

# Robert Greene

## King of the Paper Stage

by Stephanie Hopkins Hughes

*I am the spirit of Robert Greene, not unknown to thee (I am sure) by my name, when my writings lately privileged on every post, hath given notice of my name unto infinite numbers of people that never knew me by the view of my person.*

“B.R.” *The Ghost of Robert Greene* (1593)

*Greene lies continually. We wish he were more trustworthy, for it would save us trouble in understanding him.*

John Clark Jordan *Robert Greene* (1915)

As those of you know who have done some digging in the dusty corners of sixteenth-century English literary history, Robert Greene was one of a group of writers known to present-day scholars as “the University Wits.” They are seen as having formed a group of London-based poets, playwrights and proto-journalists (pamphleteers) who were active for a brief period beginning in the mid-1580s, most active in the late '80s and early '90s, and who were, for the most part, like some strange species of human firefly, dead or at least gone from the records, by the late '90s.

Scholars group them together for several reasons: most of them came to London from either Oxford or Cambridge University; there are evident personal and professional connections between some of them, although their real relationships remain unknown; and they share a number of important stylistic similarities. Perhaps more important than anything is the fact, often not accentuated enough by commentators, that it was from this group that the potent force of English journalism, with its cogent and often satirical brilliance, its long history of accomplishment, first flickered, however briefly, into the light of publication.

Besides Greene, the names most often included in this group of are: Thomas Watson, George Peele, Thomas Lodge, Thomas Kyd, and Thomas Nashe. Thomas

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*This article was originally written as a paper for the 1995 Shakespeare Oxford Society Conference in Greensboro, NC, but not given until the Seattle conference in 1997. Titled “The Relevance of Robert Greene to the Oxfordian Thesis,” I published it as a pamphlet in 1997, and again, slightly revised in 1998. Finally, with material acquired in 2009, this edition brings the argument to a conclusion. More or less.*

Achelow (Acheley?) and Matthew Royden are generally included, but remain little more than names. Sometimes John Lyly and Christopher Marlowe are included. George Buc was mentioned by one commentator. Their ties to each other are almost entirely found in dedications and other mentions in their published works. Only a very few have been found in court and other non-literary records.

Greene is the foremost member of this group for many reasons. He was the first to publish; he remained the longest; and he was the first to leave. He first surfaces in the publishing records in 1580 and is gone—well, almost gone—by 1593. He was also by far the most prolific; in fact, he was the most prolific writer of his time, with thirty published pamphlets, six plays, and over eighty songs and poems to his credit in the twelve years of his activity, many of them going into multiple editions over the years.<sup>1</sup>

Pamphlets were the sixteenth-century equivalent of our modern magazines, different only in that for the most part they were the work of a single author, though frequently including letters and poems by other writers. They ranged a broad gamut of subject matter, often combining poetry and prose in one publication. As all forms of publishing grew out of earlier forms of communication, pamphlets were the outgrowth of centuries of letter writing (note the term *newsletter*), so it isn't surprising that they often relied on a letter format, and that like letters, they were topical, opinionated, and intended both to inform and entertain.

Produced quickly in short press runs, pamphlets were cheaper than books, to buy, to make, and to sell. If the first edition sold out, a second could be in the book-stalls before public interest waned. They occupied a niche on the scale of publications midway between bound books and the cheap single sheets known as ballads or broad-sides, fore-runners of modern newspapers.

Robert Greene's early specialty was the "love pamphlet," the sixteenth-century equivalent of our modern romance magazine<sup>2</sup> in fact, it can be said that he more or less invented the genre.<sup>3</sup> With strong central female characters, Greene emphasized the view that—contrary to popular (male) sentiment—women were more inclined than men to be faithful and honorable in matters of love. His early heroines were paragons of fidelity, their faith repeatedly tested by men behaving badly. Often (though not always) dedicated to noblewomen, there was always an opening letter from Greene to "the Gentleman Reader." Since few then outside a small community of aristocrats and

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<sup>1</sup> In *Strange News* Nashe called Greene, "chiefe agent for the company (for he wrote more than four others)." C.H. Hereford, writing a century ago, said of Greene that he "produced the most considerable body of English narrative which the language yet contained...." John Clark Jordan, writing in 1915, said "Greene was the most prolific of all the Elizabethan writers. He was the most versatile, too. No other man in the Elizabethan period attempted so many different kinds of work. Greene did all that the rest did and more. Drama, poetry, framework tales, romances, social pamphlets, treatises, prodigal-son stories, repentances—all these flowed from his pen with a rapidity that is amazing." A.B. Grosart, editor of Greene's complete works, wrote, "The volume of Greene's work is astonishing." Compare his edition of Greene's works in fifteen volumes to the output of all other writers of the period.

<sup>2</sup> Nashe called Greene "the Homer of women."

<sup>3</sup> More, because he wrote so much; less because his early work echoes Lyly, whose *Euphues* also has a claim to that distinction.

wealthy merchants had enough education to read for pleasure, this would seem to indicate that Greene found a large part of his audience among the literate ladies-in-waiting of Elizabeth's Court and the law students and university graduates who inhabited bachelor digs in or near the Inns of Court, London's legal colleges.

By the late 1580s, Greene's heroines began to fall victim to temptations of their own, and although he continued to create models of virtue until the end, his interest gradually shifted to more complex and interesting situations. Throughout the bulk of his work Greene continued to explore a wide range of strenuous emotional predicaments of one kind and another, including—though perhaps not in ways that would seem very realistic to a modern reader—the consequences of yielding to the temptations of desire.<sup>4</sup> Although his style and technique went through several changes during his twelve-year career, the manifestation, causes, and consequences of human passion remained his central concern from first to last.

By 1590, Greene had begun to write what the scholars term the so-called renunciation pamphlets in which he swore off love topics, promising thenceforth to write nothing but beneficial moral tracts. This he would promise in the opening paragraphs, but inevitably it turned out to be pretty much the same old thing, the only discernible difference being that the miscreant male now replaced the long-suffering and devoted female as protagonist while she was consigned to a supporting role.

Finally, during his last year of publication, 1591-92, he published, among other things, the four so-called coney-catching pamphlets in which he claimed to reveal the con games of the London underworld for the avowedly moral purpose of awakening innocent readers to their peril. These too sold like the proverbial hotcakes.

Greene was the Stephen King of his day; but, unlike King, he was not only popular and extremely prolific, he was a writer of taste and quality. His style, graceful, erudite, conversational in tone, ranged far above most of his fellow pamphleteers in ease of expression, size of vocabulary, and apt use of metaphor. He had a knack for sensing the currents of popular interest and capitalizing on them, yet never by resorting to the gross imagery or crude language of his competitors. Though forced by his biography and by his own claims for himself to portray him as a hack writer, most commentators eagerly defend his originality and his style, qualities rare in a genuine hack.<sup>5</sup>

Greene's true competitors, in terms of theme and style, weren't really other pamphleteers, but contemporary authors of romantic idylls like Spenser and Sidney, though in my opinion Greene remains far more readable than either of those much-praised worthies. Even in his coney-catching pamphlets, where he made an effort to

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<sup>4</sup> Greene's plots used the long-standing conventions of romance and pastoral, familiar to the educated youth of the nobility who were weaned on the tales of King Arthur, Orlando, and Tristram. Greene's protagonists were the kings and queens of exotic eastern kingdoms; his plots were filled with amazing coincidences and twists of fate. It may be that it was necessary for writers as absorbed in the dilemmas of human passion and frailty as were Greene, Sidney and Spenser, to use such exotic settings to distance their stories as much as possible from any connection to present company.

<sup>5</sup> Most would agree with John Churton Collins who wrote in 1905 "That [Greene] did not employ his pen, as he at first intended, in didactic treatises is hardly matter for regret." (29)

sound street-wise and slangy, he could never totally shed his innately elegant style.<sup>6</sup> In addition, the prose of his pamphlets was liberally interspersed with excellent poems and song lyrics in a wide range of styles and forms.<sup>7</sup>

### *Greene's Groatsworth of Witte*

Thus it seems ironic that Greene's importance to English literature probably lies less in his considerable literary achievements than it does in the seeming happenstance that it is in one of his pamphlets that some would have us see the first mention of "the Bard." In late September of 1592 was published *Greene's Groatsworth of Witte, Purchased with a Million of Repentance*, which claimed to have been written by Robert Greene on his deathbed. Of the two sections that make up this pamphlet, the first and much longer section, yet another variation on his favorite prodigal son theme, sounds as though it had been written at some earlier time.

It was at the end of the shorter final section, the one supposedly written during the agonies of his last hours on earth, that Greene bursts forth in a furious cry of warning directed at his fellow playwrights, urging them in the strongest terms to stop writing for the theater. Calling the actors "puppets" who speak from "our mouths" and who are "garnished with our colors," he rails against one in particular whom he calls an "upstart crow, beautified with our feathers," a "Johannes fac totum" and a "Shake-scene," who, with his "tiger's heart wrapped in a player's hide" supposes he is "as well able to bombast out a blank verse as the best of you." (For the full passage see Appendix D, page 57.)

Desperate for any morsel that might connect William of Stratford to the world of the London stage, and strengthened in their belief by the obvious quote from Shakespeare's *Henry VI, Part I*, "O, tiger's heart, wrapped in a woman's hide," most orthodox scholars staunchly maintain this as the first—and, we might add, *only*—extra-official contemporary reference to Shakespeare as a man of the theater.

Nevertheless, to anyone not driven by the need to establish Shakespeare of Stratford as a living presence in the London theater community it should seem obvious that

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<sup>6</sup> Editor Arthur F. Kinney states in his "Note" at the beginning of Crupi's biography of Greene:

Crupi argues, with considerable care, that the received story of Greene's relatively low birth and life of dissolution is based more in myth than in available documentation; that Greene's prose romances, forging a poetics of emblematic fiction new to English literature, are important investigations of human will and depravity that explore the relationships of experience and story, delusion and fantasy in fresh and important ways; and that Greene's drama, far from merely anticipating some of the best comic techniques in Shakespeare, stood on its own with Elizabethans as complex, sophisticated, and artistically structured . . . .

