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'To Coosen the Expectation': George Gascoigne's Moral 'Poses' in *Supposes*

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Supposes*, based on Ludovico Ariosto's* Suppositi*, found its way into print twice during George Gascoigne's lifetime: first, in* A Hundreth Sundrie Flowres *(1573); then, in* The Posies of George Gascoigne*, a 1575 revised version of* Flowres*. In* Posies*'s prefatory letters, Gascoigne presents the collection as the 'undoubted proof' of his reformation, advertising the 'morall discourses and reformed inventions' it harbours. Recent criticism questions these claims, arguing for the marginality and inconsistency of Gascoigne's revisions, yet gives little consideration in this respect to the actual works featured in the miscellany, including* Supposes *— a play rich in sexual innuendos, left unamended in* Posies*. This article addresses this gap by reconsidering* Supposes *as functional to Gascoigne's deceptive fiction of reformation as set forth in* Posies*'s paratexts.*

'Torquened and turned'? Revisiting *Posies*

Presented at Gray's Inn in 1566, George Gascoigne's *Supposes* stands out as the first English comedy in prose. The play is a free translation of Ludovico Ariosto's *Suppositi* (prose 1509; verses 1528–32) — a prototypic example of Italian learned comedy whose plot revolves around the illicit relationship between Polinesta, the daughter of a covetous Ferrarese merchant, and Erostrato, a Sicilian student in Ferrara who exchanges identities with his servant Dulippo to work undercover in Polinesta's house and sleep with her. Gascoigne conjures up a 'treasonably faithful'[1] reflection of this intrigue in *Supposes*, which finds its way into print twice during the translator's lifetime: first, as part of *A Hundreth Sundrie Flowres*, issued anonymously in 1573 when Gascoigne was performing military duty in Holland; and second, in *The Posies of George Gascoigne*, a revised version of *Flowres* published in 1575.

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All we know about the Elizabethan reception of these volumes comes from Gascoigne's own pen, specifically from *Posies*'s three prefatory letters. In the first epistle, addressed 'to the reverende Divines', the author alleges that the 1573 collection was misconstrued as 'scandalous' due to 'sundrie wanton speeches and lascivious phrases', deemed particularly 'unclenly' in the case of the prose fiction *The Adventures of Master F.J.*[2] Once back in England, Gascoigne supposedly claimed control over the unfortunate *Flowres*, revising it to expunge all errors and 'filthie phrases' and beautify it with the 'addition of many moral examples' (6). He then reprinted it under his name, repackaged with apologetic prefatory material that refashions his authorial persona as a reformed prodigal,[3] a repentant sinner who intends to atone for his 'unbrydled youth' as reflected in the first collection by devoting his pen 'to morall discourses' (5). The revised *Posies* are accordingly offered to his readers as the 'undoubted proofe' of his reformation and aptitude for government employment:

> Because I had written sundry things which could not chuse but content the learned and Godlye Reader, therefore I hoped the same should serve as undoubted proofe, that I had layde aside all vanities, and delighted to exercise my pen to moral discourses … So even in the worste sorte, I might yet serve as a myrrour for unbrydled youth, to avoyde those perilles which I had passed. (5)

Thus laid out, the same line of argument is further developed in the volume's second prefatory letter, meant for 'all young men, and generally to the youth of England':

> I have here presented you with three sundrie sortes of Posies: *Floures, Hearbes* and *Weedes.* In which division I have not ment that onely the Floures are to be smelled unto, nor that onely the Weedes are to be rejected … The seconde [section] (being indeed morall discourses, and reformed inventions, and therefore more profitable than pleasant), I have named *Hearbes*. (12–13)

In mentioning *Posies*'s sections, Gascoigne points out that 'the second' one — that is, *Hearbes*, containing a few poems and his play translations, *Jocasta* and *Supposes* — enshrines '*morall* discourses and *reformed* inventions' (my emphasis) that are 'more profitable than pleasant' and may serve, therefore, 'as example to the youthful Gentlemen of England'. Likewise, the third and final letter 'To Readers generally' expands on the anthology's overarching botanical metaphor to invite readers to 'smell unto these Posies, as Floures to comfort, *Herbes to cure*, and

Weeds to be avoyded. So I have meant them', Gascoigne writes, 'and so I beseech thee Reader to accept them' (17, my emphasis).[4]

