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Saints and the Social Order:

Alexander Barclay’s The Life of St. George

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This paper examines The Life of St. George, Alexander Barclay’s 1515 translation of a humanist Latin prose poem. Barclay, who styled himself a laureate in the tradition of Lydgate, adapts laureate poetic practice in order to address a noble audience in a bid to gain court patronage. Barclay’s emendations and additions transform the hagiography of England’s patron saint into a commentary on traditional English ideals of citizenship and good governance, aimed at an audience comprised of both common citizens and noble elites, including, as this paper argues, the young king Henry VIII.

Based on textual evidence found in his extant works, the literary career of early Tudor poet Alexander Barclay was marked by a long struggle to gain patronage and preferment at Henry VIII’s court. Barclay, a Benedictine (1475?-1552) and a self-styled “laureate,” authored a number of adaptations of popular Latin poems over a 15-year period in the early sixteenth century. His first published work, The Ship of Fools, based on Sebastian Brant’s Narrenschiff, appears to have functioned as a bid for royal patronage. The poem contains a number of passages praising the king of England, but between the time Barclay finished the work in 1508 and the time it was published at the end of 1509, Henry VII died and Henry VIII acceded to the throne. Accordingly, “at some time between April and December” of 1509, “the finished translation was revised, apparently by Barclay himself.” References to Henry VII were quickly revised to reflect the change in rulers. For example, a description of the king’s dress, which displays “inwarde prudence” and “godly wyt and grauyte” —

1 Barclay appears to have joined the Franciscan Order sometime after 1520; thus, later writers sometimes describe him as a Franciscan. See Beatrice White, Introduction to The Eclogues of Alexander Barclay, EETS o.s. 175 (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1928), xli.

a passage which would have best described Henry VII—was annotated with the marginal comment, “Laus svmma de grauitate eximia Henrici Anglorum regis, viij (High commendation of the extraordinary seriousness of Henry VIII, King of England).”

Alistair Fox argues that the “inconsistencies and emendations” found in The Ship of Fools show Barklay scrambling to change his text to more effectively seek patronage in the new regime. It is obvious from Barklay’s next extant work, his Eclogues, that Barklay failed to secure that patronage. The Eclogues, which date to 1513-14, reflect Barklay’s bitterness at the court patronage system and those poets who did gain preferment at the court of Henry VIII. The first three Eclogues translate a satirical letter on court life by Aeneas Sylvius Piccolomini, which Barklay transforms into pastoral dialogues featuring an old shepherd who tries to persuade a younger shepherd of the disadvantages of being a courtier. Fox reads Eclogues I-III as a dramatization of Barklay’s own feelings about his lack of patronage. Barklay chooses not to retain the satirical tone of his source text, instead creating a serious dialogue on the corruption and unpleasantness to be found at court “not only to justify a life away from court, but also to reconcile himself to his rural existence” at the monastery at Ely.

Despite the Eclogues’ attack on court life, the poem contains a direct petition for patronage. The fourth Eclogue is a dialogue between a rich man, Codrus, and a poor poet, Minalcas, who voices his grievances against unfair, miserly patrons. In the midst of these complaints Minalcas recites a 300-line elegy on the death of Sir Edward Howard, son of the Duke of Norfolk. Howard, who served as


5 Ibid., 46.

6 White, Introduction to The Eclogues of Alexander Barklay, EETS o.s. 175 (London: Oxford UP, 1928), xx.
the lord admiral of Henry VIII’s navy, died at sea during an engagement with the French in 1513. In the elegy, Barclay depicts the “Towre of virtue and honour, into the which the noble Hawarde contended to enter by worthy actes of chialy,” lamenting that Fortune turned her favor against him (IV, ll. 1071-1078). “In the course of his fiction, Barclay has thus managed to depict his need [and] offer a sample of the flattering panegyrics he can provide for his intended patron,” which ultimately succeeded in securing the Duke of Norfolk’s support.7

Barclay’s The Life of St. George, published by Richard Pynson in 1515, must also be read in light of the author’s efforts to secure patronage. The Life of St. George is an amplified adaptation of a Latin text by a contemporary continental humanist – in this case, the Georgius of Baptista Spagnuoli Mantuanus (1448-1516), or Mantuan. Mantuan’s works were popular products for the sixteenth-century book trade; nine separate editions of the Georgius were printed in Europe between 1507 and 1513.8 By translating Mantuan’s verse Barclay continued to “turn into English writings whose continental successes would have engendered confidence in their marketability in England,”9 as he had with The Eclogues and The Ship of Fools. Barclay’s translation reworks Mantuan’s version of the vita of St. George, turning a “primarily religious and moral”10 text into a poem deeply concerned with civic order and exemplary moral leadership within the English realm – a poem of advice and criticism addressed toward the Tudor political elite who have either rewarded or rejected Barclay’s poetic efforts.

