A Manuscript Portion of Barclay's Life of St. George

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A Manuscript Portion of Barclay’s

Life of St. George

Alexander Barclay’s Life of St. George is known to exist only in a unique copy of the printed text. It is therefore of some interest that stanzas from the Life can now be identified in manuscript form, especially since the identification necessitates a correction to the Index of Middle English Verse, and provides another instance of the practice particularly prevalent in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries of excerpting portions from poems and transcribing them as poems in their own right.

No. 4257 of the Index ‘Ye that are comouns obey your king and lord’ has been edited several times. It occurs uniquely in British Museum MS Sloane 4031 of Lydgate’s Fall of Princes, written on the flyleaf in a sixteenth century hand, and consisting of ten rhyme royal stanzas. There is a very close correspondence between this poem and 11. 1261-1325 of Barclay’s Life. The only variants are the following (citing Barclay’s completed text first): 1270. more] 10. none; 1274. you] 14. your; 1279. for of] 19. omits of; 1281. deede] 21. dedes; 1313. more] 53. nye. The only major divergence between the two texts is the omission in Barclay’s completed poem of 11. 57-63 of Index no. 4257. I reprint this stanza below:

note well, also, how whan the hedes be
of perfyte lyvynghe and vndefyled name,

2. In the Library of Trinity College, Cambridge. For an account of this copy see Nelson, op. cit., xxi.
3. C. Brown and R. H. Robbins (New York, 1941); the present discovery is not mentioned in R. H. Robbins and J. L. Cutler, A Supplement to the Index of Middle English Verse (Lexington, 1965).
6. On flyleaf poems see R. H. Robbins, Secular Lyrics of the XIVth and XVth Centuries (Oxford, 1952), xxx-xxxii. Bergen notes (op. cit., p. 59) that this leaf was not part of the original manuscript.

66
as chasely lyvynge or gyven to eqyvre,
more commonly the commons are the same;
bvt whan the rvlers ensvyth synne and shame,
the commons feteth the lesse ther-wyth to mell.
for ef the hecle be syke, the body es natt well.

The relationship between the Sloane manuscript and the printed
text remains conjectural, particularly with regard to this stanza. It does
not occur anywhere else in the Life of St. George (although a number
of stanzas are missing almost immediately after this point in the narra-
tive 7). But the general accuracy of the scribe when assessed in rela-
tion to the printed text suggests a fidelity to his exemplar that makes
it at least unlikely that this stanza is an unauthorized interpolation.
It seems most probable that the source of the Sloane transcript was a
more complete version of Barclay's poem, than is now extant, but one
that was textually very close to it.

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7. Lines 1331-1358 have been destroyed as have 1079-1106, 1408-25 and
1506-19.