This liminal contextualization indicates the author's attempt at moralizing the more troubling contents of his works by presenting them as potentially bitter and yet necessary herbs only meant to 'cure' troublesome youth. *Posies*'s negative reception suggests, however, that such an ostensibly virtuous hermeneutic injunction was ultimately defied: if no evidence of censorship has been found for *Flowres* — the records of the Stationers' Company are notoriously defective for the years 1571–6 — the *Stationers' Court Book* reveals that the 1575 collection was seized by the 'Q. M. commissioners' in August 1576.[5] Surely, therefore, it was the 'gelded' (6) edition that was called in — a circumstance that might be explained by the marginality of *Posies*'s much-advertised revisions, which actually amount to little more than the completion of *Dan Bartholomew*, the Italianization of *Master F.J.*, and the addition of a few marginalia of uncertain attribution. These inconsistencies raise questions about the actual fate of *Flowres* as well as the authorial motives behind *Posies*: does the confiscation of the 1575 edition testify to a failed attempt at moralizing a censored volume, as earlier critics have argued?[6] Or is there something more behind the contrite tones of *Posies*'s paratexts?

Rereading Gascoigne's comments against the backdrop of Elizabethan courtly politics and censorship mechanisms, Cyndia S. Clegg has proposed to reinterpret them as an 'elaborate fiction' meant to articulate a superficial code of morality while actually emphasizing the collection's sexualized discourse to 'deflect reception away from political and personal slander'.[7] Factoring Gascoigne's courtly ambitions into her analyses, Rahel Orgis has recently integrated this argument by functionalizing *Posies*'s paratext to a self-advertising operation fueled by *Flowres*'s success rather than debacle:[8] by insisting on his works' lewdness and moralization, Gascoigne would have profited from the renown of his princeps to showcase his ability in rhetorical manipulation, a useful skill for a man of letters with aspirations to royal preferment. Regardless of the end — self-protection or self-promotion — deception would then be the very linchpin of *Posies*, a binding motif set forth in the prefatory comments and developed through the collection via linguistic and rhetorical artifice. Scholarship has traditionally turned to *Master F.J.*, revised as a pseudo-translation from 'Bartello' titled *The Pleasant Fable of Ferdinando Jeronimi*, to prove this point, reading this controversial tale of an extramarital affair alongside *Posies*'s first prefatory epistle to address the contradictions of Gascoigne's paratextual stances.[9] Little consideration has been given to the other works featured in the miscellany, including *Supposes*, a play frequently examined for its Shakespearean posterity but rarely considered in relation

to Gascoigne's ambiguous narrative of moralization. In questioning the censorship of *Flowres*, for instance, Orgis suggests that 'the safest path for Gascoigne to appease the High Commission' in 1575 'would have been … to republish only' some of his poems and 'his translations', thereby passing the latter off as relatively unproblematic.[10] I suspect this speculation falls for Gascoigne's paratextual ruses in that it underestimates his work on Ariosto as well as the implications of his moral refashioning of the play: when cross-examined with its sources, *Supposes* reveals a number of linguistic and structural variations that press against Elizabethan moral boundaries, problematizing the play's mores rather than reforming them. What is more, *Supposes* appears unamended in *Posies*: excluding the correction of a few errors, the play's second edition differs from the one in *Flowres* only for the addition of twenty-five marginalia signalling as many 'supposes', that is, equivocations and conjectures that pivot the plot. Their contentious authorship, however, makes their role in Gascoigne's alleged reformation difficult to ascertain.[11]

Considering these elements and sharing Richard McCoy's view of *Supposes* as an essential cog in *Posies*'s deceptive mechanism, I propose to reconsider the 'Englished' play as functional rather than collateral to Gascoigne's liminal fiction of moralization.[12] The Elizabethan author's peculiar take on Ariosto's sexualized discourse responds, I contend, to a devious domesticating strategy that swings *Supposes* between conformity and resistance to Elizabethan sexual mores, bringing into effect the rhetorical dissimulation set forth in *Posies*'s paratexts. This aspect is best thrown into relief by working backward on the plays, moving from the cross-examination of meaningful scenes to the prologues that contextualize them.

Un-reforming Ariosto

It is worth underlining, by way of premise, that Gascoigne uses *Suppositi* in both prose and verse for his translation, integrating their readings with additions and revisions of his own. In examining his handling of sexual propriety in *Supposes*, I shall pay attention, therefore, not only to what he keeps or drops from Ariosto but also to how he combines and alters the Italian readings to negotiate the moral codes they bespeak. For his part, Ariosto gave Gascoigne plenty of occasions for such manipulations: *Suppositi* is very rich in innuendos and obscene language — something to be expected from an Italian Renaissance comedy with a convoluted intrigue sparked by premarital sex. The unsanctioned union between Erostrato and Polinesta generates indeed most of the bawdy discourse in the play,

but Ariosto does not skimp on explicit hints at homoeroticism and pederasty as well — which, again, is common for early sixteenth-century learned comedy and serves as a specific object 'of jocose punning'[13] in *Suppositi*.

