

The Shake-scene



Robert Greene's allusion to Shakespeare and the Shakespeare studio of poets in his 'Greene's Groats-worth of Witte'.

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The first allusion to Shakespeare is thought to be in the pamphlet, *Greene's Groats-worth of Witte, bought with a Million of Repentance*, attributed to the Elizabethan scholar, writer and playwright Robert Greene and published a few weeks after Greene's death on 3 September 1592.

Robert Greene (1558-92), a graduate of Cambridge University, was one of the first authors in England to support himself professionally as a writer, poet and playwright, although he sadly died in extreme poverty. He published more than 25 works in prose, which included several romances starting with *Mamillia* (1580) and reaching their highest level in *Pandosto, the Triumph of Time* (c.1588) and *Menaphon* (1589), various short poems and songs, and "cony-catching" pamphlets. He also wrote several plays, none of which were published in his lifetime, including *The Scottish history of James IV* (c.1590-1), *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay* (c.1589-92), *Orlando Furioso* (1592), and *The Comical History of Alphonsus, King of Aragon* (1599). Greene's *Pandosto* provided the main plot and idea of Shakespeare's *Winter's Tale*, and influences from the romantic comedies *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay* and *James IV* can be found in the Shakespeare plays.

Greene's Groats-worth of Witte was the last of Greene's autobiographical pamphlets. They formed his confessions and were edited by his friend, the playwright and printer Henry Chettle.¹ The passage in question is in the epistle addressed "To those Gentlemen his Quondam acquaintance that spend their wits in making plays". In this passage the demoralised and poverty-stricken Greene tries to warn three of his fellow playwrights not to trust actors—those "puppets", "burrs" and "anticks garnished in our colours"—and refers to a particular actor as an "upstart Crow" beautified with the "feathers" of the playwrights, who not only believes that he is able to bombast out a blank verse as well as the best of the playwrights but also, being an "absolute Iohannes fac totum", is conceited enough to imagine that he is the only "Shake-scene" in a country. Greene urges his fellow playwrights to follow more profitable courses of action by allowing these "Apes" (i.e. the actors) to imitate their "past excellence" (i.e. poetry or drama already published or performed on stage) but not to make them privy to their "admired inventions" (i.e. those new ideas and poetic creations of the playwrights of the sort that the actors admire):-

Base-minded men all three of you, if by my miserie you be not warnd: for unto none of you (like mee) sought those burrees to cleave: those Puppets (I meane) that spake from our mouths, those Anticks garnisht in our colours. Is it not strange, that I, to whom they all have beene beholding: is it not like that you, to whom they all have been beholding, shall (were yee in that case as I am now) bee both at once of them forsaken? Yes trust them not: for there is an upstart Crow, beautified with our feathers, that with his *Tyger's hart wrapped in a Player's hyde*, supposes he is as well able to bombast out a blanke verse as the best of you: and beeing an absolute

Iohannes fac totum, is in his owne conceit the onely Shake-scene in a countrey. O that I might entreate your rare wits to be employed in more profitable courses: & let these Apes imitate your past excellence, and never more acquaint them with your admired inventions.

Robert Greene, *A Groats-worth of Wit* (1592).

“*Iohannes fac totum*” was a term of abuse used mainly by the university wits and meaning “Jack-of-all-trades, master of none”. The qualifying “absolute” emphasises Greene’s contempt, ironically declaring the “upstart Crow” to be a perfect Jack-of-all-trades, who is conceited enough to think he can do anything well.

The crow is famous for mimicry but not for invention. It also croaks bombastically. Furthermore, the crow in classical fables is associated with stealing whatever it finds beautiful or attractive, even the finer plumes of other birds. For this reason, in Renaissance symbolism the crow is associated with plagiarism, particularly literary plagiarism. In this instance the actor who is the “upstart Crow” is accused of beautifying himself with the words that come from the “feathers” (i.e. the quill pens) of the playwrights.

The meaning of this is made even clearer in the speech by Juliet in Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*, which not only has the same sense but also uses the same imagery of the feathers that beautify the crow or the raven, the latter being traditionally confused with the crow. In this play, the feathers which the black raven uses to beautify itself are those of a white dove, symbol of all that is good, beautiful, inspiring and peaceful:-

O serpent heart, hid with a flowering face...
Dove-feather’d raven...
Just opposite to what thou justly seem’st!

Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, III, ii, 73-78.

