

Cambridge University Press
 978-0-521-11343-4 - Ronsard and the Age of Gold
 Elizabeth Armstrong
 Excerpt
[More information](#)

Introduction



The Age of Gold in Renaissance symbol and ceremonial

‘Ce fut ung renouvellement du temps de Saturne, tant il fut fait alors grand chère.’ Thus Rabelais, writing in 1532, summed up the rejoicings at the triumphal entry of his hero, the giant-prince Pantagruel, into the city of the Amaurotes whom he had liberated.¹ The association of ideas was becoming a familiar one to most sixteenth-century readers.

The Age of Gold, a legendary era of human happiness, ruled by Saturn (before he was dethroned by Jupiter), and sanctified by the presence among men of Astraea, the virgin goddess of Justice, had been succeeded by an Age of Silver, an Age of Brass, and finally an Age of Iron. Whether it had been an age of simple civilised life favoured by ideal conditions, or an even earlier phase when Nature supplied every need unbidden, the provision of ‘good cheer’ for everyone was a constant feature of the reign of Saturn. That the cycle of the years might one day bring it back again was an ancient belief, consecrated by Virgil, the most respected of all the poets of antiquity: the occasion would be (according to Book VI of the *Aeneid*) the reign of Augustus, or (according to the Fourth Eclogue) the birth of a mysterious child.

Renaissance poets, orators and pageant-masters, called upon to celebrate an accession or a marriage, the birth of an heir or the signing of a treaty, could do no less than promise the same to their patrons. First fully exploited in Italy, this device became equally popular in northern Europe.² It was particu-

¹ *Pantagruel*, ed. V.-L. Saulnier (TLF), chap. XXI, p. 166.

² See Frances Yates, ‘Queen Elizabeth as Astraea’, *JWCI*, x (1947), 27–82, and E. H. Gombrich, ‘Renaissance and Golden Age’, *ibid.* xxiv (1961), 306–9, and *X Congresso Internazionale di scienze storiche: Rassunti delle comunicazioni* (1955), VII, 304–5.

Cambridge University Press
 978-0-521-11343-4 - Ronsard and the Age of Gold
 Elizabeth Armstrong
 Excerpt
[More information](#)

Renaissance symbol and ceremonial

larly prominent in the ceremonial Entries of rulers into cities on some occasion of public festivity.

It could, on such occasions, be made to stand for more sectional interests. The show or 'tableau vivant' contributed to the Entry of the Archduke Charles (the future Charles V), as Count of Flanders, into Bruges in 1515, by the Franc or Vrij, the



Figure 1. Astraea and the Age of Gold from *Le siècle doré* of Guillaume Michel

Paris, 1521, 4°, woodcut on title-page and at end

rural area lying round Bruges, thus used the Age of Gold to symbolise the country as against the town. Whereas most of the other shows along the processional route naturally glorified various crafts and trades, the 'tryumphe des seigneurs du Franc' showed Charles's father Philippe le Beau, who had in 1501 restored the status of the Franc as the Fourth Member of Flanders, handing the charter to a group of knights kneeling on

Cambridge University Press
 978-0-521-11343-4 - Ronsard and the Age of Gold
 Elizabeth Armstrong
 Excerpt
[More information](#)

Renaissance symbol and ceremonial

his left, while on his right Saturn holding his sickle presided over the divinities of field and forest and over a group of shepherdesses dancing in a ring. The author of the illustrated published account (which was printed at Paris) explained that ‘in the first Age and archaic crudeness of the human race, under the rule of the gods and goddesses represented in this enclosure, men lived in huts and cottages, entirely, and peaceably, on agriculture and stock-raising, for they sought no gain nor fruit save from the earth and from the brute beasts’, and claimed that the building of cities and states had been the downfall of the ‘bienheureux cierge aurain du glorieux Saturne’ and of the simple virtues for which it stood.¹

In contrast to this, one author made an imaginative attempt to show that the Age of Gold as the ideal society into which a nation could be turned were the Three Estates—clergy, nobles and people—persuaded to abandon ‘mauvaise coutume’ and live according to piety and reason, each citizen contributing his share of work and good will to the community. This was the allegorical story, part verse, part prose, by Guillaume Michel, entitled *Le siècle doré, contenant le temps de Paix, Amour & Concorde*,² published in 1521. The moral earnestness with which the author pleaded for honesty and unselfishness had indeed nothing ascetic about it. The perfect society would be the affluent society. The elegant *Astraea* in the illustration on the title-page and back page of the book is being apostrophised by a figure symbolising the *siècle doré*: the figure is that of a fashionably dressed young man.³ The same figure appears, in an illustration

¹ Rémy du Puys, *La triumpante entrée faicte sur le nouvel advenement de Charles prince des Hespaignes en la ville de Bruges* (1515), ff. F4^a–F5^b. A nearby show staged by the tailors’ guild reflected a different concept of it: here an allegorical figure of Bruges lamented the decline of her economy, speaking of her ‘golden time and age’ turning to silver as the merchants deserted her (f. F3^b).