A tell-tale example in this sense is offered by act 2 scene 3 of the prose version, where Dulippo pokes fun at Cleandro by suggesting that he attracts young men to his house to cure 'an infirmity for which a useful and appropriate remedy is to lie with adolescent boys'.[14] The verse version reads:

> *Suppositi* in verse, 2.4.860–6:
>
> Dulippo … E che cercate pigliar questa giovane
> Più perché di mariti desiderio
> Avete, che di moglie.
>
> Cleandro Che significa
> Questo suo dire?
>
> Dulippo Che adescar li gioveni
> Così volete, che a casa vi venghino.
>
> Cleandro Li gioveni? A che effetto?
>
> Dulippo Imaginatelo
> Voi pur.
>
> [Dulippo … and that you try to marry [Polinesta] out of a desire for a husband rather than a wife.
>
> Cleandro What does he mean by that?
>
> Dulippo That you thus want to entice young men to your house.
>
> Cleandro Young men? What for?
>
> Dulippo Nay, guess you that.]

As is evident, the low jest is cut out of the verse reworking, its implications condensed in a more diplomatic 'Immaginatelo / Voi pur'.

Massimiliano Morini has observed that it was common for Elizabethan translators to tamper with 'the source text when it contravened some commonly accepted principles of their culture'.[15] References to same-sex or even pederastic relationships clearly fell into this category: Jonathan Crewe points out that Elizabethan society labelled these acts as sodomy, 'an essentially masculine sin' that was prosecuted as a sexual, political, and religious crime under 'English sodomy legislation'.[16] The Elizabethan collective imagination therefore associated such practices with treason and heresy, making Ariosto's jest quite thorny to handle in translation. Having two options on his table — the bawdy mockery of *Suppositi*

in prose and the more sober verse reading — Gascoigne in this instance decides to bend his model to Elizabethan propriety, providing a literal translation of Ariosto's cryptic verse indication in the relevant passage from *Supposes*:

> Dulipo And he saith, that you desire this yong gentlewoman, as much for other mens pleasure as for your owne.
>
> Cleander What meaneth he by that?
>
> Dulipo Peradventure that by hir beautie, you would entice many yong men to your house.
>
> Cleander Yong men? to what purpose?
>
> Dulipo Nay, gesse you that. (2.4.209)

This move is what would be expected from a 'reformed' author who pledged to devote his pen to 'morall discourses' and advertised his translations as 'more profitable than pleasant'.[17] Strikingly, however, the same censorious principle does not apply to the domestication of equally problematic references to the affair between an imposter servant and his young mistress. Let us consider, for instance, Erostrato's soliloquy in act 1 scene 3:

> *Suppositi* in prose, 1.3.185–97:
>
> Erostrato … Speravomi … l'amorosa mia brama, per il continuo vedere Polinesta e spesso ragionare con essa, et a furtivi abbracciamenti quasi ogni notte ritrovarmela appresso, dovesse aver fine. Ahimè! Di tutti gli umani affetti solo amore è insaziabile. Sono oggimai due anni che … ad Amor servo, dal qual, la sua merzé, quanto di ben possa un inamorato core desiderare, io, sopra tutti gli amanti aventuroso, ho conseguito.
>
> [Erostrato … I had hoped that … my loving desire would be fulfilled by continually seeing Polinesta, by frequently talking with her, and by finding her by my side almost every night in furtive embraces. Alas! Of all human passions, only love is insatiable. It has been two years that … I've been a servant of Love, thanks to whom I've gained more than a loving heart can hope for, more than any other lover has obtained.]
>
> *Suppositi* in verse, 1.3.860–78:
>
> Erostrato … speravomi … [che] li miei bramosi desiderii, / Per veder Polinesta di continuo, / E per aver con esso lei gran comodo / Di ragionare, di spesso trovarmela / Le dolci notti in braccio, pur dovesseno / Aver quïete. Ahimè, di tutti i varii / Affetti umani, è amor solo

> insaziabile! / Due anni oggimai son, che … Ad Amor servo, dal qual quanta grazia / E quanto bene alcun cuore, alcun animo / Innamorato gli possa richiedere, / Io, sopra tutti gli altri felicissimo / Amante, ho conseguíto.]
>
> [Erostrato … I had hoped that … my eager desires would be fulfilled by continually seeing Polinesta, by frequently talking with her at ease, and by often finding her sweetly wrapped in my arms at night. Alas! Of all human passions, only love is insatiable. It has been two years that … I've been a servant of Love, thanks to whose grace I've gained more than a loving heart can hope for, more than any other lover has obtained.]

