



Katie Barclay, *Caritas: Neighbourly Love and the Early Modern Self* (2021)

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Review: Katie Barclay, Caritas: Neighbourly Love and the Early Modern Self (2021)

Lucy Morgan

Abstract

In this article, Lucy Morgan reviews Caritas: Neighbourly Love and the Early Modern Self by Katie Barclay, published in hardback and e-book in January 2021. This book explores the Christian concept of caritas as an expression of neighbourly love and how it was experienced by lower-order Scottish people from 1660 to 1830. Barclay uses legal depositions and correspondence to examine the emotional and bodily aspects of caritas, positing that in a loving community, marital relationships were the ideal upon which all other social relationships were based. The author goes on to discuss how children were raised into the beliefs of caritas, what happened to those who rejected caritas's principles, and how itinerant individuals who lived outside of the normal boundaries of society still had a role within the loving community.

Keywords: Emotion, early modern, history, community, Christianity

Biography

Lucy Morgan is a first-year PhD student at the University of Sheffield. She is interested in the relationship between manhood and paternity in early modern England.

Katie Barclay's book, *Caritas: Neighbourly Love and the Early Modern Self*, is the most recent instalment in Oxford University Press's 'Emotions in History' series. Barclay describes *caritas* as an aspirational form of Christian neighbourly love, practiced by Catholics and Protestants across early modern Europe, with the purpose of creating loving communities of neighbours who supported and relied on each other. This book focuses on the lives of 'lower-order' Scots from 1660 to 1830, examining 2,000 cases from the Scottish Justiciary Court as well as sampling some surviving correspondence, providing a wide temporal and geographic overview of *caritas* throughout this period.¹ Barclay aims to understand 'how individuals enculturated [*caritas*], how they performed it, negotiated it, and occasionally rejected it' within their everyday lives, through a study of 'behaviour, gesture, material culture practices, and ritual'.² *Caritas*, literally translating into English as 'charity', was a force which went beyond the Ten Commandments' dictates to not covet your neighbour's house or wife. Barclay positions *caritas* as the opposite of lust; instead of selfish, individualistic, sinful love, *caritas* was a selfless, ethical, moral love which encouraged individuals to connect with others.³

Scotland provides an excellent setting for a study of this type; during this period, it was still dominated by the village and small-town structure where close-knit communities determined the social life and economic success of an area. Barclay also notes, however, that geographic mobility of Scottish people was rapidly increasing at this time, resulting in an itinerant population who do not necessarily fit into historians' perceptions of community living. The legal sources, mostly depositions, used by Barclay are invaluable to a study of emotions—they provide a great deal of first-person information about how lower-order people felt about the behaviour of their neighbours. The lives of lower-order people at this time blurred the boundaries between household and community—they were far more likely to live in single rooms or as multiple families to a house in comparison to their higher-order counterparts—and as a result of that forced closeness, their

¹ K. Barclay, *Caritas: Neighbourly Love and the Early Modern Self* (Oxford, 2021), 4 and 19–21.

² Barclay, *Caritas*, p. 14, 24.

³ Barclay, *Caritas*, p. 3.

experience of *caritas* was physical as well as emotional. *Caritas* was expressed through virtue and grace, and therefore encompassed neighbourly love through non-action—for example, not starting a fight or not reporting bad behaviour—as well as expressions of the traditionally Catholic concept of “good works” like feeding the poor. Where cynical Protestants might interpret expressions of “good works” as selfish ploys only done to get to heaven, the emphasis on charity within *caritas* made “good works” acceptable within the Kirk and therefore central to the loving community.⁴

