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Review by George Klawitter

Austen, Gillian. *George Gascoigne*. Studies in Renaissance Literature 24. Martlesham, Suffolk, UK; Rochester, NY: D. S. Brewer, 2008. 254 pages.

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In *George Gascoigne*, Gillian Austen tries to overturn one of the earliest received opinions furthered by the poet's modern biographer Charles Prouty: that Gascoigne was a young wastrel whom the 1575 Dutch wars righted and set on the road to conversion and repentance. Nothing more than a standard Renaissance pose, in the fashion of Augustine and Ignatius Loyola, the Gascoigne personae were multiple, Austen maintains, for the 1572/3 *A Hundreth Sundrie Flowres* but coalesced into a single (repentant) prodigal narrator for the 1575 *Posies*. Such an explanation makes perfect sense for a man whose only goal was advancement at court. Gascoigne was also, apparently, a brave man, not afraid to dust his *Jocasta* translation with overtones of the 1566 succession question as it touched Elizabeth and her relationship with an impatient parliament. Austen's astute covering of the play's genesis notes that the performance at Gray's Inn was not a quiet production, but possibly required a quarter of the 250 law students enrolled at the time. The dumb shows added by Gascoigne were particularly topical and politically dangerous. Austen's analysis of the dumb shows is extensive.

Although Austen gives scant attention to "Gascoignes Lullabie," one of the poet's most rollicking lyric pieces, Austen does extensive analysis of important pieces like "Gascoignes Memories," composed in 1565 as an initiation into the writers' circle at Gray's Inn where Gascoigne studied law. This sequence of five interlocking sonnets work off five themes proposed by the group, and the poems exhibit Gascoigne's mastery of the form when Shakespeare was yet a newborn. Austen's analysis of the set includes excellent historical commentary on men likely associated with the poet at the time. The blend of explication and historical-political analysis is handled in a readable and enjoyable way.

Just as Austen scanted the “Lullabie,” limited attention is given to another popular piece, “Gascoignes wodmanship,” Austen preferring to leave analysis to earlier critics (Jonathan Crewe, Elizabeth Heale), but in a work so admirably conceived as Austen’s, readers may wish more time had been taken with Gascoigne’s popular pieces and saved us the trouble of hunting down previous analyses. Austen’s coverage, however, of the prefatory letters (all by Gascoigne himself but purportedly from the publisher, the editor, and the fictive character G.T.) for *A Hundreth* is comfortably helpful for our understanding of Gascoigne’s purpose, i.e., advancing himself as a major wit in 1573. Although poets today are fiercely protective of their work, Gascoigne had great fun with the publication of his first book, ascribing some of his own poems to various gentlemen. Austen carefully traces their provenance.

In keeping with a thematic insistence on the “Reformed Prodigal” pose, Austen notes that *A Discourse of the Adventures passed by Master F.J.*, the real masterpiece in Gascoigne’s first book and the prototype of the modern novel, does not present the reader with a repentant sinner: with one hand Gascoigne serves up his sorrowful self while with the other hand undercuts it with the delightful romps of a profligate rogue. One need hardly add that the prose work today is read more often than the master’s poetry.

After several military expeditions, Gascoigne republished his book in 1575 in a revised (and self-censored) version with a preface explaining his intention to eliminate offensive material, an intention that Austen points out was simply more stage-craft for the pose since the new edition shows little evidence of cleansing. Austen devotes extensive and welcomed analysis of the revisions, such as they are. Several months after the edition appeared, Gascoigne published *The Glasse of Government*, in the style of the Dutch Prodigal Son play, probably as an attempt to further solidify his public repentance. Austen gives slight attention to the piece, affording Gascoigne’s translation *The Noble Arts of Venerie or Hunting* and its magnificent woodcuts five times as much attention. This latter piece attracted Leicester’s attention and so advanced Gascoigne into the queen’s circle with subsequent production of several plays at Kenilworth. The year 1576 proved to be Gascoigne’s zenith as he presented *The Tale of Hermetes the*

*Heremyte* to the queen. In the same year he published *The Steele Glas*, the first nondramatic poem ever written in blank verse. Further adding to his works that year, Gascoigne translated three religious pamphlets and published them as *The Droome of Doomesday*, undoubtedly capitalizing on the moral fervor extant in the court at the time. Austen here takes issue with Prouty, who had maintained that the translations were the result of an extended illness which tipped the poet's mind to meditations on death in the spring of 1576. Austen points out that sickness struck Gascoigne well into the proofreading phase of the work, not during its translation phase. The subject matter was incidental to the intention.

Gascoigne's final works revolve around the military mission to Antwerp in 1576, and they serve as the capstone to his continuing quest to portray himself as a moral crusader. *The Grief of Joye*, one of two final works, was presented to the queen on New Year's Day. Austen devotes much attention to the lyrics in it. She gives some attention to Gascoigne's *Letter to Sir Nicholas Bacon*, presented on the same New Year's Day as *The Grief of Joye*. To the last, Gascoigne tried to convince his audience that he was a reformed prodigal without history's giving us any indication that he was at one time indeed a prodigal. How ironic it is today that his most popular work, *Master F.J.*, fosters for the man anything but reformed prodigality.

Austen's book is a must read not only for Gascoigne scholars but also for those readers who hope to understand the flowering of the Elizabethan Golden Age in the 1580's and 90's. Gascoigne's innovations in genre and style were essential to what would follow his experiments in prose and verse. When many ascribe to Marlowe a "mighty line," they would do well to look back at the blank verse in Gascoigne's plays for earlier mightiness. Austen has therefore done a great service not only to those who love Gascoigne, but also to those who want to capture the foundations of Renaissance poetics usually ascribed to other poets. Gascoigne kept not only his head but his poetic wits about him at the time and never fell out of favor with his contemporaries. We would do well to treasure him as much as they did, and Austen's book is a step in that direction. The book concludes with a fine bibliography and a helpful index.

*George Klawitter*