Supposes 1.3, 197:

> Erostrato … my restlesse desire might have founde quiet by continuall contemplation. But alas, I find that only love is unsaciable: for the flie playeth with the flame till at last she is cause of hir own decay, so the lover that thinketh with kissing and colling to content his unbrideled apetite, is cõmonly seene the only cause of his owne consumption. Two yeers are nowe past … I have free libertie at al times to behold my desired, to talke with hir, to embrace hir, yea (be it spoken in secrete), to lie with hir. I reape the fruites of my desire.

At the outset of the speech, Gascoigne drops Ariosto's hint at the lovers' 'furtivi' ['furtive', prose] or 'dolci' ['sweet', verses] nightly embraces, keeping only Erostrato's innocent praise of the 'continual contemplation' favoured by his cohabitation with Polynesta. This abridgment censors the sources' allusion to sexual intercourse, but a few lines later Gascoigne deviates again from Ariosto to introduce a natural simile that materializes Erostrato's dangerous and yet unquenchable desire for Polynesta, then going on to expand on his sources with a climactic description of the lovers' interactions culminating in the unmistakable 'I lie with her', 'I reape the fruites of my desire'.

Evidently far from worried about the obscene overtones of the speech, Gascoigne plays them up to clarify that the lovers have indeed consummated their relationship more than once. These revelations come from the less vulnerable element in the couple, the cunning young boy, but Polynesta herself does not hold back on bawdy details in 1.1, where she engages with her Nurse in what David Bevington described as 'a disarmingly frank discussion of how the affair came about':[18]

Suppositi in prose, 1.1.17–31, 37–43:

Nutrice … Ti dovrebbe pure essere a bastanza che per il mezzo mio vi trovate tutta la notte insieme

….

Polinesta Chi n'è stato principio se non la nutrice mia? Che tu continuamente lodandomi, or la bellezza sua, or li gentili costumi, or persuadendomi che egli oltra modo mi amava, non cessasti pormelo in grazia, e farmi di lui pietosa, e successivamente accendermi del suo amore, come io ne sono.

[Nurse … It should be enough that, through my help, you two have been spending the whole night together

….

Polinesta Who was the cause of it all but my Nurse? Who didn't cease to endear him to me — now praising his beauty, now his fine manners, and convincing me that he loved me exceedingly — until I became sorry for him, and was finally turned on with love for him.]

Suppositi in verse, 1.1.64–82, 88–106:

Balia … Ti dovrebbe essere
pur a bastanza ch'ogni notte, e tacita
mente, per mezzo mio tu stia a gran commodo
con essolui

….

Polinesta E chi n'è, se non voi, stata principio?
Che continuamente voi lodandomi,
quando la sua bellezza, quando i nobili
costumi, or persuadendomi il grandissimo
amor che mi portava, faceste opera
che mi venisse a poco a poco in grazia;
Né mai cessaste, finché nel medesimo
desiderio con lui mi vedeste ardere.

[Balia … It should be enough that, through my help, you've been secretly spending every night with him

…

Polinesta Who was the cause of it all but you? It was you who endeared

> him to me by continually praising his beauty, and his fine manners, and persuading me that he loved me exceedingly; and you didn't cease until you saw me burn with the same desire that caught him …]

Supposes, 1.1, 189:

> Balia … a man would thinke it were inough for you secretly to rejoyce, that by my helpe you have passed so many pleasant nightes togither
>
> …
>
> Polynesta And I pray you whome may I thanke but gentle nourse, that continually praysing him, what for his personage, his curtesie, and above all, the extreme passions of his minde, in fine you would never cease till I accepted him, delighted in him, and at length desired him with no lesse affection, than he earst desired me.

Again, Gascoigne blends Ariosto's prose and verses not to obscure the dialogue's scandalous implications but to bear them out: for Balia's warning, the adverb 'tacitamente' is taken from *Suppositi* in verses, the prose reading 'tutta la notte insieme' is mingled with the verses 'ogni notte' and the adjectives 'many' and 'pleasant' are introduced to foreground the frequency of the lovers' encounters and the satisfaction Polynesta took in them. Similarly, he expands on the girl's reply to specify that she 'accepted' Erostrato, 'delighted in him', and 'at length desired him with no lesse affection than he earst desired' her, in an affirmation of sexual agency that astonishes for its straightforwardness, considering that it is voiced by an unmarried young woman. Gascoigne's Polynesta thus appears more resourceful and self-conscious than her Italian counterpart, a girl who unapologetically eludes her father's control in the pursuit of her own love interest: 'Why should I not talk with Dulippo as well as with any other, I pray you?' (1.1, 189), she had insolently asked her Nurse a few lines earlier, going then on to disclose the servant's true identity and 'the policy devised … to put Doctor Dotipole out of conceit' (1.1, 191). Polynesta has clearly claimed control over her body and destiny, joyfully giving herself to Erostrato while plotting to deprive her father of the right to sell her virginity to a suitor of his liking.

