

Poetry in two worlds: Latin pastoral at the court of King James I

John Barclay, the Neo-Latin author and best-selling novelist of the 17th century, also wrote several thousand lines of poetry in Latin. His verse has not enjoyed the same longevity as his prose, but has lapsed into obscurity. It is my purpose in this presentation to describe and evaluate it with an eye towards its recovery by a larger reading audience. All the poems mentioned in this paper can be found (with an introduction and translation) at <http://www.philological.bham.ac.uk/barclay/>

In 1608, in London, a humble shepherd, Corydon, petitioned his Lord Phoebus for a sign of his favor. Three years earlier the shepherd had left his flocks and his family to enter Phoebus's temple service. Before coming to the temple, the shepherd had won great fame for his songs in lands where the Rhone thunders and the Loire and Seine flow, not to mention the Po and the Tiber. But Phoebus's shining countenance pleased the shepherd more than anything else in the world, and so he had come to offer his talents to the god. He has been disappointed: he has worn himself out in the god's service with little reward, and now he must leave for home, covered in shame. Nevertheless he will continue to glorify Phoebus; his songs will outdo the loud trumpet and drum of Bacchus and the raucous flute of the mother goddess Cybele, but he will still be considered wretched because Phoebus had let his talents go. The shepherd begs one last time for Phoebus's favor; all the god has to say is, "these are good songs." These simple words will make the shepherd stay. If not, he asks the god to return his shepherd's crook, pack, and other equipment, and he'll leave. Grovelling in the dust before the temple gates, the shepherd hears the god approve his request.

Thus John Barclay in poem I.5 of his collection *Poematum Libri Duo* (1615). The following poem (I.6) is a pastoral hymn of thanks for Phoebus's favor. This collection contains two more explicitly pastoral poems, one on the shepherd's so-far futile attempts to win the love of Daphne, a shepherdess with influential relatives (I.7), and one on the death of the shepherd-king Daphnis, a paragon of rural virtues suddenly snatched away into the heavens (I.8). (In this volume there are 37 other poems of various genres, including love lyrics, humorous vignettes, prayers for rain, poems celebrating notable places and buildings. This paper emphasizes the pastoral poems.)

These poems are striking examples of Barclay's ability to operate simultaneously in two worlds: the beguiling, but often treacherous, royal court, and the international *res publica litterarum*, the republic of letters. In this particular poem, he has taken the traditional literary guise of the shepherd of pastoral, who pays more attention to his songs and his beloved shepherdesses than to any real

sheep. He uses this literary guise to beseech his god, who is of course King James, his patron, who has been less than generous. Why might his pleas have been effective?

For about 10 years Barclay was able to use his linguistic and literary skills to successfully make his living at King James's court. He moved from his home in France to England in 1605, first winning the king's favor by a poem on the Gunpowder Plot, and shortly thereafter by a collection of occasional poems, the *Sylvae*. He remained in England until 1615. We have independent evidence of his career at court, including several references to him in the Calendar of State Papers, which records grants to Barclay in 1607, 1609, 1610, and in 1611 a note saying that Barclay “begs payment of his pension.” It seems King James needed a reminder. He is mentioned in letters of the period.¹ In 1609 the Catholic Barclay was sent on a European mission to distribute presentation copies of the king's book *A Premonition to all Most Mightie Monarches*, which was addressed to Catholic rulers and called for an ecumenical council led by secular rulers (not by the Pope) to restore the unity of the Christian faith. The book created quite a stir and was received with favor in France, but not everywhere else. Barclay received about £500 for expenses on the trip. Barclay helped the King with the Latin version of this book, *Apologia pro iuramento fidelitatis*. He also was present at the king's table and participated in the discussions there, a fact which he reports with pride in a work published after he left England. He records that the King, who hated Puritans and the like, thought John Knox to be “not only wicked, but a wizard,” “non impium modo fuisse, sed etiam Magum.” Barclay left England in 1615 and moved to Rome, where he lived until his death in 1621. He may have been seeking a more generous patron, and he certainly was concerned about the religious education of his children, who had been born in England and hence had to be raised as Protestant. But he had had some success at the court and had produced some of his best work there, including the poem just described.

