In 1961, Henry Orion St. Onge, a graduate student in English at The Ohio State University, found himself embroiled in controversy. St. Onge had attended a campus screening of Operation Abolition, a film sponsored by the House Un–American Activities Committee depicting student protestors as the unwitting dupes of communist agitators. As a response to the film’s bias, St. Onge invited William Mandel, journalist and outspoken critic of the House Un–American Activities Committee, to give a talk at the university. The film had described Mandel as “a top communist propagandist,” so it made sense to call on him to provide a different perspective on the film’s material. When the university refused to host the talk, St. Onge proceeded to invite Mandel to speak in the graduate student’s own backyard, not far from the university. In part as a jest amid the controversy over Mandel’s visit, St. Onge promoted the lecture under the banner of “The Thomas Tusser Society,” ostensibly a student club. With roughly 200 people in attendance, the event caused a scandal in the way it appeared to defy Ohio State’s stance on Mandel. Finding himself and the Thomas Tusser Society scrutinized in local newspapers, letters to the university, and a special meeting of the Nebraska Constitutional Conservatives, St. Onge described the backlash as “a new era of

3. Coverage of Mandel’s visit appears in Randy Wright and Ben Kline, “U.S Could Never Win War with Russia, Mandel Says,” Ohio State Lantern, April 14, 1961, 1.
McCarthyism. . . of thought control.” 4 Indeed, as a result of the controversy, Wayne State College of Nebraska revoked a tenure track job offer it had earlier extended to St. Onge. 5

Although what had come to be called “the Mandel affair” ironically underlined precisely the infringement on academic freedom and constitutional rights St. Onge was concerned with preserving in the first place, the Thomas Tusser Society received an unusual amount of attention. The Daily Nebraskan suggested that some thought the organization to be “a mysterious secret movement,” a communist cell in America’s heartland. 6 Named for the author of the sixteenth-century book of georgic poetry, Five Hundred Points of Good Husbandry, the Thomas Tusser Society, said St. Onge jokingly, “informally discusses points of interest and possibly husbandry.” 7 The AAUP asserted that one of the core issues of the case was whether “by his levity and use of the Thomas Tusser Society placard on this occasion, Mr. St. Onge transcended the boundaries of professional propriety.” 8 On close inspection the society turned out not in fact to be a formal club at all, its membership being only St. Onge and one friend of mutual disposition, and its formation a kind of inside joke as Tusser’s poetry was, again according to the Daily Nebraskan, “reportedly terrible.” 9

Scholars have tended to agree with the Daily Nebraskan’s assessment of Tusser’s poetry. Indeed, Tusser is much more likely to be cited by botanists and agricultural historians in search of evidence about such things as early modern pest control and other agricultural matters than by literary scholars engaged with the poetic quality of Tusser’s popular verse. 10 It is

5. According to the CV included in his dissertation on Thomas Churchyard, St. Onge moved on to Waimea College in New Zealand and then a tenure-track position at SUNY Potsdam, and eventually settled in Maine. I had hoped to meet St. Onge in preparation for this essay; unfortunately, he passed away in 2013. Henry Orion St. Onge, “Thomas Churchyard: A Study of His Prose and Poetry,” PhD diss. (The Ohio State University, 1966), iii.
7. See Wright and Kline.
10. Alan B. Farmer and Zachary Lesser, for example, categorize Tusser’s book only “secondarily under Poesy and Arts” in their study of popular print: “What Is Print Popularity? A Map of the Elizabethan Book Trade,” The Elizabethan Top Ten: Defining Print Popularity in Early Modern En-
worth noting that *Five Hundred Points of Good Husbandry* is often denied the status of poetry, described instead as a “manual,” “almanac,” or as one historian put it, “a pioneering study” in gardening.¹¹

Even among literary scholars, Tusser’s poetry is almost compulsively denigrated as “doggerel.”¹² In a review of a 1984 reprint of *Five Hundred Points of Good Husbandry*, Eric Kerridge implores, “Every Englishman should read his Tusser” but also laments that readers will find the book going “from verse to worse.”¹³ Similarly, after praising Tusser’s philosophic view in one poem, Anthony Low contends that Tusser “quickly returns to his usual mixture of didacticism, forehead-knuckling, and greed interspersed with characteristically pastoral moments of relaxation.”¹⁴ Wendy Wall, who has devoted considerable scholarly attention to Tusser, nonetheless reduces his book to an agrarian book of jingles while Amy Erickson, interested in Tusser for his sympathetic attitudes regarding women’s work, describes Tusser’s poetry as “the most execrable extant example of Elizabethan verse.”¹⁵

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But Tusser was enormously popular throughout the early modern period. Richard Tottel printed the first edition of the book as *An Hundreth Good Pointes of Husbandrie* in 1557. A companion volume, *An Hundreth Pointes of Good Huswiferie* followed, and in 1561 the two books were combined as *The Marriage of One Hundreth Good Points of Huswander with One Hundreth Good Pointes of Huswiferie*. A testament to the book’s immediate popularity, in that same year, printer Owen Rogers was fined for printing without permission “the boke of husboundry beynge master Totteles.” The book was reprinted in 1562, possibly two more times in the 1560s, and again in 1570 and 1571. By 1573 the book had been expanded and revised to *Five Hundred Points of Good Husbandry*. It was then reprinted at least ten more times in the Elizabethan period and continued to be printed throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. It was one of the most frequently reprinted works of poetry in the early modern period.

For early modern readers, Tusser’s book evoked the georgic poetry of classical antiquity: Tusser is compared favorably to Cato, Varro, and Virgil. Tusser received honorable mention in John Stow’s *Survey of London* (1598), Robert Burton’s *Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621), Henry Peacham’s *The Art of Living in London* (1642), and Thomas Fuller’s *The History of the Worthies of England* (1662). Although many readers looked to Tusser for a store of farming knowledge, his book was also clearly read for its poetic qualities. Tusser is listed alongside Thomas Wyatt and Christopher Marlowe in William Winstanley’s *The Lives of the Most Famous English Poets* (1687). Thomas D’Urfey describes Tusser as “fam’d for Rural Wit,”

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18. Mavor lists confirmed editions from 1557, 1561, 1570, 1573, 1577, 1580, 1585, 1586, 1590, 1593, 1597, and two printings in 1599. To this list, one should add editions from 1571, 1574, and 1576. Mavor further cites references to printings from 1562 and 1564 (17–23).
19. See, for example, Jerome Stephen, *The Arraignment of the Whole Creature, at the Barre of Religion, Reason, and Experience* (1632), 204; Conrad Heresbach, *Foure Bookes of Huswander*, tr. Barnabe Googe (1577), iii.
while Barten Holyday’s seventeenth-century translation of Juvenal includes a note praising Tusser for his “Poetical Husbandry.” In *A Discourse of English Poetry* (1586), noting that few English writers had tried their hand at georgic poetry, William Webbe cites *Five Hundred Points of Good Husbandry* as “a peece surely of great wytt and experience, and withall very prettily handled.” And in *Palladis Tamia* (1598) Frances Meres compares Tusser to Hesiod, and further notes that Tusser wrote “very wittily and experimentally.”