Other poets before Barclay had used hagiography to address themes of politics and leadership. Authors like John Capgrave and John Lydgate used the vehicle of the saint’s life to exhort their royal patron to virtuous behavior. Karen Winstead’s study of Capgrave’s

7 Fox, 53-54.


10 Nelson, xvi.
Life of St. Katherine and Fiona Somerset’s study of Lydgate’s St. Edmund and St. Fremund in particular have revealed relationships between hagiography and advice-to-princes literature. Yet in these works, the characters of Sts. Katherine, Edmund, and Fremund also allegorize the rule of the king contemporary to the text, Henry VI, and reflect anxieties about the king’s qualities and capacities as a leader. Writing almost a century later, Barclay expresses similar concerns about the nature of contemporary rule and governance of the English kingdom, describing the characteristics of strong, virtuous leaders and the ideal relationship between rulers and subjects.

Politics was a perennial concern of early sixteenth-century English literature, and the legend of St. George was a particularly fitting vehicle for an early Tudor-era author to explore political themes. Historically, St. George enjoyed popularity throughout medieval Europe as a military cult-figure, especially during the Crusades, but from the reign of Richard I (1189-99) he was regarded as a special protector of England. Edward III, who was particularly devoted to the saint, was the driving force behind a royal cult of St. George, establishing the Order of the Garter and St. George’s Chapel at Windsor between 1347 and 1349.

Edward’s successors strengthened the kingdom’s ties to the saint; George was officially made England’s patron saint after Henry V’s victory at Agincourt in 1415, marking the development of a national cult of St. George. In following decades the saint came to be “identified as a patron of the English monarchy and the English nation, rather than of any one specific sovereign.” These ties to crown and country meant that the saint could be appropriated for po-


12 Fox, 3-10.


14 Riches, 113.
political propaganda. During the Wars of the Roses, both Lancastrian and Yorkist monarchs utilized St. George’s popular following and image to help legitimize their respective governments.15

Early Tudor monarchs followed the example of prior regimes in promoting their ties to St. George. After the Battle of Bosworth, Henry VII presented a standard with the red cross to St. Paul’s, London. His chapel at Westminster houses a statue of St. George and the dragon, and the figure of the saint also appears in two different places on Henry’s tomb. During the reign of Henry VIII, coins (the “George Noble”) were issued depicting the saint. By Barclay’s time, St. George was firmly connected in popular imagination with England’s national identity and with the English monarchy. This association facilitates Barclay’s use of the saint’s life to discuss political power and social order in early sixteenth-century England.

Before presenting the St. George story, however, Barclay lays out his credentials and aims as a poet. Barclay’s poem can speak to and about power because it, like his other work, is firmly embedded in a long tradition of high-culture laureate poetry. Barclay claims to be “lawreat” (118) early on in The Life of St. George. His career has obvious parallels with Lydgate’s, the first laureate in English poetic tradition: both poets were Benedictines, and both authored poems (often vernacular translations of Latin sources) for noble patrons. Yet though Barclay tries to adopt the trappings of laureateship, his circumstances were markedly different from fourteenth-century poets like Capgrave or Lydgate.

When English humanist poets, like Barclay, styled themselves as “laureates,” they drew attention to their university education and their ability to act “as translators, transmitters, and interpreters of culture” through literary production.16 Following the precedent of Petrarch, sixteenth-century poets could receive honors called laureations from universities (though many writers – includ-

15 Bengtson, 327.
16 Seth Lerer, Chaucer and His Readers: Imagining the Author in Late Medieval England (New York: Cambridge UP, 1993), 163.
ing Barclay—called themselves laureates without having received such formal distinction). The laurel garland was bestowed for excellence in the faculty of grammar, but laureateship was not just an academic honor. In the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, students of humane letters had become so valuable to the [English] nation that the king himself took part in honoring them. . . . the laurel was granted to scholars who . . . had rendered themselves capable of teaching poetry and oratory to others and of using their pens in the service of the State.  

Laureateship was no longer the province of poet-monks receiving patronage from secular and ecclesiastical princes. Laureation implied close ties to government and politics; attracting a patron from among the ranks of powerful nobles or court officials could help a writer win monetary compensation as well as institutional employment (such as advancement to an ecclesiastical office or a bureaucratic post) for their literary output. In England Henry VII had established the paid position of King’s Poet, first awarded to French humanist Bernard André in 1486.

Writing within a court patronage system, laureate poets needed to be attuned to their historical and sociopolitical milieu, especially since their work might be used to reaffirm the power of the patron. But the poet’s relationship to court power structures was complex. Though important enough to address the princely patron with advice and even criticism, the laureate was subservient and in service to the crown. Because laureates were still servants, they needed a separate authority in order to address those in power and to comment on contemporary historical and political events. Late-medieval laureates attempted to adopt what Robert J. Meyer-Lee describes as “a timeless, autonomous authority that reflects, but is

17 Barclay’s educational credentials cannot be verified, but based on textual evidence from *The Ship of Fools* and Barclay’s translation of Sallust, most biographers agree that he received a degree at either of the English universities, and that he seems to have been “acquainted . . . with the humanist circle in Paris.” (see White, “Introduction” to *The Eclogues of Alexander Barclay*, viii-ix).


not reducible to, the parallel embodied authority of the prince.” To generate this authority, Lydgate adapted traditions and practices used by monastic historical writers. As Meyer-Lee explains, monastic historians incorporated biographical information into the preface of their work “as an analogue for the veracity of the history it reports,” reinforcing recorded events with “the factuality of a named, historically specific author.” Lydgate and other poets in the laureate tradition introduced first-person passages or other biographical material into their work as a way of affirming a specific and authoritative voice, separate from the authority of the patrons they addressed.