² The Bodleian copy has the mark of ownership on the title-page of Louise de Bourbon-Vendôme (1495–1575), Abbess of Fontevault, which suggests that the work attracted some attention at the time. B. Weinberg, in his article in *BHR*, xi (1949), argues on stylistic grounds that Michel was responsible for the ‘modernised’ version of the *Roman de la Rose* published at Paris in 1526, and lists his works (pp. 75–6). See also below, p. 149, n. 5.

³ See Fig. 1.

Cambridge University Press
 978-0-521-11343-4 - Ronsard and the Age of Gold
 Elizabeth Armstrong
 Excerpt
[More information](#)

Renaissance symbol and ceremonial

near the end, seated in his house counting piles of money at a table, while in the background stands a dresser (the traditional show-place for the family silver) loaded with splendid plate: only the ears of corn and sprays of vine which deck his hat remind us that he is an allegorical figure, symbolising the plenty of the Age of Gold which would follow if the Three Estates



Figure 2. The Age of Gold enjoying the Benefits of Peace, Love and Concord, from *Le siècle doré* of Guillaume Michel

Paris, 1521, 4°

decided to heed the preaching of 'divine sapience'.¹ There is, it is true, a reference to a legendary Age of Gold in the past when even the greatest were content to live on Nature's bounty, on acorns and wild fruit. This is mentioned with scorn by Mauvaise Coutume, who asks rhetorically: 'fault-il revoir en ce monde la

¹ See Fig. 2.

Renaissance symbol and ceremonial

souffisance de nature qui jadis contentoit par sa chiche face les plus grands et parfaitz du glan des bois & forestz de Dodonne, de pommes, poires, labrusques et aultres fruitz sauvaiges? me contenteroie bien de cela? nenny, certes!¹ It is not, however, the material conditions of such an Age of Gold which the author seeks to re-establish, in defiance of Mauvaise Coutume, but the spirit of moderation and contentedness which it symbolised. The greatest obstacle to a happy society seemed to him that 'evil habit' of desiring gain as an objective in its own right. It was rare for the Age of Gold to be used, as in this work, as an equivalent to an age of social justice, compared for instance with its use to denote the revival of learning.²

Frequently it stood, however, for peace, as opposed to war or civil strife (the Age of Iron was particularly notorious as an age of war). Deploring the wars between Charles V and Francis I, Jacques de Pape, an outspoken humanist poet of Ypres, repeatedly used this image,³ and, welcoming the prospect of the treaty of 1529, wrote:

Marte soporato redeant saturnia nobis
 Tempora, felices et sine lite dies.
 Aurea sedato bellorum saecla tumultu,
 Iam reduci veniant saepe vocata pede.⁴

With this ideal of peace might be associated ideas of religious revelation and revival.

Jean Raulin, whose life had been devoted to reform of the French Church and especially of the monastic orders, and whose letters and treatises were published posthumously in 1521, was very fond of this image. In an *Oratio* delivered in the Collège de Navarre on the feast-day of St Louis, he described how a *gens aurea* might spring up under the rule of a good king, which would so overcome malice by their virtue that swords should

¹ G. Michel, *Le siècle doré: contenant le temps de Paix, Amour, et Concorde*, f. F3^a.

² E.g. 'Haec sunt vere aurea tempora, in quibus bonarum literarum studia multis annis neglecta reflouerunt'. Jo. Trichemius, *Epistolae familiares* (Hagenau, Petrus Brubach, 1536, 4^o), p. 175, letter dated 24 June 1506.

³ *Elegiae Jacobi Papae Hyppensis, edidit Jacobus Meyerus, Elegia Tertia*, pp. 7 ff.

⁴ *Ibid. Elegia Septima*, p. 13, lines 3–6.