By “experimentally,” Meres meant “through experience,” and this has much to do with the way Tusser tried to present himself. He had left courtly service under Lord William Paget to start his own farm first in Suffolk and later in Essex. Tusser presents his poetry as pragmatic, the product of actual practice in the field. Rather than write poetry from the perspective of an imaginary shepherd or plowman, Tusser set out to actually be the farmer he writes about. This emphasis on his status as a farmer has perhaps led some modern readers to presume a lack of craft, and instead a haphazard rhyming of rural life.

I would like to suggest, however, that Tusser knew precisely what he was doing in his poetry. Just as St. Onge sought to counter the red scare around him in the 1960s, so Tusser aimed at a subtler response to aesthetic and political developments in early Elizabethan England. The mere fact of printing a book of nativist poetry focused on the plow hinted at an extension of mid-Tudor populism against the grain of Elizabethan poetry increasingly modeled on Continental trends. In his revisions of specific poems, appropriations of poetic forms, and his recollections of the mid-Tudor court, Tusser was responding to the fact that Elizabeth I was not, as some had hoped, returning England to the heyday of popular commonwealth discourse that developed under Edward VI. In Book I of *The Georgics* Virgil imagines a farmer of the future turning the soil to dis-

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cover the weapons and bones of Roman soldiers; as will be demonstrated, Tusser’s book attempts to turn the soil of the populist aesthetics of England’s mid-Tudor protectorate for a new generation of readers.

II

Revising and Refining Pointes

Although Frances Meres did not mean “experimentally” in the contemporary sense, in presenting poetry from the field rather than the court’s imaginary, and in its attempt to construct a counter to prevailing courtly aesthetics, Tusser’s book may be read as a kind of poetic experiment. The book began as a little over twenty pages of verse about farming organized around the months of the year. By 1580, the book was nearly 180 pages long with poems on everything from the cosmos to the qualities of good cheese. Meredith Ann Skura has shown how Tusser constantly revised and expanded his book in relation to his personal circumstances, but the revisions also reveal Tusser expanding and refining an aesthetic statement informed by the politics of regime change and the populist radicalism of the mid-Tudor period. The 1557 edition begins with an acrostic dedication to Lord Paget in which Tusser provides a brief autobiographical account of the book’s development:

So since I was, at Cambridge taught,
Of Court ten yeres, I made assay:
No musike than, was left unsought,
A care I had to serue that way.

But something happens to lead Tusser to flee the court. He explains, “My joye gan slake, then made I chaunge, / Expulsed mirth, for musike straunge.” “My musike synce,” begins the next stanza, “hath bene the plough.”

26. The poem on cheese, “A Lesson for Dayrie Mayde Cysley,” first appeared in the 1573 printing (M3–M3v), “Of the Planets” did not appear in the book until 1580: Tusser, Five Hundred Pointes of Good Husbandrie as Well for the Champion, or Open Countrie, as also for the Woodland, or Severall, Mixed in Every Month with Huswiferie (1580), D3v.
29. Tusser (1557), A2.
have written his poetry as a pose, like the “gentlemen shepherds” discussed by Louis Montrose, but in starting an actual farm where he might cultivate the music of the plow, Tusser engages in a poetics subtly counter to that of the Elizabethan court.  

By 1570 Tusser had moved the dedicatory poem to later in the book and instead begins with a poem to the common reader:

What lookest thou here for to haue?  
Trim verses, thy fansie to please?  
Of Surry (so famous) that craue,  
Looke nothing but rudenesse in these.  

The music of the plow is heard more clearly here, in direct contrast with Surrey whose courtly poems had entered print a short while after the 1557 edition of Tusser’s book. Tusser differentiates his book and its “rudenesse” from the craving for “trim” poetry of courtly leisure. The poem continues,

What other thing lookest thou then?  
Graue sentences herein to finde?  
Such Chaucer hath twentie and ten,  
Ye thousands to pleasure thy minde.  

What looke ye, I pray you? shewe what,  
Tearmes painted with rhetoricke fine?  
Of makers of Englishe looke that,  
But never in me nor in mine.  

Tusser’s experiment begins to take shape: those looking for “Trim verses,” “Graue sentences,” “rhetoricke fine,” or something simply to “pleasure thy minde” might do well to look elsewhere. The 1570 version of the poem contrasts Tusser’s poetry with that of Surrey and Chaucer, but in his search for a way to define his experiment in poetry, Tusser risks rejecting himself as a genuine “maker” or poet “of Englishe.” A 1573 revision re-
claims some of this lost ground: for example, “Of Surry (so famous)” is re-
placed with “Of manye my betters,” a claim that hints at social status rather
than poetic fame. The next stanza of the 1573 version continues in the same
spirit:

What other thinge lookest thou then?
Graue sentences manye to finde?
Such poets hath twenty and ten,
Yea thousands contenting the minde.32

The comparison to Chaucer is avoided here, replacing his name with
“Such poets,” a more general reference apparently building on “manye
my betters” from the previous stanza. Moreover, without giving up the
practicality of his book, Tusser no longer concedes “pleasure” to other
poetry. “Such poets” now write sentences merely “contenting the mind.”
The next stanza furthers Tusser’s greater specificity in his poetic project:

What loke ye (I pray you shew what?)
Termes painted with rhetorick fyne?
Good husbandry seeketh not that,
Nor ist any meaning of myne.

The “makers of Englishe” from 1570 give way to “Good husbandry,”
while “rhetorick fyne” slips from existence to intention, from some-
thing not to be found “in me nor in mine” to simply not being “any
meaning of myne.” The contrast with court aesthetics is still present but
revised to assert that the book offers not non-poetry but a different kind
of poetry, the poetry of husbandry, an aesthetic neither by nor necessar-
ily for courtiers. Instead the book presents “Good lessons” and “Things”
or in 1573 “Poyntes needful.” Critics who disparage Tusser for a lack of
courtly conceit along the lines of Surrey would do well to note that he
explicitly avoids such an aesthetic. The sometime court musician shifted
from courtly ornament to a music that is pragmatic, focused on agricul-
tural labor in an intentional contrast with courtly leisure. Throughout,
the preface to the reader frames the courtly aesthetic as one of privileged

32. Tusser, *Fiue Hundreth Points of Good Husbandry United to as Many of Good Huswiferie* (1573), B3. It should be noted that in 1573 Tusser moved the poem further into the book, after dedications
to the Paget family.
craving for the likes of Surrey or “manye my betters” as opposed to Tusser’s own poetry of soil, toil, and common need.