Lacking both university laureation and an official court post, Barclay must rely on older literary traditions in order to demonstrate his authority as a laureate poet and the authority of his poetic output. Barclay inserts himself into the text of the prologue of the *Life of St. George*, describing his humble talent and pledging “selfe and seruyce” (94) to the poem’s first dedicatee and patron, Thomas Howard, Second Duke of Norfolk (Barclay states that his translation was undertaken by the Duke’s “commaundement” in line 76 of the prologue). He derives further authority from “the tradition which conceived literature to be a means of propagating virtue . . . which dominated the English Renaissance” in the early Tudor period. To set himself apart from his contemporaries, Barclay insists on his unique moral authority. In his opening invocation, the poet petitions the Virgin to help him avoid the “vayne gestes and fruyles” (110) of “raylynge poetes” (113) who call on Venus and “may the reders / to vicious lyfe excyte” (117). After all, he says, “he which is lawreat/ Ought nat his name / with vyce to vyolate” (118-19). This passage is aimed at court-sponsored laureates—most likely John Skelton, whom Barclay disparages as a “rascolde poete” in his Fourth


21  Meyer-Lee, 69.

Barclay maintains that he differs from these so-called laureates because he tries to convey moral principles through his poetry, unlike those of his peers who had commoditized their verse in service of the Tudor political machine.  

Barclay also exhibits his authority as a scholar and translator on the printed page. As with the bulk of his works translated from Latin, the text appears in a bilingual format, with the full Latin text of the original work being printed in the outer margins of the page. The *Life of St. George*, like a number of other Barclay translations, uses different typefaces to present the two texts: a larger blackletter for the English verse and a smaller blackletter for the Latin prose in the margin. David Carlson believes that this “distinctive” format was likely agreed upon by Barclay and Pynson, perhaps at the time of their first collaboration on the 1509 *Ship of Fools*.  

This format mirrors the centuries-long tradition of attaching textual authorities in the form of marginal glosses and commentary to the text proper, which act as both a reference and “an external sanction, reproduced visually by a display on the page of one’s sources or auctors.” Textual apparatuses accompanied the work of many humanist poets, including that of Mantuan, whose poems were often used as textbooks of Latin grammar. And dual-language text was used a century earlier by vernacular poets like John Gower, whose English chapters in the *Confessio Amantis* are framed by Latin verses, perhaps indicating that he “intended the Latin verses to serve as an important aid to reading, even as a primary means of entry . . . into the larger poem.”


24 Meyer-Lee, 193.


The marginal Latin text of Mantuan’s *Georgius* acts as a similar framework to Barclay’s work, an entry point or reference which facilitates study of the Latin and English poems, as Barclay explains in the prologue to his translation of Sallust’s *Bellum Jugurthinum*:

I haue also added vnto the marge of this my tra[n]slacion to thintent that such as shal dysdane to rede my translation in englysshe : may rede this hystorie more co[m]pendyously & more obscurely written in laten. Which hystorie : parauenture shal apere more clere & playne vnto theym in many places by help of this my tra[n]slation.  

The Latin text acts as a pedagogical tool, but it also demonstrates Barclay’s learning and poetical abilities to readers, including current potential patrons. In *The Life of St. George*, the dual-text format provides evidence of Barclay’s facility with Latin, his familiarity with humanist scholarship, and his proficiency as a translator and interpreter. With such skills in high demand at the Tudor court, Barclay’s unique presentation format displays his Latinity and scholarship: proof of his ability to excel as a laureate in service of patron and country.

Barclay relies on disparate authorities to support his claim of laureateship. In order to prove his poetic credentials he tries to recreate the authority of the Lydgatean tradition in his poetry. Barclay also links his writing to humanist scholarship, both by his choice of base text and by displaying Mantuan’s Latin text alongside his verse adaptation. Barclay attempts to straddle both the medieval and the humanist poetic tradition, using old and new authorities to assert that he is qualified to address princely patrons with criticism and advice. Though writing outside the Tudor court, when Barclay calls himself a laureate, he defines his work in relation to court power structures and politics in the English realm.

Barclay’s *Life of St. George* is deeply concerned with the power relationship between government and the governed, which Barclay locates when possible into the context of contemporary English society. In the course of the narrative, Barclay introduces two kingdoms. The first, Silene, is a city-state beset by maladies. Terrorized by a dragon, the people live with poisoned air, water,

and food, as well as the imminent threat of being selected as part of the dragon’s daily meal. Their rulers are unable to defend their city from the dragon and can do no better than to “sacyate” (573) its appetite by sacrificing the citizens twice a day. As protectors of the realm, they fall far short of their duty to the people. No wonder then that the community, “With wrathfull chere / and thretynge yrefull” (611-12) shows no mercy when the lot falls on the king’s daughter. Many versions of the George story portray a passive citizenry mourning for the princess, but Barclay gives the governed a voice, echoing a history of rebellion against weak or unpopular monarchs in late medieval England. Like Henry VI or Richard II, the king of Silene is powerless and ineffectual in dealing with threats to his realm and even to his own family.