I agree with Bevington that 'this is a remarkable scene to be appearing on the English stage in the 1560s',[19] and even more so among the pages of a supposedly moralized reprint of a 'scandalous' volume. To quote Faramerz Dabhoiwala, in sixteenth-century England 'the main trend over time was towards even-tighter control and punishment of non-marital sex, by secular and ecclesiastic authorities

alike':[20] if men were most vulnerable to violations when 'they were married householders',[21] women were particularly at risk of transgression in their maidenhood, a delicate life stage that called for strict parental vigilance and guidance, as the most popular Elizabethan conduct book for girls, *The Instruction of a Christian Woman*, makes clear. First translated from Latin into English in 1528 and offered to the Elizabethans in no less than eight editions throughout the sixteenth century, this 1523 manual by Juan Luis de Vives provides strict rules for the appropriate upbringing of daughters, including indications on how to prepare them for marriage. Chapter XV, 'On seeking a spouse', reads:

> True virginity knows nothing of sexual union nor seeks after it and indeed does not even think of it, being protected and free of all such feelings through a heavenly gift … when her parents are deliberating about her marriage, the young woman will leave all of that concern to those who wish as much good for her as she does for herself … And how can a girl who has been confined within the walls of her house know the character and morals of men so that she can choose among them, or in her complete inexperience know what is best for her?[22]

The contrast between this chaste, obedient feminine ideal and Gascoigne's Polynesta could not be starker. Ursula Potter has observed that 'there were aspects of Vives's strict training programme that were unpalatable to English readers', but their subversion in *Supposes* is so striking as to raise questions of motive on the part of Gascoigne.[23] Given the play's inclusion in a section of 'profitable' examples in *Posies*, should Polynesta's attitude serve to warn readers against a too-liberal upbringing and the potential cunning of their betrotheds? Or does it coyly challenge the validity of Vives's rules?

Further complications regarding this matter arise in 3.4 of *Supposes*, featuring a soliloquy in which the parasite Pasiphilo paints a mocking moral portrait of Polynesta that sits awkwardly against Vives's precepts as well as Elizabethan rules of propriety at large:

> *Suppositi* in prose, 3.4.28–37:
>
> Pasifilo O Cleandro, o Erostrato, che moglie desiderate, e vergine, come vi potrà succedere facilmente che aresti l'uno e l'altro insieme! Che Polinesta, benché essa non sia, forse ha la vergine nel corpo, che voi cercato … Chi averia di lei così creduto? Domanda la vicinanza di sua condizione: la migliore, la più devota giovane del mondo; non pratica mai se non con suore; la più parte del dì in orazione; rarissime volte si

vede o a uscio o a finestra; non si ode che d'alcuno innamorata sia: è una santarella.

[Pasifilo Oh Cleandro, oh Erostrato, you both seek a wife and a virgin; it could easily be that you'll find them both together! For, although Polinesta isn't a virgin, she may have the virgin you seek inside her body … Who would have ever believed this of her? Ask the neighbours about her countenance: she's the best and most pious girl in the world; she associates with no one but nuns; she spends most of the day praying; most rarely do you see her at the door or the window; she's not rumored to be in love with anyone: she's a little saint.]

Suppositi in verses, 3.5.1128–44:

Pasifilo O buon Cleandro, o buon Erostrato,
ch'aver desiderate moglie, e vergine,
beato chi di voi torrà la giovane!
Chi la torrà, potrà trovarle vergine
creatura nel corpo, o maschio o femina,
se ben ella non è. Chi di lei credere
avrìa potuto tal cosa? Domandane
il vicinato: la più onesta giovane, la più devota che viva; con monache,
e non con altre persone mai, pratica;
sta sempre in orazione, con l'officio,
con la corona in mano o col rosario;
all'uscio e alla finestra son rarissime
volte che tu la veggia; non si mormora
che innamorata ella mai fusse: ella è proprio una romita santarella.

[Pasifilo Oh good Cleandro, oh good Erostrato who seek a wife and a virgin, lucky is the one who will get the girl! For, although she isn't a virgin herself, the one who gets her shall find a virgin creature inside her body, be it a boy or a girl. Who would have thought that of her? Ask her neighbours: she's the most honest, most pious girl; she associates with no one else but nuns; she's always praying, during service, with a rosary in her hand; you most rarely see her at the door or the window; she's not rumored to have ever been in love: she's a cloistered little saint.]

