

SKELTON'S *MAGNYFYCENCE* AND TRAGIC DRAMA

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Late medieval tragedy has enjoyed a significant revival of critical interest in recent years, but poetic examples of the genre, such as Lydgate's *Fall of Princes*, have drawn far more attention than dramatic instances.¹ There are good reasons for this. It is difficult to see, for example, how the doctrinal commitment of such key forms as the cycle drama and the morality play could countenance anything like the irredeemable nature of catastrophe and loss we associate with tragedy. Robert Weimann suggests that it is only after the Reformation that the self-confident representation of authority 'as a given, unitary court of appeal' gives way to evoke more divided and uncertain responses both within and without drama. Consequently, there emerges 'a previously unknown element of vulnerability in the assertion and appropriation of authority', a quality that is crucial for the realisation of a tragic theatre.² More specifically, Ruth Lunney has insisted that it is only with Christopher Marlowe's plays that a definitive break is made with the legacy of medieval drama and with its way of revealing the relationship between human and divine forms of authority. For example, Marlowe refuses to view tragic suffering as part of a cautionary moral narrative and his works abandon, Lunney suggests, the enduring imperative to provide an audience with moral guidance. Instead, Marlowe's plays represent experience stripped of any symbolic association with fundamental truths and depict the reactions of a confused protagonist whose certainty, along with that of the audience, has disappeared.³

Such forms of tragic composition seem remote from an early Tudor interlude and moral play like John Skelton's *Magnyfycence* (c.1520–1522; printed 1530) with its homiletic, not to say cautionary, narrative. The play is pervaded throughout with proverbial observations which direct understanding of what we see, perhaps most signally, Measure's statement of its core moral teaching: 'Measure is treasure'.⁴ Yet even this key perception is not elaborated as clearly as we might expect by the more complex and, in many ways, darker story the play tells. For example, Measure is, of course, personified in the play as one of its leading representatives of virtue, yet once he is expelled by the Vices, he never