<sup>7</sup> Alan Dormer said in 1950, "I certainly agree with those who have found in Greene an authentic lyric gift and with those who point to the wide variety of meters, styles and subjects that he uses . . . . Greene chiefly claims our notice as a poet," while Greene's earliest editor, Alexander Dyce, thought that "as a poet he has permanent claims . . . ." (Crupi preface) C.S. Lewis held that "Greene is the first great master of plot before Shakespeare," while *James IV* is "the most important landmark in the whole formative period of English tragicomedy . . . ." and *Friar Bacon's* double plot achieves a "perfected form . . . for the use of future playwrights" (144). According to Greene biographer, Charles Crupi, "Greene's romances have often been praised for portraying actions that are moving or exciting on their own terms and which therefore 'foreshadow later fiction.'"

the upstart crow outburst could not have been directed at a fellow playwright, but rather at an actor, one who also functioned as a manager; one whose recently-acquired power, popularity and/or success had gone to his head; someone above all who was well-known to Greene's readers, for had he not been well-known to Greene's readers, Greene would surely not have wasted his "dying" breath on him.

Was there at that time an individual who fits this description?

### Enter "Shake-scene"

During the summer of 1592, the individual who perfectly fits Greene's description was the actor Edward Alleyn, whose portrayals of Christopher Marlowe's heroes had taken him in a few short years from obscurity to a level of celebrity never before known to an English actor; a popularity that helped rocket the acting companies he worked with, the Lord Admiral's and the Lord Strange's Men, into the limelight at Philip Henslowe's Rose Theater, and in so doing, secured life for the newborn London commercial Stage.

Six weeks after Greene's apparent departure for the hereafter, Alleyn, in established trades-guild tradition, married the step-daughter of his boss, who endowed the happy couple with a cut of the profits from the Rose, hiring his new son-in-law as his stage manager, thereby creating a partnership that would take both of them to a level of commercial success rarely known to theater folk, either then or later. By mid-life Alleyn had risen to middle-class wealth and respectability, an astonishing phenomenon in a time when the term *player* meant little more than *thief* or *beggar*.<sup>8</sup>

As for Greene's sarcastic use of the pun-name "Shake-scene," certainly it is understandable that Shakespeare scholars would leap to conclude that Greene was referring to the world-famous focus of their attention, particularly when one of his plays was quoted in the same sentence; but second thoughts may be in order. Certainly when these words were written in the summer of 1592, Shakespeare, whoever and wherever he was, was not yet famous.<sup>9</sup> Not only was he totally unknown to the public at this time, if the records are any indication, he would never be known at this level, at least, not as a personality apart from his works (Jiménez: *Eyewitnesses*).<sup>10</sup>

Thus the question of why Greene would spend his final hours in an attempt to destroy the reputation of someone who had no reputation to destroy ceases to be a

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<sup>8</sup> A handful of comedians had achieved widespread popularity, notably the clown Richard Tarleton, but Alleyn was the first dramatic/tragic actor to reach this level.

<sup>9</sup> Nor is it justified to see in the pun-name "Shake-scene" proof in and of itself of Shakespeare's fame at that time, proof so solid that it requires nothing in the way of supportive evidence, of which there is in fact none. E.K. Chambers, one of the most careful scholars of the English stage ever, reluctantly admits in his exhaustive four-volume work, *The Elizabethan Stage* (1923), that on no list of players, or any document that has come through his hands, is there the slightest evidence for Shakespeare's presence anywhere in the London theater community before March 15, 1595. (1.195; 1.199-201) This is significant since, as he also shows, most of the leading actors of this period *were* mentioned in contemporary records.

<sup>10</sup> Even as now, when most moviegoers care little about the names of those who write the screenplays that showcase their favorite stars, so the celebrity of a star performer in the sixteenth-century would far outstrip that of the playwright whose works were his springboard to fame. "Such was Alleyn's fame that in 1594 a play was described as given, not [as was the usual term] by the servants of the Lord Admiral, but by 'Ed. Allen and his Company'" (Bradbrook 198).

problem if it was in fact not Shakespeare, or any other playwright or actor, that Greene was attacking, but the hugely popular Edward Alleyn, who did have a reputation to protect, one that his later pretensions to gentility make clear was important to him.<sup>11</sup>

The pun-name “Shake-scene” may have referred even more immediately to the heavy tread that Alleyn, a big man, was known for; a tread so heavy that upon one occasion it is said that he cracked the boards of the stage floor (Frazer 8). Further, the use of the word “Shake” in a pun-name has turned up in at least two other contemporary publications, giving rise to the natural conjecture that it was often used for this purpose in contemporary jargon. Villains in the anonymous play *Arden of Feversham* (registered with the Stationers, April 3, 1592) are named “Black Will” and “Shake-bag,”<sup>12</sup> while Will Kemp in *Kemp’s Nine Days Wonder* (published in 1600) addresses the “impudent generation of Ballad-makers” (proto-journalists) as “my notable Shakerags.” Here, “rags” would be a reference to the paper used in printing, which was made from rags (and at the same time, a reflection on their beggarly status). Thus a thief could be called “Shake-bag,” a pamphleteer (or beggar) “Shake-rags,” while an actor, particularly one

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<sup>11</sup> Scholars of the theater (such as Muriel Bradbrook) often point to Alleyn as an example of the rise in importance of actors and acting at this time, but although it is true that the reputations of actors did improve during this period, the fact is that Alleyn’s career was unique. No other English actor came even close to his accomplishment in his own time, nor would they for a good two hundred years.

Though Alleyn certainly must have had a gift for acting, it is clear that it was not the actor’s art that was the primary motivating force in his career, since he had almost totally abandoned it by the age of thirty-four. From that time on his wealth was derived from investments in real estate from Sussex to Yorkshire, and by building and successfully managing the Fortune Theater in partnership with Philip Henslowe. By 1604 he could afford to pay his half of the exorbitant Crown fee (£450) that made him and Henslowe Masters of the Royal Game, a position which brought them a lucrative monopoly providing bears and dogs for the Court pastime of bear-baiting. In 1610 he became a churchwarden in Southwark, the tough red-light district where he had made his reputation; and in 1613, built a home for the poor in Dulwich, establishing it as a permanent charity in 1619, himself to be known henceforth as Lord of Dulwich Manor. It was said that he was greatly disappointed not to have achieved knighthood.

Philip Henslowe, Alleyn’s father-in-law, himself never made it past artisan status, nor did any of the long-term sharers of the Lord Chamberlain’s men, later known as the King’s Men, the most successful theater company in that age of great theater; indeed, one of the most successful commercial enterprises of any kind in the first half of the 17th-century. While John Hemmings, Henry Condell, Augustine Phillips, and Thomas Pope, whose names appear again and again in the court records and elsewhere in connection with their business dealings through the Lord Chamberlain’s-King’s Men, achieved an impressive level of financial success, socially they never rose above the level of artisans.

The clearest statement of the animus against actors and the Stage by the Renaissance Establishment can perhaps be glimpsed in the treatment dealt the great French playwright, Molière. Though a favorite and friend of the mightiest of all Renaissance Kings, Louis XIV, Molière was buried at night in squalid secrecy because he died before his family could get a priest to him in time for him to confess the sin of acting and to formally renounce his profession, a requirement placed on actors by the Church if they were to be buried with ordinary decency. If anything, the Reformation attitude was even less accepting.

<sup>12</sup> *Arden of Feversham* is frequently included among the apocryphal plays of Shakespeare on the basis of its style, which lends its villains, *Black Will* and *Shake-bag*, something more than passing interest, since *Arden* was first registered with the Stationers in 1592, only a few months before the name *Shakespeare* first appeared in print on *Venus and Adonis* sometime after April 18, 1593.

that thundered and shook the scenery as did Alleyn, could be called “Shake-scene,”<sup>13</sup> trusting that the audience would grasp the inference.

As for Greene’s parody of the line, “O tiger’s heart, wrapped in a woman’s hide,” substituting “player’s” for “woman’s,” it was in all probability Alleyn himself who made had made the line famous, since it was uttered by the Duke of York in Act I, Scene 4 of *The True Tragedy of Richard, Duke of York* (known in later versions as *Henry VI, Pt. I*),<sup>14</sup> the role that, more than any other in that play, called for Alleyn’s star quality.<sup>15</sup> E.K. Chambers states that, as manager of the Rose, it was, in fact, Edward Alleyn who was responsible for opening the 1592 theater season in February with Robert Greene’s play, *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay*; which places Alleyn and Greene at the same place and the same time in the very situation we see reflected in Greene’s diatribe.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> It is chiefly for this that some have identified Will Kempe as “the upstart crow,” among them the late Oxfordian, Winifred Frazer (*SNL* 10). However, although he achieved great popularity as an actor with the Lord Chamberlain’s Men in the late ’90s, there is no record of Kempe ever acting as a stage manager, clearly the function that most angered Robert Greene.

<sup>14</sup> E.K. Chambers states that *Henry VI, Part I* was played fourteen times at the Rose between March 3, 1592, the date of its first performance as a new play, and June, when all the London theaters were closed until the following December due to the plague; so this line would have been fresh in the minds of playgoers when *Groatsworth* was published three months later, there having been no plays performed during the interim to dim its recall.

<sup>15</sup> A.D. Wraight describes the likely effect of this speech on the audience:

“It is . . . the opening line of the climactic accusation in perhaps the most powerful speech of invective that had, up to that time, ever been heard upon the English stage . . . . In it the captured York, surrounded by his triumphant foes and confronting the bitterest of them, Queen Margaret, scathingly answers her heartless mockery, his passion mounting step by step until, holding out to her the napkin soaked with the blood of his little son, Rutland, he comes to the crowning instance of her unwomanliness:

*Oh, Tiger’s heart, wrapped in a woman hide!*  
*how couldst thou drain the life blood of the child,*  
*To bid the father wipe his eyes withall,*  
*And yet be seen to bear a woman’s face?*

And in the next four lines his self-control breaks, and the rest of the fifty-four lines given in tears. The speech on the stage must have been memorable and the quoted line . . . unforgettable” (196).

<sup>16</sup> Wraight, in her book on Marlowe, goes into convincing detail on the probable additions or alterations made to the script of *Henry VI Part I* in order to take maximum advantage of the tower that had just been built at the back of the stage of the Rose, changes she feels were most likely made by Alleyn in his role as stage manager (196-200). Alleyn, of course, would feel that he knew best what his audiences wanted to see, and would wish, naturally, to take immediate advantage of his new tower as well, and thus may have inserted the new lines without asking the author’s permission.

