Thomas Gascoigne and Robert Grosseteste: Historical and Critical Notes

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There may be more than one reason why that scholarly Chancellor of the University of Oxford, Thomas Gascoigne, had a particular devotion for his predecessor Robert Grosseteste. Beryl Smalley suggested that it was St. Jerome who linked both Chancellors together over the gap of two centuries. As a matter of fact, Gascoigne’s program for the University in the mid-fifteenth century was a patristic revival which proposed an effective and authentic reform of the clergy. It was to bring them to a more learned and less scholastic, more biblical and less financial involvement in their ministry, particularly in preaching. It seemed to him that the combination of scholarship and spiritual interpretation of the Bible found in Jerome’s works, was the ideal that ought to be imitated. In his day Gascoigne could not find anyone who came so close to Jerome’s spirit as Grosseteste. Odd to say, it was precisely the unscholastic strain of Grosseteste’s exegetical writings, which to his contemporaries appeared obsolete and archaic, that gained him the grateful sympathy of Gascoigne.

These general and correct statements may be further illustrated by various circumstances and by referring to the background. According to his own words Gascoigne started collecting materials for his principal work, the Dictionarium theologicum, in 1434. That same year he had

1 The basic study on Thomas Gascoigne is still Winifred A. Pronger, “Thomas Gascoigne”, English Historical Review, LIII (1938), 606-626; LIV (1939), 20-37; see also the excellent entry in DNB, VII (1908), 920-923, by R. L. Poole and A. B. Emden, A Biographical Register to the University of Oxford to A.D. 1500, II (Oxford, 1958), pp. 745-748.


3 "... quam expositionem ... ego Thomas Gascoigne, in Eboracensi diocesi in Anglia natus, vidi Oxonie anno Domini 1434 quando incipi secundum formam tabule et secundum ordinem litterarum alphabeti librum seu scriptum de veritatibus collectis ex sacra scriptura et ex scriptis sanctorum et doctorum". Thomas Gascoigne, Dictionarium theologicum (MS Lincoln College lat. 118, p. 142). Some extracts of this work have been printed by J. E. Thorold Rogers under the title Loci e libro Veritatum. Passages selected from Gascoigne’s theological dictionary, illustrating the
obtained his mastership in theology at Oxford. Being no more an undergraduate, he ventured to ask permission from the Greyfriars to visit the famous library of their friary. In those days there were two libraries at Greyfriars: that of the undergraduates and the other of the friary itself. It is open to discussion whether this double library was due to the reaction of the Friars when in 1412 they were no longer allowed to use the University library. In any case the young doctor was anxious to see the library of the friary, for it contained the precious collection of important books that Robert Grosseteste had bequeathed to the Friars ‘because of his love for Friar Adam Marsh’. Among them were many autographs of the Lincoln Bishops, and even a pair of his sandals were jealously preserved there as relics. Gascoigne must have been fascinated by this superb collection of books he needed so much for his work. No other library was used by him more assiduously throughout his academic career. He explicitly mentions in his Dictionarium that he worked there in the years 1434, 1451, 1455 and 1456.

condition of Church and State, 1403-1448 (Oxford, 1881). However, since the selection is by no means exhaustive and the edition abounds in errors of transcription, my references are given from the manuscripts.

1 Emden, p. 746.
2 Gascoigne was the first to note this fact, e.g.: “est ille liber in libraria conventus sed non in libraria studentum. Due enim sunt ibidem librarie inter fratres minores Oxonie” (MS Lincoln College lat. 117, p. 519b); see also ibid. p. 144 and MS Lincoln College lat. 118, p. 16a and p. 89a.
5 On Grosseteste’s autographs see R. W. Hunt, loc. cit., p. 132-135, 138-141. Some years ago S. H. Thomson found a new MS with autographs of Robert Grosseteste viz. Vienna, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, MS lat. 1619. See his article “An Unnoticed Autograph of Grosseteste”, Mediaevalia et Humanistica, XIV (1962), 55-60, with one photograph. However, comparing this photograph with other certainly authentic hand-written notes of the Bishop, I cannot convince myself that it is the same hand.
6 “Hec dominus Lincolniensis...cuius sandalia episcopalia facie de cipris ego doctor Thomas Gascoigne Eboracensis dioecesis vidi et sunt Oxonie inter fratres minores in libraria conventus sed non in libraria studentium fratum” (MS Lincoln 118, p. 89a).
7 “Vidi Oxonie anno domini 1434” (MS Lincoln 118, p. 148); “vidi illa Oxonie inter fratres minores anno domini 1451 et postea” (MS Lincoln 117, p. 117b); “quod scriptum vidi anno Christi 1455” (ibid. p. 629a); “idem opus ego vidi Oxonie pluries anno Christi mmo CCCCmo quinquagesimo sexto et antea” (ibid. p. 640b).