The king’s lack of political and military power contrasts with the prowess of George, who faces the dragon and kills it almost immediately. George preserves the king’s “lynage” (986) by rescuing the princess, ensuring dynastic continuity. After saving the citizens from physical danger, he reverses their spiritual maladies by converting them to Christianity. George endows churches and gives to the poor (1217-18), supporting the masses rather than endangering them as did the king and his council. He also introduces a new social hierarchy to the city. He institutes a clergy, completing the traditional three orders of society, and endows people of all ranks with access to Christian ritual through holy days and feasts.

Barclay links the city’s social hierarchy to contemporary English practice by describing an annual play instated by the people to commemorate George’s triumph over the dragon (1156-59), recalling the civic dramas enacted in late medieval English towns. The driving force behind these pageants was not city governors, but citizens who formed groups such as guilds in order “to give religious meaning to their labours and to participate in [a] collective manifestation of civic pride.”

Pageants and feasts involved com-

mon citizens in the city’s social structure. Charles Phythian-Adams describes civic ceremony as “a valued instrument through which the basic divisions of humanity, by sex, age and wealth, could be related to the structure of the community.” Pageants “often provided at least the opportunities for bringing together in celebratory circumstances those who might otherwise be opposed or separated in their separate spheres.” Ritual turns social and economic disparity amongst the city’s population into wholeness. By helping to institute religious and civic ceremony, St. George promotes unity among the citizens where formerly there was strife.

After freeing the people of Silene from the dragon, George enters the city “as one inspyred / with heuynly sapyence” (1010). He delivers a sermon introducing Silene to basic Christian beliefs. Although 34 lines (ll.1079-1113) are missing from the sole extant copy of The Life of St. George, the saint’s speech is obviously much longer and more detailed than in Mantuan’s Latin poem, where the speech is only 33 lines long. In a striking departure from the base text, Barclay opts not to translate a long list of mythical monsters to which Mantuan compares George’s dragon. Instead Barclay supplies George with an eleven-stanza discourse to the people of Sylene, instructing the members of each social class on their responsibilities within the political realm.

George charges the king and his subjects to obey God’s laws and to “let no newe doctryne” (1258) corrupt their faith. He exhorts the citizens, “obey your kyng and lorde/ Obserue vnto hym / loue and fydelyte/ Auoyde Rebellyon,” (1261-63) and counsels the nobles to be charitable to the commoners. George also reminds the

32 Phythian-Adams, 63-64.
33 See Mervyn James, “Ritual, Drama and Social Body in the Late Medieval English Town,” Past and Present 98 (1983), 9.
34 Barclay comments at line 1247, “Lector amice: hec fabulosa pretermisi non exposita quorum loco: a nobis vulgaria hec inseruntur veruntamen baptiste carmina pretermittere non statui. que hec sunt.”
city’s leaders they are examples to their subjects, for good or ill:

A vycyous prync / is a plaghe mortal
And foule example / to all his comonte
Occasyon to folowe / his vyle enormyte.
Lyke wyse his lyfe / establyd in vertue
Shalbe example / to all his regyon
His lyfe / his maners / and vertue to insue (1307-12).

In Silene, George imposes both spiritual and political order in a land where a weak ruler endangers the populace. George next encounters Dacian, the Roman judge of Persia, whose repressive rule contrasts with George’s defense of Christian ideals and the Christian faithful in Dacian’s realm. Dacian is a tyrant, a “Iudge iniust” (1636) who is extreme in his persecution of his Christian subjects. While the king of Silene misguidedly sacrifices his people in hopes of preserving the greater whole, Dacian is willfully cruel to his citizens. He persecutes his Christian subjects, including his wife, who converts after witnessing George’s miracles. Dacian seeks to overcome the saint to promote himself, confidently asserting that he will win “immortal glory” (2257) for oppressing George and the other Christians.

Barclay appends some 28 lines to his translation of Mantuan’s passage describing the persecution of the Persian Christians, delineating Dacian’s tyranny. In these stanzas Dacian is indiscriminate in his slaughter of the populace:

. . . where a paynym / one crysten sawe and knewe
He lost hys lyfe / by paynes vyolent
Thought he were euyn / before the sacrament (1622-24).

By killing even the Christians’ associates Dacian goes above and beyond the statute condemning Christians who refuse to sacrifice to pagan gods. Sadistically finding “most laude / in greatest cruelte” (1642), Dacian institutes numerous methods to exterminate people: “Some [are] brent / som boyled / some flayne . . . Some hedyd / some caste to bestes,” (1630-31).
Tyranny and unjust rule were matters of concern to Medieval and Renaissance political theorists. The prince could be a divinely-inspired enforcer of law, but he could use the law to enforce his personal will—perhaps not for the common good. John Trevisa, translating Giles of Rome’s *De Regimine Principum* in the 14th century, defined tyranny as “pe worst eligarchia;” the result of “whanne fewe men ben lorde and ben not good and vertuous but riche and my3ty and louen not þe comune profit but desireþ here owne profite.” Following the argument of Aristotle’s *Politics* (Book V), Trevisa states that “þe firste cautel [quality] of a tyrant is sleyenge and destroyenge of excellent men,” the second being “destroyenge of wise men.”