Following Marlowe’s assassination, the method that would be developed by the Alleyn-Henslowe team at the Rose would come to rely less on the work of first-rate authors, and more on a stable of hack writers, paying them stipends to keep them available, and parceling out work as needed, sometimes to as many as four or five writers to a single play, a process which gave individual playwrights little say over the play’s final form. The Hollywood studios adapted the same practise in the 1940s, and for the same reasons.

Thus we feel secure in identifying the “upstart crow from Greene’s *Groatsworth* as the actor and stage manager Edward Alleyn,” who was, like Aesop’s crow,<sup>17</sup> risen from a prosaic working-class<sup>18</sup> background, and who, “beautified” with the “feathers” cast off peacock-fashion by the playwright—peacock feathers being a reference to the elegant language written for the noblemen that Alleyn played on-stage and possibly as well to the expensive costumes that must have contributed to the impact of his image<sup>19</sup>—roused the wrath of playwright Robert Greene.<sup>20</sup>

Greene was angry at Alleyn and the rest of his acting company because they had failed in some way to give him his due as the true source of their new-found popularity and commercial power.<sup>21</sup> It was for this that, seemingly, Greene spent his final hours on

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<sup>17</sup> As Greene’s classically-educated readers would be aware, the “upstart crow” metaphor was taken from the well-known fable by the ancient Greek Aesop, in which a lowly crow, wishing to attract to himself the respect and admiration reserved for the peacock (sacred to queens because sacred to Juno, queen of queens) dressed himself in some of the peacock’s discarded feathers. Thus arrayed, the foolish crow paraded past the other birds, basking in their envy and respect, but when they realized that the feathers he was sporting weren’t his own, they attacked him, and snatching out the borrowed plumage, left the foolish crow looking even more shabby than before.

<sup>18</sup> *Working class* is perhaps not the precise term that should be used for those members of the English theater and publishing communities that were born into families of yeomen or artisans, but rather than get off on a lengthy side-track on sixteenth-century economics and class distinctions, hopefully this familiar term will indicate an individual who earned his living by his own labor, as opposed to one who made his living by hiring others or by trading commodities. Much is known of Alleyn and his life (Cerasano), and that he rose from this class is not a matter for conjecture.

<sup>19</sup> There were numerous references in the publications of the time to the practice of actors receiving payment in the form of expensive cast-off clothing, one that Greene himself refers to in the first part of *Groatsworth*. Since the kind of clothing that distinguished the nobility was actually forbidden by law to individuals of lower status, how else were actors to get sufficiently impressive costumes for their stage kings and noblemen if not as hand-me-downs from the real thing?

Clothing was a sensitive issue in those days. Dress codes forbidding the wearing of certain fabrics by persons of low degree prescribed the size of ruffs (the biggest for the highest rank, etc.); the metals and jewels allowed for buttons; even certain colors. Like most such efforts, these were probably ineffective, but it is evident that the authorities took them seriously enough to write them into law, while the Puritans prophesied doom for a society that winked at violations.

<sup>20</sup> I am not the only one who believes “Shake-scene” refers to Alleyn. A handful of respected orthodox commentators over the years have urged this likelihood. Most recently it has been put forth by Jay Hoster, in his 1993 *Tiger’s Heart; What Really Happened in the Groat’s Worth of Wit Controversy of 1592*. A.D. Wraight in *In Search of Christopher Marlowe* also makes a very convincing case for Alleyn, a view perpetuated by other Marlovians.

<sup>21</sup> In the *Defense of Conny Catching*, Nashe refers to Greene’s sale of *Orlando Furioso* to two separate companies of players (to Alleyn’s company, and again to the Queen’s Men) at the same time. Nashe justifies this lapse of ethics on the grounds that “there was no more faith to be held with players, then with them that valued faith at the price of a feather:... they were uncertain, variable, time pleasers, men that measured honesty by profit, and that regarded their authors not by desert, but by necessity of time.” In other words, Nashe was saying, Greene was only giving as good as he got. If he was double-dealing with the actors, then it was no more than they deserved. The truth about the authorship of *Orlando* needs some close study. It sure sounds like Marlowe.



earth castigating them and imploring his fellow playwrights to stop writing for them.<sup>22</sup>

Greene's outburst is curious in a number of ways. To us who are used to the ways of a world based on commercial considerations it may seem at first glance the familiar complaint of the artist or the innovator who has lost the rights to his creation to those in a better position to profit from it. But is it? Angry as he is, Greene makes no mention of being cheated out of money, labor, or authorial credit. Instead his rage seems to focus on the actors' *attitudes*; chiefly on their lack of *gratitude*.

Seldom does the down-and-dirty world of commercial transaction—certainly every bit as down and dirty then as now—take notice of such tender considerations of feeling as are implied by the terms used by the angry playwright, terms like “beholding” and “forsaken.” It isn't likely that Greene, who reportedly lived with thieves and prostitutes and was destitute a good deal of the time, would have donated his plays to the actors; yet if he wasn't paid, or paid enough, or perhaps given proper credit, it seems as though his anger would have focused upon the stinginess of the actors, or their thievery, or their false promises—not on their *ingratitude*, a term that implies a level of fellowship, or at least a level of social response considerably removed from that of ordinary commercial enterprise where disagreements are generally reckoned in terms of cheating or violation of contract. If it wasn't because he wasn't being paid enough, then what was the problem? What other complaint could he have had?

In addition it seems an egregious waste of Greene's precious dying breath to demand that his fellow writers, who must continue to earn a living after he's gone, give up this source of income, perhaps the only one they could count on—either a waste of breath, or surprising naiveté. How could Greene, who, we must assume, if we take him seriously, knew what poverty meant, expect his struggling colleagues to take him seriously, that is, unless his diatribe was no more than a blast of hyperbole? But how can anyone be expected to believe that a man in Greene's situation would waste his final hours on empty hyperbole?

The accusation of ingratitude is certainly odd under the circumstances. If it were conventional we could perhaps consider that it was faked for some reason, but being odd it can only be genuine. In fact, the tone and language alone should establish that the author of *Greene's Groatsworth*, whoever he was, was genuinely angry while he was writing this section. Although the anguished tones of the confession that make up the larger part seem more than a little histrionic, there is no phony ring whatsoever to the anger expressed towards the actors and the “upstart crow.” It may actually be one of the few times that genuine emotion was openly expressed in the entire Greene canon.

Greene refers to the upstart crow as a *Johannes fac totum*—meaning a “Jack of all trades”—a term of derision for one who fancies himself capable of everything, most likely

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<sup>22</sup> There is hardly a commentator who doesn't believe that Marlowe is the writer Greene addresses first and at greatest length, while most agree that Nashe is the “young Juvenal” and “byting satirist” addressed next. That George Peele is the third is a matter for greater controversy; the reference to “St. George” is the chief argument for it, though there are other points in his favor as well. It does seem as though Greene was speaking most directly and passionately to Marlowe, turning briefly to Nashe, and then, almost gently, to Peele (or Lodge) as little more than an after-thought.

used by someone who felt that said *factotum* was impinging upon his territory in some way, usurping what he thought to be a duty or role that was rightfully his. What duty or role might it be that would be most likely to be usurped by an actor recently turned manager, a duty or role performed previously by one of the company's most popular playwrights?

Isn't a director a *Johannes factotem*?—particularly when he is also the star actor of the company, engaged to the theater-owner's daughter and, as he moves into ever higher levels of power and control, more likely than not to be taking liberties with the staging and with the lines as written, feeling it within his prerogative to change them for the sake of the production. Wouldn't this be particularly true of one who would soon be working with a team of hacks to provide the scripts for his productions?

Next to nothing has come down to us about how and by whom plays were directed. Every other theatrical function is mentioned, but nothing about that of the director. Still, plays must have directors; someone has to do the blocking, arrange entrances and exits, etc. Lacking any information to the contrary, it would seem logical to assume that in some cases playwrights directed their own works (just as, conversely, modern film directors often write their own screenplays). Was this one of the functions that the increasingly powerful Alleyn, who, born and bred a groundling himself, felt he knew the tastes of the audience he served better than any lord, however talented? Can anyone who has ever had to deal with the mighty egos that inhabit the world of the theater have any doubt?

In any case it must be clear enough that with this so-called first mention of *Shakespeare* there is a mystery right away in who is the real target of the "upstart crow" outburst,<sup>23</sup> and a mystery as well in Greene's accusations, not, as might be expected in a commercial situation involving the sale of plays, of violations of honest business practice, but of what would seem to be a purely social response of *gratitude*. In fact, if gratitude were the issue, one would think that if Greene were the ne'er-do-weel hack writer that he was supposed to be, it should be he who was grateful to the actors, not, as he clearly expects should be the case, the other way round. He should have been grateful as a writer for the opportunity to earn a living by writing and, as an artist, for the chance to see his work brought to life on the stage. That his take on the situation is so much the opposite is—or certainly ought to be—extremely puzzling.

## The Death of Greene

"His Tragical Penitence and Burning Tears"

Yet the mysteries surrounding Greene's farewell pamphlet are as nothing compared with those surrounding his death; which, we might note, was only one of a number of mysterious deaths to affect the London theater and publishing scene in the early 1590s.

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<sup>23</sup> Besides Alleyn, Shakespeare and Will Kemp, there have been other candidates for the "upstart crow" put forward over the years. Christopher Marlowe has been suggested, but again, Marlowe has never been mentioned in the role of manager, and as the evidence (circumstantial, but strong) that it is he whom Greene is primarily addressing in his plea to his fellow playwrights to cease writing for the ungrateful actors, Marlowe himself could hardly be one of the actors he was being warned against.

Among these are the death the following year of Christopher Marlowe, which reads like an episode out of James Bond,<sup>24</sup> and the year after of Marlowe's patron, Lord Strange, whose company produced plays by both Greene and Marlowe; a death of horrid violence, attributed at the time to either witchcraft or poison (Wilson 172). There was the death or disappearance of Thomas Watson in 1592, of Thomas Kyd in 1594, and of Thomas Nashe at some point before 1601; deaths about which we know nothing, all five of these literary figures dead in their early-to-mid-thirties of bizarre, mysterious or unknown causes; deaths that left a singularly barren publishing scene after one of the most intensely creative decades in the history of literature.

