

Displaying secrecy in George Gascoigne's The Adventures of Master F.J.

RAHEL ORGIS* 

Two years after his works had appeared anonymously as *A Hundreth Sundrie Flowres* (1573), George Gascoigne (1534/5?–77) republished them as *The Posies of George Gascoigne Esquire* (1575), preceded by new prefatory letters. In the first, addressed ‘To the reverende Divines’, Gascoigne explains that the 1573 collection, containing two play translations, the narrative *The Adventures of Master F.J.* and numerous poems, was intended to demonstrate the poetic merits of the English language, to further his career in the service of the country and to testify to his misspent youth as a warning for others (4–6).¹ Gascoigne ends by justifying the 1575 republication and especially the revision of *Master F.J.*:

I understande that sundrie well disposed mindes have taken offence at certaine wanton wordes and sentences passed in the fable of *Ferdinando Jeronimi*, and the Ladie *Elinora de Valasco*, the which in the first edition was termed The adventures of master F.J. And that also therewith some busie conjectures have presumed to thinke that the same was indeed written to the scandalizing of some wortheie personages, whom they woulde seeme therby to know. Surely (right reverend) I smile to see the simplicitie of such, who being indeed starke staring blind, would yet seeme to see farre into a milstone. And the rather I scorne their rash judgments, for that in talking with .xx. of them one after another, there have not two agreed in one conjecture. Alas, alas, if I had bene so foolishe as to have passed in recitall a thing so done in deede, yet all the world might thinke me verie simple if I woulde call John, John, or Mary, Mary. But for the better satisfying of all men universally, I doe here protest unto you (reverend) even by the hope of my salvation, that there is no living creature touched or to be noted therby. And for the rest you shall find it now in this second imprinting so turquened and turned,

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¹ George Gascoigne, *The Posies*, 1575, ed. John W. Cunliffe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1907), 3. All subsequent references to the 1575 *Posies* are to this edition and cited parenthetically.

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so clenched from all unclenly wordes, and so purged from the humor of inhumanitie, as percase you woulde not judge that it was the same tale. For although I have bin heretofore contented to suffer the publication thereof, only to the ende men might see my Methode and maner of writing; yet am I nowe thus desirous to set it forth eftsoones, to the ende all men might see the reformation of my minde: And that all suspitions may be suppressed and throughly satisfied, by this mine unfeined protestation (7)

In a dazzling display of tones ranging from mockery to imploration, Gascoigne complains of the supposedly adverse reception of the 1573 collection and *Master F.J.* in particular, and he aligns his authorial career with writers who reformed their ways after youthful follies.² Despite his emphatic ‘protestation’, scholars have become wary of taking Gascoigne at his word. Going further in this direction, I propose that the 1573 collection may have been more successful than Gascoigne admits and that in the above passage he reveals himself to be a dissembler capable of acting as a professional dissembler, i.e. a government agent or spy. My reading of *Master F.J.* refines Lorna Hutson’s and Robert W. Maslen’s views of the narrative as instrumental to Gascoigne’s career ambitions in government intelligence: it traces how Gascoigne’s attempt to recommend himself as a government informer pervades the 1573 text and considers the frequently discussed idiosyncratic features of the narrative in the light of Elizabethan intelligence practices. The features in question are the work’s fiction of production, its *roman-à-clef* characteristics and its concern with indirect communication. Gascoigne’s handling of these features not only bespeaks his literary ambition and brilliantly daring experimentation.³ It also serves a functional purpose, playfully suggesting his mastery of skills which, as shall be detailed further on, correspond to skills expected from Elizabethan informers. Gascoigne’s endeavour to showcase his aptitude as a government agent through what he calls his ‘Methode and maner of writing’ is inherently paradoxical, at once dependent on and contributing to the literary sophistication of the text. Harnessing the essential characteristic of narrative to withhold as well as provide information, Gascoigne simultaneously applies and reveals his talent for secrecy, that is, his skill at keeping, concealing, encoding, transmitting, and disclosing secrets.

Whereas the scholarly appreciation of *Master F.J.* has remained constant in twentieth-century and more recent criticism – generally favouring the 1573 version over its revised form as an Italian novella – accounts of the Elizabethan reception of Gascoigne’s work have undergone a considerable shift. Previous

² For Gascoigne’s construction of his authorship, see for instance Katharine Wilson, *Fictions of Authorship in Late Elizabethan Narratives: Euphues in Arcadia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 14–15, 24.

³ Paul Salzman, ‘Placing Tudor Fiction’, *YES*, 38, 1/2 (2008), 136–49, 142, characterizes Gascoigne’s miscellany as a ‘highly self-conscious literary game’.

scholarship assumed that Gascoigne's 1573 volume was 'withdrawn from circulation by order of the High Commission'.⁴ This assumption has convincingly been challenged by Cyndia Susan Clegg, who notes that it relies solely on Gascoigne's previously cited assertions.⁵ With the records of the Stationers' Company from 1571 to July 1576 no longer extant, there is no other evidence of the 1573 volume having been censored.⁶ Hence, Clegg proposes that the volume 'may have been censored' but 'was probably not censored' – in contrast to the 1575 *Posies*.⁷ For this publication there is evidence of censorship in the Stationers' Court Book from 1576, but 'Only 50 copies still remained in Smith's shop in 1576 when they were seized.'⁸ Moreover, whereas earlier critics represented both print ventures as failures, Gillian Austen among others has highlighted that after the 1575 publication Gascoigne was employed by the Earl of Leicester to contribute to the Kenilworth and Woodstock entertainments for Elizabeth I, allowed to present New Year's gifts to Elizabeth I in 1576 and 1577, and, in 1576, he was sent to Paris and Antwerp as a government agent in the service of Lord Burghley and Sir Francis Walsingham.⁹ Noting the temporal proximity between Gascoigne's employment by Burghley and the subsequent seizure of his *Posies*, Clegg concludes that 'the relationship between Gascoigne's political career and his texts' is more complex than previously assumed.¹⁰

The shift in the reception history of Gascoigne's texts centres around a reconsideration of two questions: first, to what extent can we trust Gascoigne's comments on the 1573 and 1575 publications, and, second, why did he publish a revised version of the 1573 volume? Given the absence of more contextual evidence, these questions cannot be resolved with certainty, but critics' tentative answers necessarily inform their interpretations of Gascoigne's reception history. Taking Gascoigne's comments at face value, earlier scholars regarded the 1575 publication as a failed attempt to revise a text censored for its representations of sexuality and scandalous *roman-à-clef* references to contemporaries. This interpretation is problematized by the superficiality and inconsistency of Gascoigne's revisions.¹¹ Clegg advocates a more sceptical

⁴ Robert W. Maslen, *Elizabethan Fictions: Espionage, Counter-espionage, and the Duplicity of Fiction in Early Elizabethan Prose Narratives* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 115, cf. also 117.