Barclay draws on a rich historiography of neighbourliness and familial love, as well as being influenced by more recent feminist philosophical works on the place of love in modern society, such as Adam Philips and Barbara Taylor’s *On Kindness*. Her approach rejects family nuclearisation models, instead suggesting that lower order-Scots retained extended horizontal and vertical familial-neighbourly networks throughout her study. This book broaches a gap in the field of emotional history, providing a link between individual and communal emotional experiences in the past. She employs William Reddy’s concept of the ‘emotional regime’, where certain emotions can be studied as “dominant norms” within a society, alongside Monique Scheer’s concept of ‘emotional embodiment’, where emotions are “practiced” through expression and reciprocation between individuals.⁵ This reinforces the idea that loving communities were sustained through nature and culture. Barclay’s work uses what she describes as the ‘new history of emotions’ to prove that there was a “self” in the early modern period, arguing that *caritas* existed to relate “the self” to “the other” through individual and shared expressions of neighbourly love.⁶

The first two chapters of Barclay’s book deal with the induction into *caritas* and the education of children, both at home and through theological teaching. This provides an excellent entry point for readers who are also unfamiliar with the concept *caritas*, although these chapters could have benefitted from a further

⁴ Barclay, *Caritas*, p. 3.

⁵ See William Reddy *The Navigation of Feeling* 2001; and Monique Scheer, ‘Are Emotions a Kind of Practice?’

⁶ Barclay, *Caritas*, p. 3.

explanation of the etymology of the word. Barclay explains the meaning and translation of *caritas* in the introduction, but how that specific word was chosen remains uncertain throughout the text. It is most noticeable in these chapters, where Kirk and legal books are quoted extensively but none explicitly mention *caritas* (although charity and neighbours are mentioned often). It may be that this is due to a translation of these books from Latin into English, but a clarification of whether this term was ever used in an early modern Scottish context would have been interesting, if not beneficial, to the rest of the work. The neighbourly love advocated for by *caritas* was bodily and intimate, reinforced through spoken language as well as physical closeness in eating, working, and living together. As such, Barclay centres marriage and its ideals of reciprocal love and support as the foundation of *caritas*. This is firstly evidenced through a study of the communal celebration of marriage post-ceremony, with Barclay noting that wedding rituals retained complexity even after the introduction of banns-reading simplified the marriage sermon. Barclay then moves into an analysis of depositions relating to marriage breakdown, showing how members of the wider community were invited to provide testimony on the state of their neighbour's marriages, indicating that all members of a loving community had a strong understanding of the role of marriage, including the 'increase of mankind' and the prevention of 'uncleanness' (sexual immorality).⁷ This in turn influenced all other relationships, such as parent-child, employer-employee, and neighbour-neighbour, encouraging both moral policing but also forgiveness of moral infringements to maintain a peaceful equilibrium within the loving community. Childhood is used to examine how the uneven distribution of *caritas* was accepted within society. Privileging certain groups over others was acceptable, as long as any disparities reflected the ordered social hierarchy, such as the prioritisation of the education of sons over daughters. While Barclay notes that Enlightenment ideals about an 'expectation of love' for all children, including affectionate treatment, was present in Scotland by the eighteenth century, this is only examined in the case of parents caring for versus neglecting their own

⁷ Barclay, *Caritas*, p. 39.

children.⁸ It would be interesting if further study reversed this perspective and expanded upon the child's place within the loving community during marriage breakdown or parental death. Similarly, future work could explore whether or not *caritas* played a role when adults cared for children other than their own.

The third and fourth chapters examine the reception of immoral actions under *caritas*; their practice, discovery, and reformation. Barclay navigates the existing historiography on the top-down or bottom-up nature of early modern discipline, drawing on Lyndal Roper's *Holy Household* and Martin Ingram's *Carnal Knowledge*, pointing out that while the Calvinistic Kirk believed that all people were born with the Original Sin, for many lower order Scots, irregular marriage (marriage without an official Kirk ceremony, legal throughout the period) and premarital sex were 'disorderly but not immoral'.⁹ By pointing out that for many lower-order Scots, their home would just be a single room likely with one or more shared walls, Barclay suggests that neighbours were probably constantly aware of each other's actions. These homes were shared and porous, and Barclay implies that there was no conception of public and private space for the people in her study. Tolerance of others therefore became a crucial part of *caritas*. Intermittent bad behaviour was permissible, but not prolonged threats to the social order. As such, while the keeping and telling of secrets was technically immoral, it also became a 'central mechanism' of *caritas* 'through which peace and harmony' was enabled.¹⁰ Evoking Amanda Vickery's *Behind Closed Doors*, Barclay describes the social rituals of making or revealing secrets as seen in legal contexts. In cases of violent altercations or elopements, the identification of overheard voices was critically important. Wordless sounds of fighting or crying were equally legally pertinent—the victim and the aggressor could be determined by who was louder or seemed more upset. Similarly, materiality as obstructing sight or sound was crucial—the act of closing doors became almost always suggestive of wrongdoing. This approach is innovative and could be adopted into other studies of the early modern home and the family,

