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Excerpt

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In the new year of 1575–6 George Gascoigne made Queen Elizabeth a handsome gift: a lavish manuscript containing ‘The Tale of Hemetes the Heremyte’ translated into four languages, and embellished with hand-drawn emblems. At the front of the book a picture shows the kneeling poet offering his manuscript to the Queen (see illus. 1), an image which neatly figures the bid for royal favour which the gift as a whole was clearly designed to represent:

fyndyng my youth myspent, my substaũce ympayred, my credytt accrased,  
my tallent hydden, my follyes laughed att, my rewyne unpytted, and my  
trewth unemployed/ all w<sup>ch</sup> extremities as they have of long tyme astonyed  
myne understanding, So have they of late openly called me to gods gates  
and yo<sup>r</sup> ma<sup>tye</sup> being of God, godly, and (on earth) owr god (by god)  
appoynted, I presume lykewyse to knock att the gates of yo<sup>r</sup> gracyous  
goodnes/ hopyng that yo<sup>r</sup> highnes will sett me on worke though yt were  
noone and past before I soughte service.<sup>1</sup>

Elizabeth had first heard the tale of Hemetes when on progress at Woodstock the previous summer. It is an elaborate, somewhat complicated story about three lovers, each of whom, for different reasons, is barred or separated from his mistress. In the miraculous and activating presence of the Queen, however, each lover is satisfied and restored, and, in inviting Elizabeth to interpret the tale not ‘grossely and literally’ but, rather, allegorically, Gascoigne alerts her to the obvious correspondence between the happily resolved courtships of his tale on the one hand and his own act of courtship on the other.

Gascoigne’s New Year’s gift hereby encapsulates many of the issues with which this study is concerned. For this is a book about courtship: both ‘courtship’ in the sense of wooing or making love to another person, and ‘courtship’ in the sense of being a courtier, of suing for favour, of behaving as courtiers should behave.

The conjunction between the two meanings of courtship and how they came to be related in a particular historical period is the subject of this book, and it is as an obvious and peculiarly suggestive site for the overlap of the two meanings that the court of Queen Elizabeth presents itself as the predominant focus. The study thus aligns itself with much recent and exciting work in which courtship narratives of many kinds (sonnet-sequences, courtly romances, court entertainments) have been shown to relate to the political scenario of Elizabethan England, and in which fictional courtships have been seen as an expression of the self-positioning of male writers within a political system of clientage.

Put thus crudely, this book may seem to offer little that has not already been challengingly introduced and worked over by a number of scholars and critics. But in the pages that follow I hope to show by a series of linked studies how courtship (in every sense) was a highly nuanced and exceptionally complex literary and political procedure. For, on further investigation, it becomes clear that courtship narratives involve much more than a simple reading might at first suggest, and that many of the texts to be studied reveal themselves, like the Tale of Hemetes, to be particularly receptive to a 'double reading over'.<sup>2</sup>

For, although primarily a social exchange, courtship has never been a simple transaction. In the prefatory poem to his Tale of Hemetes Gascoigne describes himself 'In dowbtfull doompes, which waye were best to take', drawing attention to the competing demands of deference and candour and to the profound uncertainty of his self-presentation. A courtier must know how to graduate his behaviour and utterance with a view to attracting favour and winning from the object of his devotion some longed-for token of esteem. Courtship is a delicate, fraught, hazardous procedure which requires constant prudence, tact and subtlety because it depends for its effectiveness upon the appearance of sincerity, an appearance which could (and at times had to be) carefully calculated. Courtship is consequently a mode which puts sincerity and deception in a teasing and often inextricable juxtaposition.

As a game, role, or way of behaving, courtship is often seen to be a highly codified system, a series of signs aimed at reassuring the prince or mistress of the suitor's unquestioning and dutiful service. And these signs must be interpreted and decoded correctly in order to manipulate the prince or beloved into making the desired gesture of

*Prologue*

3

return. But a courtier could never guarantee the hoped-for response, of course, and, however circumspect, judicious, rhetorically aware, he could be cruelly spurned, his suit rejected or ignored.