⁵ Cyndia Susan Clegg, *Press Censorship in Elizabethan England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 103–4.

⁶ See Gillian Austen, *George Gascoigne*, *Studies in Renaissance Literature* 24 (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2008), 85.

⁷ Clegg, *Press Censorship*, 103.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 120.

⁹ See Austen, *George Gascoigne*, 115–52; Clegg, *Press Censorship*, 107; Maslen, *Elizabethan Fictions*, 156; Wendy Wall, *The Imprint of Gender: Authorship and Publication in the English Renaissance* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), 127–40; and Gillian Austen, 'The Adventures Passed by Master George Gascoigne: Experiments in Prose', in Andrew Hadfield (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of English Prose 1500–1640* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 156–71, 166–70.

¹⁰ Clegg, *Press Censorship*, 107.

¹¹ See Felicity A. Hughes, 'Gascoigne's Poses', *SEL*, 37, 1 (Winter 1997), 1–19; Clegg, *Press Censorship*, 110–17.

stance regarding Gascoigne's prefatory comments, calling them 'an elaborate artifice'.¹² However, she nonetheless credits his claim that the 1573 text was received as a *roman à clef* and proposes that the 1575 prefatory letters 'sought to deflect reception away from political and personal slander' while advertising the text's 'sexualized discourse'.¹³

I suggest a more radical approach and propose that Gascoigne's complaint about the 1573 volume's negative reception primarily serves a marketing purpose rather than giving us an accurate idea of Elizabethan readers' reactions to *Master F.J.* Building on this conjecture, we might speculate further that the publication of the 1575 *Posies of George Gascoigne Esquire* in fact testifies to the success of the 1573 print venture rather than its failure.¹⁴ This would provide a more logical explanation as to why Gascoigne chose to republish his collection and acknowledge his authorship.¹⁵ Austen underlines Gascoigne's efforts in the 1575 prefatory material to establish his 'most successful authorial persona, the Reformed Prodigal'.¹⁶ The 1575 *Posies* might thus be interpreted as a double-edged coup of Gascoigne's – an attempt at once to profit from the success, or perhaps notoriety, of the 1573 volume and to refashion his authorial persona in more moral terms.¹⁷ Presumably, if the 1573 collection had truly been censored or caused a scandal, the safest path for Gascoigne to appease the High Commission would have been to continue denying authorship of his problematic narrative and to republish only his translations and some of his poems, but certainly not 'to try to joke his way out of trouble' and to remodel *Master F.J.* as an Italian novella, which provokes rather than avoids erotic associations.¹⁸ If Gascoigne's 1573 publication was indeed a success, his failure in 1575 would not have been that he 'failed to placate his enemies'.¹⁹ Rather he might have gone too far in his provocation of the censors – be it by including the prefatory letter 'To the reverende Divines' as if it were a license

¹² Clegg, *Press Censorship*, 108.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 103, cf. also 110–12.

¹⁴ By contrast, the hypothesis that the 1573 volume did not sell and Gascoigne invoked a fictitious scandal to boost the volume's sales seems less convincing since in this case the 1575 publication of a revised collection would have been a risky venture, and it might have made more sense for the bookseller and printer to pass off the already printed 1573 copies as a second edition.

¹⁵ Austen, *George Gascoigne*, 8, assumes that 'Gascoigne's literary reputation' was 'high' at and 'beyond court' but admits that there is no hard evidence of 'the demand for his works during his lifetime'. She suggests the many literary references to Gascoigne's works and their republication ten years after his death to indicate their enduring popularity (11–14).

¹⁶ Austen, 'Adventures', 156. Critics frequently discuss Gascoigne's 'reformed prodigal' persona. See for instance Lorna Hutson, *The Usurer's Daughter: Male Friendship and Fictions of Women in Sixteenth-Century England* (London: Routledge, 1994), 118–21; Austen, *George Gascoigne*, 14–20; and Susan C. Staub, 'Dissembling his art: "Gascoigne's Gardnings"', *Renaissance Studies*, 25, 1 (2011), 95–110.

¹⁷ An additional incentive for the republication might have been Gascoigne's wish to publish a complete text of *Dan Bartholomew of Bathe*, which had remained incomplete in 1573.

¹⁸ Hughes, 'Gascoigne's Poses', 3; cf. Clegg, *Press Censorship*, 111–12.

¹⁹ Richard C. McCoy, 'Gascoigne's "Poëmata Castrata": The Wages of Courty Success', *Criticism*, 27 (1985), 29–55, 32.

for publication or by blatantly drawing attention to the licentiousness of *Master F.J.* while professing his own moral reformation.²⁰

In addition to promoting both the juiciness of his works and the reformation of his morals, Gascoigne's letter 'To the reverende Divines' explicitly discloses his intended self-advertisement as a potential government agent. Gascoigne emphasizes the functionality of his literary endeavours,²¹ openly proclaiming his aspiration to patronage and government employment through his writing:

as I seeke advaancement by virtue, so was I desirous that there might remaine in publike recorde, some pledge or token of those giftes wherewith it hath pleased the Almightye to endue me: To the ende that thereby the virtuous might bee encouraged to employ my penne in some exercise which might tende both to my preferment, and to the profite of my Countrey. For many a man which may like mine outward presence, might yet have doubted whether the qualities of my minde had bene correspondent to the proportion of my bodie. (5)

Gascoigne pointedly draws attention to 'the qualities of [his] minde' and asks that his 'penne' be employed. He adds to this, as quoted above, that he was 'contented to suffer the [1573] publication ... only to the ende men might see my Methode and maner of writing' (7). Keeping in mind the scepticism I have expressed with respect to taking Gascoigne at his word, I nevertheless propose that we should take this last assertion seriously and consider what 'qualities' 'the virtuous' might have perceived in his 'Methode and maner of writing'. Steve Mentz notes that Gascoigne's narrative has 'anachronistically' been discussed as "modern," or even "post-modern" due to its 'sophistication and ironic detachment'.²² Mentz sees these seemingly modern qualities as historically grounded, deriving from Gascoigne's 'self-conscious' negotiation of the 'popular and culturally forbidden' Italian novella genre through the juxtaposition of 'a sceptical view of Italian culture' and a protagonist who 'steals his best lines from Ariosto and Petrarch'.²³ My reading of the narrative proposes an alternative historical explanation for the tensions and contradictions that readers may experience as 'post-modern'. These result, I argue, from Gascoigne's paradoxical attempt to showcase his aptitude for a career as

²⁰ Maslen, *Elizabethan Fictions*, 117, identifies 'the reverende Divines' as ecclesiastic censors of the High Commission. However, according to Clegg, *Press Censorship*, 108–9, including such a letter in a publication is highly unusual and hence suspect. See also Alan Stewart, 'Gelding Gascoigne', in Constance C. Relihan and Goran V. Stanivukovic (eds.), *Prose Fiction and Early Modern Sexualities in England, 1570–1640* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 147–69, 164 n.4.

