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 JOHN BETJEMAN – Poems selected by Hugo Williams
 ROBERT BROWNING – Poems selected by Douglas Dunn
 ROBERT BURNS – Poems selected by Don Paterson
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JOHN SKELTON

Poems selected by ANTHONY THWAITE



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from The Bouge of Court (1498)*

DREDE

The sail is up, Fortune ruleth our helm,
We want no wind to pass now over all;
Favour we have tougher than any elm,
That will abide and never from us fall.
But under honey oftime lieth bitter gall:
For, as methought, in our ship I did see
Full subtil persons, in number four and three.

The first was Favell, full of flattery,
With fables false that well could feign a tale;
The second was Suspect, which that daily
Misdeemed each man, with face deadly and pale;
And Harvy Hafter,¹ that well could pick a male,²
With other four of their affinity,
Disdain, Riot, Dissimuler, Subtilty.

Fortune their friend, with whom oft she did dance;
They could not fail, they thought, they were so sure;
And oftentimes I would myself advance
With them to make soláce and pleasúre.
But my disport they could not well endure:
They said they hated for to deal with Drede.
Then Favell 'gan with fair speech me to feed.

FAVELL

'No thing earthly that I wonder so sore
As of your conning,³ that is so excellent;
Deyntee⁴ to have with us such one in store,

* *Bouge*, the free rations provided at Court

¹ fraudster; ² purse; ³ learning; ⁴ pleasure

LBBIS | We know
book

So virtuously that hath his dayes spent;
Fortune to you gifts of grace hath lent:

Lo, what it is a man to have conning!
All earthly treasure it is surmounting.
'Ye be an apt man, as any can be found,
To dwell with us, and serve my lady's grace;
Ye be to her, yea, worth a thousand pound!
I heard her speak of you within short space,
When there were divers that sore did you menace;
And, though I say it, I was myself your friend,
For here be divers to you that be unkind.

'But this one thing – ye may be sure of me;
For, by that Lord that bought dear all mankind,
I cannot flatter, I must be plain to thee!
An ye need ought, man, shew to me your mind,
For ye have me whom faithful ye shall find;
Whiles I have ought, by God, thou shalt not lack,
And if need be, a bold word I dare crack!

'Nay, nay, be sure, whiles I am on your side
Ye may not fall, trust me, ye may not fail.
Ye stand in favour, and Fortune is your guide,
And, as she will, so shall our great ship sail:
These lewd cockwats¹ shall nevermore prevail
Against you hardely,² therefore be not afraid.
Farewell till soon, but no word that I said!

DREDE

Then thanked I him for his great gentleness.
But, as methought, he ware on him a cloak
That linéd was with doubtful doubleness;
Methought, of words that he had full a poke;
His stomach stuffed oft times did reboke.

¹ rascals; ² boldly

Suspect, methought, met him at a braid,
And I drew near to hark what they two said.

'In faith,' quod Suspect, 'spake Drede no word of me?'
'Why? what then? wilt thou let men to speak?
He saith he cannot well accord with thee.'

'Twyste,' quod Suspect, 'go play! him I ne reke!
'By Christ,' quod Favell, 'Drede is sullen freke.¹
What, let us hold him up,² man, for a while?'
'Yea so,' quod Suspect, 'he may us both beguile.'

And when he came walking soberly,
With hum and ha, and with a crooked look,
Methought his head was full of jealousy,
His eyen rolling, his handès fast they quoke;
And to meward the straight way he took.
'God speed, brother!' to me quod he then,
And thus to talk with me he began.

SUSPICION

'Ye remember the gentleman right now
That communed with you, methought a pretty space?
Beware of him, for, I make God avow,
He will beguile you and speak fair to your face.
Ye never dwelt in such another place,
For here is none that dare well other trust—
But I would tell you a thing, an I durst!

'Spake he, i'faith, no word to you of me?
I wot, an he did, ye would me tell.
I have a favour to you, whereof it be
That I must shew you much of my counsél.
But I wonder what the devil of hell
He said of me, when he with you did talk!
By mine advice use not with him to walk.

¹ man; ² leave him alone

'The sovraneſt thing that any man may have
Is little to ſay, and much to hear and ſee;
For, but I truſted you, ſo God me ſave,
I wouldè nothing ſo plainè be:
To you onlie, methink, I durſt ſhrive me,
For now am I plenarly¹ diſpoſed
To ſhew you things that may not be diſcloſed.'

DREDE

Then I aſſured him my fidelity
His counſel ſecret never to diſcure,
If he could find in heart to truſtè me;
Elſe I prayed him, with all my buſy cure,²
To keep it himſelf, for then he might be ſure
That no man earthly could him betray,
Whiles of his mind it were locked with the key.

'By God,' quod he, 'this and thus it is . . .'
And of his mind he ſhewed me all and ſome.
'Farewell,' quod he, 'we will talk more of this . . .'
So he departed where he would be come.
I dare not ſpeak, I promiſed to be dumb.
But, as I ſtood muſing in my mind,
Harvy Hafter came leaping, light as lynde.³

Upon his breſt he bare a verſing-box,⁴
His throat was clear, and luſtily could fayne.
Methought his gown was all furred with fox,
And ever he ſang, '*Sith I am nothing plain . . .*'
To keep him from picking⁵ it was a great pain:
He gazed on me with his goatish beard,
When I looked on him, my purſe was half afeard.

¹ fully; ² diligence; ³ light as a lime tree, nimbly; ⁴ dicing-box;

⁵ pocket-picking

HARVY HAFTER

'Sir, God you ſave! why look ye ſo ſad?
What thing is that I may do for you?
A wonder thing that ye wax not mad!
For, an I ſtudy ſhould as ye do now,
My wit would waſte, I make God avow!
Tell me your mind: methink ye make a verſe;
I could it ſcan, an ye would it rehearſe!
'But to the point ſhortly to proceed,
Where hath your dwelling been ere ye came here?
For, as I trow, I have ſeen you indeed
Ere this, when that ye made me royal cheer.
Hold up the helm, look up, and let God ſteer:
I would be merry, what wind that ever blow!
Heave and ho rumbelow, row the boat, Norman, row!

'*Princes of Youth* can ye ſing by rote?
Or *Shall I ſail with you* a fellowſhip aſſay?
For on the book I cannot ſing a note.
Would to God, it would pleaſe you ſome day
A ballad book before me for to lay,
And learn me to ſing *re mi fa sol*!
And, when I fail, bob me on the noll.

'Lo, what is to you a pleaſure great
To have that conning and ways that ye have!
By Goddès ſoul, I wonder how ye gate
So great pleaſure, or who to you it gave.
Sir, pardon me, I am an homely knave,
To be with you thus pert and thus bold:
But ye be welcome to our houſehóld.

'And, I dare ſay, there is no man therein
But would be glad of your company.
I wiſt never man that ſo ſoon could win
The favour that ye have with my lady.
I pray to God that it may never die.