"I goe outlandishe lyke, yet being Englishe borne": Catholic England, the Ottoman Empire, Venice and Fragile Identities in George Gascoigne’s *A Devise of a Maske for the Right Honorable Viscount Montacute*

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George Gascoigne (1534/5?-1577) holds a distinguished place in English letters: he produced the first essay on versification, ventured the first English translation of an ancient Greek tragedy and an Italian prose comedy, published the first poem in blank verse, and authored what has been widely acknowledged as the first work of prose fiction in English.1 Despite the volume and diversity of his work as well as the fact that he has been labeled both “the chief poet of the young Elizabeth’s court” and “the most interesting writer of the mid-sixteenth century,” some of his texts did not receive the critical attention they deserved in the last decade.2 Moreover, although critics have recently focused on *The Spoyle of Antwerpe* (1576), Gascoigne’s eyewitness account of the Spanish sack of Antwerp, very little has been written hitherto on *A Devise of a Maske for the Right Honorable Viscount Montacute* (1573), a masque which revolves around two significant contemporary military events: the siege of Famagusta and the battle of Lepanto.3

The author was commissioned to write *A Devise of a Maske* in honor of the double marriage of the offspring of Anthony Browne, first Viscount Montague (1526-1592), a leading Catholic nobleman of the English South. The marriages took place in 1572, and the masque was first published in the following year.4 It is my contention that *A Devise of a Maske* constitutes Gascoigne’s effort to record and interpret the internal “Other”—the English Catholic—through the dramatization of the external “Other”—the Turkish/Venetian—in order to reinforce as well as subvert English identity. In particular, I will argue that the masque upholds yet also challenges the status of Christian Europeans as the defenders of their civilization against the military, religious and cultural threat of the “barbaric” Turk, so as to respond to early modern England’s own struggles with domestic, and in particular, sectarian divisions. Moreover, I will contend that if Gascoigne’s presentation of the Turks sheds light on England’s domestic conflicts, his treatment of the Venetians constitutes a far more daring political move on his behalf. Indeed, the author brings the Venetians to the foreground of his masque by making them the protagonists of the siege of Famagusta, the battle of Lepanto, the English boy-narrator’s salvation and the masque’s closure. I will demon-
strate that Gascoigne’s portrayal of the Turkish “infidels” and, to a greater extent, of the Catholic, though potentially anti-papal, Venetians, enables him to dramatize contemporary anxieties about national identity and religion and, more specifically, the loyalty of the English Catholics to the Crown. Moreover, since Browne commissioned Gascoigne’s masque, in all probability he played a crucial role in the author’s portrayal of the loyalty of English Catholics to the Elizabethan regime in general and his dramatization of the Montagues as loyal Catholic Englishmen in particular. In fact, “Gascoigne’s biographer, Charles Prouty, suggested that [in 1572] Gascoigne was awarded for A Devise of a Maske with the Parliamentary seat of Midhurst in Sussex, a borough controlled by Lord Montague and Sir John Peachy” (Austen, George Gascoigne 65). Such a rich reward underscores the political significance of this short dramatic text for the Viscount’s pursuit of influence in the Elizabethan court. Indeed, I will demonstrate that Gascoigne’s masque unravels his subtle and complex handling of his patron’s religious identity as a means of promoting him. That is to say, I will show that through his masque, Gascoigne “translates” Montague’s Catholicism from a serious drawback to a potential asset for Elizabethan foreign politics and, thus, to a factor that could lead to the Viscount’s political empowerment and advancement in the Elizabethan court. Simultaneously, the masque works to Gascoigne’s advantage since it enables him, as already mentioned, to achieve furtherance through the precarious means of patronage. After all, one should neither forget that the author’s father, Sir John Gascoigne of Cardington, Bedfordshire, was a Catholic, nor undermine the significance of “Gascoigne’s poetic construction of himself as an unpredictable power that need[ed] to be employed by the state, lest the Catholic enemies inside and outside of England do employ him” (Hamrick, “Set in Portraiture” n. 66).

Gascoigne’s masque consists of a long narrative delivered by a boy, an English Montague, whose father was killed by the Ottomans in the battle that followed the siege of Famagusta. After his father’s death, the boy had been taken prisoner by the victorious Turks and remained in captivity until he was rescued by his distant relatives the Montagues of Venice, following the battle of Lepanto and the defeat of the Turkish fleet by the Holy League. On his first appearance, the boy declares his English identity: he is an “English boy, in England borne, and bred,” and of a double “auncient worthy race,” since his mother was a Montague, “a house of worthie fame,” and his father a “knight, Mount Hermer was his name” (lines 20, 224, 22, 21). Following the boy’s long narration of the events to his Venetian savior, the latter informs the Montagues of his encounter with the boy and the manner by which he rescued him. Finally, the boy and the Venetian Montagues set out for Italy, where he is “[d] etermined with them… to dwell,” yet they are providentially redirected by a tempest to his “native countrey,” England (lines 285, 298). There, he appears at the double wedding where he repeats his narration and, following the masque’s closure, brings the Montagues of Venice together with the first Viscount Montague.