²¹ This does not preclude that Gascoigne's writing also reflects on philosophical and legal issues, as argued by Michael Hetherington, 'Gascoigne's Accidents: Contingency, Skill, and the Logic of Writing', *ELR*, 46, 1 (2016), 29–59.

²² Steve Mentz, 'Escaping Italy: From Novella to Romance in Gascoigne and Lyly', *Studies in Philology*, 101, 2 (2004), 153–71, at 156.

²³ *Ibid.*, 157, 155, 162.

a government agent by simultaneously performing the tasks of an informer and displaying his ingenuity in doing so. The 1573 version of *Master F.J.* and the 1575 prefatory comments advertise Gascoigne's linguistic and rhetoric abilities – abilities that fuel Gascoigne's literary craft but are also indispensable for a government agent.

Examining the 'kind of service for which printed collections of poetry and fiction might have been expected, in the mid to late sixteenth century, to serve as qualification', Hutson demonstrates that 'a liberal or humanistic education was envisaged as a preparation for ... textualized intelligence service' like compiling reports.²⁴ Maslen develops Hutson's implication that texts like *Master F.J.* aim to recommend their author for 'some form of intelligence service' by focusing on the narrative's content.²⁵ He interprets it as a daring warning that intelligent writers like Gascoigne might go astray and become Catholic agents if not given government employment.²⁶ As Maslen notes, Gascoigne thematizes the gathering and transmitting of secret information. The narrative relates Master F.J.'s clandestine love affair with the married noblewoman Elinor, ending with his rejection after Elinor's former lover returns and F.J. has raped her. Although F.J. and Elinor try to keep their affair secret, they are observed by Lady Frances, who is in turn observed by Dame Pergo. In this setting of constant surveillance characters communicate indirectly to pass information to their designed addressee but keep their secrets from prying eyes and ears. Gascoigne exploits the shared necessity for secrecy in illicit affairs and politics. He offers readers a seemingly frivolous domestic version of contemporary court society and rival political factions, a version 'stuffed with acts of treachery, secret messages in code, cunning infiltrations of restricted areas, and the leaking of highly sensitive confidential documents'.²⁷ Yet Gascoigne's attempt to demonstrate his capacities as a government informer goes further than the general display of humanist erudition or the fictional representation of spy work discussed by Hutson and Maslen respectively: it pervades the very fabric of the text insofar as Gascoigne obliquely puts into practice crucial aspects of Elizabethan 'textualized intelligence service'.

Master F.J. was published in the year when Walsingham returned from his ambassador's post in Paris – after having witnessed the horrors of the St Bartholomew's Day massacre (1572) – and largely took over the management of the Elizabethan intelligence service from Burghley.²⁸ Continuous conflicts

²⁴ Hutson, *The Usurer's Daughter*, 104, 105. Hutson bases herself on the comments of Walsingham's secretary on his tasks, Walsingham's reading instructions to his nephews and the writing careers of Hugh Platt and Geoffrey Fenton (105, 110–11, 117).

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 115.

²⁶ Maslen, *Elizabethan Fictions*, 155–7. Maslen highlights Gascoigne's proximity to Catholicism through his father and aristocratic acquaintances. He notes the narrative's original setting in the Catholic-friendly north of England and sees allusions to 'clandestine Catholic practices' (133).

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 9, cf. also 10–16.

²⁸ Cf. Christopher Andrew, *The Secret World: A History of Intelligence* (Milton Keynes: Penguin, 2018), 158.

over religious and territorial hegemony, the Ottoman threat and commercial competition led to a marked development of intelligence services in early modern Europe.²⁹ Such secret services took the form of 'web[s] of relationships',³⁰ as statesmen and diplomats, for example, established their own intelligence networks, relying both on recruited spies and voluntary informers.³¹ These networks functioned similarly to the literary patronage system: just as writers dedicated literary works to potential patrons, informers often provided intelligence of their own accord in the hope of steady employment or remuneration.³² Gascoigne's publication of *Master F.J.* could be considered a similar move, situated somewhere between the two models and designed to serve as a literary and fictional equivalent of an informer's initial demonstration of usefulness by proffering intelligence.

Early modern spies and informers came from various social stations, ranging from criminals, servants, merchants and soldiers to scholars and elite travellers.³³ Their activities, which indicate what professional skills their employers expected, were equally varied: producing written accounts of events, conveying possibly diverging oral and written accounts, authoring anonymous propaganda pamphlets for clandestine print publication, passing on 'court gossip and trade news and naval preparations and movements of troops' and 'pos[ing] as a malcontent Catholic refugee' to win 'the confidences of the Spanish and French and Italian and English-émigré circles',³⁴ as well as forging documents and stealing letters.³⁵ When Gascoigne was eventually sent on a government mission to Paris and Antwerp in 1576, he accomplished a number of the above tasks.³⁶ He reported his observations in two letters to Burghley, including information on the movement and financing of troops, the whereabouts of important French noblemen and the king, and, possibly, an encoded remark concerning the Spanish fleet. Moreover, he promised additional intelligence to be transmitted orally upon his return. He was in contact with the ambassador in Paris and the Governor of the English Merchants in Antwerp and transported letters from Antwerp to Walsingham. During his stay in Antwerp, he witnessed the sack of the city by the Spanish on 3 November and

²⁹ Ioanna Iordanou, *Venice's Secret Service: Organizing Intelligence in the Renaissance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 38.

³⁰ John Cooper, *The Queen's Agent* (London: Faber and Faber, 2012), 163.

³¹ Iordanou, *Venice's Secret Service*, 49–50, 164, 179.

³² Stephen Alford, *The Watchers: A Secret History of the Reign of Elizabeth I* (London: Penguin, 2012), 15; Hutson, *The Usurer's Daughter*, 104–5.

³³ Cf. Stephen Budiansky, *Her Majesty's Spymaster: Elizabeth I, Sir Francis Walsingham, and the Birth of Modern Espionage* (London: Penguin, 2005), 93; Michael Kempe, 'Burn after Reading: Verschlüsseltes Wissen und Spionagenetzwerke im elisabethanischen England', *Historische Zeitschrift*, 296, 2 (2013), 354–79, 371–2; Iordanou, *Venice's Secret Service*, 49–50.

³⁴ Budiansky, *Her Majesty's Spymaster*, 18, 15, 72, 81, 93, 96.

³⁵ Alford, *The Watchers*, 19, 77.

³⁶ Cf. Austen, *George Gascoigne*, 179–95.

compiled a written account of the event that was published anonymously before the end of the month, within a week of his return to London.