Related in meaning to this whole quotation, the “Tyger’s hart wrapped in a Player’s hyde” is a parody of a line in the Shakespeare play of *Henry VI*, Part 3, spoken by Richard Plantagenet, Duke of York, to Queen Margaret, who has captured York and is about to have him beheaded. In his final condemnation of the “proud queen”, the “she-wolf of France”, York refers to the murder of his young son Rutland and the offering to him by the queen of a handkerchief soaked in his son’s blood:-

Oh tiger’s heart wrapp’d in a woman’s hide!
How could’st thou drain the life-blood of the child,
To bid the father wipe his eyes withal,
And yet be seen to bear a woman’s face?

Shakespeare, *3 Henry VI*, I, iv, 137-140.

Greene’s *Groats-worth* version, “Tyger’s hart wrapped in a Player’s hyde,” and Shakespeare’s *Henry VI* version, “Oh tiger’s heart wrapp’d in a woman’s hide,” probably derive from a line written by Greene himself. In his *Mamillia*, published in 1583, Greene had written of “Covering...the heart of the Tigre with the fleece of a Lambe”.

The usual assumption is that the “upstart Crow” is the actor Will Shakspeare of Stratford-upon-Avon, to whom the Shakespeare plays are commonly attributed—an attribution which

is highly questionable and in fact improbable. It is also questionable as to whether it is Will Shakspeare who is the actor to whom Greene is referring, or whether in fact it is the actor Edward Alleyn, who had acted in Greene's plays and who in 1590 had been accused by Greene, in Greene's *Francesco's Fortunes*, of being "proud with Aesop's crow, being cranked with the glory of other's feathers".²

Greene is accusing this actor of possessing a tiger's heart, which in the symbolism of the sixteenth century meant having a dangerous, proud, lustful, hypocritical, duplicitous, deceitful, ferocious, ruthless, destructive and downright evil nature. Whether Greene associated the actor with all these qualities is unclear, but he must have meant many of them because of his analogy with the "ruthless" Queen Margaret, the "she-wolf of France, but worse than wolves of France,"³ who was determined to have the throne of England for herself and her son.

Greene clearly not only felt angry and betrayed by the actors, who took the playwrights' plays as if they were their own and made a lot of money and fame out of them while the playwrights received little of either, but he was also clearly annoyed that this particular actor, in his own conceit, thought that he was the only "Shake-scene" in a country. In saying this Greene acknowledges that the actor is a "Shake-scene", but at the same time points out that he is not by any means the only Shake-scene in England. More than this, Greene identifies the actor's Shake-scene with what might be considered a fraud, wherein the actor was not only stealing or plagiarising the writings of others but also passing himself off as the only Shake-scene. Indeed, the inference of Greene's statement is that the other Shake-scene (i.e. not the actor's Shake-scene) is not only the truer one in terms of poetic invention but also is made up of Greene and his fellow playwrights, whose "feathers" are beautifying the "upstart Crow".

Elsewhere in his *Groats-worth of Witte* Greene makes a clear distinction between the university-educated "Gentlemen" who "spend their wits in making plays" and the common actors among whom the "upstart Crow" is counted. The gentlemen playwrights to whom Greene refers were the 'University Wits', of whom Greene himself was one. They were the university-educated poets of the 1580s who revolutionised the stage. These included Thomas Nashe, Christopher Marlowe and Robert Greene of Cambridge University, George Peele, John Lyly and Thomas Lodge of Oxford University, plus others. Of all these, the three friends to whom Greene's confessions were specifically addressed and who were named by him were Peele, Nashe and Marlowe.

Several of the playwrights apparently took offence at *Greene's Groats-worth of Wit*, and it was even suspected that Greene's name had been used as a cover for someone else. Both Nashe and Chettle were accused. Nashe immediately published a denial, followed soon after by Chettle, who published his own pamphlet, *Kind-Harts Dreame*, in reply. Chettle claimed that he and Nashe were being wrongly accused by one or two of the other "play-makers" of having written Greene's pamphlet posthumously; but, having denied his and Nashe's authorship of *Groats-worth of Wit*, Chettle accepted that he had been the editor of it and apologised for the fault. He then went on to describe one of these playwrights as being civil, honest, and having a witty grace in writing:-

I am sorry, as if the original fault had been my fault, because myselfe have seene his demeanor no lesse civill, than he exelent in the qualitie he professes;—besides,

divers of worship have reported his uprightnes of dealing, which argues his honesty, and his facetious grace in writting, that aprooves his Art.

Henry Chettle, *Kind-Harts Dreame* (1592)

Generally it has been assumed that Chettle was describing the actor Shakspere (assumed to be the author Shakespeare), although this is highly unlikely, indeed impossible, as the *Groats-worth of Wit* was not addressed to the Shake-scene actor in the first place: it was addressed to gentlemen playwrights, among whom the “upstart Crow” was not counted. Chettle was apologising to these playwrights, not to the actors, and his description of the “play-maker” was of one of these university-educated authors.