III

Appropriating the Courtly

In addition to revisions of specific lines of poetry, Tusser also engaged in what might be termed appropriations of form which furthered his poetic project. The 1573 printing, for example, features a substantial revision to “September’s Husbandry,” including an 18-stanza list of farm tools, which by 1574 was set off from “September’s Husbandry” with the subtitle “A digression to husbandlie furniture.” Lists are not unusual in Tusser’s book: between “January’s Abstract” and “January’s Husbandry” is an alphabetical list “Of trees and fruits,” for example, and “Marches Abstract” includes several lists of herbs. “A digression” is different in that it presents the list in verse. Tusser is clearly drawing on classical models—Homer’s list of ships in The Iliad, Hesiod’s lists of lovers in Theogony, and Virgil’s list of Trojan enemies in The Aeneid. Tusser would seem to have appropriated the epic catalog to honor the farm. But ancient georgic poetry also indulged in lists. Tusser’s “A digression to husbandlie furniture” nods to Virgil’s much shorter list of farm tools in Book One of The Georgics.

Tusser’s “A digression,” then, provides a practical list of “things needful” while also gesturing to a time when georgic and epic, the practical and the lofty, were not so starkly opposed, when countryside and empire seem to have participated in a substantially similar aesthetic.

Virgil further links epic to georgic by describing his catalog of farm implements as a list of “duris agrestibus arma,” “the sturdy peasants’ weap-

33. Tusser (1573), D4v–E1; Tusser, Fiue Hundreth Points of Good Husbandry Vnited to as Many of Good Huswiferie (1574), D4–E1.
34. Tusser (1573), J2, L1–L3v.
Tusser, in contrast, resists metaphor and simile and instead revels in the common names for everyday objects of the farm:

A pitch fork, a dung fork, seeue skep, and a bin,
A brome, and a paile, to water therein.
A handbarowe, whelebarowe, sholue, and spade:
A currey combe, mainecombe, and whip for a Jade.

The poem elevates the utilitarian objects and lays claim to a sense that the everyday language of the farmer is in itself already a kind of poetry. The list of objects stands on its own without need of courtly embellishment or epic simile. Here the pragmatic and poetic meet in the storehouse of the peasant rather than the imagination of the courtier.

Tusser’s experiment in developing a non-courtly poetics is perhaps clearest in his appropriation of the sonnet. The 1557 edition of *One Hundredth Good Pointes* includes “A sonet, or brief rehersall of the properties of the twelue monethes afore rehersed.” As Dympna Callaghan summarizes it, the poem describes how “human labor seeks to harmonize itself with the passing seasons.” Tusser’s oft-extolled virtue of thrift is here the crucial means by which humans can survive harsh winter months. The poem is made up of six rhyming couplets summarizing the central features of husbandry by month, ending with a seventh couplet on the passing of time: “So wisdom did kepe, and prouide while we may: / For age crepeth on, as the time passeth away.” The final couplet suggests the limits of thrift. The bulk of the sonnet is devoted to cyclical calendar time and

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37. This is my translation of the phrase. Although some translations do away with the metaphor, John Dryden translated the phrase as “What arms they wield, / Who labour Tillage and the furrow’d Field” (ll. 239–40). Similarly, T. F. Royds renders the phrase “what weapons hardy rustics need.” More recently, Janet Lembke has translated the phrase as “militant farmers’ weapons,” and Kristina Chew translates the phrase as “THE TOOLS WITH WHICH / THE EXPERIENCED FARMER WAGES WAR” (caps in original). T. E. Page, ed., P. Virgili Maronis Bucolica et Georgica, l. 160; John Dryden, *The Works of Virgil Containing His Pastoral, Georgics and Aeneis* (1696); Janet Lembke, tr., *Virgil’s Georgics* (New Haven, 2005); T. F. Royds, *The Eclogues and Georgics of Virgil* (London and New York, 1880); Kristina Chew, tr., *Georgics* (Indianapolis, 2002).

38. Tusser (1574), D4v.


41. On thrift as a central virtue in *Five Hundred Points*, see McRae, *God Speed the Plough*, 146–51.
the changing seasons, but the final lines with their echo of Psalm 144, “Man is lyke a thynge of naught, his time passeth away like a shadow,” provide a somber glance at mortality and the fact that humans live in linear time with only a limited experience of seasonal renewal.42

Despite the title, “A sonet . . .,” J. Christopher Warner, keen to highlight the preeminence of Tottel’s Miscellany, argues that the poem (printed shortly before Tottel printed Surrey’s sonnets) is not really a sonnet at all, suggesting that perhaps Tottel himself came up with the title because Tusser’s poem happened to be 14 lines.43 Warner’s evidence for denying that the poem is a sonnet hinges on the idea that the poem’s rhyming couplets link it more strongly with Tusser’s other poems than with the sonnet tradition, but the fact that the sonnet has a rhyme scheme congruent with other poems in the book only emphasizes the book’s overall coherence as a poetic project, not that Tusser was incapable of working within various poetic forms. William Shakespeare, after all, would go on to write Sonnet 126, also made up entirely of couplets. Indeed, Jessica Rosenberg argues that Shakespeare’s use of the couplet throughout his sonnets owes more to Tusser than to Wyatt or Surrey.44

Moreover, Tusser would have been keenly aware of the sonnet tradition. Despite his claim to “rudenesse,” the Tusser family was “of linnage good, of gentle blood” as Tusser himself described it in “The Author’s Life,” a verse autobiography appended to the 1573 edition of Five Hundred Points.45 As a member of the gentry, Tusser would have been raised with the educational advantages that came with that status and at least moderate wealth. In fact, Tusser’s education was at the cutting edge of humanist learning in mid-Tudor England.46 Trained from an early age as a chorister and musician, Tusser served in the boys’ choir at St. Paul’s under John Redford, among the earliest English composers for organ and

42. The Byble in Englyshe (1540), Dd3.
46. Details of Tusser’s life are based on this poem as well as Skura, 126–48; and Andrew McRae, “Thomas Tusser (c.1524–1580)” (ODNB).
probable author of the interlude *The Play of Wit and Science*. In "The Author’s Life," Tusser recalls Redford, "the like no where."47 Tusser went on to Eton under the tutelage of notable translator and author, Nicholas Udall. Tusser then attended King’s College and Trinity Hall, Cambridge. In all his reflections on education, Cambridge receives the most nostalgic, affectionate praise:

There joy I felt, there trim I dwelt,  
There heav’n from hell, I shifted well,  
With learned men, a number then,  
The tyme I past.48

The classical learning and musical training Tusser had received ought to indicate someone quite familiar with Latin and Greek as well as contemporary trends in English and European poetry. It seems unlikely that with this educational background, Tusser would not have encountered Petrarch. Indeed, Udall parodied the pose of the Petrarchan lover in his play, *Ralph Roister Doister*.49

After Cambridge, Tusser served as a musician for Paget, who had risen from a humble birth to be a leading statesman in the court of Henry VIII and his successors. Until 1547, Paget was a sometime ally of Surrey’s: Paget advised the headstrong Surrey, and Surrey’s letters tended to emphasize, at least for rhetorical effect if not genuine feeling, his friendship with Paget.50 When Surrey fell from favor, however, Paget turned on the Earl and involved himself in the prosecution of Surrey and his father.51 Surrey, displaying precisely the petulance Paget had cautioned him about in the previous year, railed against Paget’s birth, referring to him simply as

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48. Tusser (1573), Z4v.
49. For a discussion of Udall’s parody, see Howard B. Norland, *Drama in Early Tudor Britain*, 1485–1558 (Lincoln, 1995), 272.
51. On Surrey’s demise, see Brigden.
“Catchpoll!” Although the short-lived alliance of Paget and Surrey does not insure familiarity with Surrey’s poetry, Tusser arrived at court as Surrey and Wyatt’s sonnets were circulating in manuscript. Many of the poems of Wyatt and Surrey as well as Petrarch before them were set to music for courtly entertainment. In recalling his years at court under Paget, Tusser emphasizes his diligence in performing: “No musike then was left unsought.” With all his choral training, it seems more than likely that Tusser had sung some sonnets during Paget’s time under Henry VIII and Edward VI.