Master F.J. anticipates Gascoigne's correspondence and writing as a government agent and suggests his familiarity with the skills expected of Elizabethan informers. Consisting of several letters and poems framed by prose narration, the 1573 narrative affects the appearance of a manuscript verse miscellany but also adopts a format of secret intelligence. It is presented as the organized result of a collection of private documents acquired by someone with privileged access to an elite society. It poses as a written account of real events and conversations – the kind of report that would be expected from a government agent – and it includes copies of letters, gesturing towards a spy's task of intercepting, transcribing and decoding letters. The elaborate and changing fiction of production surrounding *Master F.J.* and the continued foregrounding of the text's *roman-à-clef* features – both in the 1573 text and 1575 comments on it – further contribute to Gascoigne's self-promotion as a potential government agent, paradoxically insisting both on his ability to encode references to real people and to mislead readers into false assumptions. Finally, Gascoigne places indirect or veiled communication centre stage not only thematically but also through his textual communication practices that are at once encoded and signalled to be so.

To display an aptitude to keep, conceal, encode, and transmit secrets in a print publication is in itself a paradoxical endeavour since a well-kept secret remains unknown and is precisely not made public or circulated – and only those in the know should be able to decode a well-encoded message. It makes sense then that Gascoigne's 1573 collection is presented as a manuscript verse miscellany destined for restricted circulation only, which has fallen into the wrong hands and hence been publicized in print. Rather than claiming authorship as in his 1575 *Posies*, Gascoigne nominally figures only as a translator and as one of the 'sundry gentlemen' who contribute poems to a verse miscellany supposedly collected and edited by one G.T.³⁷ Three fictitious paratextual letters sustain this deception: one by G.T. to his friend H.W. to accompany and introduce the manuscript, one by H.W. to the reader, relating how instead of faithfully returning the miscellany he secretly gave a copy to the printer A.B. for publication (3), and one by the supposed printer A.B. to the reader, justifying his decision to publish the manuscript.³⁸ The three letters give the impression that existing individuals hide behind the initials and hence also stage F.J. as a living person, introduced in G.T.'s letter to H.W. as

³⁷ George Gascoigne, *The Adventures of Master F.J.*, 1573, in Paul Salzman (ed.), *An Anthology of Elizabethan Prose Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 1–81, at 80. Unless otherwise noted, all quotations from the 1573 text are from this edition and hereafter cited parenthetically.

³⁸ For the printing of the letters, see Adrian Weiss, 'Shared Printing, Printer's Copy, and the Text(s) of Gascoigne's "A Hundreth Sundrie Flowres"', *Studies in Bibliography*, 45 (1992), 71–104, 93 n.27, 98–9; and G. W. Pigman's textual introduction, in George Gascoigne, *A Hundreth Sundrie Flowres*, ed. G. W. Pigman III (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), lvii–xi.

'your friend and mine' (5). Gascoigne thus deviously hides behind the aliases of G.T., H.W., and A.B., similar, one might say, to a secret agent assuming a false identity.³⁹ Yet, considering that he is explicitly named as the author of the play translations that open the volume and a series of poems following *Master F.J.*, his authorship is not completely veiled but open to speculation. Such speculation is explicitly encouraged when G.T. closes *Master F.J.* by inviting readers to 'gesse' the identity of the subsequent poems' authors.⁴⁰ Gascoigne's authorial anonymity could then be qualified as semi-transparent, i.e. his authorship is both hidden and partly disclosed. Gascoigne thereby textually performs the camouflage of authorial identity necessary to author anonymous propaganda pamphlets and participate in clandestine print publication. Simultaneously he covertly invites potential employers to trace the 1573 collection back to him and recognize his mastery of the skills expected of a government agent.

The elaborate fiction of production lays the groundwork for presenting *Master F.J.* as an account of a historical individual's experiences. The description of the account as a verse miscellany, 'a form where authorial ascription is frequently misleading or mysterious, and surrounding private emotional narratives are tantalisingly implied but not spelled out',⁴¹ predisposes readers towards a *roman-à-clef* reading, which the text explicitly suggests. While the supposed intelligence conveyed by G.T.'s account is neither military nor economic, the information is nevertheless secret and qualifies as the equivalent of the 'court gossip' that a government agent would be expected to report. Gascoigne reinforces the impression that the narrative gives a veiled report of true events by continuously referring to F.J. as a real person in G.T.'s linking texts that develop the story of F.J.'s love affair and situate his letters and poems within it. Time and again, G.T. emphasizes that his principal informant is F.J. himself (see for instance, 6, 7, 8, 9, 11, etc.),⁴² and he extends this treatment of F.J. to other characters, most markedly Dame Pergo, one of Elinor's companions. G.T. introduces her as 'A gentlewoman of the company, whom I have not hitherto named, and that for good respects lest her name might altogether disclose the rest' (53). Dame Pergo's true identity, G.T. suggests, might

³⁹ I do not propose an autobiographical reading of G.T., but rather that he functions as a fictive persona for Gascoigne. As Gregory Waters, 'G.T.'s "Worthles Enterprise": A Study of the Narrator in Gascoigne's "The Adventures of Master F.J."', *The Journal of Narrative Technique*, 7 (1977), 116–27, 116 notes, the text exposes G.T.'s 'ambiguous moral character'. I see similar problems for the association of Gascoigne with F.J. For autobiographical readings, see Austen, *George Gascoigne*, 75–7, and Meredith Anne Skura, *Tudor Autobiography: Listening for Inwardness* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2008), 168–96. For similarities between G.T.'s poetic criticism and Gascoigne's 'Certayne Notes of Instruction Concerning the Making of Verse or Rime in English', see Penelope Scambly Schott, 'The Narrative Stance in "The Adventures of Master F.J."': Gascoigne as Critic of His Own Poems', *Renaissance Quarterly*, 29, 3 (Autumn 1976), 369–77.

⁴⁰ Gascoigne, *A Hundreth*, 216.

⁴¹ Helen Hackett, private communication, December 15, 2018.

⁴² Staub counts 'no less than seventy' such references; "'According to My Source": Fictionality in *The Adventures of Master F.J.*', *SP*, 87 (1990), 111–19, at 115.

provide the key to the identity of all the other characters, making it necessary to refer to her by a fictional name, as G.T. underlines: ‘This dame had stuff in her—an old courtier and a wily wench, whom for this discourse I will name Pergo, lest her name natural were too broad before, and might not drink of all waters’ (54), that is, lest her identity be ‘too obvious, and might not suit everyone’ (395 n.54).