What was the basis of his worldly success? As a citizen of the *res publica litterarum*, Barclay was an inheritor of a literary culture going back to antiquity. His Latin language, of which he was a master, brought with it fixed styles, genres, metaphors, similes, and all the rhetorical devices of a 2000-year-old tradition. First, this tradition gave him a geographical and historical setting: most of what Barclay wrote can be located in an idealized Greco-Roman world. To take examples from this poem: we worship the god Phoebus Apollo in his temple; like the Romans, we foretell the future

¹ In a letter to his friend Ioannus Meursius (16 June 1613) Hugo Grotius comments on the situation for scholars in England: “the rewards for literature there is small; the theologians rule; pettifogging lawyers prosper. Only Casaubon has an income sufficiently favorable, but (as he thinks) it is not secure. There was no place even for him In England as a literary man; he had to take on the role of theologian...Barclay is hovering between riches and poverty.” (...*litterarum ibi tenuis est merces. Theologi regnant: Legulei rem faciunt: unus ferme Casaubonus habet fortunam satis faventem, sed, ut ipse iudicat, minus certam. Ne huic quidem locus in Anglia fuisset ut literatori; induere Theologum debuit...Barclaius inter divitias et paupertatem medius haeret.* Grotius *Epistolae* 1687 751a-b)

with omens from birds (the prescient fowl of line 10); the shepherd's songs can ring louder than do Lydian trumpets, Bacchus's drums, or Cybele's horn; the shepherd has travelled to Phrygia, where Midas is king. In another poem dedicated to and praising Robert Cecil, Earl of Salisbury and King James's secretary of state, Cecil is compared to the Greek ambassador Cineas (an historical figure from the 2nd century BC) and to Homer's aged advisor Nestor, not to any post-Classical figure. In a poem celebrating Prince Henry, the king's eldest son who died in 1612, Barclay compares Henry to Achilles, who was mighty with the sword and harp, and to Bacchus, who conquered the lands of the East, but who also delights in the songs that rise to him at Delphi. In several poems the Phoenix still rises from the ashes in Egypt; the king's life will be long enough to see this happen many times. In his most famous work, the long novel *Argenis*, Barclay created an entire fantasy Greco-Roman world consistent in almost every respect with the actual Greco-Roman world except for the characters and the plot.

Second, this tradition gave him a religious setting. Roman gods are frequently invoked. Phoebus and Bacchus have been mentioned, but Jove the Thunderer appears, as do the sylvan goddess Diana, Neptune with his trident, Minerva, Iris the rainbow, Juno, Venus, and Cupid. More exotic divinities are cited: the Magna Mater Cybele and Adonis. Barclay mentions abstractions which became divinities: Nemesis is fairly common, as is Pietas, Righteousness. Several of these are used when referring to the king: he is called the Thunderer, an epithet of Jove; the queen is the wife of the Thunderer (I.10.75); he is called a *numen*, the Latin word meaning "divine power"; he is the "lux prima deum" "chief light of the gods"(I.6.41) Even when not a god himself, the king associates with them: in poem 5 the god of the seas has handed over his waves to Phoebus, the king (lines 4-5; the translation obscures this a little). Note that, at least in Barclay, his use of inherited classical tradition utterly precludes any specifically Christian reference. Indeed, in his imaginative works (poems and novels), he includes Christian institutions and figures only under heavy Classical guise: in his novel *Euphormio*, the Jesuits appear as the ascetic philosophical sect of the Acignians, an anagram for Ignatius; in his *Argenis*, the Huguenots appear in Greek as the Hyperephanians, "the arrogant people." In the latter novel, which is essentially a long roman-a-clèf describing the political situation in Western Europe in the first two decades of the 17th century, all religious issues of the period are recast as political controversies of the Greco-Roman world. Contrast Barclay's methods with George Buchanan's, who was the greatest of the Neo-Latin poets and, incidentally, King James's Latin tutor. Buchanan's poems often refer to Christian groups by name. His *Franciscanus*, an attack on the Franciscans, is the most famous example.

