

## Gascoigne, George

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George Gascoigne (1534/35–77) was the most influential English writer of the mid- to late 1570s, responsible for important innovations in several genres, including tragedy and comedy, blank verse, prose fiction, sonnets and sonnet sequences, complaint, essay, and reportage. His work was quickly outdated in 1579 when Edmund Spenser published *The shepheardes calender*, but Gascoigne's literary reputation remained very high throughout the 1580s and 1590s. His lack of personal popularity had held him back in the system of patronage and prompted him to adopt a range of poetic and authorial personae under which he presented his work. Gascoigne produced both courtly and moralistic works and wrote for manuscript presentation as well as print; some of his most successful work was written for performance before Elizabeth I and her court at Kenilworth in 1575. Gascoigne published some of his work anonymously, and this – together with the transient nature of performance and the private nature of manuscripts – led to a distortion of his reputation after the death of Elizabeth in 1603. In the twentieth century, his reputation came to rest primarily on the published works which bore his name, those presented under his 'reformed prodigal' persona, but the most recent criticism acknowledges his courtly successes and recognizes the significance of his literary innovations and the extent of his influence on later Elizabethan writers.

Gascoigne was born in 1534/35 and died in October 1577. He was the eldest son of Sir John Gascoigne of Cardington in Bedfordshire; he claims to have studied at Cambridge

before arriving in London in 1555 to join Gray's Inn. By his own account, he led an extravagant life at court in the first years of Elizabeth's reign, which he funded by borrowing against his expected inheritance. Far from gaining preferment, as he had hoped, he accumulated a great deal of debt. In 1561 Gascoigne married Elizabeth Breton, the wealthy widow of William Breton and mother of the poet Nicholas Breton, but she had already married another man, Edward Boyes. This conundrum led to a fight in Redcrosse Street in London (where Elizabeth had a house) between Gascoigne and Boyes and their men, recorded by Henry Machyn in his diary; and it also prompted Gascoigne's poem, 'Eyther a needlesse or a bootelesse comparison betwene two letters', in which he urges the lady to 'Take dooble G for thy most loving letter, And cast off[f] B, for it deserves no better' (Austen 2008). Elizabeth was finally divorced from Boyes and the marriage with Gascoigne was repeated, but the couple then attempted to appropriate property bequeathed by Breton to her children. The many legal suits against him confirm that Gascoigne's poor personal reputation evidently had some foundation in his own actions.

Gascoigne returned to Gray's Inn in 1565. His sequence of poems 'Gascoignes memories' dates from this year and shows him trying to gain acceptance into one of the many literary cliques at the Inns of Court. Its members, Francis Kinwelmershe and his brother Anthony, Alexander Neville, John Vaughan, and Richard Courtop, each set him a Latin motto upon which he was challenged to 'wrighte in verse somewhat worthy to be remembered'. His response was a sequence of five poems, which he claims he wrote and memorized while riding from London

to Chelmsford to visit a friend; he stayed overnight, and returned the next day, 'writing none of them untill he came at the end of his Journey'. The 'Memories' is dazzling in its inventiveness: not only does it incorporate the terms of the challenge, but its five verse forms in five metres include experiments in rhyme royal and satire, as well as one of the earliest sonnet sequences in English.

Gascoigne consolidated this success by translating two plays for the Christmas revels at Gray's Inn in 1566. These were a tragedy, *Jocasta*, which he co-authored with Francis Kinwelmershe, and a comedy, *Supposes*. Both are innovative: *Jocasta* is based on Lodovico Dolce's *Giocasta*, itself a version of Euripides, so that *Jocasta* is the first example of a Greek tragedy on the English stage. The *Supposes* is the first prose comedy in English, translated from Lodovico Ariosto's *I suppositi*. It is uncertain whether Gascoigne's literary efforts at this stage were aimed at posterity or designed solely to display the linguistic skills which might eventually gain him employment. The answer may be both, since he urgently needed to make a living, but also had the ambition to attempt both comedy and tragedy and mark himself out as a writer familiar with the latest Italian writers. But in 1569 Gascoigne was expelled from Gray's Inn for indebtedness to the house. By the following year he faced financial ruin: on 21 April 1570 he was in Bedford gaol for debt (Prouty 1942).