Dacian, as described by Barclay, fits this definition of the tyrant not only because of his personal wickedness, but because he persecutes and kills so many of his subjects. “He dyed the stretyes . . . with vermell blode,” leaving bodies lying in the “gutters of the strete” (1643-44). In torturing and killing Thamyr, the “most sure inchantour / of all the hole cyte” (1669), and even the city’s queen, Dacian is guilty of destroying some of the most renowned figures in the city – all of whom die as Christians. He pursues his own fame, refusing to protect the common good. But ultimately Dacian’s pride, self-assurance, and even his belief in the pagan gods cannot “socoure” (2380) either himself or his city. God destroys the heathen temple, and eventually annihilates Dacian, his “armydmen” (2652), and other city elites.

George, in contrast, advocates for the Christian community and all who come into contact with it. He pursues the common good, trying to stop the slaughter of Persia’s Christians and their pagan associates. Barclay implies that George’s efforts could have wide-reaching effects, since similar anti-Christian campaigns are carried out “In egyp / Syry / in Naples / Grece / and Spayne / In Fraunce / in Flaunders / and Brytayn lesse / & more” (1606-07). By extension, George represents all the Christian faithful, particularly


36 Trevisa, 340 (ll. 30-31), 341 (line 1).
the English, championing their beliefs and challenging the injustices perpetrated against them.

The two leaders of Persia and Silene rule to the destruction of their realms, Dacian because of wickedness and the king of Silene because of weakness. Their personal flaws dictate their inability to rule in their subjects’ best interest. Twelfth-century English theologian John of Salisbury asserted that the prince “as head of the body politic represents the whole people, as well as rules them,” and if the head is weak or corrupt it will lead the body to weakness and corruption.\(^{37}\) This idea would resonate even in Barclay’s time, reinforced by scripture and by medieval authorities like Aquinas. Believing that “the way a king lives his life determines the fate of his people,”\(^ {38}\) Barclay and his audience would see a causal effect between the weak king of Silene and the tyranny of the dragon, between the evil judge Dacian and his pagan subjects’ violent end. Barclay’s additions to Mantuan’s text heighten the two rulers’ poor leadership skills, establishing Silene’s king as vacillating and ineffective and Dacian as a sadistic tyrant. Each stands as an example of a bad prince whose actions directly affect the well-being of his subjects. George is a counterexample, a strong, virtuous leader who protects the citizens of Silene and the Christian faithful physically and spiritually.

As England’s patron saint, St. George also acts as an omnipresent champion of the nation and its faith. Like a medieval king, who was considered “the guardian of the public appurtenances which served the benefits and security of the whole body politic,”\(^ {39}\) St. George is heavenly steward over the temporal and spiritual health of the English people and the English crown. And Barclay invokes the saint as such in a final orison to protect England and its leaders:


\(^{38}\) Ibid.

Preserue thy royalme / in peas and vnyte
Reppresse rebellers / and men presumptuous
Defende thy prynce / from all aduersyte
In longe succession / of chauncys prosperous
Expell from his grace / all thynge contraryons [sic]
Graunt helth / and welth / good lyfe and charyte
Within thy royalme / contynually to be (2682-88).

The leader who emulates the saint, who upholds divine law as a defender of the faith and example of virtue, will be equally effective in preserving the peace and safety of his kingdom.

Although Barclay inherits the themes of strong and weak rulership and threats to the realm from Mantuan and the St. George legend, he grounds his translation in a specifically English political tradition. First, he describes Silene’s government according to English practice. The “kynge and comonte and lorde” (568-69) hold “parlyament” (563) to discuss how to deal with the dragon (Mantuan’s word is consilium, line 171). Barclay further explains in the heading to Cap. V that their solution “was ordeyned by Act of Parlyament.” Barclay’s description mimics standard parliamentary procedure: the king calls Parliament and meets with the Lords and Commons, who together issue an “Act.”

In a passage entitled “Apostrophe ad anglos,” Barclay further aligns his verse to English political theory by exhorting his audience to “vse noble besynes / And thynges that at ende / may helpe a comon welth” (327-28). The idea of the “common wealth” or “common weal” began to take shape in England and Scotland during the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, “the two words were used indiscriminately” in Barclay’s time, both in the sense of “public welfare” or “general good” and the sense of “the whole body of people constituting a nation or state, the body politic.”

Barclay’s near-contemporary Edmund Dudley (ca. 1462-1510), author of the treatise The Tree of Commonwealth (1509), uses the term in the former sense—applying it to the welfare of the entire English nation—when he describes

that it is each citizen’s duty “most hartely to pray for the prosper-
ous contynewance of his liege souuereign lord and thencrease of the
comonwelth of his native countrie” and “to do all things that might
furder or sounde to thencrease and helpe of same.”

Arthur B. Ferguson suggests that “the idea” of common-
wealth “was conservative, even reactionary in its implications, in-
spired in large part by a suspicious distaste for the changes taking
place in early sixteenth century England.” He argues that “the ideal
. . . was little more than a vigorous and impassioned re-statement of
orthodox medieval theory.” Most Tudor theorists acknowledged
that their society could no longer be classified into three estates, but
they still applied the medieval idea of the body politic to their chang-
ing world. English humanists maintained that this social hierarchy
was divinely instituted, although it was made less rigid through per-
sonal excellence in earthly pursuits. Accordingly, early 16th-century
writers wielded the idea of commonwealth to express traditional
views of community and public good in the face of shifting social
and political ties, economic change, and political unrest. The
concept was almost “exclusively a social and ethical ideal” drawn
from established thought, but it was a concept distinctly applied to
the English nation.