Within the narrative, characters likewise make use of G.T.’s *roman-à-clef* strategy, creating a *mise-en-abyme* effect with regard to narrative technique and strengthening readers’ impression that they are let into the secret of real events and people. When Lady Frances,⁴³ a kinswoman of F.J. (27), tries to expose Dame Pergo through gossip, she prefaces her narration as follows: ‘I will rehearse unto you a strange history, not feigned, neither borrowed out of any old authority, but a thing done indeed of late days, and not far distant from this place where we now remain’ (67).⁴⁴ Responding to the story, F.J. explicitly recalls this claim to veracity, calling the narrative ‘a notable tale, or rather a notable history, because you seem to affirm that it was done indeed of late and not far hence’ (73). Moreover, G.T.’s comment on the narrative’s reception further provokes readers’ curiosity, as he remarks that ‘Lady Frances ... smiled in her sleeve at Dame Pergo, who had no less patience to hear the tale recited than Lady Frances had pleasure in telling of it—but I may not rehearse the cause why, unless I should tell all’ (73). G.T.’s comment thus confirms the initial claim to veracity even as he refuses to decode the narrative’s supposed references.

The continual recourse to *roman-à-clef* strategies positions Gascoigne’s fictional stand-in, G.T., as someone who knows secrets and is skilled at encoding and obscuring information and identities.⁴⁵ However, G.T. also undermines a *roman-à-clef* reading of the text when he discusses the identity of a certain ‘Helen’ in one of F.J.’s poems. In an explanation that borders on the ludicrous, G.T. notes that some friends of F.J. pretend the poem to be addressed to a real Helen – which is also what Elinor suspects. By contrast, F.J. claims ‘Helen’ to be a codename for Elinor that associates her with the famed beauty of Helen of Troy (39).⁴⁶ In sentences of tortuous logic, G.T. discusses the arguments for and against an identification of this poetic Helen with a real Helen that F.J. might have had an affair with at some later point. In addition, he

⁴³ For Lady Frances, see Maslen, *Elizabethan Fictions*, 145–6, 153–5; Mentz, ‘Escaping Italy’, 158, 163–5, 167–9; Staub, ‘The Lady Frances Did Watch: Gascoigne’s Voyeuristic Narrative’, in Constance C. Relihan (ed.), *Framing Elizabethan Fictions: Contemporary Approaches to Early Modern Narrative* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1996), 40–54, 43–7, 51–4.

⁴⁴ Mentz, ‘Escaping Italy’, 163 argues that Lady Frances is attempting to put ‘Italianate fiction’ to ‘moral use’ without however considering her vengeful intentions, ‘being desirous to requite Dame Pergo’s quips’ (67).

⁴⁵ See also George E. Rowe, ‘Interpretation, Sixteenth-Century Readers, and George Gascoigne’s “The Adventures of Master F.J.”’, *ELH*, 48 (1981), 271–89, at 272, 275.

⁴⁶ For later Royalist use of romance and classical codenames in secret correspondence, see Nadine Akkerman, *Invisible Agents: Women and Espionage in Seventeenth-Century Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 162–3, 168–70.

considers that the poem might have been adapted for that Helen at a later stage – only to conclude that ‘by whom [i.e. addressed to whom] he wrote it I know not’ (39). The passage at once frustrates and fuels a *roman-à-clef* reading, as does G.T.’s remark at the end of *Master F.J.*, ‘yet I will cease, as one that had rather leave it [‘this thriftless history’] unperfect than make it too plain’ (80).

In view of these insistent hints to read the text as a *roman à clef*, it seems no surprise if, as Gascoigne criticizes in the 1575 prefatory letter, ‘some busie conjectures have presumed to thinke that the ... [narrative] was ... written to the scandalizing of some worthie personages’ (7). In his 1575 revision, Gascoigne relinquishes the fiction of production and pretends that *Master F.J.* is in fact a ‘fable’ (7), ‘translated out of the Italian riding tales of *Bartello*’ (383).⁴⁷ Gascoigne hence dons a new disguise, that of a translator, and undermines the 1573 suggestions to read the text as a *roman à clef* of contemporary events. Moreover, he mocks ‘simple’ readers, who are not ‘agreed in one conjecture’ as to who is portrayed but ‘who being indeed starke staring blind, would yet seeme to see farre into a milstone’ (7). This mockery can be read as Gascoigne’s implicit boasting that he managed to make so many readers believe that his narrative should be read as a *roman à clef* when it is supposedly no such thing. Gascoigne thus showcases his ingenuity more openly,⁴⁸ simultaneously drawing attention to his skill at encoding delicate information and professing a talent for misinforming his readers or leading them astray on a wild goose chase in the manner of a government agent who disseminates false rumours.

As if this were not baffling enough, Gascoigne goes on to ‘protest ... even by the hope of my salvation, that there is no living creature touched or to be noted’ by the narrative. But he only does so after sneeringly declaring that ‘if I had bene so foolishe as to have passed in recitall a thing so done in deede, yet all the world might thinke me verie simple if I woulde call John, John, or Mary, Mary’ (7). In other words, immediately before making an ‘unfeined protestation’ that *Master F.J.* is not a *roman à clef*, Gascoigne proclaims his ability to conceal the truth and hence, to feign or lie. What we see emerging here is a pattern of contradictory assertions, practices of concealment and disclosure that cancel or undermine each other, resulting in a text that remains opaque and appears encoded even as its encoding is advertised.

Gascoigne’s 1575 contradictory protestations can also be read in the context of an anonymous note addressed to the Privy Council in 1572 and the fundamentally problematic early modern perception of spying as both disreputable and necessary. The note accused Gascoigne of debts and ‘Manslaughter’, called him ‘a deviser of slaunderous Pasquelles againste divers personnes of

⁴⁷ The name of the fictitious author combines the names of Gascoigne’s character ‘Dan Bartholmew’ and the Italian novella author Bandello.

⁴⁸ This suggestion conflicts with McCoy, “Poëmata Castrata”, 32, who reads Gascoigne’s career and 1575 revision as marked by progressive loss of authorial control and ‘surrender’ to ‘Elizabethan orthodoxy’.

greate callenge' and 'bothe a spie; an Atheist and godlesse personne'.⁴⁹ To be accused of being a spy was defamatory and generally suggested 'dishonesty and treachery'.⁵⁰ Yet to become what in the most institutionalized early modern secret service in Venice was termed a 'confidente' was a valid option to serve one's government, though not a career that could openly be acknowledged.⁵¹ Constituting perhaps a belated response to the anonymous note, Gascoigne's emphatic protestations against a *roman-à-clef* reading and his sharp mockery appear understandable. The subsequent undermining of his assertions, however, becomes even more contradictory and surprising – unless Gascoigne actually wished certain readers to entertain the idea that he could be employed as an informer.