Still, of all these departures, Greene's death is the most mysterious, and not just in one way, but in many ways. First and most peculiarly, it's mysterious for the attention it received; not in his case for the lack of attention, as was the case later with Shakespeare, for unlike that most peculiar of all literary deaths, the death of Greene received a great deal of attention. The mystery lies in the nature of that attention.

The death of a popular literary figure in sixteenth-century England usually called forth a rash of memorials. In a tradition that went back in one form or another at least as far as the ancient Greeks, poets and writers responded to the death of one of their fellows with written encomia. Pagan and Christian alike through the centuries have always believed in burying their differences with the deceased along with the body, and in taking the moment of passing as a sacred space in which to affirm all that was noblest and best in the departed. We see much of this during the period in question; not for all celebrities, yet certainly for writers, who were most inclined to memorialize their own.

When Edmund Spenser died in 1599 he was given an elaborate funeral by the Earl of Essex, during the course of which poets showered his coffin with elegies and the pens with which they wrote them. The funeral of playwright Ben Jonson was a splendid affair, followed by publication of memorial works, with many honorific references in current letters and journals (Riggs 348, Gayley 195). Even the much maligned Christopher Marlowe was mourned in print within weeks of his death.

Yet when the most popular writer of his day, the author of one of the stage's most popular plays (*Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay*) and one of the most accomplished poets of the 1580s died in September of 1592, it produced a rash of jeering pamphlets that sound for all the world like jackals howling over the grave of a dead lion. In pamphlet after pamphlet, Greene's notorious lifestyle and the lurid details of his death were played for all they were worth by his fellow pamphleteers, while for the most part the quality of his writing seems all but forgotten. As puzzled scholars have noted, even those pamphlets which claimed to be written in his defense sound strangely jocular in tone.

This response to the death of an excellent writer and fine poet is so anomalous, so utterly bizarre, that it demands an explanation; yet scholars, bemused perhaps by the confusion surrounding every aspect of Greene's life, do little more than cluck disapprovingly at the posthumous pamphleteers, calling them "heartless," "vindictive,"

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<sup>24</sup> Marlowe's death is detailed in numerous works of more or less orthodox scholarship, among them: *In Search of Christopher Marlowe*, by A.D. Wraight; *Christopher Marlowe in London* by Mark Eccles; and *The Murder of Christopher Marlowe*, by Calvin Hoffman. My own view is presented in pamphlet format: *The Great Reckoning: Who Killed Christopher Marlowe, and Why*. (1997, 2004)

“sour” and “in questionable taste.” Not one that I read pondered openly on this extremely peculiar and unique violation of literary tradition and good manners. After all, where there are so many mysteries, what’s one more?

Upon further thought an interesting possibility suggested itself. Could it be that all of this was because *no one had actually died*? That, for some reason, Greene had only *pretended to die*? After all, there were so many strange things going on in the London literary scene at that time. Marlowe’s death leaves many questions unanswered. There was the Martin Mar-prelate controversy and the fact that apparently not then and certainly not now does anyone know the whole truth about him, including who he was. There was the imprisonment and torture of Thomas Kyd, the weird murder the following year of Marlowe’s patron, Lord Strange. There was the mysterious “War of the Theaters” and the lost play, *The Isle of Dogs*, that closed not only the theater that produced it, but all the theaters, or at least threatened to, landing author Ben Jonson and two others in jail, yet its subject and the authorities’ reasons for suppressing it have not survived. In fact there’s a very great deal about the Early Modern theater that hasn’t survived.

Still, why would Greene fake his own death? Surely he would be found out. Did the authorities have him transported, as has been suggested that they did with Marlowe? Greene was controversial, but not it would seem in any way that might be considered politically dangerous. Yet something of the sort would go far to explain the bizarre response of his fellow pamphleteers.

## Enter Gabriel Harvey

It was the Cambridge don, Gabriel Harvey, known to modern scholars primarily for his early friendship with Edmund Spenser, who announced Greene’s death at the end of the plague-haunted summer of 1592. In the so-called “Second Letter,” dated September 5 and purportedly on the streets within days of Greene’s burial, Harvey claimed to have his information from Greene’s own landlady, whom he had graced with a visit the day after Greene’s death; noting, with the concern of a poor university don over expenditure, the cost to the penny of every expense connected with Greene’s demise, including the nice touch that Greene had managed to persuade his benefactress to crown his dying head with a poet’s bay wreath. Though Harvey neglects to give us the price of the wreath, he does inform us of the lady’s name, “Mrs. Isam.”<sup>25</sup>

Harvey’s pamphlet was soon followed by even more intimate details from printer Cuthbert Burby. These were followed by others—eight publications altogether, eight that we know about at any rate—over a period of two years following Greene’s passing,

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<sup>25</sup> This first published notice of Greene’s death, purportedly written the day after his funeral, was the most vituperative towards Greene and his lifestyle of all the posthumous pamphlets. Harvey’s harsh attitude towards Greene was later explained by Nashe as caused by some insulting lines in Greene’s pamphlet from earlier that year, *A Quip for an Upstart Courtier*, but this hardly seems likely since the supposed cause of Greene’s anger at the Harveys was a full two years old by the time he got around to retaliating. In addition, when scholars finally tracked down an early edition of *Quip* that contained the supposedly horrific jibe, it was clearly too mild in nature to have caused anything of the sort, adding another layer to the mystery.

some signed by real names, some only by initials.<sup>26</sup> Reading them in sequence, the story appears to evolve from pamphlet to pamphlet, as though each writer were building on the tale told in the previous pamphlet, although often ignoring or contradicting each others' details, leaving three centuries of scholars at a total loss.

### “A certain undercurrent of humor”

Such anomalies and contradictions are infinitely more understandable if perceived as simply fiction added to fiction added to more fiction, either by a handful of pamphleteers playing can-you-top-this with a lucrative hoax, or by a single author using a variety of names. It also explains the strangely heartless tone of the posthumous pamphlets, and the fact that in places there even seems to be a suspicion of suppressed glee.<sup>27</sup> It would

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<sup>26</sup> The eight publications that refer to Greene over the period of the two years following his death:

- *Four Letters*, by Gabriel Harvey. A rerun of his “Second Letter,” with more details on Greene’s life and death.
- *The Repentance of Robert Greene*, including “The Life and Death of Robert Greene, Maister of Artes,” an unsigned biography of Greene, published sometime in late ‘92. Cuthbert Burby, Greene’s erstwhile publisher, turns his discussion of Greene into a moral tale, for although his life was “odious to God and offensive to men,” his repentance at the end was most edifying as described by Burby in what appears to be an eye-witness report, though quite unlike Harvey’s, and with yet another version of Greene’s farewell letter to his wife.
- *Piers Pennilesse*, by Thomas Nashe, the preface to the 2nd edition, in which Nashe protests his innocence of writing *Groatsworth*, published in late ‘92.
- *Kinde Heart’s Dreame*, by Henry Chettle; entered with the Stationer’s Register in December 1592; probably published shortly after. Chettle offers a vision of Greene’s ghost demanding revenge on Harvey via Nashe, and protests his own innocence.
- *Strange News of the Intercepting of Certain Letters* by Thomas Nashe, entered with the Stationers on January 13, 1592-3: an extremely popular work that went through five editions in two years. In it Nashe terms Harvey’s eye-witness account of Greene’s death as “palpable lies, damned lies, lies as big as one of the Guards’ chines of beef.”
- *Greene’s Funerall*, by R.B., published two years after Greene’s death. R.B. purports to defend Greene despite the fact that his life was a “loathsome puddle of filthiness.”
- *Greene’s Vision*; published 1593: two epistles, one signed by publisher, Thomas Newman, the other signed by Greene, purporting to have been “written at the instant of his death.” Aware that he will no doubt be charged with forgery, Newman asserts that although it is true that “many have published repentances under his name, but none more unfeigned than this, being every word of his own: his own phrase, his own method.” Since it promises that a forthcoming work will show even more believably his entire reformation, it seems likely that, as Crupi holds, it was “written around 1590 but for some reason never published.”
- Thomas Bowes, in the preface to his 1594 translation of the second part of Primaudaye’s *The French Academy*, mentions Greene in the same distasteful terms as Harvey.

<sup>27</sup> Alexander Grosart, unusually perceptive in this case, recognizes in Nashe’s response to Greene’s death “a certain undercurrent of humor.” And how else can we explain Harvey’s ghoulish lack of compunction in punning on Greene’s name, not once but several times, in the midst of detailed descriptions of his death agonies? (*Harvey* 22)

explain why most of the names involved are puns,<sup>28</sup> and might help to suggest why so many features of Harvey's version of Greene's death repeat almost verbatim published accounts of the death of the popular stage commedian Tarleton in 1588.<sup>29</sup>

It explains as well the absurdly melodramatic nature of the deathbed scene in *Groatsworth*, with Greene composing letters to his wife and his fellow playwrights as he was dying, a gross improbability which all but a few commentators, from his contemporaries on down to the present, have found impossible to swallow, preferring to regard it as a forgery by another writer, usually Nashe or Chettle<sup>30</sup>; though none can explain to anyone's satisfaction why in the world either they or their printers would willingly commit such an astonishing impropriety. (See Appendix E, page 58.)

Yet even as this hypothesis solved one set of questions it raised others; chief among them why the popular Greene should choose to end his successful career at the age of thirty-four in this peculiar fashion.

Would the biographers perhaps have a clue?

### Mysteries of Greene's Biography

In the most recent Greene biography, author Charles Crupi, writing in 1986, devotes his opening pages to defining the problems that confront Greene's biographers, chief among them that, although Greene left us the richest biography of all Elizabethan writers, apart from one or two (relatively) unambiguous facts, the entire body of this biography comes

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<sup>28</sup> Greene's son, *Fortunatus* (or *Infortunatus*, as Harvey would have it), his wife, *Doll* (a stand-in, a fake person); *Mrs. Isam* (Mrs. Is-am) introduced by Harvey. Only *Mrs. Appleby*, also introduced by Harvey but mentioned by no one else, is no pun, though she may serve some other humorous function, no longer apparent.