Gascoigne turned to military service as a means to repair his fortunes, joining Sir Humphrey Gilbert's expedition against Spanish rule in the Netherlands. On his return in the winter of 1572–73, Gascoigne was invited to hunt by Arthur, Lord Grey of Wilton, and wrote for him 'Gascoignes wodmanship', a witty poem in which he turns his poor day's hunting into an appeal for patronage. Further tours of duty followed (Pigman 2004). Later that year, Gascoigne gathered up a selection

of the literary works which he had produced during his 14-year association with Gray's Inn and published them anonymously as *A hundreth sundrie flowres*. This is one of the earliest single-author miscellanies and includes the 'Memories', 'Wodmanship', *Jocasta*, *Supposes*, and sequences of poems presented as the 'Devises of sundrie gentlemen', by which Gascoigne hoped to pass off *A hundreth sundrie flowres* as a multi-authored work. The 'Devises', some of which he had set to music, include many of the short poems he had written for circulation in manuscript among the literary coteries of the Inns of Court.

In the meantime Gascoigne returned to Holland, leaving his manuscript with Henry Bynneman to be printed in his absence and apparently delivering further items piecemeal as he wrote them (Weiss 1992). The most important of these was 'The adventures of Master F.J.', which includes some poems but is one of the earliest examples of prose fiction in English; other notable items include another poem dedicated to Lord Grey, 'Gascoignes voyage into Hollande, An[no] 1572', and the incomplete sequence of narrative poems 'Dan Bartholmew of Bathe'. Gascoigne seems to have made at least one proof correction in *A hundreth sundrie flowres* (Pigman 2000), but the job was shared between two printers and the items in the collection were not printed in the intended sequence (Austen 2008). Gascoigne's later habit of attending the daily proofs when he had a work in press may have been a consequence of the mishandling of *A hundreth sundrie flowres*. He is the first English author known to check his proofs daily. Upon his return to England in 1574/75, Gascoigne was embarrassed by the state of his first published book, and perhaps by some readers' suspicions that 'Master F.J.' was based on real events, although it is characteristic of the work that he seems to provoke speculation at the same time as apparently trying to quash it. He republished the work as

the *Posies* (1575) under his own name, using both the persona of the 'reformed prodigal' and the motto which signified his ambition as a soldier-poet: *Tam Marti, quam Mercurio* ('[Devoted] as much to Mars [god of war] as to Mercury [god of eloquence]'). Essentially the same material is rearranged into 'Floures to comfort, hearbes to cure, and weedes to be avoyded'. Gascoigne also added substantial prefatory material, including commendatory verses and three letters to his readers, grouped as 'reverend Divines', 'al yong Gentlemen', and 'the readers generally', in which he fully develops his 'reformed prodigal' persona (Austen 2008). In these letters Gascoigne raises the possibility that *A hundreth sundrie flowres* had been censored, although again this may be authorial playfulness: it is impossible to verify as the records of Stationers' Company are missing for the period. (However, on 13 August 1576 50 copies of the revised volume, the *Posies*, were confiscated by the queen's commissioners [Pigman 2000].) Nonetheless, in the *Posies* 'Master F.J.' was recast in a more obviously fictional frame as a fable and Gascoigne added to the collection '*Dulce bellum inexpertis*' and 'The greene knight', as well as 'Certayne notes of instruction concerning the making of verse or ryme in English', the earliest essay on prosody in English.

In April 1575 Gascoigne published a tragedy-comedy, *The glasse of governement*, a rare English example of the Dutch prodigal son play. He also received a commission from the bookseller Christopher Barker to translate a comprehensive and up-to-date French manual of hunting, *The noble arte of venerie*. This was designed as a companion volume to George Turbervile's *Booke of hauking*, both being aimed explicitly at a noble readership and especially the queen, herself a keen and skilful hunter. Gascoigne designed woodcuts for both volumes showing Elizabeth enjoying both sports (Austen 2008). Hunting was clearly an activity close to Gascoigne's heart,

since he mixes into his translation several anecdotes illustrating his own expertise, which show that his self-portrayal as an inept hunter in the early poem 'Gascoigne's wodmanship' was a superbly witty pose.

