

George Gascoigne

1534/1535?-1577

For a biography of Gascoigne, as well as a discussion of and selections from his other works, see the print anthology, pp. 339-76.

EDITION: *The posies of George Gascoigne Esquire*. London: [Printed] for Richard Smith, [1575]. STC 11637.



from *The Posies of George Gascoigne*

Certain Notes of Instruction Concerning the
Making of Verse or Rhyme in English,
Written at the Request of Master Edouardo
Donati.¹

Signor Edouardo, since promise is debt, and you
(by the law of friendship) do burden me with a
promise that I should lend you instructions
towards the making of English verse or rhyme, I
will assay to discharge the same, though not so
perfectly as I would, yet as readily as I may. And
therewithal I pray you consider that *quot homines, tot*
sententiae,² especially in poetry, wherein (neverthe-
less) I dare not challenge any degree,³ and yet will
I at your request adventure to set down my simple
skill in such simple manner as I have used, refer-
ring the same hereafter to the correction of the
Laureate.⁴ And you shall have it in these few
points following.

The first and most necessary point that ever I
found meet⁵ to be considered in making of a
delectable poem is this: to ground it upon some

fine invention.⁶ For it is not enough to roll in
pleasant words, nor yet to thunder in *rim, ram,*
20 *ruff*⁷ by letter (quoth my master Chaucer), nor yet
to abound in apt vocables⁸ or epithets, unless the
invention have in it also *aliquid salis*.⁹ By this *aliquid*
salis, I mean some good and fine device, showing
the quick capacity of a writer; and where I say
25 “some good and fine invention,” I mean that I
would have it both fine and good. For many
inventions are so superfine, that they are *vix*¹⁰
good. And again many inventions are good, and
yet not finely handled. And for a general fore-
warning: what theme soever you do take in hand,
30 if you do handle it but *tanquam in oratione per-*
petua,¹¹ and never study for some depth of device
in the invention, and some figures¹² also in the
handling thereof, it will appear to the skilful reader
but a tale of a tub.¹³ To deliver unto you general
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⁶ *invention* the subject, idea, or method of treatment in a literary composition. Although the *OED* dates the first use in this sense to 1638, the context here does not really allow “invention” to have its much older meaning of “a work or writing produced by exercise of the mind or imagination; a literary composition.”

⁷ *rim, raff, ruff* a phrase used to denote crude or unsophisticated alliterative or rhyming verse.

⁸ *vocables* words, terms.

⁹ Latin, “Something of salt (i.e., of wit or value).”

¹⁰ *superfine* excessively-refined, over-refined; *vix* Latin, “barely, hardly, scarcely.”

¹¹ Latin, “in the same way as an uninterrupted oration.”

¹² *figures* any of the various forms of expression, deviating from the normal arrangement or use of words, which are used to give beauty, variety, or force to a composition.

¹³ *a tale of a tub* Proverbial. “A tale of a tub” is an apocryphal tale, a “cock-and-bull” story (*Tilley* T45).

¹ *Edouardo Donati* probably not a real person; the name means, “Edward the Gift-Giver or Patron.”

² Latin, “There are as many opinions as men” (Terence, *Phormio*, 2.4.14). Proverbial (*Tilley* M583).

³ *degree* manner, way [of creating poetry].

⁴ *the Laureate* here, a collective noun referring to those crowned with poetic achievement.

⁵ *meet* fit, appropriate.

examples it were almost impossible, sithence¹ the occasions of inventions are (as it were) infinite. Nevertheless take in worth mine opinion, and perceive my further meaning in these few points. If I should undertake to write in praise of a gentlewoman, I would neither praise her crystal eye, nor her cherry lip, etc., for these things are *trita et obvia*.² But I would either find some supernatural cause whereby my pen might walk in the superlative degree, or else I would undertake to answer for any imperfection that she hath, and thereupon raise the praise of her commendation. Likewise if I should disclose my pretence in love, I would either make a strange discourse of some intolerable passion, or find occasion to plead by the example of some history, or discover my disquiet in shadows *per allegoriam*,³ or use the covertest mean that I could to avoid the uncomely customs of common writers. Thus much I adventure to deliver unto you (my friend) upon the rule of invention, which of all other rules is most to be marked and hardest to be prescribed in certain and infallible rules; nevertheless to conclude therein, I would have you stand most upon the excellency of your invention, and stick not⁴ to study deeply for some fine device. For that being found, pleasant words will follow well enough and fast enough.

2 Your invention being once devised, take heed that neither pleasure of rhyme nor variety of device do carry you from it. For as to use obscure and dark phrases in a pleasant sonnet is nothing delectable, so to intermingle merry jests in a serious matter is an indecorum.

[...]

4 And in your verses remember to place every word in his natural emphasis or sound, that is to say in such wise,⁵ and with such length or shortness, elevation or depression of syllables, as it is

¹ *sithence* since.