Third, this tradition gave Barclay poetic genres to play with, in this poem the pastoral eclogue.² Pastoral in the strict sense goes back to Theocritus. His *Idylls* established the genre of tuneful shepherds whose names he transmitted to later poets: Tityrus, Corydon, Daphnis, Amyntas, Lycidas (used by Milton), and others. The immediate model, however, for Renaissance pastoral was Vergil, whose *Eclogues* elevated the occasionally low tone of Theocritus and introduced new motifs. His characters are shepherds and shepherdesses, whose duties tending sheep seem to be minimal, and who have much leisure for singing songs, for making love, and for competition in the rustic skills (archery, running, leaping). Vergil introduced into pastoral both the contrast between rural and urban life and political allegory. Pastoral thus became a (relatively) safe way to address political and social issues. For example, in his first *Eclogue* Virgil portrays a simple shepherd who has gone to the city and found favor with a young man who has allowed the shepherd to remain in his home pastures. This has always been taken as an allegory of thanks by the poet to the Emperor Augustus. His *Eclogue* 4 celebrates the birth of a child who will usher in the Golden Age again. This was always taken as a prophecy by the noble pagan poet of the birth of Christ.

In his four pastoral poems, Barclay continued this tradition of political allegory, which in his case is transparent, since we know about his life at court. (In contrast, the references in Vergil's poems seem to me quite opaque.) In poems I.5 and I.6 the identities of Corydon the shepherd, Phoebus, and Amyntas (Barclay's father) are obvious. Not so clear are identities of his rivals Chromis and Nomias (I.51), and the nation called Phrygia and its king Midas (I.77), perhaps France and King Henri IV. A later poem in this collection (I.8) is based on Vergil's *Eclogue* 5, the death of Daphnis; this is an amoebaeon lament, a poem in which one singer sings a stanza with a certain mode and subject, and a second singer responds with the same poetic structure and a related topic. Barclay adheres closely to his model, even keeping the name Daphnis for his dead shepherd. Daphnis has died and the whole world mourns, until suddenly a new star appears in the heavens (the transfigured Daphnis), and a new, small Daphnis appears on earth with the promise of a new Golden Age to come (I.8.100ff). It is clear that this poem is a lament on the death of Prince Henry in 1612 and a hopeful forecast for the future reign of Prince Charles, who did in fact succeed to the throne in 1625.

Finally, classical literary tradition, specifically the Silver Latin court poetry written by Statius and Martial addressing the Emperor Domitian (late 1st century AD), gave Barclay the vocabulary and manner of address which he used towards the king and other patrons. Much of this is far from

² In the Renaissance pastoral comes in three forms: the eclogue described here, the pastoral play, such as Jonson's *Sad Shepherd*, and the pastoral romance, such as Sidney's *Arcadia*. Barclay's novel *Argenis* owes much to the pastoral romance.

attractive to the modern reader, although parallels could certainly be found in the more exalted comments about a recent American president. In Statius and Barclay, the king is like Jupiter *pater* (*Silvae* IV.1.167; B. I.5. 63, 75, 96); the king has the divine aura, the *numen*: Britain worships its *numen* appearing in the guise of the king (I.2.146). Even if not a god, the king has at least received power over the earth from the gods or the fates: in Statius, Jupiter gives all earthly power to the emperor (*S.* IV.3.128); the Fates (Parcae) grant Britain to James (I.1.18); Neptune entrusts his waves to James (I.5.4). The king is addressed as Phoebus, the sun god. He is the sun which warms the earth: when the king falls ill, clouds have hidden the sun (II.1). Louis XIV's epithet as the Sun King goes far back into antiquity.