Thus, Tusser’s sonnet made it to print shortly before the major printing of Wyatt and Surrey’s sonnets in Tottel’s Miscellany. Perhaps personally motivated by Surrey’s sneer at Paget’s birth, Tusser’s sonnets (he would add more in later editions) are in clear contrast with Surrey’s participation in the Petrarchan tradition. Instead, Tusser’s first sonnet crystallizes the pragmatic georgic advice of the entire book. In 1573 Tusser included another sonnet made up of rhyming couplets. Listed in “The table to the booke of Huswifery” as “A sonet of almes deedes,” the poem offers a condensation of Saint Augustine’s sermon on almsgiving where charity is praised and encouraged, but not as a means to salvation. The poem’s Latin title “Eleemosyna prodest homini in vita, in morte, et post mortem” [“Giving alms profits man in life, death, and after death”] summarizes Augustine but also echoes early editions of Petrarch’s Il Canzoniere which organized the sonnets into “in vita” and “in morte,” those written while the beloved Laura was alive and those upon her death. Tusser seizes upon the Petrarchan organizational principle (and its precedent in Latin liturgy) but denies the centrality of a Laura figure. Instead, the poem begins “For onely love to God, more Christian like to leve, / and for a zeale, to help the poore, thine almes dayly geve.” Of course, Petrarch himself was not exactly at odds with Augustine. In the Secretum Petrarch imagined a dialogue between himself and Augustine in which the ancient theologian rebukes the poet for his obsession with Laura to the neglect of spiritual life. If Tusser’s use of the sonnet form for a paraphrase of Augustine is taken as an allusion to the Secretum, it may well be that Tusser was

52. Gammon, 127.
54. Tusser (1570), A3.
55. Tusser (1573), Y4v–Z1; my emphasis.
obliquely turning an Augustinian Petrarch against the Petrarchism of English court poetry.56

The devotional nature of Tusser’s sonnet, moreover, owes a debt to Anne Lock’s 1560 sonnet cycle, “A Meditation of a Penitent Sinner: Written in a Maner of a Paraphrase vpon the 51. Psalme of David” (itself a response to Wyatt’s Penitential Psalms).57 Tusser insures that his Augustinian sonnet fits within his own georgic design, however. He ends with a warning to those who believe charity will purchase heaven, a simile taken straight from the farm: “For else as cacklyng henne, with noyse bewrayes her nest, / Euen so go thou & blaze thy deedes, & lose thou all the rest.”

Together Lock and Tusser mark an early counter-tradition of the sonnet, one where the church and countryside are given precedence over the court.58 All Tusser’s other sonnets (like Lock’s) follow the English rhyme scheme popularized by Wyatt and Surrey, but none of them dwells on erotic love. Even Tusser’s sonnets relating to his time under Paget resist Petrarchan content. For example, although the 1570 addition of “A Sonet to the Lady Paget” refers to “pleasures past,” the focus is on service and indebtedness rather than scandal.59 Lest the reference to “pleasures” seem too invitingly vague or potentially salacious, by 1577 Tusser had replaced the phrase with “service past.”60


59. Tusser (1570), K4v.

60. Tusser (1577), Y4.
The 1574 printing of *Five Hundred Points* further emphasizes Tusser’s conscious appropriation of the sonnet form as he paired two more poems under the simple heading “Sonettes.” 1574’s “A Sonet upon the Autors first vii. yeares seruice” provides another homage to Paget, praising the enduring bond of master and servant with no mediating unattainable lady. On the opposing page, “A Sonet against a slanderous tongue” poses a series of rhetorical questions aimed at comparing slander to some other parasitic and/or idle occurrence in nature. “Do taint worms good, that lurk where ox shuld eate? / Or sucking drones, in hiues where bees abide?” writes Tusser. The “taint worm” was often a symbol of something small harming something big, or, in John Milton’s *Lycidas*, something unseen that kills someone before his time. The “sucking drone” is a more pointed image, a common allusion to the idle—sometimes vagrants, but more often usurers, sycophantic courtiers, and tyrannical lords: those who lived off the labor of others were frequently described in insect fables as “drones.” In both instances, an imagined order is disrupted by an undeserving parasite. Lest this vision of a fallen, backbiting court be missed or seem primarily personal in nature, the sonnet also asks about the effect of “stinging snakes” on “this our commonwelth?” In this last line, Tusser again avoids the inwardness often associated with the sonnet and instead echoes the commonwealth men whose mid-Tudor writings emphasized civic duty and the common good over personal gain.

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61. Tusser (1574), R.1.
62. Tusser (1570), K2v; Tusser (1574), R.1.
63. Tusser (1574), Q4v-R.1.
65. See, for example, the fisherman in William Shakespeare’s *Pericles*, who declares, “We would purge the land of these drones, that rob the bee of her honey” (2.1.40–47). Early modern writers no doubt gleaned the notion from classical sources: for instance, in his *Georgics*, Virgil similarly describes drones as lazy (IV, 168).
66. The 1577 edition includes the odd variant, “stinking snakes,” rendering them potentially less harmful, but certainly more noxious and repugnant (R.1).
Remembering the Mid-Tudor Commonwealth
Tusser’s depiction of venomous snakes and lazy drones relates to his experience at court where the instability of the unrequited Petrarchan lover paralleled the shifting alliances of courtiers vying for favor and influence. Tusser seems to have been a casualty of some such machinations at court. In “The Authors life,” Tusser conveys ambivalence about the court. In a stanza glossed as “The uyces of the Court,” Tusser writes,

By Court I spyed, & ten years tryed,
That cardes & dyce, with Venus uyce,
And peish pride, from uertue wyde,
   With some so wraught,
That Tyburne play, made them awaye.68

With its conflation of the dramatic stage and the executioner’s scaffold, Tusser is a reluctant observer of what seems to be a real-life morality play at court. Pride, lust, and avarice are figured as enticing pitfalls for courtiers. It’s difficult to know if Tusser had a particular courtier in mind in his allusion to execution—Edward VI’s short reign oversaw thousands of executions at Tyburn, but among the most notable executions there under Edward was that of the leaders of the Western Rebellion.69

Tusser follows this description with a stanza glossed as “The Court commendid”:

Yet is it not, to be forgot,
In Court that some, to worship come,
And some in time, to honour clime,
   And speede full well:
Some haue such gift, that trym they shift,
Some profit make, by paynes they take,
In perill much, though oft are such,
   In Court that dwell.70

68. Tusser (1573), Z4v.
70. Tusser (1573), Aa1.
One does not profit without taking “paynes,” in direct contrast with the easy pleasures of vice at court. One doesn’t simply have honor; one climbs to it. And one does not advance without making some useful talent available to the court. For Tusser, what is commendable in court is that some advance by merit. Even in his positive depiction of court as meritocracy, however, lurks “perill.”