Supposes, 3.4, 216:

> Pasyphilo O good *Erostrato* and pore *Cleander*, that have so earnestly stroven for this damsell, happie is he that can get hir I promise you, he shal be sure of mo than one at a clap that catcheth hir, eyther Adam or Eve within hir bellie: oh God how men may be deceived in a woman: who wold have beleeved the contrary but that she had bin a virgin? aske the neighbours and you shal heare very good report of hir, marke hir behaviors and you would have judged hir very maydenly, seldome seene abroade but in place of prayer, and there very devout, and no gaser at outwarde sightes, no blaser of hir beautie above in the windowes, no stal at the doore for the bypassers: you would have thought hir a holy yong woman.

Taking after Ariosto's more explicit and jeering verses, Gascoigne's Pasiphilo suggests that the virgin that Cleander and Erostrato desire may be found only in Polynesta's womb at this point. He then goes on to depict Polynesta as a cunning manipulator who acts like a 'holy yong woman' while sleeping with her servant. One cannot help but contrast these remarks with Vives's recommendation that 'young women should be kept home, should stay out of sight':[24] Polynesta was indeed kept home and sheltered from the lascivious gaze of bypassers, yet she had sex before marriage and even got pregnant, as Gascoigne takes pains to clarify in translation.

Taken together with the interpolations and recombinations hitherto examined, this passage testifies to Gascoigne's paradoxical attitude of conformity and resistance to Elizabethan mores in *Supposes*, showing how he tweaks his sources either to adapt them to English moral codes, as in the case of homoerotic allusions, or, more often, to challenge them. To try to reconcile this inconsistent working method with *Posies*'s preliminary claims of reformation, I propose to return from endings to beginnings, factoring the plays' prologues into these analyses.

Dissembling Morality

It cannot go unnoticed that Ariosto's prose prologue is extremely sexualized in language. The Italian playwright exploits the sexual connotation of his title in an assortment of bawdy puns, underpinned by salacious references to pederasty and Greek erotica, with only a passing allusion granted to the more innocent 'suppositions' of the Sophists:

Suppositi in prose, 0.1–17:

> Qui siamo per farvi spettatori d'una nuova comedia … El nome è li Suppositi, perché di supposizioni è tutta piena. Che li fanciulli per l'adrieto sieno stati suppositi, e sieno qualche volta oggidì, so che non pur nelle comedie, ma letto avete nelle istorie ancora; e forse è qui tra vuoi chi l'ha in esperienzia auto o almeno udito referire … Non pigliate, benigni auditori, questo supponere in mala parte; chè bene in altra guisa si suppone, che non lasciò nelli suoi lascivi libri Elefantide figurato; ed in altri ancora, che non s'hanno li contenziosi dialettici immaginato.
>
> [We are here to make you witness a new comedy … it is called Suppositi because it is full of sub-positions. That boys have often been mis-taken from behind, and sometimes are even today, you must have read in books; perhaps, some of you have either experienced it or at least heard about it … Do not take these sub-positions in a bad sense, my kind audience, for our sub-positions are very different from the ones Elephantis illustrated in her lascivious books, or those others devised by contentious dialecticians. Here, the servant is substituted for the master and the master for the servant.]

Notwithstanding its intended bawdiness, Ariosto's wordplay receives immediate resolution through the disclosure of the play's main plot line: the *suppositi* at the center of the Italian intrigue are just *scambiati* [exchanged] — a master and a servant who have swapped clothes and roles.

While following the same scheme, the verse reworking makes sexual punning even more vigorous by expanding on the risqué allusions of the prose version:

> *Suppositi* in verses, 0.1–38:
>
> Che talora i fanciulli si suppongano
> A nostra etade, e per addietro siano
> Stati non meno più volte suppositi;
> Oltre che voi l'abbiate nelle fabule
> Veduto, e letto nell'antique istorie …
> Ma voi ridete? Oh, che cosa da ridere
> Avete da me udita? Ah, ch'io m'immagino
> Donde cotesto riso dee procedere …
> E bench'io parli con voi di supponere,
> Le mia supposizioni però simili
> Non sono a quelle antique che Elefantide …
> Nè son simili a quelle che i fantastichi
> Sofisti han ritrovate in dïalettica.

> Questa supposizion nostra significa
> Quel che in volgar si dice porre in cambio.
>
> [That sometimes children are mistaken to be our age, or have been mistaken from behind time and time again, you have read in stories … But you laugh? Oh, what have you heard from me that makes you laugh? Ah, I imagine from whence this laughter comes … And even though I speak to you of substitutions, my substitutions are neither the ancient ones that Elephantis in various acts and fashions left painted … nor are they similar to those devised by contentious Sophists in their dialectics. This substitution of ours means what is commonly referred to as exchange.]