Two tropes are particularly worth mentioning. One is the prayer for an extremely long life for the emperor and a hope that he may prefer to remain on earth instead of ascending to his well-deserved place in heaven. In Statius, the Delphic oracle says: "I have seen what chain of meritorious years the Fates are weaving for you; a mighty roll of centuries awaits you...as many as old Tithonus counted" (*Silvae* IV.3.145ff). (Tithonus was the husband of the goddess Aurora and received the gift of immortality.) Statius himself begs that the emperor "not hasten to ascend to the great heaven" (*S.* IV.2.22). Barclay cites Tithonus several times in his forecasts of long life for the king, for example: "He will see the Phoenix oft reborn, and will enjoy more years than Tithonus. Only then will he seek the heavens and leave the scepter to his son" (I.1.45ff). In another passage both the king and his son will be twin Phoenixes in Albion, which will be unique in allowing two of the birds to exist at once (I.1.177).³ Barclay addresses Prince Henry "may you stay on the earth with your father and cherish the earth forever" (I.4.81-2). Of course all this simply means: "Long live the king," but it is noteworthy to see how the flattery of the Roman imperial court with all its extravagance was imitated at the English court.

The other trope is the poet's characterization of the king as the best of kings and the best of poets. Statius invokes Domitian at the start of his unfinished epic on Achilles: "But you whom the pride of Italy and Greece regards with reverent awe far more than anyone else, for whom the twin laurels of poet and warrior-chief flourish with mutual rivalry – already one of them [i.e. poetry] grieves to be surpassed..." (*Achilleid* I.14-5).⁴ Statius's contemporary Quintilian says, in his list of contemporary

3 The image of the king as Phoenix is not rare. In a sermon preached before the king at Whitehall in 1604, Henry Hooke compares the transition from Elizabeth to James as the rebirth of the Phoenix: "For when the rare Phoenix of the world, the queen of birds, which had for many yeeres gathered together and safely covered Jerusalmes children under her wings, was now through age to be turned into dust and ashes, though she appeared unto men to die, yet she died not, but was revived in one of her own blood; her age renewed in his younger yeeres; her aged infirmities repaired in the perfection of his strength..." (*A Sermon Preached Before the King at White-Hall, the eight of May 1604* (London 1604), quoted in Perry 156).

4 At tu, quem longe primum stupet Italia virtus
Graiaque, cui geminae florent vatumque ducumque

poets worthy of study: “We mention these poets because, since the supervision of the world has diverted Germanicus Augustus [=Domitian] from the studies which he had begun, the gods decided against his being the greatest of poets. For what could be more sublime, more learned, and in every respect more excellent than those productions to which he devoted himself when he granted the throne to his father and brother? Who could sing of war better than he who wages it with such skill? To whom would the goddesses that preside over literature sooner lend an ear? To whom would Minerva, his patron deity, more readily reveal her secrets? Future ages shall tell of these things more fully; today his glory as a poet is dimmed by the splendor of his other virtues” (*Inst.* 10.1.91-2). In other words, if the emperor had gone into poetry full-time, no other poets would have been worth mentioning.⁵

Barclay employs this trope several times with reference both to Prince Henry and Prince Charles, if not directly to the king. For example, referring to Prince Charles, he says: “He will also give great honor to the lords of the Delphic slope. How oft could he pluck the laurel of Parnassus, twine it and place it on his brow? Indeed he would do so, but that a greater laurel wreath will crown his brow, and so he will deprecate those poetic honors” (I.1.187-190)⁶ Praise for the king himself as a poet had perhaps become hackneyed (English examples below), because King James was in fact a prolific writer in prose and verse. The king's verse, along with the rest of his literary production (*Basilicon Doron*, *the Trew Law of Free Monarchies*, and others), was well known in England and was anthologized in two miscellanies.⁷ As a result Barclay directs his praise at the king's sons. The motivation for such passages, of course, is the poet's attempt to elevate his own craft in everyone's eyes: even great kings engage the Muses.