<sup>29</sup> Tarleton died in 1588, reportedly at the home of his mistress, one Em Ball, the sister of an underworld figure. Harvey appears to make use of this in his description of Greene's death, asking who has not heard of Greene's "employing of Ball (surnamed Cutting Ball) to . . . guard him in danger of arrests; his keeping of the foresaid Ball's sister, a sorry ragged queane, of whom he had his base son Infortunatus Greene." It is, perhaps, within the realm of possibility that Greene took over as Em Ball's lover after the death of Tarleton; but just barely; and if such was the case, it seems even more unlikely that Harvey would have refrained from further comment.

Tarleton's death, which occurred September 3, 1588, four years to the day before Greene's death, was followed by a rash of anonymous pamphlets, called "repentances," very similar in tone and content to those that followed the demise of Greene, among them *Tarleton's Repentance, or his farewell to his friends in his sickness a little before his death*, published in October 1589, and the last one, *Tarleton's News Out of Purgatory*, ent/SR June 1590.

Tarleton was perhaps the most famous actor of the Elizabethan period until the advent of Edward Alleyn. A talented comedian with a gift for extemporizing, he was said to be able to joke the Queen out of a bad mood. He was the foremost actor with the Queen's men, for whom he played a leading role in *The Famous Victories of Henry the Fifth* (doubtless that of Derrick, forerunner of Falstaff). Chambers sees Tarleton's death in 1588 as marking the end for the Queen's Men (4.109).

<sup>30</sup> Not all scholars have felt the musings of mistrust while reading Greene's death-bed prose. Greene's Victorian editor, Alexander Grosart (1905) speaks of his "tragical penitence and burning tears." For Grosart, "sincerity and reality pulsate in every word, . . . and I for one do not envy the man who can read them with dry eyes even at this late date,"—if nothing else, a moving tribute to Greene's evocative powers. However, another Victorian, John Addington Symonds, felt less compassion: "Greene deserves almost unmitigated reprobation."

to us from Greene himself. And never was there a more self-revelatory writer than Robert Greene.<sup>31</sup> Over and over he repeats, either in brief tales framed by a longer story, or, towards the end of his career, as the frame story itself, the same basic plot, based on what Crupi calls the “prodigal son theme,” which he differentiates from its predecessors by little more than a change of names and minor details.

According to the scholars, Greene’s autobiography begins to surface in the increasingly personal versions of the prodigal son in which a young man, raised by sober and industrious parents, turns to evil companions, drink and blasphemy. At one point he reforms by marrying a decent woman, has a child by her, then casts them both off in favor of a heartless siren who tempts him to his destruction.

Much as earlier in his career the male character gradually usurped the role of protagonist from the female character, gradually the role of the father in the prodigal son story darkens, until in the final version, as it appears in *Groatsworth*, he has metamorphosed into a stingy old money-lender while the prodigal has blossomed into an artistic book-lover, more sinned against than sinning, to whom is left but a single coin in his father’s will (a groat), while the rest of the old man’s ill-gotten fortune goes to the son who shares his parent’s materialism. Hints along the way that these are but fictionalized versions of Greene’s own life story are finally confirmed with his confession in *Groatsworth*, that this is, indeed, his own story that he has been portraying all along.<sup>32</sup>

The problem for us and for all commentators is, can we believe him? Certainly it is not possible to believe everything he says. And if not all, then how much and exactly what? And if we can’t believe him, then why in the world does he lie about himself in such an absurdly degrading manner?

Efforts to establish the truth of the details flung out by Greene in his apparently hectic self-irrevelations led scholars such as J. Churton Collins, working at the turn of the twentieth century, to dig deep into university, parish, tax and other records in London,

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<sup>31</sup> Crupi opens his biography of Greene with the following paragraph:

In *An Account of the English Dramatic Poets* (1651), Gerard Langbaine began his section on Robert Greene by describing his doubts about his source—and then proceeded to quote the source verbatim as the basis of Greene’s life and career. Langbaine here set a pattern that has continued into the twentieth-century: generations of scholars express uncertainty, for example, about the authenticity of the autobiographical pamphlets published just after Greene’s death while relying on them for details about Greene’s life; or they deplore the irresponsible attribution of anonymous plays to Greene while adding others to the list; or they argue for skepticism toward what Greene’s contemporaries said of him while using their comments to analyze his character. For perhaps no other Elizabethan writer, even Shakespeare or Marlowe, do fact and conjecture so tightly intertwine. On the surface is a clear image of Greene, passed on from book to book for the past four centuries. Beneath the surface lie important questions that remain unanswered, and perhaps unanswerable. The sources of Greene’s life are both unusually rich and unusually untrustworthy; too suspicious to be used without reservations, they are also, *for us as for Langbaine*, too suggestive not to be used at all. (1, emphasis added)

<sup>32</sup> Attempts to connect Greene’s own history with the apparently autobiographical elements of his works are troubled by the fact that the prodigal son theme, complete with the desertion of the faithful betrothed for a harlot, was already a primary element of his first work, *Mamillia*, which was written by 1580, a good four years before scholars agree that his marriage could have taken place (Crupi 9).

Oxford, Cambridge, Norwich, and Norfolk, places where Greene hints in his works that he once lived. Since the name was so common, Collins found himself “involved in such a labyrinth of Robert Greenes” (B1), that finally, overwhelmed by details of a dozen lives all lived by someone named Robert Greene, Green, or Grene, both Collins and his readers are left no wiser than before.

Greene claimed university degrees at points in his pamphlets, and records from both Cambridge and Oxford Universities reveal that a Robert Greene did obtain degrees from both universities (see Appendix B, page 45); but there is nothing beyond the name itself and dates that fit his bio that solidly connect either or both of these to the author. They provide probability, not certainty.

As for his years in London, one would think that a man who had become so well known to the reading public would have left a substantial paper trail in the court or parish records. It should be no more difficult to locate public records of the misdeeds of this notorious deadbeat, rakehell and confidante of criminals than writers like Thomas Watson, Ben Jonson, Anthony Mundy, George Peele, and Thomas Lodge, who all left at least something of a paper trail, yet apart from a handful of mentions in parish and tax subsidy record that could not possibly all relate to the same man, there is nothing. Even writers with brief careers like Marlowe and Kyd are better documented.

In all this mess there are but three documented facts that would seem to solidly connect the real Robert Greene with the works with which his name is associated. First: the preface to his first pamphlet, *Mamillia*, entered with the Stationers (for the second time) in September 1583, was signed by Greene, “from my study in Clare Hall, the 7th of July” (oddly, *the very same day* that the Cambridge University records show that the sizar, Robert Greene, received his MA from St. John’s).<sup>33</sup> Second: in the list of disbursements in the household account book of Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester, for June 1585, is found the following entry: “Given by your lordship’s commandment to one Robert Grene that presented a booke to your lordship at Wanstead viij Junij} vli. [= £5].” The book in question must have been the pamphlet *Planetomachia*, dedicated to Dudley, for which “Grene” received the generous acknowledgement of £5, a substantial sum in those days (Adams 259). Third: there is a burial record for one *Fortunatus Greene* in Shoreditch, August 12, 1593 (Crupi 4, 5, 9).

Items of his biography are suspicious, such as the names of his wife and child. He calls his wife “Doll,” a 16th-century equivalent of “Babe” or “Chick”—Shakespeare’s *Doll Tear-sheet* comes to mind.<sup>34</sup> As for his supposed illegitimate son by the sister of the underworld character “Cutting Ball,” referred to as *Fortunatus*, people did name their children such names in those days, but not very often. It could be argued that Greene was exceptional in this as in other matters, and so might have chosen a fanciful name for his son, even as the flower children of the 1960s gave their children names like *Sunshine* or *Ecstasy*. Still, considering the ironic nature of the name, perhaps we should take both that and *Doll* with a grain or two of salt. *Fortunatus* in particular calls for further consideration.

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<sup>33</sup> A *sizar* was a student who received his education in exchange for work in the dorms, kitchens and laundries of the university. Several of the writers with questionable biographies matriculated as sizars at one of the universities.

<sup>34</sup> A doll is also a stand-in of sorts, a fake person.



Descriptions of Greene that have come down through the years lack believability. Lacking descriptions for so many writers of the time, scholars have been pleased to have at least his basic description as provided by his fellows: long hair, pointy red beard, disheveled appearance, green cloak. The problem with these descriptions lies in the fact that, when taken together, they don't add up. Two described his hair as disheveled. Otherwise not one of the descriptions matches another.<sup>35</sup>

As you can see, the whole thing is very confused. The scholars make the best of it they can, but they are hard-pressed to make sense of it for the reader, for as it stands, no amount of fiddling can bring the pieces of the puzzle together in any way that creates a thoroughly believable picture. And, unfortunately for the truth, Shakespeare scholars, whose aim in researching Greene is generally to provide an overview of the literary scene just preceding The Great One, are inclined to take what facts they choose from the groaning smorgasbord of Greene details without bothering to the many contradictions and ambiguities.

### Mysteries of Greene's Career

In turning from his biography to an examination of Greene's work, we find ourselves surrounded by an even more puzzling set of mysteries. Despite the plethora of self-revelations displayed in his writing, we confront much the same difficulty we have with William of Stratford in that the nature of his works does not match his biography.

The picture Greene paints of his life is of a man driven by a compulsion to booze it up, hang out with drunks, whores and thieves, and waste his slender substance and himself in riotous living. He accuses himself, via his protagonists, of blasphemy and the most fearsome depravity<sup>36</sup> (though without any substantiating details) all enthusiastically

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<sup>35</sup> Harvey seems to know a lot about Greene, although the "ruffianly hair" and "unseemly apparel" of his description don't give us much in the way of a real picture.

Chettle's description is distinguished by its total lack of defining detail. His portrait of Greene is of "a man of indifferent years, of face amiable, of body well-proportioned, his attire after the habit of a scholarlike gentleman, only his hair was somewhat long;" which could fit just about anyone on two legs. Nashe gives us the single identifying characteristic, a sharply pointed red beard. (It should be noted that Nashe finds hair, particularly beards and mustaches, to be excellent material for jests, so reader beware.)