² Latin, "trite/commonplace and obvious."

³ Latin, "through allegory."

⁴ *stick not* do not hesitate.

⁵ *in such wise* in such a way.

commonly pronounced or used.... For further explanation hereof, note you that commonly nowadays in English rhymes (for I dare not call them English verses) we use none other order but a foot of two syllables, whereof the first is depressed or made short, and the second is elevate or made long, and that sound or scanning continueth throughout the verse. We have used in times past other kinds of meters, as for example this following:

No wight in this world, that wealth can attain,
Unless he believe, that all is but vain.

Also our father Chaucer hath used the same liberty in feet and measures that the Latinists do use.⁶ And whosoever do peruse and well consider his works, he shall find that although his lines are not always of one selfsame number of syllables, yet being read by one that hath understanding the longest verse and that which hath most syllables in it will fall (to the ear) correspondent unto that which hath fewest syllables in it; and likewise that which hath in it fewest syllables shall be found yet to consist of words that have such natural sound as may seem equal in length to a verse which hath many more syllables of lighter accents. And surely I can lament that we are fallen into such a plain and simple manner of writing that there is none other foot used but one; whereby our poems may justly be called rhythms,⁷ and cannot by any right challenge the name of a verse.

[...]

5 Here, by the way, I think it not amiss to forewarn you that you thrust as few words of many syllables into your verse as may be, and hereunto I might allege many reasons: first, the most ancient English words are of one syllable, so that the more monosyllables that you use the truer Eng-

⁶ *Also our father Chaucer ... use* On Gascoigne's failure to understand Chaucer's use of the iambic foot in his verse, see C.T. Prouty, *George Gascoigne* (New York, 1942), esp. pp. 126-30.

⁷ *rhythms* rhyming or rhymed verse.

lishman you shall seem, and the less you shall
 110 smell of the inkhorn;¹ also words of many syllables do cloy a verse and make it unpleasant, whereas words of one syllable will more easily fall to be short or long as occasion requireth, or will be adapted to become circumflex² or of an indiffer-
 115 ferent sound.

6 I would exhort you also to beware of rhyme without reason: my meaning is hereby that your rhyme lead you not from your first invention, for many writers when they have laid the platform of
 120 their invention are yet drawn sometimes (by rhyme) to forget it or at least to alter it; as when they cannot readily find out a word which may rhyme to the first (and yet continue their determinate invention), they do then either botch it up
 125 with a word that will rhyme (how small reason soever it carry with it) or else they alter their first word and so percase³ decline or trouble their former invention. But do you always hold your first determined invention, and do rather search
 130 the bottom of your brains for apt words than change good reason for rumbling rhyme.

[...]

9 Also, as much as may be eschew strange words, or *obsoleta et inusitata*,⁴ unless the theme do give just occasion. Marry,⁵ in some places a
 135 strange word doth draw attentive reading, but yet I would have you therein to use discretion.

10 And, as much as you may, frame your style to perspicuity and to be sensible, for the haughty obscure verse doth not much delight, and the

verse that is too easy is like a tale of a roasted horse;⁶ but let your poem be such as may both delight and draw attentive reading, and therewithal may deliver such matter as be worth the marking.⁷

11 You shall do very well to use your verse after the English phrase, and not after the manner of other languages. The Latinists do commonly set the adjective after the substantive, as for example *femina pulchra*, *aedes altae*, etc.; but if we should say
 150 in English ‘a woman fair,’ ‘a house high,’ etc., it would have but small grace, for we say ‘a good man,’ and not ‘a man good,’ etc. And yet I will not altogether forbid it you, for in some places it may be borne, but not so hardly as some use it which write thus:

Now let us go to Temple ours,
 I will go visit mother mine &c.

Surely I smile at the simplicity of such devisers, which might as well have said it in plain English phrase and yet have better pleased all ears than they satisfy their own fancies by such superfinesse.⁸ Therefore, even as I have advised you to place all words in their natural or most common and usual pronunciation, so would I wish you to frame all sentences in their mother phrase and proper *idioma*,⁹ and yet sometimes (as I have said before) the contrary may be borne, but that is rather where rhyme enforceth, or *per licentiam poeticam*,¹⁰ than it is otherwise lawful or commendable.

—1575

¹ *smell of the inkhorn* be pedantic.

² *circumflex* neither long nor short.

³ *percase* perhaps.

⁴ Latin, “obsolete and unsuitable [words].”

⁵ *Marry* mild oath, meaning “indeed” or “why, to be sure.”

⁶ *a tale of a roasted horse* Proverbial. “A tale of a roasted horse” is a silly or nonsensical story, one lacking in wit (synonymous with “a tale of a tub”) [Tilley T44].

⁷ *marking* noticing, paying attention to.

⁸ *superfinesse* excessive refinement or fastidiousness.

⁹ Latin, “idiom.”

¹⁰ See print anthology, p. 368, note 1.