Several of these rhetorical tropes can be found in contemporary English-language poets—who also (don't forget) had received a Latin education, were fluent in Latin, and thus were subject to the same influences as was Barclay. Ben Jonson is always a good source for such parallels. Like Barclay, he received an annual pension from the king, in addition to compensation for his famous masques.

certatim laurus—olim dolet altera vinci...

⁵ Hos nominamus quia Germanicum Augustum ab institutis studiis deflexit cura terrarum, parumque dis visum est esse eum maximum poetarum. Quid tamen his ipsis eius operibus in quae donato imperio iuvenis secesserat sublimius, doctius, omnibus denique numeris praestantius? Quis enim caneret bella melius quam qui sic gerit? Quem praesidentes studiis deae propius audirent? cui magis suas artis aperiret familiare numen Minerva? Dicent haec plenius futura saecula, nunc enim ceterarum fulgore virtutum laus ista praestringitur.

⁶ Quoties Parnassida laurum

Carpere iure queat, tortamque imponere fronti?

Et faceret. Sed tota teget tunc tempora maior

Laurea, et hos ultro sic dissimulabit honores.

⁷ *Englands Parnassus* (1600) and *Bel-Vedère, or The Garden of the Muses* (1600). Both are collections of short passages, arranged by topic (Angels, Banishment, Bliss, etc), from recent or contemporary poets. King James is identified as “K. of Scot”. See Perry 24.

Jonson was familiar with the conventions of Roman laudatory verse. In his Epigram “To the Ghost of Martial,” he writes

Martial, thou gav'st farre nobler Epigrammes
To thy Domitian, than I can my James:
But in my royall subject I passe thee,
Thou flatterd'st thine, mine cannot flatter'd bee. (*Epigrams* I.36, 1616)

In Jonson's *Panegyric on the Happy Entrance of James, our Sovereign to his Parliament* (1603) we find many of Barclay's motifs, including this wish for the king's long life:

And this Confession flew from every Voice,
Never had Land more reason to rejoyce,
Nor to her bliss, could ought now added be,
Save, that she might the same perpetual see.
Which when Time, Nature, and the Fates deny'd,
With a twice louder Shout again they cry'd,
Yet, let blest Britain ask (without your wrong)
Still to have such a King, and this King long.

Another of his epigrams praises the king for his poetic talents:

How, best of kings, dost thou a sceptre bear!
How, best of poets, dost thou laurel wear!
But two things rare the Fates had in their store,
And gave thee both, to shew they could no more.
For such a poet, while thy days were green,
Thou wert, as chief of them are said t' have been.
And such a prince thou art, we daily see,
As chief of those still promise they will be.
Whom should my muse then fly to, but the best
Of kings, for grace; of poets, for my test? (“To King James” *Epigrams* I.4)

A lesser writer, Thomas Greene, also celebrated the king's poetic talent in his dream vision, *A Poets Vision, and a Princes Glorie* (1603). The Muse Calliope tells the poet:

To be a Prince it is an honour'd thing,
Yet ev'ry Poet to himselfe's a King.
But where in one they both commixed be,

He then is equall with a Dietie. (214-7)

Later in this work, Calliope promises the poet a share in the king's generosity: "thy Muse may once be blest, / And gently fost' red in a Kingly brest" (308-9).⁸ Examples could easily be multiplied. All this shows, of course, that under similar circumstances, i.e. life at a court entirely dependent on the whims of the king and higher nobles, writers resort to flattery in making their living. Barclay had inherited from antiquity literary devices to elevate and ennoble this flattery, and he had no hesitation in using them. For him flattery worked.

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⁸ Both passages from Greene quoted in Perry 26-7. Greene himself is available on the Early English Books microfilm.