In *Master F.J.*, Gascoigne's contradictory practices of concealment and disclosure also manifest themselves in the narrative's emphasis on and constant recourse to indirect means of communication, including the representation of sexual encounters. The beginning of the narrative exemplifies how, to suggest his capacities to intercept, manipulate and transmit written and oral secret messages, Gascoigne operates on three textual levels. On the story level, he creates a narrative situation that warrants secret dealings between characters. This set-up permits Gascoigne to display his familiarity with secret communication practices. On a second level, Gascoigne in the guise of G.T. discloses the characters' secret dealings through editorial commentary. Arthur F. Kinney characterizes the 1573 narrative as 'a twice-told tale',⁵² with F.J.'s poems and letters commented on by the fictitious editor and narrator persona G.T. This allows Gascoigne to address readers repeatedly on a meta-poetic level through G.T. and to draw attention to his 'Methode and maner of writing'. On a third level, Gascoigne employs literary techniques like allusion, irony, allegory and metaphors to add further meanings to the text. These additional meanings are sometimes gestured at, as in the allegory of suspicion, but not necessarily – especially regarding licentious scenes.

On the story level, the narrative focuses from the outset on the transmission and reception of coded information: F.J. first approaches Elinor through a possibly signed letter,⁵³ in which he 'commit[s]' his feelings 'unto this telltale paper' (7), only to be told by her that 'as at the delivery thereof she understood not for what cause he thrust the same into her bosom, so now she could

⁴⁹ Prouty, C.T., *George Gascoigne: Elizabethan Courtier, Soldier, and Poet* (New York: Benjamin Blom, 1966), 61. Cf. also Austen, *George Gascoigne*, 8, 65–6.

⁵⁰ Jordanou, *Venice's Secret Service*, 55.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 161–3.

⁵² Arthur F. Kinney, *Humanist Poetics: Thought, Rhetoric, and Fiction in Sixteenth-Century England* (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1986), 91.

⁵³ It is not clear if the letter is signed. In the 1573 version, poems and letters by F.J. are followed by his initials to distinguish them from G.T.'s comments followed by 'G.T.' Hence the letter appears to be signed, but the initials 'F.J.' can also be interpreted as an editorial addition since they are in the same font as G.T.'s. The 1575 version omits G.T.'s but keeps F.J.'s initials at the end of his letters and poems – even when the text states that they are transmitted anonymously. The 1575 initial letter appears thus even more obviously signed.

not perceive thereby any part of his meaning' (7). F.J.'s letter on 'telltale paper' is too transparent on the one hand, but, on the other, still vague and – employing Petrarchan discourse – conventional enough for Elinor to deny understanding its import.⁵⁴ Elinor follows this up by telling F.J., 'For that I understand not ... the intent of your letters, I pray you take them here again and bestow them at your pleasure' (8).⁵⁵ Yet the paper that F.J. receives and, frustrated, rips apart turns out not to be his own letter but an answer signed 'SHE' (9). Instead of being elated, F.J. immediately doubts the letter's authenticity and suspects it to have been written by a man since 'by the style this letter of hers bewrayeth that it was not penned by a woman's capacity' (9). Through G.T.'s comments we learn that F.J.'s guess is correct as well as how to confirm such a forgery: by a comparison of 'handwriting' and 'style' (15). G.T.'s digression highlights the difficulty of asserting the reliability and authenticity of clandestine communication. This issue is particularly fraught in a society where recourse to scribes or 'secretaries' is common, and a secretary, in the Elizabethan understanding, is both 'One whose office it is to write for another' and 'One who is entrusted with private or secret matters'.⁵⁶ On a larger scale, the questionable authenticity of Elinor's letter gestures towards the intrinsic difficulty of evaluating and verifying secret information in the early modern period.⁵⁷

We thus move from a possibly signed to a deviously transmitted anonymized letter of uncertain origin. F.J., getting better at his game too, replies both by way of a letter signed 'HE' aimed at 'either ... her or ... her secretary' and a love declaration in the form of a poem that he 'privily lost ..., in her chamber, written in counterfeit' (9). Again we notice the focus on how secret messages are transmitted, encoded, and interpreted. F.J.'s letter carries different meanings depending on whether it is read by Elinor or her secretary,⁵⁸ just as coded secret intelligence is supposed to convey different information to its destined receivers than to outsiders.

Similarly, Gascoigne uses literary allusion in F.J.'s poem, 'written in counterfeit', to transmit multiple meanings to be decoded by different audiences. Elinor is addressed as 'Fair Bersabe the bright once bathing in a well', who 'With dew bedimmed King David's eyes that ruled Israel' (7, lines 1–2). The biblical allusion casts Elinor as the beautiful married Bathsheba, who

⁵⁴ On practices of 'secret epistolary writing', see James Daybell, 'Secret Letters in Elizabethan England', in James Daybell and Peter Hinds (eds), *Material Readings of Early Modern Culture: Texts and Social Practices, 1580–1730* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 47–64, at 47.

⁵⁵ For F.J.'s opening exchanges with Elinor, see for instance Stewart, 'Gelding Gascoigne', 152–9. Cf. also Elizabeth Heale, *Autobiography and Authorship in Renaissance Verse: Chronicles of the Self* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 135–6 on the erotic associations of F.J.'s request that Elinor reuse his letter.

⁵⁶ 'secretary, n.1 and adj.', *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, accessed December 2018, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/174549?rskey=4TGCOD&result=1&isAdvanced=false>.

⁵⁷ Cf. Iordanou, *Venice's Secret Service*, 169–70.

⁵⁸ On writing ambiguous poetry see also Thomas Whythorne, *The Autobiography of Thomas Whythorne*, ed. James M. Osborn (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1961), 41.

provokes an overwhelming passion in King David, and F.J. as King David, who disposes of Bathsheba's husband to have her for himself. On the story level, the allusion signifies F.J.'s illicit sexual desire for Elinor, spelling out the meaning of his earlier Petrarchan discourse. At the same time, the allusion ironically undermines F.J. as a character, underlining the immorality of his intentions.⁵⁹ Further biblical and mythical allusions to Solomon, Hercules and Samson (7) function likewise, illustrating the irresistible power of desire on the one hand and, on the other, presenting F.J. in a dubious light by emphasizing the extent of his misguided infatuation. The final verses, '*Lenvoi*', consist of a specific reading instruction for the poem's addressee, Elinor, but also gesture more generally towards the need to decode the poem's hidden meanings: 'To you these few suffice, your wits be quick and good,/ You can conject by change of hue what humours feed my blood' (8). The lines invite Elinor to decode the poem in relation to F.J.'s bodily reactions to her presence. More generally, Gascoigne's text points towards the encoding of secret content and both performs and discloses this encoding.⁶⁰ Moreover, Gascoigne's use of irony at F.J.'s expense establishes a hierarchy of knowing that positions G.T., and through him the actual author Gascoigne, as an authority that surpasses the protagonists' skill at encoding delicate information and decoding hidden meanings.