When Barclay exhorts his audience to follow St. George’s
example in upholding “a common wealth,” he evokes this social
ideal, “the idea that every member of the community had a role
to play, and should dedicate his labours to the common good.”

George upholds the state and the social order by instituting a tra-

44 Ferguson, 12-13.
45 Ferguson, 14-15.
ditional Christian body politic in Silene during his life and by defending the English nation in the afterlife. England’s patron saint fulfills the obligations of the good prince and advocates an ideal society in which the several estates coexist in equity, righteousness, and unity. Barclay’s changes, additions, and embellishments in *The Life of St. George* address the various members of English society, advising them on their duties to the common good of their country. His poem also comments on the characteristics of an ideal leader, who uses chivalric prowess and moral strength to maintain order, institute and uphold Christian law, and defend his faith and realm. In advocating long-held ideals of right rule and citizenship, *The Life of St. George* becomes more than a retelling of a religious story, it becomes a piece of advice to the estates, and particularly to those in power.

Barclay’s moral advice on the duties of leaders may be aimed at the English governing class in general, but the text points to a more specific audience. The first is comprised of Barclay’s patrons, the two dedicatees of *The Life of St. George*, both of whom had close ties to England’s patron saint and the English crown. Barclay first addresses the work (in vernacular verse) to Thomas Howard, second Duke of Norfolk, whom he had successfully petitioned for patronage in the Fourth *Eclogue*. The Duke was a member of the Order of the Garter and of Henry VIII’s Privy Council. He and his father, John Howard, first Duke of Norfolk, had fought with Richard III at Bosworth, and in response Henry VII had stripped the family of their dukedom. Yet Thomas Howard proved himself an able and loyal servant to the Tudors, both as an administrator and advisor to Henry VII and Henry VIII and as a military commander. At age 70, Howard decisively defeated the invading Scots at Flodden in 1513 and was rewarded with his lost dukedom in February 1514.

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47 See Aristotle, *The Politics*, Book IV, or Trevisa, III.ii.32.

48 This double dedication is not unique among Barclay’s extant works. Barclay would later dedicate his *Warre Agaynst Jugurth* to Howard, with a second dedicatory passage in Latin to John Veysey, the Bishop of Exeter; *The Mirror of Good Manners* was dedicated to both Sir Giles Alyngton and Richard, Earl of Kent.

second dedicatee (in a separate, Latin prose passage) is Nicholas West, who was consecrated bishop of Ely not long after the Latin dedication was dated.\textsuperscript{50} West, as dean of Windsor, had repaired and renovated its George chapel a few years previously. In the aftermath of tensions with France and Scotland, he served as an ambassador to France twice, helping to secure peace and an alliance with the French in April 1515. West’s nomination to the bishopric at Ely was brokered by Thomas Wolsey as a reward for this diplomatic success. Barclay was a member of the monastery at Ely, so in dedicating \textit{The Life of St. George} to his new bishop, he demonstrates his poetic ability to a new superior and potential benefactor with court ties.

In his portrayal of St. George, Barclay’s emphasis on the dual nature of leadership—service both to the temporal and spiritual needs of the commonwealth—is significant in light of the two spheres represented by his intended patrons: the Duke of Norfolk, a famed English military leader and the senior member of the Privy Council, and West, an influential member of England’s clergy. George, in his first guise, is a strong young knight who slays the dragon and establishes a new government in Silene, and in his second guise is an ascetic “of age auncyent” (1696) who challenges the tyranny of the pagan judge Dacian. As an allegorical depiction of both physical defense and care of souls, the character of George embodies the separate spheres of leadership the dedicatees possessed. The moral and political advice Barclay conveys throughout his poem would be appropriate to these two leaders, who were close to the crown and heavily involved in matters of state.

In return for his poetic service, Barclay would expect his dedicatees to confer patronage upon him, or to use their influence at court to promote him to other sources of patronage, including the “ultimate patrons,” the king and queen.\textsuperscript{51} As shown earlier in this paper, Barclay had previously sought patronage from an unrespon-

\textsuperscript{50} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{51} Maria Dowling, \textit{Humanism in the Age of Henry VIII} (London; Dover, NH: Croom Hel, 1986), 18.
sive royal audience. From a close reading of his *Eclogues*, Barclay appears to have felt that he was being overlooked by the king in favor of “railing poets” like Skelton, whose work eschewed didacticism and advice-giving in order to entertain Henry VIII and his circle.\(^5^2\) Despite his prior failures, however, Barclay offers advice and criticism to a court audience aside from the 2\(^{nd}\) Duke of Norfolk and Bishop West: King Henry VIII, whose symbolic ties to England’s patron saint were personally significant and widely apparent to many observers.

The celebration of St. George’s Day was a significant state occasion for all English monarchs since Edward III founded the Order of the Garter, but it was of even greater personal significance for Henry VIII. Though Henry VII died on the evening of April 21, 1509, his death was kept secret for two days and was not announced to the court until April 23, St. George’s Day.\(^5^3\) Henry VIII was publicly proclaimed king the following morning. His first official act as king, a general pardon, was issued April 23, 1509.\(^5^4\) Thus the saint’s feast day marked the approximate time when Henry gained the crown, an important anniversary for the King.