In the texts with which this study is primarily concerned, these well-known vulnerabilities of courtly life are inscribed and formalized within the vicissitudes of fictional courtship and romance. Gascoigne's allusion to the parable of the vineyard ('yt were noone and past before I soughte service') hints ruefully at the difference between human and divine scales of reward, when the divine are shown to be impenetrable if not arbitrary and unfair (Matt. 20: 1–16). His text thus admits quietly of the possibility that Elizabeth might fail to respond altogether, or might do so in such a way as to demean the poet's gift and offer of service. Throughout this book, we will see courtiers and writers suing for favour while also, more subtly, rehearsing their projected failure and meditating upon its implications for their future and for their art.

While a suitor's courtship inevitably laid itself open to misinterpretation and misrepresentation, therefore, the quintessentially courtly strategies of indirection and obliquity could also be exploited as agents of distortion. In *The Adventures of Master F. J.*, for example, F.J. and Elinor conduct their courtship by means of 'secrets' (55) and 'private talk' (57); they share an overwhelming tendency to speak 'in cloudes' (64) and in 'cyphred words and figured speeches' (77).<sup>3</sup> Gascoigne's courtship narrative is thus governed by the need for closed systems of meaning, codings which are comprehensible only to a specific group or pair. As a result, the relationship between the lovers is constantly dogged by misunderstandings, the 'doubtfull shewe' (53) with which their liaison began proceeding little further than the 'doubtfull conclusion' (101) with which it ends.

Gascoigne's sense of frustration and marginalization at court is figured not only in the doubtfulness and perplexity that exists between Elinor and F.J., however, but also in the instability of courtly language itself as a referent of value. For here we find that notions of courtesy, of the proper conduct at court, and of the idealized male–female relations (as sketched by Castiglione) are scrutinized, analysed and, in the end, debunked. So while 'courtesy' is seemingly stabilized at the outset of the story by Gascoigne's courtly setting, the courteous qualities of hospitality, grace, and yieldingness are increasingly disturbed and perverted by the events of the narrative. For the 'courtesy' which Elinor and F.J. show to

each other is no more than sexual favour: ‘of hir curteouse nature [Elinor] was content to accept bords for a bead of downe’ (69); F.J. ‘could no lesse do, than of his curteous nature receyve his Mistresse into his bed’ (91), and, ‘having now forgotten all former curtesies’, then rapes her. Although loth ‘to use such curtesie’ to her jealous lover, Elinor finds herself ‘constreyned (for a time) to abandon hir body to the enimies curtesie’ (92). ‘Courtesy’ thus begins to evolve quite different associations until it is shown to be unstable, polysemous, ambiguous, and over-extended.

It will be clear from even these brief examples that Elizabethan courtship narratives raise issues more complicated than might at first be supposed. For courtship is shown to be semantically confusing as well as narratively and politically potent. Furthermore, it will become evident that those who (for whatever reason and in whatever capacity) had to ‘court’ Queen Elizabeth seemed to display an acute self-consciousness about what they perceived to be their predicament, and about the possibilities that the representation of romantic courtship in fiction granted them. For the structural and semantic ambivalence of courtship provided Elizabeth’s subjects with a rich and varied means of exploring relations with their sovereign, allowing them to rehearse alternative and competing experiences: success and failure, domination and subordination, obedience and subversion.

This book focuses most closely, therefore, on the courtship narratives written by a number of men who, like Gascoigne, stood in some kind of client relation with the Queen – Leicester, Essex, Lyly, Sidney, and Spenser – and shows how the internal tensions of courtship allowed them to enact and animate their own positions. It begins by putting this specific focus into the much larger historical and theoretical contexts which the subject demands, considering how the detailed study of a particular period fits into related semantic and historical changes that were occurring across Europe at the same time, and how Elizabethan ‘courtship’ might fruitfully be compared with medieval romantic terminology and with the preoccupations of so-called ‘courtly love’. I draw on recent anthropological models of gift-exchange which stress ambivalence as the governing principle of courtship, and suggest that the uncertain relations between courtier and sovereign can be understood in terms

*Prologue*

5

of the relation between courtship and marriage, a theme central to the literary genres of comedy and romance.