Gascoigne also uses literary translation and allegory as methods to transmit multiple layers of information. Addressing F.J.'s jealousy when Elinor's former lover returns, G.T. recounts an allegorical story about Suspicion translated from Ariosto (47–50). This is followed by F.J.'s translation of a song from Ariosto (50–51). Apart from demonstrating Gascoigne's competency in Italian and (poetic) translation – both valuable assets for a government agent who might have to pose as a discontented Catholic – the translations also imply that Gascoigne is more erudite than the common Elizabethan gentleman, and they demonstrate his skill at adapting a given text to a new purpose. Rather than translating an episode from *Orlando Furioso*, Gascoigne takes the allegorical tale from the supplement *Cinque Canti* and highlights his wide reading and superior knowledge through G.T.'s remark, 'for I think you have not read it in Ariosto' (47).⁶¹ Whereas the verse translation of Ariosto's song remains close to the source in content and form, showing off his linguistic and poetic mastery, Gascoigne enlarges and reorients Ariosto's allegory of

⁵⁹ I am not fully convinced by Kinney's reading that Bathsheba signifies a 'prostitute'; Kinney, *Humanist Poetics*, 93.

⁶⁰ Compare also a later poem by F.J., which G.T. calls 'a full discourse of his first love', adding that 'by it he meant in clouds to decipher unto Mistress Frances such matter as she would snatch at, and yet could take no good hold of the same' (23). The reader is at once presented with the encoded account, its meaning, F.J.'s intention of half-hiding, half-displaying his feelings and the intended effect on Frances.

⁶¹ Maslen, *Elizabethan Fictions*, 139–40 assumes that G.T. relates the tale 'for the benefit of his friend H.W.' as it 'is the only text in *The Adventures of Master F.J.* that has no audience within the narrative'. While this makes sense within the fiction of production, G.T.'s justification does not evoke a particular reader.

Suspicion, turning a political reflection on tyranny to a love context.⁶² This resembles the 'widely popular method of encoding called *in parabula* or the Cicero method', i.e. the 'technique of substituting specific words with inconspicuous code words', such as 'commercial jargon' for instance.⁶³ Gascoigne only keeps Ariosto's implicit reference to Dionysius, the tyrant of Syracuse, at the opening of the story and concludes by commenting that Suspicion affects especially 'such as either do sit in chair of greatest dignity and estimation, or else such as have achieved some dear and rare emprise' (50). These inconspicuous framing remarks point those in the know towards the political significance of the allegory that Gascoigne has otherwise erased. The allegorical digression thus signifies on different levels to different audiences and can be read as an illustration of how Gascoigne showcases his skill at manipulating and obfuscating political content. To a readership aware of Ariosto's original the digression retains its political meaning, which for a less well-versed readership Gascoigne has disguised as an allegorical and foreshadowing comment on F.J.'s destructive jealousy.⁶⁴ Moreover, the digression might have evoked a further signification to a Protestant readership, capturing the atmosphere of fear and suspicion following the shock of the St Bartholomew's Day massacre. In its stark contrast to the narrative's general tone, the allegory invites a reflection on the difficulty of trusting the right person and the simultaneous necessity and danger of suspicion, lest one provoke the very catastrophe one seeks to forestall.⁶⁵

In the above example, Gascoigne again performs, as well as displays, his manipulation, obfuscation and encoding of information. This changes when it comes to the representation of sexual encounters, as Gascoigne figuratively encodes sexual references but does not draw attention to this textual strategy within the narrative. However, the preliminaries of both editions alert readers to the presence of sex scenes. The 1575 letter 'To the reverende Divines' protests that the text has been 'clensed from all unclenly wordes' (7), and A.B., the fictitious 1573 printer, explains: 'I find nothing therein amisse (to my judgemente) unlesse it be two or three wanton places passed over in the discourse of an amorous enterprise: The which for as much as the words are cleanly (although the thing ment be somewhat naturall) I have thought good also to let them passe as they came to me'.⁶⁶ The 'cleanly' 'words' describing the 'somewhat naturall' 'thing ment' – and note how A.B.'s letter already addresses the encoding of meaning – turn out to be elaborate but relatively

⁶² Cf. Gascoigne, *A Hundreth*, 583 n.184.23–4, 587 n.187.38.

⁶³ Iordanou, *Venice's Secret Service*, 174–5.

⁶⁴ In 1575 Gascoigne even conceals Ariosto's authorship. The narrating voice – presumably, the translator Gascoigne – claims to reproduce the narrative 'as I finde it in *Bartello*' (421), thus attributing Ariosto's texts or their appropriation to a fictitious author.

⁶⁵ The allegory thus problematizes Walsingham's credo that 'there is less danger in fearing too much than too little'. Cf. Andrew, *The Secret World*, 158.

⁶⁶ Gascoigne, *A Hundreth*, 3.

obvious metaphors. Thus, when planning to replace his rival, the secretary, F.J. aspires to ‘lend his mistress such a pen in her secretary’s absence as he should never be able at his return to amend the well-writing thereof’ (15–16).⁶⁷ When the secretary returns and thwarts F.J.’s wishful fantasy, the same metaphor is enriched by a musical metaphor to depict the sexual act:

the secretary, having been of long time absent and thereby his quills and pens not worn so near as they were wont to be, did now prick such fair large notes that his mistress liked better to sing faburden under him than to descant any longer upon F.J.’s plainsong.

And thus they continued in good accord until it fortun’d that Dame Frances came into her chamber upon such sudden as she had liked to have marred all the music. Well, they conveyed their clefs as closely as they could, but yet not altogether without some suspicion given to the said Dame Frances[.] (62)

The move from the phallic image of the pricking pen suggesting penetration to the musical vocabulary renders the representation of the sexual act even more graphic if taken literally. ‘[T]o sing faburden under’ a melody signifies accompanying the melody a third or fifth below, mirroring its movements, whereas ‘to descant ... upon ... plainsong’ means accompanying a melody in counterpoint fashion with a treble or soprano voice or instrument.⁶⁸ Read figuratively, the extended metaphor intimates the harmony and disharmony as well as the power relations between Elinor and her lovers.⁶⁹ Read literally, it suggests the position of Elinor’s body ‘under’ or ‘upon’ that of her respective lovers, the parallel or contrary movements of her and her lovers’ bodies as well as the lower or higher pitch of Elinor’s voice. However, unlike other instances, Gascoigne’s text here provides no indication of how to interpret the metaphors, leaving it solely up to the readers to decode their meaning.

Despite their pornographic potential, these metaphoric passages remain unchanged in 1575, implying that metaphoric encoding proved an acceptable writing strategy to convey sexual meanings, even in a text for which Gascoigne now assumed partial responsibility as its pretended translator. By contrast, the rape scene, in which F.J.’s aggression is signified relatively explicitly through military terms, is cut from the 1575 text.⁷⁰ This leaves an ellipsis between the summarizing statement that ‘*Ferdinando* ... assayleth his enemies by force’ and

⁶⁷ On the pen/penis metaphor, see for example Staub, “A Poet with a Spear”: Writing and Sexual Power in the Elizabethan Period’, *Renaissance Papers*, (1992), 1–15.