The opinions of Thomas Bowes, last of the posthumous commentators, should be interesting since he took his MA at Clare Hall the same year as Greene, so that we might expect him to give us a more exact description of the famous writer; but Bowes as well does nothing more than reiterate Greene's own description of himself. This is not to deny that Bowes knew Greene the sizar personally, as classmates he would have to (Clare Hall had approximately 125 students in residence in 1583, and graduated twelves with MAs), but it does nothing to solidify our faith in the sizar as Robert Greene the notorious pamphleteer.

<sup>36</sup> In *Quip for an Upstart Courtier*, "Velvet Breeches," another of Greene's self-portraits as prodigal son, is described by the respectable "Cloth Breeches" as coming from Italy "accompanied by a multitude of abominable vices" such as "vainglory, self love, sodomy and strange poisonings." Greene's bad reputation comes purely from his own renunciation pamphlets, and from the pamphlets published about him after his death. Cuthbert Burby's biographical pamphlet explained how university friends led Greene to Italy and Spain where he "saw and practised such villany as is abominable to declare." Elsewhere he's found guilty of "intemperance, licentiousness, irreverence for religion, and finding vent in coarse and revolting blasphemies." None of his contemporaries ever get any more specific than this. Indeed, if we can believe them, none seems to have known him well enough to have seen his intemperate and licentious behavior, or heard for themselves his coarse and revolting blasphemies.

corroborated by his fellow pamphleteers. Yet, one is forced to consider how they came by their intimate knowledge of Greene, since to a man they disdain any sort of personal acquaintance. Nashe and Chettle alone admit, reluctantly, to knowing him personally, though, as they make clear, not intimately<sup>37</sup> and since there was hardly anything that any of them said about him that he hadn't said first himself, it seems fair to suggest that most what they knew—perhaps all of it—came from Greene himself.

In his so-called renunciation pamphlets from 1590 on, Greene revels in self-condemnation for his “blasphemy” and for the depravity of his earlier “love pamphlets,” yet these not only show not the slightest trace of bawdry or of blasphemy, but, in fact, in sharp contrast to the writings of Jonson or Nashe, for instance, everything he ever wrote stands at the opposite end of the moral or ethical spectrum.<sup>38</sup> There is no foul

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It is interesting that these are the same faults laid at the doors of two other university wits, Christopher Marlowe and George Peele. Peele's most recent biographer, David Horne, goes to lengths to clear his subject of his 400-year-old bad reputation, claiming that there is no foundation in fact to justify it. According to Horne it was based on the wanton misuse of Peele's name following his early death, including a popular jest book wherein Peele, like the comedian Tarleton before him, was made the up-to-date protagonist of all kinds of ancient comic fables. Not surprisingly, the truth about Peele seems to have been far more sober and sad. More intensive research into the life of Christopher Marlowe as well seems to show that his reputation as a brawler, atheist, and government spy, is not justified by the records.

Such statements should raise the question of why such similarly negative reputations were so easily attached to these writers? Were their lives truly “careless,” a contemporary assessment so easily accepted by Crupi and dozens of other academics? Or was a life devoted to writing entertaining fiction seen by the increasingly puritanical English establishment of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries as, *ipso facto*, a wasted life and writers of fiction as, *ipso facto*, wastrels and sots?

<sup>37</sup> Despite Harvey's apparently detailed description in *Four Letters*, he claims that he was “altogether unacquainted” with Greene and “never once saluted him by name.” In *Kind Heart's Dream*, Chettle imagines meeting the ghosts of four recently departed Londoners, one of whom “I supposed to be Robert Greene, maister of Arts”; which would seem to indicate that Chettle had never actually met Greene in the flesh, or at least wants us to think so.

Although Nashe's first published work was the preface to Greene's *Menaphon* in 1589, in 1592/3 in *Strange News* he claimed that, “never was I Greene's companion any more than for a carouse or two;” and “a thousand there be that have more reason to speak in his behalf than I, who, since I first knew him about town, have been two years together and not seen him.”

In *Greene's Funeralls*, R.B. wrote:

Greene is the pleasing object of an eye.  
Greene pleased the eyes of all that looked upon him.  
Greene is the ground of every painter's die.  
Greene gave the ground to all that wrote upon him.  
Nay more the men, that so eclipsed his fame  
Purloined his plumes, can they deny the same?

R.B.'s rave is the only statement by a contemporary that doesn't make it clear either that he never met the man, or that he hadn't seen him in a long time.

<sup>38</sup> J.M. Brown (1877): “If Greene is to be known by his works alone there are not many blots on his escutcheon; compared with the playwrights who follow him, he is purity itself.” Collins (1905): “He was of Shakespeare's race, not Marlowe's or Peele's. . . . [and] kept throughout a purer moral tone and simpler style than any of his contemporaries. . . . His writings had been Puritanic in their scrupulous abstinence from anything approaching profanity and impurity.” Grosart (1886):

language, no smut, no gross imagery, and, except for several outbursts against actors, and a mildly satirical poke at the Harveys in *A Quip for an Upstart Courtier*, no real anger directed towards authority or any other political group; nothing at least that calls our attention.

The only thing that could possibly be condemned is the frequency with which Greene's heroes and heroines are romantically or sexually attracted to inappropriate partners: their husband's rivals, various out-and-out villains, even their own children, siblings and parents (though always the true relationship is hidden from them); but such things were the stock in trade of works like these, and could be found as well in Sidney's *Arcadia* and Spenser's *Faerie Queene*; and of course in the Greek and Roman myths as told by Ovid and others. They were also stock elements of the Greek romance tales, on which much of Greene's story-telling was based.

Even accepting that a writer can create a persona that is the opposite of his or her true self, it still doesn't explain why Greene swore to stop doing something that he never did in the first place, i.e. write obscene and blasphemous pamphlets. Nor does it satisfy a persistent wonder at the possible reasons why a writer would purposely demean himself in this way. Already the burgeoning middle class was giving rise to the English passion for respectability—if such a thing can be called a passion. How is it that this writer, apparently born to humble working-class parents, would wish to tell such awful truths about himself? How could he? Why should he? Or, if he's not telling the truth, then why in the world does he create such a repellent persona?

The only logical conclusion is that for some reason he is playing a part, either to sell pamphlets or for some reason or reasons as yet unfathomed.

Added to these mysteries is the complete lack of any mention, by himself or by others, of his career as a dramatist until his final year as a writer. Crupi points this out: "We do not know . . . when his involvement with the theater began, how long it lasted, how many plays he wrote, or in what order he wrote the plays now assigned to him . . . . Greene himself makes "no unambiguous reference to writing plays before the repentance pamphlets" (18). Burby said in his posthumous pamphlet that Greene's "pen in his lifetime pleased you as well on the Stage as in the Stationer's Shops," but no play with his name on it was published before his death; and, although there were a number of allusions to the theatre and to actors by Greene in his later pamphlets (and by Nashe) that with hindsight can be seen to refer to his activity as a playwright, there were no direct references to him as such before *Groatsworth*.

Since his death, over forty plays, either anonymous or by disputed authors, have been assigned to Greene, either by his contemporaries, or in modern times by various commentators, chiefly on the basis of style, a number of which had to have been written

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We can find no other author whose writings and life are so opposed to each other, so decidedly contradictory and seemingly irreconcilable, as Greene's. A sensualist and a cynic in his life, Greene was ideally pure and edifying in his writings . . . . It is with difficulty we are brought to believe that a man possessing such exalted views on the destiny of mankind and moral duty . . . could spend whole days in the filthy dens of vice, surrounded by half-drunken, admiring boon companions and courtesans. (xx)

Most Greene biographers have expressed the same thought in similar terms.

as far back as the mid-80s. Why should Greene, who appears to be so open about the rest of his personal affairs, remain silent for so long about his involvement with the theater? Surely not out of delicacy (in two separate pamphlets he compares writing plays to the feeding of swine) since he didn't hesitate to accuse himself of far worse things!

From a rather tepid start, Greene's works became more and more dramatic over the twelve years of his career. The first, *Mamillia*, is relatively tame; apart from protracted scenes of anguished internal debate, not a whole lot happens. Gradually he picks up steam; wisps of plot begin to develop, and characters gain dimension. Right from the start he shows a journalist's awareness of what brings 'em back for more, as most of his pamphlets end with a catchy come-on for his next opus. Even in *Groatsworth*, he promises—with his last dying breath—more to come should he survive.<sup>39</sup>

By the coney-catching pamphlets, although they still lack what we would consider any real plot, much real-time drama is generated as Greene puts his readers on tenterhooks awaiting immanent news of his death or dismemberment at the hands of underworld characters out for revenge over his revelation of their trade secrets, all to end at last in a splendid display of histrionics, with the author pausing between fatal spasms to scribble his blast at the upstart crowd while begging his landlady to bury him with a crown of bays. Truly the distinction between fiction and reality is so blurred by this time that it becomes totally arbitrary where the hapless critic will choose to draw the line.<sup>40</sup>

### Mysteries of Greene's Style

Still, of all the mysteries relating to Greene's career, the greatest have to do with his style. Scholars never fail to note his reckless misuse of classical references, but in so doing they often miss the extensive fund of classical learning on which he drew. Clearly well-educated in ancient literature and history, it is pointless to play the critic and call Greene's accuracy into question as he clearly has no intention of sticking to the facts, but borrows from any and all sources whatever name, locale, event or fanciful detail on the behavior of panthers will serve to enhance his tale. To Greene, his fund of classical learning is of value only as one of the sources upon which he draws to achieve his goals. This is truly a unique use of an expensive university education; particularly one obtained

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<sup>39</sup> A typical example comes from the last page of *Never Too Late*: "the Palmer set forward towards Venice: what there he did, or how he lived, when I am advertised (good Gentlemen) I will send you tidings."

<sup>40</sup> "Whether he actually had first-hand experience [with underworld characters] has been much debated" (Crupi 16). J.M. Brown, writing in 1877, thought the character of Falstaff was based on Robert Greene. Certainly it cannot be denied that Greene's death evokes the death of Falstaff, with his landlady (in the role of Mistress Quickly) giving the characters on-stage (Harvey, Chettle, Nashe, etc.) an ever so affecting description of the progress of *rigor mortis*; nor does "Mrs. Isam" ring any truer than "Mistress Quickly." That Greene and Falstaff both showed symptoms of dropsy has also been noted.

by the hours of scullery duty required of a poor sizar. It is, in fact, a far more astonishing example of profligacy than his purported lifestyle.<sup>41</sup>

Further, as with Shakespeare, Greene exhibits the aristocratic point of view in everything he writes, something that Greene scholars, less threatened than their Shakespeare colleagues by the issues this raises, freely admit has them baffled. Many have tried to find some explanation for the dichotomy between Greene's humble background as the son of a saddler (or perhaps a cordwainer?) from Norwich (or perhaps York?) and the politically and religiously conservative tone of Greene's works, his knowledge of aristocratic customs and mores, his crypto-Catholicism, his intimate knowledge of purely aristocratic pastimes such as hawking, his fascination with the kinds of stories and issues that were plentiful in courtier literature but rarely elsewhere.

