

Whetstone, George

GILLIAN AUSTEN

George Whetstone (1550–87) was an Inns of Court writer of the early Elizabethan period, and a modestly successful elegist and moralist. He is chiefly remembered today as the author of a play which was the main source for Shakespeare's *Measure for measure*, and an elegy for George Gascoigne, the most influential and innovative writer of the mid- to late 1570s. Whetstone is interesting because he reacted so quickly to literary developments, and he was certainly one of Gascoigne's earliest followers, although the evidence for any friendship between the two men is very slight indeed. During the 1580s Whetstone found his own direction with a series of moralizing publications.

George Whetstone was baptized in 1550 and died in 1587. The third son of a wealthy merchant and haberdasher, he did not attend university but joined Furnivall's Inn in 1573. At this time the Inns of Court were the focus of literary activity in London and, while the significance of this milieu in the period is widely acknowledged, Whetstone has shared in the general neglect of individual Inns of Court writers. He is chiefly remembered for his verse drama *Promos and Cassandra* (1578), which provided the plot for Shakespeare's *Measure for measure*. Whetstone's play is an early example of English romantic comedy, based on a tale in *Hecatommithi*, by Cinthio (Giovanni Battista Giraldis) which had been translated into English in William Painter's *Palace of pleasure* (1566).

Like Gabriel Harvey, Whetstone had as his first publication a commendatory verse

prefixed to Gascoigne's *Posies* (1575). However, the only evidence for a friendship between Whetstone and Gascoigne is Whetstone's own claim, in *A remembrance of the wel employed life, and godly end, of George Gaskoigne esquire* (1577), that Gascoigne was staying at his house in Stamford, Lincolnshire, at the time of his death. This was the first of six elegies that Whetstone published over the next 10 years: he went on to commemorate Sir Nicholas Bacon (1579), Sir James Dyer (1582), Thomas Radcliffe, earl of Sussex (1583), Francis Russell, earl of Bedford (1585), and Sir Philip Sidney (1587). Both Bacon and Bedford were linked with Gascoigne, so he and Whetstone were associated with similar social and patronage networks. Whether Whetstone was in fact an eyewitness of Gascoigne's death, as he claims, is uncertain.

Whetstone was clearly an admirer of Gascoigne's work and modelled his own first book upon it. Like Gascoigne's *A hundreth sundrie flowres* (1573, republished as the *Posies* in 1575), Whetstone's *The rocke of regard* (1576) is a miscellany of items by one author in both verse and prose. Gascoigne influences Whetstone's vocabulary and imagery and even his choice and treatment of subjects. For example, in the first section, 'The castle of delight', Whetstone's prose and verse fiction 'The discourse of Rinaldo and Giletta' directly imitates Gascoigne's 'A discourse of the adventures passed by Master F. J.'; while in the second section, 'The garden of unthriftines', Whetstone's 'Dom Diego his dolorous discourse' imitates Gascoigne's 'Dan Bartholmew of Bathe'. Whetstone's various sequences of narrative poems echo those in *A hundreth sundrie flowres* and the *Posies*

and indeed Gascoignesque literary and stylistic innovations are evident throughout the volume.

In 1580–81 Whetstone travelled to Italy and on his return to London published *An heptameron of civill discourses* (1582; reissued as *Aurelia*, 1593). This describes the Christmas pastimes of a group of nobles who engage in ‘civill and friendly disputations’ on the theme of marriage, gathering up many illustrative stories, including a prose retelling of the story of *Promos and Cassandra*. Conducted over seven days, the *Heptameron* is based on the courtly idea of a group of aristocrats exchanging stories, as in Marguerite de Navarre’s *Heptameron*; the model for both works is Giovanni Boccaccio’s *Decameron*.

Whetstone’s preoccupation with civil conduct and the reform of prodigality now led him to publish a series of didactic texts. The first was *A mirour for magestrates of cyties*, published with *A touchstone for the time* (1584). Dedicated to the lord mayor of London and addressed to the ‘yong Gentlemen of the Innes of Court’, this volume advocated reform of the city and especially the culture of the ‘Dicyng-houses’. The following year came *The honorable reputation of a souldier* (1585), a conduct book for soldiers almost certainly prompted by the expedition led by Robert Dudley, earl of Leicester, to the Low Countries that year, which Whetstone’s brother Bernard joined. In its prefaces Whetstone confirms that he had no military experience to date. In 1586, he published an encyclopedic compilation of texts grouped around the theme of envy, which he called *The English myrrior*, and retroactively linked to his earlier *Mirour* and the *Honorable reputation*, calling them in an endnote ‘appendants’ to the present work,

‘to which in right they belong’. In the same year, *A mirour for magistrates of cyties* with *A touchstone for the time* was republished as *The enemie of unthryftinesse*; and *The honorable reputation of a souldier* was republished in a dual English–Dutch edition in Leiden.

Also in 1586, Whetstone published a condemnation of Mary, Queen of Scots and her fellow conspirators in the Babington Plot; the book, *The censure of a loyall subiect*, was dedicated to William Cecil, Lord Burghley, and reissued in 1587. That year, Burghley sent Whetstone to the Low Countries as ‘commisary of musters’, to join the mathematician Thomas Digges in auditing the accounts submitted by the English captains. Whetstone was killed in a duel outside the garrison town of Bergen-op-Zoom, having accused one of the English captains, Edmund Udall, of financial abuses. Whetstone’s elegy on Sidney was published posthumously and included a notice of his death. An annotated bibliography of works by Whetstone is included in the biography by Thomas Izard (1942).

SEE ALSO: Gascoigne, George; Harvey, Gabriel; Painter, William; Sidney, Philip

REFERENCES AND SUGGESTED READINGS

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