Gascoigne takes a radically different route in his translation. In *Supposes*'s *Argument*, nothing but a vague nod is made to 'some wanton Suppose' (0, 188), an allusive phrase obscured by the omission of erotic references found in the originals. The 'supposes' elicited in the prologue range from aesthetic 'conceiptes' (0, 188) to sophistical dialectics, but their connotations remain inscribed in the semantic fields of misapprehension and assumption. Accordingly, the *Argument* stresses the importance of 'discipher[ing]' — a verb never mentioned by Ariosto — the 'subtill Suppositions' (0, 188) the play is replete with, forewarning the audience of the difficulty in understanding 'our supposes' (0, 188). Gascoigne does not openly state that Erostrato and Dulippo have arranged to exchange identities: 'the master' is '*supposed for* the servant' (emphasis added) and vice versa, but this exchange is presented as a 'mystaking or imagination of one thing for an other' (0, 188), an equivocation rather than a deliberate ruse. At the end of their prologues, both playwrights defer to the spectators' judgment, but whereas Ariosto's resolves in a conventional plea for approval, Gascoigne's teases the interpretative skills of the audience: if they suppose him 'very fonde, that ha[s] so simply disclosed … the subtilties of these our Supposes', they are sorely mistaken, for 'almoste the laste of our Supposes' (0, 188) shall be heard to try and solve the riddle of the *Argument*. Thus reframed, the play's focus shifts from 'the act of changing places' to 'the subjective states of perceiving and misperceiving',[25] giving primacy to the deceptions that move the action along to invite an engaged, interpretive reading of it.

Noting the explicitness of *Supposes*'s dialogues, it does not seem farfetched to suggest that, in trading Ariosto's low jokes for conjectures, Gascoigne is not setting forth the reformation of his Italian model: he is rather cozening his readers' 'expectations',[26] to quote one of Gabriel Harvey's insightful handwritten notes on his copy of *Posies*. By drawing attention to the multiple layers of meaning in the play, *Supposes*'s *Argument* shifts moralizing responsibility onto its readers,

encouraging them to unriddle the play's 'supposes' while constantly belying their conclusions and wrong-footing them. The same rhetorical ruse can be found in *Posies*'s second prefatory letter, where Gascoigne makes a gesture at moralizing his translation and authorial intentions by pointing out that it is not 'the planter to be dispraised, which soweth all his beddes with seeds of wholesome herbes', but rather 'the Chirurgian' who 'mistook his gathering': only his young readers are to blame if they 'runne upon the rocks of unlawfull lust' instead of using *Hearbes*'s supposedly 'profitable' and yet licentious examples to learn how 'to avoid the subtile sands of wanton desire'. 'It is your using (my lustie Gallants) or misusing of these Posies', Gascoigne cleverly underlines, 'that may make me praysed or dispraysed for publishing of the same': if they were to fail, 'then great' would be their folly, and greater his 'rebuke' (12).

I contend that these sly preliminary manipulations bring *Supposes* full circle back to *Posies*'s overarching conceit of deception as established in its paratexts. In Robert Maslen's words, Gascoigne 'is a cunning dissembler who can adopt whatever "pose" he likes and who can play at will on the "supposes" — the expectations, fantasies, assumptions of his simple readers'.[27] A play of sexual gamesmanship, richer in innuendos than its original and yet marketed as 'reformed' and included unamended in a supposedly moralized anthology, *Supposes* dramatizes 'the shiftings and circlings and realignments'[28] to which Gascoigne subjects his readers, serving a liminal fiction of reformation that, in the light of its inconsistency, may in fact be reread as yet another 'sundry Suppose' (0, 188).

Notes

1 Donald Beecher, 'Introduction', in Ludovico Ariosto, *Supposes*, trans. George Gascoigne, ed. Donald Beecher and John Butler (Ottawa, 1999), 66.

2 George Gascoigne, *The Posies of George Gascoigne Esquire. Corrected, perfected and augmented by the Author*, ed. John Cunliffe (Cambridge, 1907), 3, 7. Unless otherwise noted, all quotations from *Posies* reference this edition by page number.

3 Scholarship has frequently dwelt on Gascoigne's self-fashioning as a prodigal writer in his 1575 collection. See for instance Richard Helgerson, 'Gascoigne', in *The Elizabethan Prodigals* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London, 1976), 44–57; Lorna Hutson, *The Usurer's Daughter: Male Friendship and Fictions of Women in Sixteenth-Century England* (London and New York, 1994), https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203215609, and Gillian Austen, *George Gascoigne* (Cambridge, 2008).

4 On the structural relevance of the gardening trope in *Posies* see Susan C. Staub, 'Dissembling his Art: "Gascoigne's Gardnings"', *Renaissance Studies* 20.1 (2011), 95–110, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1477-4658.2010.00709.x.

5 Walter W. Gregg and E. Boswell, eds, Records of the Court of Stationers' Company 1576-1602, from Register B (London, 1930), 86-7.