Ideas for resolving the mystery of Greene's aristocratic viewpoint and style have been put forward by various scholars, but nothing that has had enough weight to stick.<sup>42</sup> Like Shakespeare's mysterious knowledge of Italy and the French Court, Greene mentions in passing his travels to foreign lands, particularly to Italy (where, he never fails to confess, he adopted "abominable vices"), but researchers have found no evidence whatsoever that anyone with his name and description ever set foot outside England.

Another mystery of Greene's style is that it changes at times, though not through any natural process like that of increasing maturity. Such changes as the gradual lessening of his use of self-conscious euphuisms with a corresponding increase in plot and character development are evidence of a natural growth. Yet from time to time there will seem to be another and altogether different voice, sometimes an astonishing shift in language and viewpoint, sometimes even what might be seen as regressions in technical skill.<sup>43</sup>

The scholars deal with these shifts in various ways. Some attribute the post-humously printed renunciation pamphlets to living writers who adopted Greene's name, knowing he was dead and so unable to stop them. They explain the euphuistic style of his early romances as Greene imitating Lyly, then at the height of his popularity. The Marlovian tone of the early plays is more difficult, since Greene was older than Marlowe and already well-established as a writer when Marlowe appeared on the scene; but his perceived unstable personality allows them to imagine him enviously attempting to duplicate Marlowe's style, failing the test of public opinion, at which point, steeped in bitterness, he returned to his previous style. His apparent wholesale borrowings from Pettie, Lyly, Marlowe, and others, of plots, characters, incidents, and voice, have caused

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<sup>41</sup> As opposed to Ben Jonson who was markedly proud of his own fund classical learning and scrupulous about how he used it.

<sup>42</sup> Crupi's take on this is that it was Greene's "attempt to present himself as a spokesman for the old social hierarchies" and elsewhere: "Greene seems to escape his Norwich origins both by defying bourgeois attitudes in his personal life and by identifying with the older attitudes of nobility and gentry in his writing"—a theory that makes Greene into some sort of mental sphinx, sporting an aristocrat's head on the body of a plebian.

<sup>43</sup> More specifically, three grouped close together towards the end of his career: *The Spanish Masquerado* (1589), *The Royal Exchange* (1590), and *A Maiden's Dreame* (1591).

scholars to regard him as the worst possible plagiarist on the one hand, even as they applaud him for his originality and inventiveness on the other.<sup>44</sup>

At intervals during the seven years (1583-1590) that John Lyly was writing plays for Paul's Boys to perform at Court, both Robert Greene and Thomas Lodge published books and pamphlets in Lyly's euphuistic style, and/or with the name of Lyly's chief creation, *Euphues*, in the titles, or as an integral part of the text, all without any reference to Lyly.<sup>45</sup> Why did Lyly sit silent, allowing this to happen, saying nothing?<sup>50</sup>

No one denies that the author of *Euphues* was brilliant, erudite, gifted with verbal charm and great energy. Clearly ambitious for recognition, he was the instigator of a literary revolution, possibly the first of its sort in England's history. Why then when he lost his Court appointment as manager of Paul's boys in 1590 at the age of thirty-two did he not strike out immediately into the burgeoning new world of commercial publishing and make his own bread and butter, or some of it at least, by following up his previous success with more adventures of the character he'd made so popular? More, why did he allow others to use his famous character in their own works, while writing nothing himself but pathetic letters to the Queen, begging for a Court position?<sup>46</sup>

Yet these are the least of the mysteries that surround the literary voice of Robert Greene. The greater mystery lies with his multi-faceted similarity to the writer who would be making his debut upon the stage of English literature within weeks of Greene's dramatic exit.

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<sup>44</sup> Here the sphinx has the head of a highly original writer and the body of a plagiarist.

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- Greene's: *Euphues, His Censure to Philautus*; 1587.
- In Greene's *Perimedes the Blacksmith*, 1588, a dedicatory poem in French by one J. Eliot has the line, "Euphues qui a bien connu...."
- Greene's *Menaphon*, pub. Aug. 1589, is subtitled "Camilla's Alarum to Slumbering Euphues."
- Lodge's *Rosalynd* is subtitled, "Euphues Golden Legacie, found after his death in his Cell at Silexedra." It was first published in 1590, with a second edition published in 1592 (while Lodge was away at sea).
- Lodge's *Euphues Shadow*; edited by Greene; dedicated "To Slumbering Euphues in his Cell at Silexedra," was entered with the Stationers in February of 1592. It too was published while Lodge was away at sea.
- The correspondences linking the most popular works of Lyly, Lodge, and Greene (and George Pettie before Lyly) are too many and complex to even begin to list here. A line by line analysis would probably be the only way to do this subject justice.

<sup>46</sup> The only work recorded for Lyly for the last 18 years of his life was sitting for Parliament several times in districts controlled by Lord Burghley.

## Greene and Shakespeare

“In style . . . Greene is the father of Shakespeare:” J.M. Browne (1877)

“We open Greene’s comedies and we are in the world of Shakespeare.”  
J. Churton Collins (1885)

The study of Robert Greene abounds with quotes such as these by two of his early biographers. Later biographers show less emphasis, accustomed as they have become to the multiplicity of similarities between what we might call Greene’s mature voice—the one he used when he wasn’t supposedly imitating Lyly or Marlowe or Lodge—and the voice we know as early Shakespeare.

In Greene’s mid-career tales we are in the same landscape as in early Shakespeare, that of *Cymbaline*, *Pericles*, and *A Winter’s Tale*, with shipwrecks and deserted coasts populated by queens and princes of exotic lands, disguised as shepherdesses and fishermen.<sup>47</sup> Parallels of style and content might be garnered by the score. However, unlike the apparent imitation by Greene of Lyly and Marlowe, Shakespeare’s dates prevent them from explaining it as Greene imitating Shakespeare, so they are forced to explain it as Shakespeare imitating Greene.

Thus the scholars, at a loss for any other explanation, would have Shakespeare adopting Greene’s style, just as Greene got his start with Lyly’s style, a plausible enough explanation. That Shakespeare went so far as to take whole plots, characters, names and all, from Greene, well, you know, those crazy plagiarizing sixteenth-century poets!<sup>48</sup> After all, Greene had done the same thing to Lyly, hadn’t he? And Shakespeare, the worst plagiarist of the lot, not only pirated from Greene (who at least was dead by that time) he stole an entire plot, characters and all, from Thomas Lodge who was still very much alive.<sup>49</sup> What’s more, some of Lodge sounds identical to Greene.<sup>50</sup> So we have:

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<sup>47</sup> This, of course, can only be seen in light of a rational dating of the plays, whereby obviously immature plays like *Pericles* and *Cymbaline* are placed where they belong, at the beginning of the chronology, not at the end.

<sup>48</sup> All commentators agree that Greene’s *Pandosto* is the source of *A Winter’s Tale*, but, once again, upon examination it is seen to be far more than just a source, for the plots are identical.

<sup>49</sup> Lodge’s novel, *Rosalynd, or Euphues Golden Legacy*, the universally agreed upon source for *As You Like It*, provides not only the plot for the play, but most of the characters and much of the dialogue; pretty much everything in fact, except for the scenes that include Jacques, Touchstone, Sir Oliver Martext, William and Audrey. Apart from these, it is the identical story, pared down and sharpened, with the youthful anger replaced by philosophic irony. John Payne Collier called it “full of agreeable and graceful invention, for we are aware of no foreign authority for any of the incidents.”

<sup>50</sup> Like so many of Greene’s works, Lodge’s *Rosalynd* begins with the death of a father and the bequeathal of his property (served up, à la Lyly and Greene, with a generous helping of euphuistic maxims). The dying father is of the opinion that women are wanton, a given in Greene’s works, not, as they should be, “chaste, obedient and silent,” the same three words used by Greene as the foundation of *Penelope’s Web*, wherein he illustrates the lack of each by a separate tale. (The same three words are also used as a basis for all the action between Petruchio and Kate in *The Taming of the Shrew*). Collier sees such similarities between *Rosalynd* and Greene’s works that he “is inclined to believe that [*Rosalynd*] was written by Greene himself” (Grosart 135).

Shakespeare sounds like Greene sounds like Lyly sounds like Lodge sounds like Greene sounds like Shakespeare.<sup>51</sup> Confused? So are the scholars, only they won't admit it; at least, not in so many words.<sup>52</sup>

Thus we have the University Wit, Robert Greene, Shakespeare's most immediate precursor, with his long career, his prolific output, his lurid biography, his success as a pamphleteer, his popular plays and his sudden death; yet when we come in close to each of these facets of his story we find that the picture loses its coherence.

If we remove from his biography all that comes to us from his own pen, we are left with even fewer facts than we have for someone like Thomas Kyd. If we examine his writing career we see on one hand the creator of the romance novel, one who paved the way for Shakespeare, and on the other, the most outrageous of plagiarists. Finally, when we examine the events surrounding his death we find all elements so suspicious that we can't help but feel we must seek some explanation, if not in the facts as they stand—which are probably all we are going to have to work with after four hundred years—then in some alternative theory of authorship.

### To Review the Mysteries

Briefly to review the problems we have touched on here: the contradictions:

1) between Greene's biography and the nature of his works; 2) between his self-description as a writer of depraved material and the reality of the refined nature of his works; 3) between the elaborate biography given by the author and the lack of any corroboration by the records; 4) between the aristocratic tone of his work and his alleged working-class origins; further by: 5) his careless use of classical references; 6) the heartless and/or humorous responses to his death by his fellow writers; 7) the lack of interest shown by Lyly in the use of his style and of his character Euphues by Greene and Lodge and in continuing with his writing career despite 18 years of financial need; 8) the way things that sound like Greene were published with someone else's name and vice versa; and 9) the fact that no one, not Greene himself nor any of his dedicatees or fellow writers, mentions him in connection with the stage while he was writing some of the most popular plays of the time.<sup>53</sup> What hypothesis will serve to bring some semblance of order to this confusion?

