Skelton, falling into a dream at Harwich, sees a stately ship in the harbour called the *Bowge of Court,@@1* the owner of which is the Dame Saunce Pere. Her merchandise is Favour; the helmsman Fortune; and the poet, who figures as Drede (modesty), finds on board Favell (the flatterer), Suspect, Harvy Hafter (the clever thief), Dysdayne, Ryotte, Dyssymuler and Subtylte, who all explain themselves in turn, until at last Drede, who finds they are secretly his enemies, is about to save his life by jumping overboard, when he wakes with a start. Both of these poems are written in the

seven-lined Chaucerian stanza, but it is in an irregular metre of his own that his most characteristic work was accomplished. *The Boke of Phyllyp Sparowe,* the lament of Jane Scroop, a schoolgirl in the Benedictine convent of Carowe near Norwich, for her dead bird, was no doubt inspired by Catullus. It is a poem of some 1400 lines and takes many liberties with the formularies of the church. The digressions are considerable. We learn what a wide reading Jane had in the romances of Charlemagne, of the Round Table, The Four Sons of Aymon and the Trojan cycle. Skelton finds space to give his opinion of Chaucer, Gower and Lydgate. He seems fully to have realized Chaucer’s value as a master of the English language. Gower’s matter was, he said, "worth gold,” but his English he regarded as antiquated. The verse in which the poem is written, called from its inventor "Skeltonical,” is here turned entirely to whimsical use. The lines are usually six-syllabled, but vary in length, and rhyme in groups of two, three, four and even more. It is not far removed from the old alliterative English verse, and well fitted to be chanted by the minstrels who had sung the old ballads. For its comic admixture of. Latin Skelton had abundant example in French and Low Latin macaronic verse. He makes frequent use of Latin and French words to carry out his exacting system of frequently recurring rhymes. This breathless, voluble measure was in Skelton’s energetic hands an admirable vehicle for invective, but it easily degenerated into doggerel. By the end of the 16th century he was a “ rude rayling rimer ” (Puttenham, *Arte of English Poesie),* and at the hands of Pope@@2 and Warton he fared even worse. His own criticism is a just one:—

" For though my ryme be ragged,

Tattered and jagged, Rudely rayne beaten, Rusty and moughte eaten, It hath in it some pyth.”

*Colyn Cloute* represents the average country man who gives his opinions on the state of the church. There is no more scathing indictment of the sins of the clergy before the Reformation. He exposes their greed, their ignorance, the ostentation of the bishops and the common practice of simony, but takes care to explain that his accusations do not include all and that he writes in defence of, not against, the church. He repeatedly hits at Wolsey even in this general satire, but not directly. *Speke, Parrot* has only been preserved in a fragmentary form, and is exceedingly obscure. It was apparently composed at different times, but in the latter part of the composition he openly attacks Wolsey. In *Why come ye nat to Courte* ? there is no attempt at disguise. The wonder is not that the author had to seek sanctuary, but that he had any opportunity of doing so. He rails at Wolsey’s ostentation, at his almost royal authority, his overbearing manner to suitors high and low, and taunts him with his mean extraction. This scathing invective was not allowed to be printed in the cardinal’s lifetime, but it was no doubt widely circulated in MS. and by repetition. The charge of coarseness regularly brought against Skelton is based chiefly on *The Tunnynge of Elynoure Rummynge,* a realistic description in the same metre of the drunken women who gathered at a well-known ale-house kept by Elynour Rummynge at Leatherhead, not far from the royal palace of Nonsuch. “ Skelton Laureate against the Scottes ” is a fierce song of triumph celebrating the victory of Flodden. "Jemmy is ded And closed in led, That was theyr owne Kynge,” says the poem; but there was an earlier version written before the news of James IV.’s death had reached London. This, which is the earliest singly printed ballad in the language, was entitled *A Ballade of the Scottysshe Kynge,* and was rescued in 1878 from the wooden covers of a copy of *Huon de Bordeaux.* “ Howe the douty Duke of Albany, lyke a cowarde knight ” deals with the campaign of 1523, and contains a panegyric of Henry VIII. To this is attached an *envoi* to Wolsey, but it must surely have been

@@@1 Bowge—Fr. *bouche-,* court rations. The term is explained as the right to eat at the king's table.

@@@2 (Spence, *Anecdotes,* p. 87) : Pope said : "Skelton’s poems are all low and bad, there is nothing in them that is worth reading,” and (in *Satires and Epigrams,* v. 38) “ And beastly Skelton heads of houses quote.”