After a detailed semantic analysis of ‘courtship’ and related words in English and other European languages, the book moves on to study selected literary examples of Elizabethan courtship narratives, and begins by looking at a series of pageants and entertainments that were mounted at court. This section considers ways in which issues of manifest political urgency (such as the succession or Elizabeth’s marriage) became the focus for a complex and thoroughgoing trial of the participants’ own circumstances, and shows how the presentation of courtier–sovereign relations in these texts is more disorientating and polyvalent than first appears.

The textual instability of many of these entertainments (arising largely from the transmission from a manuscript to a print culture) makes for a climate of doubtfulness and uncertainty that is not, in every case, accidental. In *The Adventures of Master F. J.*, for example, Gascoigne exploits the ‘doubtful’ status of his own text (47), layering different narratives in order to distort perspectives and to confuse his readers. A study of the *Euphues* and *Arcadia* narratives shows how Lyly and Sidney similarly expose courtship as a nexus of particularly difficult interpretative (and therefore moral) questions.

The book concludes by looking at Spenser’s meditations on courtship in both the *Amoretti* and *Epithalamion*, and in book vi of *The Faerie Queene*. Superimposing a public courtship upon a private one, Spenser’s alternative ‘endings’ to the sonnet-sequence subtly figure the poet’s own aspirations and fears as a courtly hanger-on. Book vi of *The Faerie Queene* is marked by a semantic and practical rupture in which courtesy can no longer be seen to derive simply or directly from the court. Throughout book vi, Spenser is shown to problematize gestures of mutual return, thus hinting that the proper function of courtesy at court is an enticing but an idle dream.

## CHAPTER I

*The rhetoric of courtship: an introduction*

Courtship has been an abiding and compelling subject in human discourse from the most ancient times because it ritualizes elements that are fundamental to social existence: love, sex, marriage, and procreation. In our own age, psychologists have shown how susceptible amorous and sexual behaviour is to change, and how modern courtship, cohabitation, and marriage have all been radically influenced by the changing demographic and ideological patterns of a post-industrial society. And, while courtship rituals naturally vary widely in different cultures and at different times, yet whatever the culture-specific variations in courtship practice, the prioritizing cultural activity which surrounds courting is pretty well a constant in Western culture and civilization.

Courtship clearly presents itself, then, as an enormous subject, with ramifications that veer off into the anthropological, sociological, mythological, historical, and psychological (to name but a few). This book's particular focus upon the rhetoric of courtship in Elizabethan language and literature therefore requires a word of explanation. For to concentrate predominantly on representations of courtship in one historical period might be argued to imply an anteriority, development, and progress through time, all of which conflict with the abiding presence of courtship as a cultural phenomenon. Yet the methodology of this book is such as to allow for a certain specificity. For this study traces the point in history when the word 'courtship' evolved meanings which had a particular political and amorous resonance, and when it came to mean broadly what it does today – the interactive behaviour and ritual between two people who are emotionally and romantically engaged.

The following chapter compares detailed diachronic and synchronic analyses of 'courtship' and cognate words in several languages in order to locate, where possible, the precise historical moment when

*An introduction*

7

their meanings changed. But here it is enough to say that ‘courtship’ first developed a predominantly amorous sense during the Renaissance period. Before then it had little to do with love or marriage at all, and signified, rather, ‘being at court’ or ‘behaving as courtiers behave’. During the sixteenth century, ‘courtship’ (and the transitive verb ‘to court’) came to particularize certain aspects of court existence, and, from the proliferation of subsidiary meanings that subsequently developed, the modern amorous sense of the words – ‘wooing’ and ‘to woo’ – emerged to supersede the others and to become, in time, their chief designation.