The phrase “divers of worship”, who reported this unnamed playwright’s characteristics to Chettle, refers to lords and gentlemen, particularly men of high rank, not actors, and Chettle made a clear distinction between the two. Strictly speaking, ‘gentleman’ was the term for a man of gentle birth (i.e. noble, or well-born), belonging to a family that had both land and position and was entitled to bear arms—in other words, the landed gentry. It also applied as the complimentary designation of a member of certain societies or professions, such as the gentlemen lawyers of the Inns of Court, and of certain privileged students, such as the gentlemen-commoners of the two universities, Oxford and Cambridge. The actor William Shakspere only became a gentleman in 1599, upon the occasion of his father being awarded a grant of Arms, which William inherited in 1601 as his father’s eldest son and heir. *Greene’s Groats-worth of Witte* was written seven years earlier than this heraldic award, in 1592.

Some scholars think that Chettle, who wrote or helped to write forty-eight plays for the Admiral’s Company, indeed wrote both the pamphlets, *Groats-worth of Wit* and *Kind-heart’s Dream*, in order to stir up controversy and convey a message.⁴ Others think it was Nashe, because of the style. Whatever the answer, the message itself is clear: the Shake-scene actor was not the author Shakespeare, despite the actor passing himself off as the author; and the true Shake-scene playwrights, who were university-educated gentlemen, were not receiving their due.

Because Greene includes himself and his fellow playwrights in this other Shake-scene, the inference is that the true author Shakespeare was the leader and chief playwright of a group of playwrights that included Greene, Peele, Nashe and Marlowe, who assisted their chief. This in turn suggests that the name ‘Shakespeare’ is a pseudonym, a matter which is confirmed by the alternative spelling of ‘Shakespeare’ as ‘Shake-speare’, such as in the title of the *Shake-speare Sonnets* and as printed on many of the quarto editions of the plays. It makes sense of the fact that various poets have been found to be possible contributors to or part-writers of some of the Shakespeare plays,⁵ whilst at the same time the general consensus acknowledges that the main authorship of the Shakespeare plays is by one supreme poet known by the name ‘William Shakespeare’ (or ‘Shake-speare’).

In other words, the name ‘William Shakespeare’ (or ‘Shake-speare’) can refer to the one principal author of the Shakespeare works and also to a group of poets led by the principal author. This in turn might make more sense of why many plays and poems published under the name of ‘Shakespeare’ have been recognised as not being by the bard Shakespeare but by other poets using or being grouped by the publisher under the name of ‘Shakespeare’.

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Endnotes

¹ Henry Chettle (c.1560- c.1607) was writing plays at least by 1598, when he was mentioned by Frances Meres as a fine writer of comedies. He is known to have written or collaborated on at least 48 dramas, including the play *Sir Thomas More*, for the Admiral's Men and Phillip Henslowe.

² Robert Greene, *Francesco's Fortunes* (1590): "Why Roscius, art thou proud with Aesop's crow, being pranced with the glory of other's feathers?" Roscius was a name given by Greene to Edward Alleyn.

See A.D. Wright, *Christopher Marlowe and Edward Alleyn* (Adam Hart Ltd, London, 1993), pp.144-238; Daryl Pinksen, [Was Robert Greene's "Upstart Crow" the Actor Edward Alleyn](#) (Marlowe Society Research Journal Vol. 6).

³ Shakespeare, *3 Henry VI*, I, iv, 111.

⁴ Three years of computer-aided research by Professor Warren B. Austin, of Stephen F. Austin State College of Texas, would seem to validate the opinion that Chettle wrote both pamphlets. His findings were published in a report entitled *A Computer-Aided Technique for Stylistic Discrimination – The Authorship of Greene's Groatworth of Wit* (1969).

⁵ For instance, Robert Greene has been proposed as the putative author or co-author of or contributor to several other dramas, including *The Troublesome Reign of King John*, *Lochrine*, *Edward III*, and Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* and *Henry VI* plays. *The Troublesome Reign of King John* was the source model for Shakespeare's *King John*. The 1595 first quarto of *Lochrine* advertises on its title page that it is "Newly set forth, overseene and corrected, / By W.S."—a statement that led to its inclusion in the second impression of the Shakespeare Third Folio (1664), which in turn led to the inclusion of the play in the Shakespeare Apocrypha. *Edward III* is frequently claimed as having been written at least partly by William Shakespeare.