England’s martial patron saint greatly appealed to the athletic Henry, who loved jousting and was eager to prove himself on the battlefield in the years after his accession. The king appropriated St. George’s image during the first decade of his reign. Venetian envoy Piero Pasqualigo described Henry as he appeared on St. George’s Day 1515, dressed in his sumptuous Garter robes and sporting “a pendant St. George entirely of diamonds.”\(^5^5\) This collar was only worn on St. George’s Day. Later, in 1521, Henry VIII introduced smaller St. George pendants that he and his Garter knights could wear for everyday use – the king is known to have owned three such

\(^5^2\) Fox, 42.


\(^5^5\) *Four Years at the Court of Henry VIII: Selection of Despatches Written by the Venetian Ambassador, Sebastian Giustinian, and Addressed to the Signory of Venice, January 12th 1515, to July 26th 1519*, ed. and tr. Rawdon Brown, (London: Smith, Elder, and Co., 1854), vol. 1, 86.
The King also owned several suits of armor and a crown adorned with St. George’s image. A set of silvered and engraved armor dating from 1515, meant to commemorate the marriage of Henry and Katherine of Aragon, depicts St. George slaying the dragon on the breastplate and scenes from St. George’s life are engraved on the horse armor. Wearing these items at tournaments and other events solidified a physical, iconographical link between England's patron saint and the young king.

In choosing to adapt the legend of St. George into English verse, Barclay takes advantage of the king’s personal connection with and interest in the saint to address the monarch with advice about the art of governance. One approach Barclay uses in *The Life of St. George* is his portrayal of the young soldier George, whom he often describes in mythical terms. George displays extraordinary talent at wielding weapons, controlling his horse, and battling evil. According to Barclay, Hercules himself is not “so crafty in wrastlynge” or “in all poyntes of strenght” as George (297-300), nor could he have dispatched the dragon as easily as did George (523-25, 908). After he defeats the dragon, the people wonder if George isn’t Hercules in mortal guise (969). Barclay compares George to Hercules a number of times, at lines 452, 908, 969, and 1161, although Mantuan never mentions the hero. William Nelson notes that “Barclay omits many of the classical allusions which he finds in his source” while adding select others; he attributes this to Barclay’s desire to write “for a general audience” and his lack of deep classical learning. But as a university-educated writer, especially one associated with European humanists, Barclay must have had some understanding of the classical allusions in his source. It is unlikely that he would have omitted them out of ignorance or incomprehension.

56 Diana Scarisbrick, *Tudor and Jacobean Jewellery* (London: Tate, 1995), 81-82.
58 Introduction to *The Life of St. George*, xxii.
These references to Hercules may have been familiar to Barclay’s audience in another context; they parallel contemporary descriptions of King Henry VIII, who was in his mid-twenties when the *Life of St. George* was written. One of his diplomats would later recall the young Henry as a sort of classical hero:

Even Hercules of old could hardly have bent the yew bow so well with the sinewy strength of his arms … and, in wrestling, Pollux would have been no match for him in striving for the wreath of oak leaves. Whenever he sought to turn the powerful neck of a warhorse … you would think he was Castor himself; and if he put on his shining armour, his splendid helmet with nodding crest, and his gilded breastplate, he would excel even Trojan Hector. When he hunted deer through the woods with nets and a pack of hounds, not even Hippolitus … could have surpassed him in glory.59

Henry’s subjects were familiar with comparisons of the tall, strong king to the heroes of myth. His jousts with his close friend Charles Brandon, Duke of Suffolk, were likened to the battles of Achilles and Hector, and writers throughout the realm praised Henry for his athletic prowess and youthful good looks.60 Barclay himself, in *The Ship of Fools*, praised the young king as surpassing “Hercules in manhode and courage” and “Achylles in strength and valyance” (II:205-07). This passage and later references in *The Life of St. George* echo popular descriptions of Henry VIII, linking Barclay’s title character with the king. Barclay’s choice of subject matter, and the language he employs to describe St. George, evoke recognizable symbolic connections between the saint and King Henry VIII.

Barclay uses St. George to exhort his noble patrons and King Henry VIII, whose public image was intertwined with that of England’s patron saint, to be virtuous protectors of their country and faith. In portraying a young, talented knight, “predestynate / and chosen of god” to be a leader (380-81), Barclay invites favorable associations between Henry VIII and the hero of the poem. Before his martyrdom St. George is a chivalrous knight who is active in arranging the affairs of government and preserving peace and order, espe-

cially as a young man in Silene. Even in Persia, despite advancing years, St. George rushes to defend the faith against an evil tyrant. Throughout his life St. George continually upholds and maintains Christian beliefs and civil order, protecting and promoting others’ physical and spiritual well-being. Though not a king himself, St. George embodies the traits of a good monarch, who in Tudor political theory was bound both legally and by moral responsibility to his subjects. 61 Like Capgrave and Lydgate before him, Barclay uses the legend of a saint to address a royal audience with observations and advice about the nature of English governance. St. George exemplifies the ideal monarch’s active moral, political, and martial defense of the common good of the realm.