The next stanza briefly touches on the danger that led Tusser to leave the court:

When court gan frown, and strife in town,
And lordes & knights, saw heavy sights
Then tooke I wife, & led my life,
In Suffolke soyle.

The reference to problems at court is prudently vague as is the stanza’s marginal gloss: “The nobilitie at variance.”71 It was not until Tusser’s final additions to the book in 1580 that he specified: “The nobilitie at variance in Edward 6 Daies.”72 This is without a doubt a reference to the fall of Protector Somerset in 1549. Edward Seymour, Duke of Somerset and uncle to Edward VI, had become the Lord Protector of the eleven-year-old king in 1547. His leadership, short-lived as it was, coupled fervent Protestant reform with a populist rhetoric that Ethan Shagan describes as “dangerously close to envisaging a political partnership between government and commons.”73

Tusser seems to have been tied to what might be called a Somerset circle, a loose knit group of writers patronized at one time or another by the Lord Protector or his immediate family members. The circle included reformers like John Hooper and Thomas Becon as well as poets like Thomas Churchyard, William Gray, Nicholas Grimald, William Baldwin, and Thomas Sternhold.74 Tusser’s maternal uncle, Sir Clement

71. Tusser (1573), Aa1.
72. Tusser (1580), 86.
Smyth, was married to Somerset’s daughter, and it seems likely that this connection helped advance the musician and poet at court, especially within the Somerset circle. A connection between Tusser and a significant network of writers around Somerset can be seen in the case of Nicholas Udall, Tusser’s former tutor. Udall was well known to Somerset: Udall dedicated his *First Tome or Volume of the Paraphrase of Erasmus Upon the Newe Testamente* (1548) to Edward VI, but included a lengthy digression in praise of Somerset. Somerset is likely the “noble personage” who requested that Udall transcribe a 1548 sermon by Bishop Stephen Gardiner, the centerpiece of an inquiry Somerset launched into Gardiner’s religious sympathies. The next year Somerset would again call on Udall, this time to write a response to the articles of the Western Rebellion, also called the Prayer Book Rebellion, an organized resistance in Devon and Cornwall to the introduction of the Book of Common Prayer. Udall provided a comprehensive defense of Somerset’s program of religious reform, reminding the rebels of “what tender love the King’s Majesty with his most dere uncle Edward Duke of Somerset, and the rest of his Privy Council bearth to his Common weale and subjects of England.”

Similarly, Tusser’s main patron was a longtime ally of Somerset. Paget helped establish the Protectorate that empowered Somerset, and although Paget was more conservative in outlook than Somerset—even criticized Somerset’s more populist policies—he remained Somerset’s closest advisor. Even as Somerset hid in Windsor Castle, his demise imminent, Paget stood by him and used his skills in diplomacy to negotiate a peaceful end to the conflict. Indeed, after Somerset lost the position of Protector, Paget continued to be associated with Somerset, much to his own detriment:

Paget eventually found himself removed from office and imprisoned for a time due to his ongoing association with Somerset.\(^81\)

Historians have referred to Somerset’s fall as nothing short of a coup d’etat whereby members of the Privy Council with Warwick at the head seized control of governance. The foundation on which Tusser had built his career at court was shaken to its core, and so he prudently fled. In “Of thauthors departing from Court to the Countrey,” another poem added to the 1573 printing of *Five Hundred Points*, Tusser laments the loss of his circle at court: “my crotches al, are broke and gone, / My woonted friends are careles bent.”\(^82\) Addressed to one such friend from court (or perhaps a generic courtier), the poem implores,

> Muse not my freende, to finde me here
> Contented with, this poore estate,
> And seme to do, with willing chere,
> That courtier doth, so deadly hate.\(^83\)

Although the poem contrasts the ease of the “daintie court” with the manual labor of the farm, Tusser asserts a “willing chere” to engage in the work that courtiers typically disdain. Just as Tusser had emphasized a positive meritocracy at court, so here he depicts labor as a virtue to be embraced. Still, Tusser’s flight to an agrarian life appears to be less a choice and more of a direct outcome of his particular connections to Somerset and the theologians, poets, and courtiers around him.

Tusser’s poetry, after all, bears significant traces of the Somerset circle’s influence. When Tusser wrote his Augustinian sonnet he may well have had in mind another text from the Somerset circle: dedicated to Somerset’s wife, Nicholas Lesse’s translation of St. Augustine’s *A Worke of the Predestination of Saints* (1550) includes a section from Augustine on almsgiving.\(^84\) Along similar lines, Tusser’s rejection of the sonnet as love lyric may owe something to Becon’s vehement condemnation of romances and love poetry in favor of psalms and prayer in his translation of *The

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81. These events have been well covered by scholars. See, for example, David Loades, *John Dudley, Duke of Northumberland, 1504–1553* (Oxford, 1996), 125–79; Gammon, 160–88; Loach, 87–95, 113.
82. Tusser (1573), Z3.
83. Tusser (1573), Z2v.
84. Nicholas Lesse, tr., *A Worke of the Predestination of Saints Wrytten by the Famous Doctor S. Augustine Byshop of Carthage* (1550), D4v–E1.
Golden Boke of Christen Matrimonye (1543). Indeed, Tusser’s “A sonet of almes deedes” was part of a cluster of devotional poems added to the 1573 printing of Five Hundred Points: “Principall Pointes of Religion,” “The Auctors Beliefe,” and “Of the Omnipotence of God” all express reformist theology. For some readers, these poems were especially memorable. Tusser’s gravestone at St. Mildred’s Church in the Poultry (a church on the west end of Cheap Ward, London) included the following epitaph:

Here Thomas Tusser, clad in earth doth lie,
That sometime made the pointes of husbandrie,
By him then learne thou maist, here learne we must,
When all is done we sleepe and turne to dust,
And yet through Christ to heauen we hope to go,
Who reads his books shall finde his faith was so.

The use of a church monument to not only memorialize the dead but remind passersby of their own mortality is unremarkable, but this epitaph unexpectedly recommends Five Hundred Points as a further testament to Tusser’s religious devotion. That is, for some readers among the most memorable aspects of Five Hundred Points was the addition of this cluster of devotional verse. John N. King notes that mid-Tudor gospellers, many of whom were an immediate part of Somerset’s circle, rejected the poetic pretensions of Wyatt and Surrey in favor of popular verse forms. Tusser’s “The Auctor’s Beliefe,” “Of the Omnipotencie of God,” “Malus Homo,” and even “A sonet of almes deedes” employ poulter’s meter (alternating lines of twelve and fourteen syllables), a popular mid-Tudor verse form used by Churchyard, Grimald, Sternhold, and several others, while Tusser’s “Principall pointes of Religion” is written as a series of tetrameter lines all ending in –ie or –y, a variation on the common meter of popular ballads. Well aware of contemporary developments in poetry, Tusser

86. Tusser (1573), Y2–Z1v.
87. Stow, 211–12.
nonetheless chose to echo the religious poetry of the Somerset circle in his devotional verse.