⁸ Barclay, *Caritas*, p. 64.

⁹ Barclay, *Caritas*, p. 95.

¹⁰ Barclay, *Caritas*, p. 118.

where scholars are often hampered by a lack of evidence around certain practices or behaviours. At many parts of this book, having no evidence is crucial; for example, Barclay shows that irregular marriages were often not disclosed to the community until it became necessary for a woman to prove that she was married, usually because she was visibly pregnant.¹¹ The “husband” might then come forward and claim such a marriage had never happened, resulting in the situation ballooning into a legal case where the *caritas* and the reputation of many members of the loving community would be affected.

The strongest chapter of Barclay’s book is the last, titled ‘Living Outside of Love’. Even by the end of the eighteenth century, Scotland remained mostly rural and non-industrial, meaning that vagrancy and itinerant work were still highly visible facets of communal living. Although these people did not live within the established boundaries of a local community, Barclay locates them within *caritas*, which gave them a place in the loving community, evidencing not only a ‘pragmatic’ approach to community but also a ‘comradery’ between those who lived on the road.¹² This chapter deftly unites the historian’s usually disparate understandings of work, vagrancy and communal living, showing how *caritas* encouraged communities to permit begging as a form of Christian charity, but also showing its limits and how it was possible to take advantage of the selflessness of *caritas* by accepting hospitality without giving back to the community. Barclay also discusses the ramifications of banishment as a punishment for extreme infringements of *caritas*, usually in cases murder or infanticide, indicating that deliberate exclusion from a community had significant local and personal impact. Although banishments were not usually permanent, it nevertheless indicates that loneliness and social exclusion were seen as the obvious repercussions for communal non-conformity, leading Barclay to conclude that ‘attachment to land and place was critical to the imagining of the social order’.¹³

¹¹ Barclay, *Caritas*, pp. 95–97.

¹² Barclay, *Caritas*, p. 150.

¹³ Barclay, *Caritas*, p. 166.

By giving *caritas* a position of centrality within early modern understandings of community, Barclay is able to show how it informed a wide range of individual, often contradictory, choices. Barclay's approach to emotional ethics allows for a more nuanced approach to bodily and emotional experiences which are lost in more prescriptive studies of law or social hierarchy. The methodology of this book could be applied to any Christian sect across Europe in the early modern period as a comparative study, and if Barclay wishes to expand on her own work, an investigation of old age's place in *caritas* would be much appreciated. As much of the book deals with education and sexual immorality, children and the unmarried necessarily take the forefront for much of the work. However, Barclay intriguingly mentions that in some parts of Scotland, community elders presided over formal Kirk disciplines alongside the minister. Although Barclay states that these courts became increasingly marginal and ineffective throughout the period, age as an indicator of wisdom and community leadership could enrich further studies of *caritas*.

Overall, this is a strong work which breathes life into its subject matter, allowing for an examination of complex social and personal issues including domestic abuse and violence, premarital and extramarital sexuality, and the material and immaterial boundaries of society and community. Crucially, Barclay's finding that almost all immoral and even some criminal actions could be redeemed through *caritas* provides a new perspective for researchers interested in society, religion, and acceptable behaviour in the early modern period.

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