Cambridge University Press
 978-0-521-11343-4 - Ronsard and the Age of Gold
 Elizabeth Armstrong
 Excerpt
[More information](#)

Renaissance symbol and ceremonial

be beaten into ploughshares, etc.¹ He applied the term *gens aurea* too to the golden age of monasticism in the past (contrasting it with the decadence he saw around him) regarding that as the fulfilment of the oracle of Virgil in *Eclogue* iv.²

Clément Marot, on the other hand, hoped in 1536 for an era of evangelical truth which might spring from endurance of the current religious persecutions:

Viens veoir de Crist le regne commencé,
 Et son honneur par tourmens avancé!
 O siecle d'or le plus fin que l'on treuve,
 Dont la bonté dedans le feu s'espreuve!³

There is here, it would seem, an allusion to 'the fiery trial which is to try you' which St Peter warned his flock to expect before the glory of Christ should be revealed.⁴ Marot assimilated St Peter's words to the image found in the Old Testament of God trying his people as gold is tried in the fire.⁵ The passage occurs in his *Eclogue* II, an 'Avant-naissance' in honour of the expected third child of his patroness Renée de France, Duchess of Ferrara.

Direct imitation of the Fourth *Eclogue* for a state occasion does not seem to have been attempted in French poetry until his *Eglogue sur la naissance du filz de Monseigneur le Daulphin* in 1544.⁶ A long-standing tradition—a tradition familiar to English readers still, through Milton's allusion to it in the *Nativity Ode*—had connected the sibylline prophecy, evoked by Virgil, with the birth of the Messiah, and only a very solemn event in the life of the French nation could justify to a poet like Clément Marot the application of it to a secular purpose. The birth of the long-awaited heir of the Dauphin (the future

¹ 'Nam sub generoso principe saepissime surgit gens aurea mundo, quae pacis ineundo consilia adeo sua virtute maliciam vincit, ut convertat gladios in vomeres... O quis aureum illud saeculum heroico carmine describere posset.' Jean Raulin, *Epistolarum opus*, (1520–21), f. 146^a.

² 'O secula aurea iuxta Maronis oraculum surgebat gens aurea mundo. O felix nimium prior illa aetas...' *Ibid.* f. 158^b (in *De perfecta religionis plantatione*, an address to an assembly of his order at Cluny).

³ *Œuvres lyriques*, ed. C. A. Mayer, pp. 341–2, lines 59–62.

⁴ I Peter iv, 12–13.

⁵ Zechariah xiii, 9.

⁶ *Œuvres lyriques*, ed. C. A. Mayer, p. 354. The child was the future Francis II.

Cambridge University Press
 978-0-521-11343-4 - Ronsard and the Age of Gold
 Elizabeth Armstrong
 Excerpt
[More information](#)

Renaissance symbol and ceremonial

Henry II) and of his wife Catherine de' Medici seemed such an event.

By that time, the theme of the Age of Gold had been pressed into service in one of the most spectacular occasions of the period, the celebrations organised for the marriage of Duke Cosimo I de' Medici to Eleanor of Toledo at Florence in 1539. In particular, it had figured in the Third Interlude in the comedy *Il Commodo*, presented on Wednesday, 8 July 1539: here the god Silenus, surprised (as in the Sixth Eclogue of Virgil) by shepherds, had ransomed himself by a song, in this case a *canzonetta* beginning, 'O begli Anni del Oro, ò secol divo'. The words, by Gio. Batista Strozzi, recalled a time when there had been neither scythe nor rake nor snare nor cruel iron nor poison; when the rivers ran milk and the oaks exuded honey, for the benefit of the nymphs and shepherds; and the possibility that such an idyllic world might once more return was referred to with nostalgia.¹

The accession of Henry II and Catherine de' Medici occurred when memories of this festival were still vivid. Not surprisingly, a prologue and interludes on this theme, performed in the interludes of the comedy *Calandria*, featured prominently in the entertainment devised by the Florentine colony in September 1548 for the Entry of the king and queen into Lyons.² The Age of Gold, in a sumptuous golden costume, appeared after Act IV, accompanied by Peace (in white), Justice (in silver and black) and Religion (blue and white), announcing herself to the king with the opening words:

L'età mi chiamo Aurata, & vengo à voi
 Gran Re, per esser vostra . . .

¹ Pier Francesco Giambullari, *Apparato et feste nelle noze dello Illustrissimo Signor Duca di Firenze, e della Duchessa sua consorte, con le sue Stanze, Madriali, Comedia et Intermedii, in quelle recitati* (1539), p. 125. Cf. A. M. Nagler, *Theatre Festivals of the Medici 1539-1637* (New Haven and London, 1964), pp. 5-12.