6 See for instance Charles T. Prouty, *George Gascoigne: Elizabethan Courtier, Soldier and Poet* (New York, 1942); Richard McCoy, 'Gascoigne's "Poëmata Castrata": The Wages of Courtly Success', *Criticism* 27.1 (1985), 31–2; John Kerrigan, 'The Editor as Reader: Constructing Renaissance Texts', in *The Practice and Representation of Reading in England*, ed. James Raven (New York, 1996), 115–37. More skeptical, though still cautious, is Pigman's view of the matter: see G.W. Pigman III, 'Introduction', in George Gascoigne, *A Hundreth Sundrie Flowres*, ed. G.W. Pigman III (Oxford, 2000), LIII–IV.

7 Cyndia S. Clegg, *Press Censorship in Elizabethan England* (Cambridge, 1997), 103, https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511585241.006.

8 Rahel Orgis, 'Displaying Secrecy in George Gascoigne's *The Adventures of Master F.J.*', *Renaissance Studies* 36.4 (2021), 529–46, https://doi.org/10.1111/rest.12766.

9 Exemplary, in this sense, are Clegg, *Press Censorship*; Felicity A. Hughes, 'Gascoigne's Poses', *Studies in English Literature 1500–1900* 37.1 (1997), 1–19, https://doi.org/10.2307/450770; Katherine Wilson, *Fictions of Authorship in Late Elizabethan Narratives: Euphues in Arcadia* (Oxford, 2006), https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199252534.001.0001; Orgis, 'Secrecy'.

10 Orgis, 'Secrecy', 532.

11 Cristiano Ragni discusses *Supposes*'s marginalia in further detail in Ragni, 'Between the Stage and the Page: Printed Marginalia in Gascoigne's *Supposes*', *Early Theatre* 27.2 (2024), 133–44, https://doi.org/10.12745/et.27.2.5855.

12 Richard C. McCoy, 'Gascoigne's Poses and *Supposes*', in *Selected Essays on George Gascoigne*, ed. Gillian Austen (London and New York, 2022), 69–78, https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003112082.

13 Louise G. Clubb, '*Commedia erudita*: Birth and Transfiguration', in *The Routledge Research Companion to Anglo-Italian Literature and Culture*, ed. Michele Marrapodi (London and New York, 2019), 101–18, https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315612720.

14 All Italian quotations from *Suppositi* in prose are from Ludovico Ariosto, *Suppositi in prosa*, in *Commedie*, ed. Angela Casella, Gabriella Rochi, and Elena Varasi (Milan, 1974), 195–257. Quotations for the comedy's verse version are from Ludovico Ariosto, *Suppositi in versi*, in *Commedie*, ed. Angela Casella, Gabriella Rochi, and Elena Varasi (Milan, 1974), 259–353. Translations in English are mine.

15 Massimiliano Morini, *Tudor Translation in Theory and Practice* (Oxford, 2006), 72, https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315235547.
16 Jonathan Crewe, 'Disorderly Love: Sodomy Revisited in Marlowe's *Edward II*', *Criticism* 51.3 (2009), 385–99, 387, https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/crt.0.0111.
17 Gascoigne, *Posies*, ed. Cunliffe, 5.
18 David Bevington, 'Cultural Exchange: Gascoigne and Ariosto at Gray's Inn in 1566', in *The Italian World of English Renaissance Drama*, ed. Michele Marrapodi (London, 1998), 25–40, 36.
19 Bevington, 'Cultural Exchange', 36.
20 Faramerz Dabhoiwala, *The Origins of Sex: A History of the First Sexual Revolution* (London, 2012), 9.
21 Ibid, 11.
22 Juan Louis de Vives, *The Instruction of a Christian Woman*: *A Sixteenth-Century Manual*, ed. Charles Fantazzi (Chicago and London, 2000), 155.
23 Ursula A. Potter, 'Elizabethan Drama and *The Instruction of a Christian Woman* by Juan Luis Vives', in *What Nature Does Not Teach: Didactic Literature in the Medieval and Early Modern Periods*, ed. J. Feros Ruys (Turnhout, 2008), 261-85, 264, https://doi.org/10.1484/M.DISPUT-EB.3.3255.
24 Vives, *Instruction*, 137.
25 Pigman, *Hundreth*, 479.
26 Gascoigne, *Posies*. Bodleian, Mal. 792(1).
27 Robert Maslen, *Elizabethan Fictions: Espionage, Counter-Espionage and the Duplicity of Fiction in Early Elizabethan Prose Narratives* (Oxford, 1997), 127.
28 Arthur Kinney, 'Introduction', in *Selected Essays on George Gascoigne*, ed. Gillian Austen (London and New York, 2022), 1–9, 2, https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003112082.