Barclay also has more specific advice for the young king Henry. At the end of Cap. II of the Life of St. George, Barclay reprimands English youth who “spende … tyme in thriftles game / The gronde of vyce and rote of wretchydnes” and who “haue deleyte in pleasour corporall” (325-26, 374). He warns these “thoughtles youth” that they may be led “to rouyne / By beaute, ryches, fre wyll, or lyberte / And yll example” (376-79) and exhorts them to “fle from suche foly” (327). Barclay, who conceived of the role of poetry as promoting virtue and warning against vice, here echoes the concerns of several humanists at the Tudor court who disliked Henry’s eager engagement in warfare, hunting, jousting, pageantry, and games, instead of attending to “tedious details” of ruling. 62 Richard Pace, the King’s Secretary, would lament to Wolsey in August 1520 that Henry was again neglecting business: “The King rises daily, except on holy days, at 4 or 5 o’clock, and hunts till 9 or 10 at night. He spares no pain to convert the sport of hunting into martyrdom.” 63

At the time Barclay published The Life of St. George, Henry VIII’s older advisors were concerned about the coterie of young men

61 Franklin L. Baumer, The Early Tudor Theory of Kingship, (New Haven: Yale UP, 1940), 5-6, 12.

62 Lacey, 40.

63 Letters and Papers, Foreign and Domestic, Reign of Henry VIII, 1509-1547, II.i.950.
known as the king’s “minions,” friends and jousting companions in their late teens and early twenties whom Henry gathered about him between 1513 and 1516. These young men “were a constant source of anxiety to the king’s men of business”64 and others close to the king; Queen Catherine “frowned on his gambling . . . and sporting with them, especially as he was losing as much as six or seven thousand ducats in one evening and carousing more than was good for him.”65 By 1519, Cardinal Wolsey, the Duke of Norfolk, and several other older members of the king’s Privy Council decided that these young men’s rowdy behavior and over-familiarity with the king needed to be checked. They convinced Henry to banish four of the offenders from court and replace them with “sad and ancient knights.”66 Barclay’s criticism of frivolous English youth echoes the opinions of Henry VIII’s senior advisors—including the poem’s patron, Norfolk—who disapproved of the king’s choice of companions and his dedication to pleasure and sport.

Barclay addresses The Life of St. George to multiple audiences in the hierarchy of English political leadership and artistic patronage. His praise and advice is aimed at older men like the Duke of Norfolk and Bishop West, who combat internal and external threats to order and peace, as well as at leaders of a younger generation, the king and his minions. All would have an interest in the story of the nation’s patron saint, but none more so than Henry VIII, who claimed the image of St. George as a personal symbol. Barclay takes advantage of this connection, shaping his poem to discuss specific aspects of English politics and to draw comparisons between St. George and king Henry VIII. Barclay uses the legend of St. George to exhort his noble audience—both existing patrons like the Duke of Norfolk and potential patrons like the king—to uphold the common good of the English nation. St. George’s example warns against tyranny and promotes a Christian leadership

66 Edward Hall, Chronicle (London: J. Johnson, 1809), 598.
that combines benevolence, moral strength, and active defense of faith and nation.

If Barclay was expecting to attract further attention from royal patrons, his efforts were again unsuccessful. He never received patronage from the king or queen, though he continued to publish his verse for several more years: The Mirror of Good Manners, based on a Latin work by Domenico Mancini, about 1518; a revision of John Stanbridge’s Latin textbook Vocabula in 1519; the Sallust translation about 1520; and the Introductory to Write and to Pronounce French in 1521. Barclay finally received a court post near the end of his writing career, perhaps through the auspices of Norfolk.\(^{67}\) In April 1520, Sir Nicholas Vaux asked Wolsey to enlist Barclay “to devise histories and convenient raisons to florisshe the buildings” being constructed for the English court at the Field of the Cloth of Gold.\(^{68}\)

After this commission, Barclay ceased writing within the course of a year. Perhaps, as Alistair Fox surmises, Barclay’s creativity was fueled by his efforts to gain a court post, and once he reached that goal, he lost the motivation to write. Fox also ties the end of Barclay’s literary career to the death of his primary patron, the 2nd Duke of Norfolk, in 1524.\(^{69}\) A more likely cause for the cessation of Barclay’s literary output is his move from Ely to become a Franciscan friar sometime after 1520-21. Based on letters received by Wolsey in 1528-29, Barclay appears to have joined the Franciscan order’s reformed, or Observant, branch.\(^{70}\) As one of Barclay’s biographers notes, “monks and friars had different traditions, objectives, and ways of life,” and in joining the Franciscans Barclay would be devoting his intellect to the study of theology rather than to translation and writing.\(^{71}\) Though the reasons for this change are lost to history, Barclay consciously abandoned his career as a poet, and thus his need for patronage, in favor of a different vocation.

\(^{67}\) Fox, 54.

\(^{68}\) Letters and Papers, III.i.737.

\(^{69}\) Fox, 55.

\(^{70}\) Letters and Papers, IV.ii.4810; IV.iii.5463. See White, “Introduction,” xlii-xlili.

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Woodcut: Frontispiece from *Lyfe of Seynt George* (1515)