The clearest and most fundamental influence of the Somerset circle on Tusser can be seen in his choice to write georgic poetry at a time when no Elizabethan writers did so.\(^90\) Within the Somerset circle was a pronounced reliance on the economic and even ethical value and therefore symbolic importance of the farmer.\(^91\) Hugh Latimer, a central figure among Somerset’s reformers, preached before Edward VI and the Lord Protector on January 18, 1548, offering an extended meditation comparing the clergy to plowmen: “as dilygentlye as the husbaunde man plougheth for the sustentacion of the bodie,” declared Latimer, “so dilygentlye muste the prelates and ministers labour for the fedynge of the soule: bothe the ploughes muste still be doynge, as moost necesarye for man.”\(^92\)

Around this time, Somerset’s primary printer of propaganda, Richard Grafton, was responsible for the publication of Sir Francis Brian’s *A Dispraise of the Life of a Courtier, and a Commendacion of the Life of the Labourying Man* (1548), which claimed, “better is the poore ploughman on a poore asse, livyng as he should, then the riche man well horsed, pillyng & doing extorcion to pore honest men.”\(^93\) Robert Crowley, another significant printer responsible for several tracts of propaganda for Somerset, published the first edition of William Langland’s wide-ranging theological and political allegory, *Piers Plowman*, in 1550.\(^94\) In his instructions to Lord Russell regarding the quelling of the Western Rebellion, Somerset himself evoked a similar agricultural metaphor, referring to Russell’s “good husbandrye in so much as maie be done for his hynes at this p[re]sent.”\(^95\) And in 1550, Somerset authorized the printing of a reformist pamphlet, which, among its many

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\(^{90}\) Sir Philip Sidney went so far as to doubt that georgic verse was in fact poetry. It should be noted that there are some fainter echoes of the Somerset circle in Tusser’s poetry: Tusser’s alphabetized lists of various herbs in “Marches Abstract” seem to have been drawn in part from William Turner, whose alphabetical *The Names of Herbes in Greke, Latin, Englishe, Duche & Frenche* (1548) was dedicated to Somerset. See also King, 90–93, 108.

\(^{91}\) On this motif in mid-Tudor rhetoric, see Betteridge, 89–104.


\(^{94}\) On Crowley’s role as printer for Somerset, see King, 96–100, 319–57.

\(^{95}\) Somerset in *Troubles Connected with the Prayer Book of 1549*, ed. Nicholas Pocock, Camden Society n.s. 37 (Westminster, 1884), 36.
agricultural metaphors, declared “God a husbandman.”

Although this line of thought may have been proverbial, it is clear that Somerset’s circle saw the plow as a useful vehicle to address religious and political matters. For Somerset’s circle, however, these metaphors of the plow did not overshadow the centrality of actual good husbandry in the commonwealth. Udall framed the Western Rebellion as the product of hardworking commoners duped by troublemaking “vagabonds and idle loiterers.” He urged the commoners to disperse, lamenting, “Ye do in meantime neglect your husbandry, whereby ye must live.” The Western Rebellion began as a protest of the new Book of Common Prayer, but the protectorate saw numerous other uprisings motivated by inflation, dearth, and resultant rising food prices. Somerset was responsive to these economic issues, passing legislation to curb inflation and stabilize prices.

Many in the countryside, however, blamed the economic problems on the increasing scarcity of arable land, and therefore the enclosure of commons. Although the enclosure movement was gradual, varied in approach and motive, and sometimes achieved by agreement, Andy Wood has shown that amid diverse grievances, many of the small and large-scale mid-Tudor riots shared an anti-enclosure sentiment. Norfolk, Wiltshire, Bristol, Oxfordshire, Berkshire, Buckinghamshire, Kent, Sussex, Surrey and elsewhere all saw rioters tearing down the hedges that prevented access to the commons. What might have been deemed objectionable but ultimately bearable to peasants in a year of relative stability appeared

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96. Otto Werdmüller, *A Spyyrtuall and Most Precyouse Pearle Teachyng All Men to Loue and Imbrace the Crosse*, tr. Miles Coverdale (1550), D3v.
97. Udall, 145.
99. On Somerset’s policies of agrarian reform see Bush, 40–83; and Shagan, “Protector Somerset.”
absolutely intolerable to many in 1549.\footnote{101} Despite strenuous objections from Paget and others, Somerset established a commission to inquire into complaints of enclosure and engrossing.\footnote{102} As the head of the commission, John Hales, put it, the commission was to investigate instances where “any man hath taken away and enclosed any other men’s commons, or hath pulled down houses of husbandry and converted the lands from tillage to pasture.”\footnote{103} Although really only aiming at enforcing longstanding laws, Somerset’s commission turned out to be controversial. Among the charges leveled against Somerset at his trial in 1552 was that his responsiveness to complaints about enclosures only emboldened the peasantry, encouraging the several riots and rebellions that marked Edward VI’s reign.\footnote{104}

The turning point for Somerset’s rule was Kett’s Rebellion in Norfolk and the perception that Somerset was not sufficiently aggressive in quelling the rebellion.\footnote{105} The sixteenth-century chronicler Alexander Neville described the uprising in Norfolk as the result of commoners resenting the removal of enclosures in Kent had not similarly been enacted in Norfolk.\footnote{106} What had started as a collection of localized riots quickly expanded into the most formidable peasant uprising in Tudor England. By mid-July somewhere between 10,000 and 20,000 rebels had joined forces on Mousehold Heath with multiple smaller encampments throughout Suffolk and Norfolk. Of the 29 demands produced by the rebels, however, only one addressed the issue of enclosure directly: “We pray your grace that where it is enacted for inclosing, that it be not hurtfull to suche as have enclosed saffren grounds, for they be gretly chargeablye to them, and that frome hensforth noman shall enclose eny more.”\footnote{107} The point about saffron is obscure, no doubt the result of extensive debate on Mousehold Heath, but it would seem that the rebels with their diverse interests sought a reasonable compromise on the issue. After all, Robert Kett, the ostensible leader of the uprising, had been drawn into the rebellion when his

\footnote{101}{On this logic, see James C. Scott, *The Moral Economy of the Peasant: Rebellion and Subsistence in Southeast Asia* (New Haven, 1976), 176–92.}
\footnote{102}{Beer, 35; Bush, 76; and Gammon, 161.}
\footnote{103}{Qtd. in Bush, 44. On the issue more broadly, see 40–83.}
\footnote{104}{Foxe, VI, 290–91.}
\footnote{105}{See Beer, 181.}
\footnote{106}{Alexander Neville, *Norfolkes Furies, or A View of Ketts Campe* (1615), B1v.}
own recently established enclosure was under attack. It may be that the rebels trusted Somerset’s commission, or, as Diarmaid MacCulloch suggests, enclosure may not have been as contentious in East Anglia as in other parts of the realm.  