It may have been Gascoigne's authorship of the *Noble arte* which drew the attention of Robert Dudley, earl of Leicester, who was at this time making preparations for the most lavish entertainments of Elizabeth's entire reign. The queen stayed at Leicester's Warwickshire estate of Kenilworth Castle for much of July 1575 and went hunting daily. Gascoigne received a commission from Leicester to compose a device for presentation 'in the woods', the *Masque of Zabeta*. This device was never performed, since its marital theme probably contributed to the arguments between the queen and Leicester which prompted her early departure from Kenilworth. However, Gascoigne's last-minute contributions to Kenilworth were ultimately highly successful. The first was a device of a 'savage man' who hid in the Chase, and approached Elizabeth as she returned from hunting. Gascoigne, clad in ivy to signify his personal ambition (because ivy climbs on other plants), recited his 'echo dialogue' (a device later used by Philip Sidney, who was in the audience, in the *Old Arcadia*), but as he cast aside his branch it caused the queen's horse to rear up. This near-catastrophic moment was saved by her superb horsemanship, and although she cried, 'no hurt, no hurt', a marginal note records her angry retort to the actor that he was 'blind' (Austen 2008). When Gascoigne later submitted the 'Argument' of *Zabeta* to the queen for her approval, he had inserted a short interlude into the masque, in which the savage man's son begged for the queen's forgiveness and asked her to lift the blindness she had imposed upon his father as a punishment. This is apology as art form: themes of transformation abounded at Kenilworth

that summer, and Gascoigne combines lavish compliment with wit and absolute submission. The savage man's son was to wear moss, to signify his humility (because moss grows low on the ground): in this coded, courtly world Gascoigne had learned his lesson well. Although the device was never performed, its apology was effective: when the queen decided to leave early, it was to Gascoigne that Leicester turned to compose a farewell device. Waiting once again in the Chase, Gascoigne appeared as Sylvanus and ran alongside the queen's horse reciting flattering and humorous verses. The success of Gascoigne's contributions at Kenilworth is easily measured, since he was invited to participate in the entertainments held by the queen's champion Sir Henry Lee at Woodstock near Oxford just a few weeks later. Once again he appeared as a woodland character, this time Hemetes the blind hermit, who told a tale written by Lee.

Having spent much of the summer of 1575 engaged in courtly pursuits, Gascoigne's continued success is indicated by his invitation to join in the traditional exchange of New Year gifts at court in January 1576. Gascoigne chose to create a fine manuscript for the queen, and translated Lee's tale of *Hemetes the heremyte* into Latin, French, and Italian. Gascoigne drew an elaborate frontispiece showing himself presenting the manuscript to Elizabeth, with a sonnet casting himself as 'Petrarkes heyre' and the queen as his 'Lawra'. The Latin, French, and Italian translations were illustrated by Gascoigne with emblematic devices describing aspects of Gascoigne's career. The manuscript represents Gascoigne's most explicit statement of literary ambition to date, as well as the most obvious sign of royal favour. It also served his short-term agenda by advertising his linguistic skills and thus his fitness for service abroad.

In March 1576, Gascoigne tried to capitalize on his success during the previous

summer and published anonymously his own account of the entertainments at Kenilworth, *The princely pleasures, at the courte at Kenilwoorth*. The following month, he contributed a prefatory letter to a short work by his former commander in the Netherlands, Sir Humphrey Gilbert, *A discourse of a discoverie for a new passage to Cataia*. This pamphlet is a proposal attempting to gather investors to support an expedition led by Gilbert to find the fabled north-west passage to China. Both these works attest to Gascoigne's continuing connection with Leicester, who invested heavily in Gilbert's expeditions. Gascoigne also provided commendatory verses this year to *The French Littelton*, a French textbook by Claude de Sainliens (Claudius Holyband), and to Thomas Bedingfield's translation of Girolamo Cardano's treatise on consolation, *Cardanus comforte*, although his links with those authors remain unclear.

During 1576, it is possible to see Gascoigne continuing to cultivate two distinct portfolios of work: a sequence of courtly works (either manuscript or anonymous publication) and alongside those a series of moralistic titles, published under his own name and the persona of the 'reformed prodigal'. He seems to have worked on some of these simultaneously; for example, less than three weeks after he published the *Princely pleasures* anonymously, he published *The steele glas and the complaynt of Phylomene*, an avowedly moralistic work, under his own name. *The steele glas* is notable as the first original non-dramatic poem in blank verse in English, and yet it also belongs to the medieval genre of estates satire, of which it is a fine example. *The complaynt of Phylomene* is based on the Ovidian tale but it is framed and presented as a dream vision, another medieval genre. The volume demonstrates Gascoigne's versatility, his experimentation, and his willingness to tailor his work to the precise moment of its production: he dedicated this volume to his first