What this book sets out to discover is what love had to do with courts. Why should a verb meaning ‘to be at court’ or ‘to behave as a courtier’ come to mean the same thing as ‘making love’? If ‘being at court’ and ‘wooing someone’ shared a semantic field, what then was the precise relation between them? Does ‘courtship’ provide an example of how an already patriarchal vocabulary of love adopted the lexis of courtly hegemony? Did the etiquette and social practice of Renaissance court life lend themselves to love in a way that medieval custom did not? Does the semantic shift of ‘courtship’ and ‘to court’ post-date the allegedly medieval cult of ‘courtly love’? How is it that courtship – a subject that might legitimately, if loosely, be seen as a major focus of attention and anxiety in texts of ‘bourgeois’ orientation, like the novel – originally had no ‘bourgeois’ overtones but specified elements of life at court? And, if it did, how valid do such terms as ‘courtly’ and ‘bourgeois’ remain?

The court of Queen Elizabeth I is an obvious place to look for the answers to some of these questions. In English, the words ‘to court’ and ‘courtship’ both evolved the amorous sense of ‘to woo’ and ‘wooing’ during the second half of the sixteenth century. It seems particularly appropriate – an enticing coincidence – that ‘being a courtier’ and ‘playing the lover’ should come to mean the same thing during her reign. For Elizabeth’s femaleness aroused deep suspicions and anxieties in the male-dominated society she ruled. One of the ways in which her society responded was to mystify and mythologize her virginity, to de-genderize her as the ‘prince’, and to revive the myth of the King’s ‘two bodies’ – only one of which was mortal, frail, and feminine. Over the last ten years, ground-breaking articles by Arthur Marotti, Louis Adrian Montrose, Leonard Tennenhouse, Maureen Quilligan, Peter Stallybrass, Ann Jones, and others have taught us to reflect on whether the courtship-situation that appears

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so often in Elizabethan literature figures the political backdrop of late sixteenth-century England; and whether writers like Sidney, Spenser, or Raleigh consciously mirror in the courtships of their poetry and prose their own self-positioning before a female authority.<sup>1</sup>

Much of this study is concerned with such poetic self-positioning. But this is also the place to say that the link between Elizabeth's sovereignty and the contemporary change in meanings of 'courtship' is, however satisfying, potentially misleading. For 'courtship' was (and is) a highly polysemous term, subject, both culturally and linguistically, to fluctuation, transition, and nuance. A mere glance at the dictionaries reveals that the developing meanings of 'courtship' had ramifications which extended far beyond the relatively localized effects of England's having a queen in the second half of the sixteenth century. For the semantic development of 'courtship' to mean 'wooing' was not a random occurrence in the highly volatile language that was Renaissance English. An identical semantic shift took place in the major European languages, and did so – fascinatingly enough – at more or less the same time: around the turn of the sixteenth century. Thus we have the French verb 'courtiser', the Italian 'corteggiare', the Hispanic 'cortejar', even the German 'hofieren', all developing an amorous sense, and all bequeathing that meaning to modern usage. And in each of these cases, of course, the amorous meaning of 'courtship' developed quite independently of any female political rule.

The correlation between 'wooing' and 'acting the courtier', which had been actualized in England by Elizabeth's rule, was therefore, in effect, part of a more profound and far-reaching socio-historical development. For the parallel shifts in the sense of 'courtship' across Europe at this time invite an obvious connection with the contemporary development of court societies. Some historians have designated the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries as a period marked by the intense centralization of power by a small number of European dynasties, one symptom and manifestation of which was the creation of supreme royal courts. And while there is a danger, in any such overview, of underestimating the highly sophisticated court societies of the Middle Ages, there are grounds for seeing a difference in degree (if not in kind) in the growth of Renaissance courts. In the Middle Ages, power was relatively decentralized, and the feudal system of reward by fief proliferated the number of lesser courts, the

*An introduction*

9

enclaves of self-styled barons with their retinues of knights.<sup>2</sup> From the fifteenth century, however, the court became a self-conscious model for the exercise – social, bureaucratic, and public – of royal hegemony. As D. A. L. Morgan has recently argued, while the language of courtesy had an indisputably medieval pedigree, extending back at least as far as the troubadours, the language of the court was (certainly in English) a fifteenth-century phenomenon.<sup>3</sup> Perceived as a centre of political and cultural activity, the court became a focus of scrutiny, and its members, the courtier and the prince, were formalized by Castiglione and Machiavelli as rhetorical role-models and categorial types.