The other articles focused on controlling rent, limiting the power of the gentry and the clergy, and generally slowing the processes that seemed to be eroding customs advantageous to the peasantry. Particular complaints about landlords converting freehold to copyhold and utilizing the commons for their own livestock, for instance, aimed at maintaining a realm of small farmers. While Somerset attempted to negotiate with the rebels, John Dudley, Earl of Warwick soon arrived with orders to crush the rebellion, which he and his supporters did. Having alienated if not antagonized many of the elites around him, Somerset appeared weak upon Warwick’s triumphant return to London. It was only a matter of very little time before Warwick would lead a faction to force Somerset’s surrender.  

Despite his fall, several of Somerset’s circle carried on the argument for agrarian and religious reform. Baldwin, who had dedicated several works to members of the Seymour family during Somerset’s Protectorate, continued to emphasize the importance of the peasantry to the commonwealth during Mary I’s reign, writing, “And ne were the plough upholde by travaile. / Of kings, & princes, fareweel all governayle.” And in his apocalyptic defense against the undoing of Somerset’s program of reform, Crowley imagined Christ rebuking lords for raising rent and encroaching and enclosing land in a way that disenfranchised the poor:  

Boeth for the housyng 
and the lande 
That you haue taken 
from the pore

108. MacCulloch, 50–53.
110. There is a substantial body of work on Kett’s Rebellion (as well as its relation to Somerset’s fall). In addition to Shagan and Wood, one should consult Beer, 82–139; James Holstun, “Utopia Preempted”; and MacCulloch.
111. William Baldwin, A Memorial of Suche Princes, As Since the Tyme of King Richard the Seconde, Have Been Unfortunate in the Realme of England (1554), 43.
Poverty was the direct result of the rapacious appetite of the wealthy. Crowley thus imagined Somerset’s economic policies as intertwined with Protestant reform and continued to advocate for both even after Somerset’s program had been compromised.

Although Paget would make his way back into the good graces of the Privy Council, and even, miraculously, the government of Mary I, Tusser chose to abandon the court in favor of a life talking the plowman-talk of the Somerset circle. He could have planted himself near London, or outside his beloved Cambridge, or in his hometown of Rivenhall, but Tusser curiously chose to start his first farm in Suffolk, and then he moved to Norwich where he apparently found work as a lay clerk: Tusser thus moved ever closer to the epicenter of the agrarian revolt that so disrupted his life at court. It is from these locales, and later Essex (where he started another farm), that he wrote much of *Five Hundred Points*.

Tusser revisited the debate over enclosure in the 1570 printing of *Five Hundred Points* in his poem “A Comparison betwene Champion and Seueral.” “Champion” refers to open, unenclosed land while “seueral” refers to separating land for various uses including enclosing land for livestock. 113 Although the Elizabethan era was marked by more than 100 minor anti-enclosure riots, the poem begins provocatively, “The country


113. On these agricultural systems in pre- and early modern England (and with a focus on Suffolk, where Tusser had been farming), see Mark Bailey, “The Form, Function and Evolution of Irregular Field Systems in Suffolk, c.1300 to c.1550,” *The Agricultural History Review* 57 (2009), 15–36.
enclosed I prayse.”

A tribute to small landholders, the poem argues for the ecological, economic, and social benefits of enclosures. Although sometimes taken as a wholesale endorsement of all types of enclosure, Tusser’s argument in favor of enclosing land for grazing is characteristically pragmatic; he depicts a world without enclosures as a chaotic one where livestock trample and feed on crops intended for human consumption while the world where some land is designated for grazing is an orderly one where productivity, profit, and care of the poor are all balanced.

This is, of course, in marked contrast to the many early modern texts citing the disorder and depopulation prompted by enclosures. An eighteenth-century editor of Tusser’s poems observes, however, that “Champion and Seueral” focuses exclusively on small enclosures of two or three acres, the practical size necessary for a small farmer to maintain modest livestock or enclosed arable land. Although not specified, Tusser’s description of enclosures sounds like one of “enclosure by agreement,” a system whereby lords, freeholders, and sometimes copyholders came to consensus regarding enclosures and common lands and established clear titles. While Tusser may have had enclosed land, he was certainly not among the members of the gentry who grew fabulously wealthy in the process. In his 1573 dedication to Paget’s son, Tusser describes his own economic suffering in the Elizabethan agrarian capitalist system:

114. Tusser (1570), F3 (fol. 23). On anti-enclosure riots in the Elizabethan era, see Manning, 55–81.
117. Tusser Redivivus: Being Part of Mr. Thomas Tusser’s Five Hundred Points of Husbandry (London, 1710), 5, 13–14. Small enclosures appear to have been the norm in Suffolk during Tusser’s time there: see Bailey, 19–23.
Great fines, so nere did pare me,
great rent, so much did skare me,
great charge, so long did dare me,
that made me at le[n]ghth cry creake.¹¹⁹

The complaints here are not out of keeping with those of the Mousehold Articles—the imposition of fines, taxes, and rising rents pared the livings of many small farmers down to mere subsistence. Although one might read Tusser’s poem of economic struggle as a posture for renewed patronage under the Pagets, shortly after delivering his final additions to *Five Hundred Points*, Tusser was imprisoned for debt where he eventually passed away. Despite his status as a member of the gentry, Tusser often appears to identify with the precarious economic position of the tenant farmer rather than the local landlord.

Still, “Champion and Seueral” seems to be inflected by Tusser’s feelings about the anti-enclosure riots of the mid-Tudor period. The 1580 printing that introduced the specific marginal gloss about Somerset’s fall also includes additions to “Champion and Seueral” that reveal a bitterness about the rioting that led to Paget’s imprisonment and Somerset’s fall:

For commons, these commoners crie,
enclosing they may not abide:
Yet some be not able to bie,
a cow with hir calfe by hir side.
Nor laie not to liue by their wurke:
but theeuishlie loiter and lurke.¹²⁰

Tusser goes on to refer to anti-enclosure rebels as “verlets and drabs,” apparently agreeing with Udall’s claim that the instigators of mid-Tudor riots were primarily vagrants.¹²¹ Such passages are in keeping with the Elizabethan paranoia over idleness and masterless men, but Tusser seems especially bitter about the anti-enclosure movement, constructing his straw man argument from the trampled hedges of rioters in the commo-

¹²⁰. Tusser (1580), Q1v.
tion time of 1549. Indeed, “Champion and Seueral” refers to a lord only to lament that he is as irresponsible as the idle instigators of riot:

The Lord of the towne is to blame,
for these and for many faults mo:
For that he doth knowe of the same,
yet lets it unpunished go.
Such Lords ill example doth giue:
where verlets and drabs so may liue.  