² 'Particolare descrizione della comedia fatta recitare in Lione la Natione Fiorentina à richiesta di sua Maestà Christianissima', in *La magnifica et triumphale entrata del re Henrico secondo fatta nella città di Lyone* (1549). This supplement, not included in the French edition (also printed by G. Roville), begins on f. M1^a.

Cambridge University Press
 978-0-521-11343-4 - Ronsard and the Age of Gold
 Elizabeth Armstrong
 Excerpt
[More information](#)

Renaissance symbol and ceremonial

After the last Act of the play, she was brought back by Apollo and left alone on the stage in the presence of the king, to whom she recited a long poetic address, afterwards presenting the queen with a golden lily weighing twenty marks.¹

Not to be outdone, the city fathers of Rouen (when Henry II made his Entry, 1 October 1550) decorated the town gate as a triumphal arch representing the Age of Gold: it was crowned with a gilded statue of Saturn, standing on a silver crescent moon (the king's personal emblem) supported on either side by a Sibyl. Saturn held a tablet inscribed with the lines:

Je suis l'aage d'or
 D'honneur revestu,
 Je suis en vertu,
 Et seray encor,

while the following quatrain appeared on the arch:

L'aage d'or, qui fut florissant,
 Avant l'argent, le fer & cuyvre,
 Par un Roy, en vertu croissant,
 Au monde recommence à vivre.²

As to their gift to the queen, this was a gold figurine of Astraea, standing one and a half feet high, 'élégante Image emailée sur le nud d'incarnation', holding in her right hand the sword of Justice and in her left 'une sphere de félicité', a symbol of Heaven.

The Entry of Henry II into Paris (16 June 1549)³ used other symbols of prosperity: the organisers no doubt wished to avoid even the semblance of copying the shows put on the previous year at Lyons. But the theme was none the less in people's

¹ An almost exactly similar scheme was adopted over a century later by Saint-Aignon as part of the entertainment offered by Louis XIV to his guests at Versailles called *Les plaisirs de l'Île enchantée*. The dramatic interlude on 7 May 1664 introduced Apollo and the Four Ages, and represented the Age of Gold professing her confidence in the king's power to revive her. The verses for this were written by Molière.

² *C'est la deduction du sumptueux ordre et magnifiques theatres dressés par les citiens de Rouen à Henry second*, ff. M2^b-M3^b. See also f. Q4^a.

³ See V.-L. Saulnier, 'Sébillot, Du Bellay, Ronsard: L'entrée de Henri II à Paris et la révolution poétique de 1550', *Les fêtes de la Renaissance*, 1, ed. J. Jacquot (Paris, 1956), 31-59.

Cambridge University Press
 978-0-521-11343-4 - Ronsard and the Age of Gold
 Elizabeth Armstrong
 Excerpt
[More information](#)

Renaissance symbol and ceremonial

minds. Ronsard's ode on the prospect of the Entry, the *Avant-entrée du roy treschrestien à Paris*,¹ one of his earliest works, predicted boldly that the goddess Astraea (who had ruled the Age of Gold and was the last of the immortals to abandon the human race) would make her entry with the king:

J'oi arriver ton Roi qui t'apporte
 La vierge Astrée, & sa belle sequelle,
 Qui s'envolla de ce monde avec elle...

sang the poet, addressing the city of Paris:

Ne la voi-tu comme elle prend sa place
 A son retour dans le sein & la face
 De nostre Roine... ?²

Over twenty years later, when Ronsard was the favourite poet of the sovereign, Charles IX, and a national figure, he was commissioned by the city of Paris to assist in planning the scenario and writing the verses for an equally splendid occasion, the Entry into the capital of the king on the occasion of his marriage (1571).³ In this, though in a subordinate position, the Age of Gold was actually represented among the decorations along the processional route.⁴

It would be natural to expect that any poetry that he wrote on the Age of Gold theme during the intervening period, or indeed afterwards, would similarly treat it as a symbol of splendour, prosperity and culture under a just and enlightened prince. The reality is quite different.

¹ The publication of this ode may have contributed to the mistaken belief that Ronsard helped to provide poems for the *official* programme of the Entry—see V.-L. Saulnier, *op. cit.* p. 34.

² Lau. I, p. 18, lines 10–15.

³ See F. A. Yates, 'Poètes et artistes dans les entrées de Charles IX et de sa reine à Paris en 1571', in *Les fêtes de la Renaissance*, I, ed. J. Jacquot (Paris, 1956), 61–84.

⁴ See below, p. 45.