So far so good. The rapid development of court society as an area of intense vigilance and scrutiny led to the evolution of a court-related lexis. But such a development does not, of course, explain why ‘being at court’ should lend itself (of all activities) particularly to love-making.

In an attempt to answer this intriguing question, the present study goes back to the words: ‘courtiser’, ‘corteggiare’, and ‘to court’. In the next chapter, I analyse in detail the usage of these words in French, Italian, and English in order to ask what they used to mean, how they changed, and what common semantic ground the two senses of ‘being at court’ and ‘making love’ shared. The semantic analysis reveals three things: firstly, that each language developed a verb which specified ‘being at court’; secondly, that this verb came to particularize a whole range of different courtly activities; and thirdly, that the element of behaviour at court which ‘courting’ came to denote most insistently was rhetoric – the flattering, dissembling, deceitful, and tactical discursive strategies that existed between individuals who found themselves forced to graduate and adjust their behaviour in the tense and hierarchized milieu of the Renaissance court. Spenser, for example, warns his readers against ‘courting masker[s]’ when they ‘with smooth flattering / Doo fawne on you’; and Donne ridicules the man who must needs ‘grin or fawne’ on a magistrate, ‘or prepare / A speech to court his beautiful sonne and heire’.<sup>4</sup>

In shifting its meaning from a social or quasi-political sense (‘being at court’, ‘behaving as courtiers behave’) to an amorous one (‘wooing’), the words ‘courtship’ and ‘to court’ thus demonstrate one of the simpler models for semantic change described by the linguist Stephen Ullmann: ‘sense *si* has some features in common

with some other sense, s2, lying within its associative field. At a given moment, attention will be focused solely on the common denominator, on the overlap between their semantic ranges, and the name pertaining to s1, n1, will be felt as an adequate designation for s2.<sup>5</sup>

The 'courting' described by Spenser and Donne connotes a style of discourse which problematizes intention and utterance, sincerity and deception. As a polysemous and volatile word, 'courtship' did not invariably have pejorative overtones: in another poem, for example, Spenser praises the 'rightful Courtier' for his judicious policy and 'courting'.<sup>6</sup> But, as we shall see, it was, on the whole, the broadly negative connotations of courtship – flattery and dissimulation – that lent themselves to the language of love. A simple associative shift from the discourse directed toward a prince–patron to that aimed at a woman–beloved gave a ready-made language of flattery and persuasion a whole new area of specification. It meant, of course, that 'courting' a lady was often understood to mean deceiving or abusing her, as Spenser's cunning Paridell 'courted [Hellenore], yet bayted euery word'.<sup>7</sup>

In the sixteenth century, then, men and women across Europe began to use the word 'courtship' and its equivalents to describe the processes of wooing or love-making. The significance of this development is made more immediately striking if one compares it with an older usage. For, in the Middle Ages, the verb used for 'wooing' in all the Romance languages took its root not from the court but, rather, from the object of that wooing – the lady, or the *donna* (from *domina*). Thus in Provençal we have the verb 'domneier', in French 'donoier', in Italian 'donneare', and in the Hispanic languages 'doñear'. The great exponents of courtly love did not so much 'court' their mistresses, therefore. Literally speaking, they 'ladies' (or 'idolized'). In troubadour lyrics, for example, 'domneier' is the commonest and most important word for love-making, as is its equivalent for those great lyricists of the Middle Ages, Chrétien de Troyes, Dante, and Petrarch (none of whom uses 'corteggiare' or 'courtiser', but only ever 'donneare' and 'donoier').

In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, however, the donna-centred vocabulary of wooing became obsolete. A new word – 'to court' – took its place in all the Romance languages, and in English and German as well. 'Donoier' covered a wide range of meanings, from Dante's sublime and rapturous wooing of Beatrice in the *Paradiso* to the more frankly sexual behaviour of some of the lovers in