The passage echoes tensions between Somerset and Paget. In response to Somerset’s offer to pardon rioters, Paget urged a more draconian approach involving troops gathering in each town “twenty or thirty of the rankest knaves” to be hanged or imprisoned.

Another addition to the 1580 version of the poem singles out Norfolk, the site of Kett’s Rebellion:

In Norfolke behold the dispaire,
of tillage too much to be borne:
By drovers from faire to faire,
and others destroienge the corne.
By custome and couetous pates:
by gaps and by opening of gates.

Here, as Andrew McRae points out, Tusser seems “to invert the language of anti-enclosure polemic.” Alluding to Kett’s Rebellion, Tusser takes accusations about greedy landlords and instead claims that the rebels themselves appear “couetous” in their appeals to “custome” without considering the depletion of soil.

At the same time, the poem should not be read as a bitter betrayal of the commons in the name of individual property rights. Even as Tusser

122. On Elizabethan concerns with vagrancy, see Linda Woodbridge, 
123. Tusser (1580), Qiv–Q2.
125. Tusser (1580), Q1.
126. McRae, God Speed, 150.
presents the argument against enclosure only to undermine it, he none-
theless registers some of the common complaints of the disenfranchised.
The poem ends with the suggestion that enclosures are not in and of
themselves a virtue:

The poore at enclosing do grutch,
bycause of abuses that fall.
Least some men should have but to much,
and some againe nothing at all.
*If order mought therefore be founde*
what were to the severall ground.*127*

The poem thus voices concerns about abuses of the enclosure system,
one that result in poverty, depopulation, and class resentment. The final
couplet’s conditional statement, its acknowledgement that an unregulated
progress of enclosures necessarily harms the commonwealth, recalls pre-
cisely Somerset’s concerns about enclosures. Indeed, the lines “Least some
men should have but to much, / and some againe nothing at all,” echo
the sentiments of Somerset’s enclosure commissioner, John Hales, who
asserted that the commission “shall go forward, and set such a stay in
the body of the commonwealth that all the members shall live in a due
temperament and harmony, without one having too much, and a great
many nothing at all.”*128* Tusser thus attempted to find a compromise be-
tween private enclosure and public commons in “Champion and Seu-
eral,” a position further reflected in the title of the 1580 printing which
included the phrase, “as well for the Champion, or open countrie, as also
for the woodlands, or Seueral.” The new title offers a frame for “Cham-
pion and Seueral” in which to imagine a balance between commons and
small-scale enclosures. Even this poem singing the praises of “the country
enclosed” appears to extend from the mid-Tudor crisis and to endorse the
policies of Somerset’s Protectorate.

Tusser’s subtle gestures to the mid-Tudor commonwealth, then, put
*Five Hundred Points of Good Husbandry* in the company of a handful of
other mid-Tudor and early Elizabethan texts intent on keeping the pop-
ulist leadership associated with Somerset alive in the popular imagina-
tion. John Heywood’s *The Spider and the Flie* (1556) and the poems com-

*127. Tusser (1570), G1; italics in the original. Although the 1580 printing does not use italics, it
similarly sets off these lines in a different font (Q3).

128. For a full transcription of the letter, see Patrick Fraser Tytler, *England Under the Reigns of
piled by William Baldwin in *A Mirror for Magistrates* (1559), for instance, allude favorably to Somerset’s policies despite his downfall. But Tusser’s poem about the small farmer’s enclosures for the raising of livestock necessarily evokes the economic backdrop of pastoral poetry, a genre notably absent from *Five Hundred Points*. It may be that the inclusion of pastoral poems in Tottel’s *Miscellany* and Barnabe Googe’s *Eglogues, Epytaphes, and Sonettes* (1563) secured for Tusser a relationship between the pastoral and courtly leisure in contrast to his poetry of the plow. Despite Tusser’s positive vision of enclosures, the poem nonetheless depicts strife just as other poems in *Five Hundred Points* highlight the potential hardships of farming. Like Tusser’s appropriation of the sonnet, then, these poems counter the court’s largely unrealistic depiction of rural life.

In that sense, Tusser’s work, with its primary organization around the calendar year, uncannily anticipates Edmund Spenser’s *The Shepheardes Calender* (1579), which, as Paul Alpers puts it, created a “domain of lyric” with a “certain distance from courtly and social accountability.” The *Shepheardes Calender* famously rejected the “peces and rags of other languages,” asserting that English was a language “ful enough for prose and stately enough for verse.” Years before Colin Clout’s debut, Tusser had situated his poetry at a distance from the court, filled his Virgilian catalog of farm tools with the vocabulary of English peasants, adapted the sonnet form to the language of the mid-Tudor commonwealth, and assimilated Augustinian theology to the sensibilities of his farm in Suffolk. Unlike Spenser, Tusser had initially distanced himself from Chaucer, but that line was quickly dropped from *Five Hundred Points*. Indeed, one might perceive a profound continuity between late medieval poetry and Tusser’s early Elizabethan poems. Alongside his 1573 sonnets, for instance, Tusser included “An habitation enforced,” his own variation on the Middle English lyric “Syt doun Robyn & reste the.” However, whereas Spen-

129. On these works, see Lucas and Holstun, “The Spider, the Fly.”
132. This poem from the Nottingham University Library, Mellish Lm1, fol. 20rb, has thankfully been made widely available through the website *The Digital Index of Middle English Verse* (DIMEV 4878): <dimev.net>. The manuscript is discussed in Norman Davis, “Chaucer’s Gentilesse: A Forgotten Manuscript, with Some Proverbs,” *The Review of English Studies* 20 (1969),
ser’s “Aprill” sings the praises of Elizabeth I, Tusser’s many additions and revisions to *Five Hundred Points* never engaged in an encomium to the monarch nor any of her key courtiers, a striking omission for the often impoverished poet in search of patronage. Instead, the final additions to *Five Hundred Points* included returning the acrostic poem to the by then deceased Paget to its original place at the beginning of the book.133 Thus, the 1580 printing would begin and end with poems tying the author’s experiences under Paget and Somerset to his experiment in poetry. “Time trieth the troth” begins the 1580 printing of *Five Hundred Points*, but unlike Spenser’s vatic focus on the idealized pastures of an Elizabethan future, Tusser’s poetics of the plow sought to turn the rich, utilitarian soil of mid-Tudor England’s populist past.

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43–50. On Tusser’s engagement with medieval models of poetry, one might similarly cite his use of “folk-verse”: see Martin J. Duffell, “The Iambic Pentameter and Its Rivals,” *Rhythmica* 1 (2003), 61–85 (75–76). How Tusser came to be familiar with the Middle English lyric is unknown, but variations of “Syt doun Robyn” appeared in the 1550s: Juliana Berners, *The Booke of Hauking, Huntyng, and Fysshyng* (1556), H4; and the anonymous *Here be Certayne Questyons of Kyngge Botheus of the Manners, Tokyns, and Condycions of Man* (1550), B4.

133. Tusser (1580), A4–A4v.