⁶⁸ Cf. ‘faburden’, *OnMusic Dictionary*, ed. Richard Cole and Ed Schwartz, Connect For Education Inc. 2015, accessed August 2018, <https://www.dictionary.onmusic.org/terms/1367-faburden>, and ‘descant’, *OnMusic Dictionary*, accessed August 2018, <https://www.dictionary.onmusic.org/terms/1051-descant>.

⁶⁹ The musical metaphor is reused in this figurative sense to signify Elinor’s changed feelings for F.J.: ‘for she was in another tune’ (74).

⁷⁰ On the rape scene and its reception, see for instance Wilson, *Fictions of Authorship*, 20, 28–9; and Maslen, ‘Sidney, Gascoigne, and the “Bastard Poets”’, in Constance C. Relihan and Goran V. Stanivukovic (eds.), *Prose Fiction and Early Modern Sexualities in England, 1570–1640* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 215–33, 223–8.

Elinor's getting up and leaving the room (435), where in the 1573 text 'he thrust her through both hands and etc.; whereby the dame, swooning for fear, was constrained for a time to abandon her body to the enemy's courtesy' (61). Gascoigne deals similarly with the first sexual encounter between F.J. and Elinor. In the 1573 text, G.T. projects an image of F.J. pressing Elinor against the floor, detailing how they make do with the gallery floorboards instead of a bed (30). He further mentions 'their delights ... ten thousand sweet kisses and straight embracings' (30–31), rendering the sexual act explicit. The 1575 version excises this passage, and only the summary description that they grew 'bolder of behaviour, more familiar in speeche, and moste kinde in accomplishing of common comfort' (407) remains. Judging by these revisions, it seems that the 'cleanly' or 'unclely wordes' in the paratextual letters ultimately signify the degree to which sexual scenes are encoded. Gascoigne does not explicitly refer to genitalia or the sexual act, leading to A.B.'s assertion that 'the words are cleanly'.⁷¹ However, if the sexual meanings are not sufficiently encoded, the text needs to be 'turquened', that is, modified, or 'cledsed' when Gascoigne acknowledges authorship of the 1575 *Posies* (7).⁷²

Readers in Gascoigne's textual universe are constantly positioned as unintended or even illicit witnesses and decoders, starting from the moment when the 1573 text construes them as the recipients of a leaked private manuscript verse miscellany. Yet, on a textual level, they are also invoked to consider Gascoigne's 'Methode and maner of writing'. Following the repeated foregrounding of Gascoigne's methods of encoding and transmitting information, the 1573 text ends with another remark by G.T. that points to the form of the narrative. G.T. excuses his 'homely manner of writing' (80) in what seems a typical gesture of modesty, but immediately adds his conviction that 'you will easily understand my meaning, and that is as much as I desire' (80). Beyond its local meaning, this statement acquires a broader significance through Gascoigne's continual invocation of the *roman-à-clef* mode. It points to an additional level of 'meaning' to be deciphered in a tone of 'sly complicity'.⁷³ The comment links form and meaning and, I would argue, is a final reminder to expert readers to consider the form of Gascoigne's narrative: they should become aware that his 'manner of writing' is 'homely' only on the surface, qualifying him in fact as an agent in matters of state.

Maslen ventures that prose fiction is a fitting choice for Gascoigne's irreverent self-promotion and bid for government employment because it is a 'mal-leable' text form, not yet codified, and characterized as morally dubious by

⁷¹ Cf. Gascoigne, *A Hundreth*, 468 n.3.25–6.

⁷² The 1575 omission of the episode and sonnet mocking Elinor's cuckolded husband through horn and seeding imagery (42–3) might support this interpretation – *pace* Clegg, who mistakenly attributes the omission to a change of Elinor's marriage status; *Press Censorship*, 115. By contrast, the 1575 retention of F.J.'s sonnet 'A Friday's Breakfast' (37), clearly celebrating a sexual encounter, seems surprising.

⁷³ Wilson, *Fictions of Authorship*, 21.

educators like Roger Ascham.⁷⁴ I would propose more broadly that Gascoigne's *Master F.J.* builds on a fundamental aspect of narrative at large. His paradoxical practices of concealing and disclosing information mirror the essential characteristic of narrative to provide but also withhold information, to create suspense, and to keep readers reading by indicating that still more information is withheld and yet to be revealed. Gascoigne draws and plays on this fundamental narrative mechanism, adding layers of fiction and signification, promises of disclosure and referentiality, and reflecting meta-poetically on his text – alternately titillating and frustrating his readers. Gascoigne's employment to contribute to the royal entertainments at Kenilworth and Woodstock suggests that the sophistication of his narrative was well received at court.⁷⁵ Austen moreover notes that Gascoigne did not abandon his 'Methode and maner of writing' after 1573 or 1575.⁷⁶ In his prefatory letter to Humphrey Gilbert's *Discourse of a Discoverie for a new passage to Cataia* (1576), Gascoigne resorts to similar techniques as in *Master F.J.* to present the *Discourse* as another text published against its author's explicit wishes. In the 1577 presentation manuscript for Elizabeth I, Gascoigne makes coded references to himself and his previous publications, which points to their continued popularity. In his brief literary career, Gascoigne thus continues to engage in complex and devious fictional play, which in *The Adventures of Master F.J.* results in a paradoxical display of secrecy.

University of Bern

⁷⁴ Maslen, *Elizabethan Fictions*, 12, 2–7, 11–12.

⁷⁵ This seems to be supported by the numerous commendatory poems in the 1575 *Posies*, which might however be as fabricated as the 1573 paratextual letters. Cf. also Gascoigne, *A Hundreth*, 698 n.P 4.0.1.

⁷⁶ Cf. Austen, 'Adventures', 159, 170–1.

Abstract

George Gascoigne's *The Adventures of Master F.J.* (1573/1575) is best known for its elaborate fiction of production and the scandal its 1573 publication supposedly caused due to being read as a *roman à clef*. This article considers the 1573 version of Gascoigne's narrative and his 1575 prefatory comments on it in the context of Elizabethan intelligence practices. Interpreting the republication of Gascoigne's works as a sign of success rather than as a consequence of censorship, I argue that at the heart of the complex narrative lies Gascoigne's paradoxical endeavour to recommend himself as a government informer through his writing. Gascoigne's display of the abilities necessary for an informer pervades the very fabric of the text, as he simultaneously puts into practice and reveals his skill at keeping, encoding, transmitting and disclosing secrets. Gascoigne's contradictory performance of concealment and disclosure results in a narrative in which meanings are both obscured and partly decoded. This manifests itself especially in the narrative's fiction of production, Gascoigne's use of *roman-à-clef* strategies and his foregrounding of indirect means of communication, including the coded representation of sexual encounters.