known patron, Lord Grey of Wilton, who had a well-known preference for medieval and especially Ricardian verse forms. It includes a superb self-portrait, drawn using a mirror, continuing the reflective theme (Austen 2008). Little more than two weeks later, Gascoigne published the *Droomme of doomes day*, his most grimly moralistic work, which consists of three lengthy Latin moral tracts and for its sheer volume must have taken some time to translate. The *Droomme* was dedicated to Francis Russell, earl of Bedford, with whom Gascoigne had had some legal disputes, and who was another well-known literary patron. In August 1576, Gascoigne published another moralistic title, *A delicate diet, for daintiemouthde droonkardes*. The *Diet* is a short temperance tract which he dedicated to a family friend, Lewis Dyve, head of another eminent Bedfordshire family. Like the *Droomme*, it is a translation of a Latin moral tract, an exercise familiar to him since his schooldays. Since he was working on his courtly, experimental works alongside these moralistic titles it seems that Gascoigne's 'reformed prodigal' persona was proving its value as a means to approach potential patrons.

The following month, Gascoigne finally gained the royal employment he sought, when he was sent abroad by William Cecil, Lord Burghley. He spent two weeks in Paris and then went to Antwerp to observe directly the increasing tension between the occupying Spanish troops and the Dutch forces. He was present on 4 November 1576 when the Spanish troops mutinied and ran amok, savagely attacking the townsfolk at random. In his pamphlet *The spoyle of Antwerpe*, Gascoigne describes how during the height of the rioting he ventured out into the town from the safety of the 'English House' where the English merchants were based, witnessing many atrocities. He also reports how, when the English House was attacked, he intervened

to protect the governor of the English merchants at Antwerp, Thomas Heton, who was menaced with 'naked swordes and daggers' by the Spaniards. *The spoyle of Antwerpe* is not strictly reportage, but its rapid publication (four days after his return to London) allies it to the development of that genre.

Gascoigne continued in royal favour and at New Year 1577 he was once again invited to join in the exchange of gifts with the queen. On this occasion, he devised *The griefe of joye*, another manuscript work. Constructed as a fragment, this is a set of four songs on the paradoxical disadvantages of earthly joys: Beauty, Youth, Strength, and Activity. It is not a translation from Petrarch but an entirely original courtly work. Gascoigne adopts the persona of a favoured courtly performer, calling for drink because his lips are dry, and comfortably addressing Elizabeth directly. It includes several reminders of his success in Antwerp, including the claim that 'the leaves of this pa[u]mphlett have passed with mee in all my perilles', although the manuscript is a fair copy with the queen's name highlighted in gold leaf throughout. Its conclusion is highly accomplished, witty, and self-referential. In the fourth song, on 'activities', in the section on horse-riding, Gascoigne breaks off suddenly, saying that it is 'Left unperfect for feare of Horsmen.' Beyond the obvious self-referencing, this ending refers back to the autumn and Gascoigne's own heroism in Antwerp as the English House was attacked: it epitomizes the ideal of the soldier-poet, one who has proved his own courage and yet can return to London and write wittily about his adventures.

Nonetheless, despite his courtly success, Gascoigne was still struggling with indebtedness and lack of funds. On the same date as his exuberant performance in the *Griefe of joye*, 1 January 1577, he wrote a set of letters to 'all my lordes and good friendes in Cowrte', asking for financial help. The

only surviving example is the letter to Lord Keeper Sir Nicholas Bacon (a relative by marriage), a beautifully illustrated presentation manuscript. It includes an emblematic device showing himself as a 'unruly colt', now tamed; and it begs Bacon to provide him with some work or a gift. This letter provides final proof of Gascoigne's pragmatic use of his personae, offering a reformed prodigal persona to Bacon on the same day that he offers his courtly poet persona to the queen.

No more is known of Gascoigne until the news of his death on 7 October that year, reported by George Whetstone in his elegy, *A remembraunce of the wel employed life, and godly end, of George Gaskoigne esquire*. His immediate successors in the 1580s and 1590s left numerous tributes to his work, samples of which were included as exempla in the collections compiled towards the end of the century. His literary influence is evident in the work of Spenser, Sidney, Greene, Lyly, Marlowe, Shakespeare, and many others.

SEE ALSO: Elizabeth I; Gilbert, Humphrey; Greene, Robert; Lyly, John; Marlowe, Christopher; Shakespeare, William; Sidney, Philip; Spenser, Edmund; Turbervile, George; Whetstone, George

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