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<sup>51</sup> Not to mention Shakespeare sounds like Kyd sounds like Peele, etc. For instance, Brown sees similarities to Shakespeare in *The Spanish Tragedy*, attributed to Kyd, and in the anonymous *Soliman and Perseda*. He sees Kyd and Peele in *The Troublesome Reign of King John*, attributed to Shakespeare. The entire scholarship of this period is permeated with attributions of work published under one playwright's name as in reality the work of some other playwright, and of the true authorship of anonymous works as the work of any one of a half dozen possible authors, a state of confusion that the ordinary reader would never guess from the smooth surface presented by scholars in their book introductions.

<sup>52</sup> Behind the comfortable labels offered by the writers of prefaces to anthologies lies a chaos of confusion and disagreement. The truth is that there is hardly an important work of the period through the 1580s until the mid-'90s upon whose authorship all scholars, or even most scholars, are in agreement. That serious scholars who have devoted a lifetime to the study of these works can still be so uncertain after four centuries must suggest that there is some sort of fundamental problem that hasn't yet been fully addressed.



For a good two hundred years questions similar to those that dog the biography of Robert Greene have also troubled the biography of the most famous writer of the period, William Shakespeare. Following four centuries of investigation, much more is known about William of Stratford than is known about Robert Greene, yet Shakespeare still presents many of the same problems that we see with Greene, among them: no connection between what we know of their lives and the nature of their works; the lack of anything in the civic and church records that corroborate their literary reputations, the aristocratic nature of their works as opposed to the plebeian nature of their origins; the anomalous response of the writing community to news of both deaths;<sup>54</sup> and, in both cases, no more than a single (nonliterary) record to show that either Greene or Shakespeare had any connection to the works that bore their names.

Since Shakespeare has no discernable juvenilia, and since he made his entrance on the stage of literary history a brief eight months after Greene's final exit, appearing to pick up—as an already fully-developed artist—right where Greene left off; helping himself to Greene's material and speaking with his voice, the possibility must be considered that the two were one. In other words, “the King of the paper stage,” as Harvey dubbed him, took his bows as “Robert Greene,” did a quick change backstage, and reappeared a few months later as “William Shakespeare.”

### Enter “Will. Monox” and his “Great Dagger”

Some who have made a study of these authorship problems believe that William of Stratford was a proxy, stand-in, or cover for the true author of the Shakespeare canon, the true author being one who wished to keep his identity hidden and himself out of the limelight and so was willing to pay said William for the use of his name in order to maintain his privacy. Many of these now believe that it was Edward de Vere, Earl of Oxford, who was the hidden writer who first rented William's punnable name at some point in late 1592 or early 1593 in order that his long narrative poem, *Venus and Adonis*, soon to be set in type at the workshop of the printer Richard Field, would have a name, if not on the title page, then close enough to give him cover as its author.<sup>62</sup> Since Oxford was in his forties when “Shakespeare” first began to publish, and since he was renowned as a poet and a playwright (as described by Francis Meres in 1597), that leaves a good twenty years of writing either under his own name or that of a different proxy prior to the work he published as by William Shakespeare. With Robert Greene exiting the “paper stage” just as Shakespeare makes his entrance, the idea seems worth pursuing that Greene was Oxford's cover (or one of several) for the decade preceding Shakespeare.

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<sup>53</sup> It must be noted that these are only the mysteries relating to Robert Greene. The myriad of mysteries connected to the lives and works of George Peele, Thomas Lodge, Lord Strange, Mary Sidney, John Webster, Thomas Kyd and Christopher Marlowe, not to mention William Shakespeare, if tracked and described in full detail, would fill a shelf.

<sup>54</sup> To news of the death of the great Shakespeare (of Stratford) in 1616 there was no response at all by the literary or theatrical community or by any community for that matter. It was universally ignored!

## GREENE'S BIOGRAPHY

### Oxford, Greene, and Shakespeare

Foremost among the arguments against Greene's working-class origins must be the nature of the moral dilemma that stands at the center of everything he wrote,<sup>55</sup> a dilemma which might be capsulized as Desire vs. Duty, a theme of small interest to a working-class playwright, or to an audience of publicans and tradesmen, whose moral choices at the time were largely determined by economics, and whose potential moral failure would have had few discernible consequences, even to themselves.<sup>56</sup>

To an aristocrat on the other hand, such a theme would be of considerable import. Although the sixteenth-century male aristocrat, particularly one at the level of Earl, had considerable license to do as he pleased, at the same time he was also held responsible for upholding by his personal example the moral standards of his entire community from peasant to prince. Whole books were written on the subject, most notably Sir Thomas Elyot's *The Booke of the Governour* (1535). For a high-minded young aristocrat, the struggle between desire and duty could easily take on vast dimensions, in his mind at least, and also in the minds of his tutors, guardians, in-laws, and patrons.

The ramifications of Desire vs. Duty constitute the primary theme throughout all of Greene's work. For him, comedy differs from tragedy only in that in a comedy the protagonist eventually makes the correct moral choice, even if inadvertently, so that things end happily, while in a tragedy he makes the wrong choice, so that things end badly. Shakespeare's protagonists usually face more varied and sophisticated choices, but if our scenario is correct, the works of Robert Greene represent the middle years of Oxford's development, Shakespeare the mature years.

Throughout the first decade of his career most of Greene's stories were pastoral romances, highly romanticized portrayals of a rustic dreamscape in which princes and queens, disguised (not very convincingly) as shepherds and seamstresses, disported themselves in exotic locations; a genre popular since ancient times at royal and ducal palaces where days of empty ritual were apt to induce nostalgia for a simpler lifestyle. Certainly no author that rose from a real rural setting ever wrote, ever could write, in such an utterly unrealistic manner about country life.

Even if Greene can be seen as conforming to demand, writing what he knew he could sell (as he claimed), still it seems hard to believe that as the son of working-class parents from the North of England, he would have been able to prevent even the slightest hint of the reality of his origins from tarnishing his fantasy. On the other hand, for Oxford to have added his contribution to the stream of pastoral romances issued by his poetic competitors at Court during these years (Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*; Sidney's *The Countess of Pembroke's Arcadia*; Harington's *Orlando Furioso*), makes perfect sense. In addition, Shakespeare's early "comedies" are all cast in this pastoral mold. The

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<sup>55</sup> Except perhaps for the coney-catching pamphlets, but it must be admitted, that the moral dilemmas in them were not taken terribly seriously by the author.

<sup>56</sup> Everyone has moral lapses, else the Catholic confession would be pointless. The question is not whether one class was more moral than another, but whether one had more anxieties about moral issues than another.

orthodox are incorrect in attributing *Cymbaline*, *Pericles*, and *Two Noble Kinsmen* to Shakespeare's later years.<sup>57</sup>

Greene's biography as depicted in his prodigal son pamphlets, rather bizarre in the case of a working-class writer struggling to make his way in a world of middle-class competition, fits like a glove as a parody of Oxford's own life at the time. Greene's respectable parents (or guardians); his travels in Europe, his "Italianate" debauchery; his marriage to a "gentleman's" daughter and their separation after the birth of an "unfortunate" child; even the red beard claimed for him by Nashe, however exaggerated and distorted for effect, all mirror the life, the persona, and even the appearance of the Earl of Oxford.<sup>58</sup> It is the way in which Shakespeare's characters and plots reflect the life story of the Earl of Oxford that is the most convincing of the many arguments for his authorship of Shakespeare.

As for the self-hatred and self-denigration in Greene's autobiography, although the charges brought against Oxford by his Howard cousins in the early 1580s were no doubt generated by their desperation to save their own skins, there was probably some truth to them. In any case the record is clear that Oxford was seen by many in his own time, including his father-in-law, Lord Burghley, as the archtypical prodigal, a wastrel with "lewd" friends. Oxford is still seen that way by historians. It would be hard to defend the notion that there were never times when he saw himself that way. As for Shakespeare, his *Sonnets*, generally accepted as having been written c.1590-96 (Shaar 185-94) and so fitting neatly into the period when Greene was evolving into Shakespeare, often reflect the same kind of self reproach and loathing that lies at the heart of Greene's self portrait. (See Appendix A, page 41.)

### Greene's timeline fits Oxford's

The various changes in the themes used by Greene follow the same pattern as Oxford's life. The female protagonist dominates in the years when he was at Court and writing primarily for the Queen and her ladies, while the major shift in theme and tone that takes place in 1590, from lighthearted "love lays" to mournful cries of *mea culpa* and promises to reform, a shift that commentators define by terming his works from that point on his "renunciation pamphlets," can be linked to Oxford's loss of favor with his community, the death of his wife, his dunning by Burghley for his supposed debt to the Court of Wards, the sale of his mansion in the Bishopsgate theater district, and his loss of favor with the Garter Assembly. As Greene's biographer, Charles Crupi states:

In 1590, although with no interruption in the flow of rapidly written works, the tone of Greene's epistles and dedications changes: he begins to admit that his

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<sup>57</sup> That they show a greater use of feminine endings is interesting, but it's hardly a sufficient argument for placing them in any particular time. The real reason for placing them late is that if they're placed where clearly they belong, they raise damaging questions about the Stratford biography.

<sup>58</sup> Even the prominence of the terrible "curtizan" in Greene's prodigal son tales shows similarities to the "Dark Lady" of the *Sonnets*, and, according to the author, her effect on his life.

writing so far has been immoral and to claim that henceforth he will write solely for edification. Greene's statements to this effect are often taken as a major turning-point, with the works to come read accordingly. (14)

The pattern of publications by Greene also seems to follow Oxford's biography, for during the twelve years of his career, periods when Greene published little or nothing correspond rather neatly with those times in Oxford's life when he was busy with other things. Of course we can't be totally sure when he actually wrote what he published, nor can we be sure that the earliest date we have for a publication represents the first edition (many pamphlets weren't entered with the Stationers until the second edition, some not at all). But the record of publishing activity itself provides us with a profile, however indistinct, of the effort put forth at given times to putting Greene's works before the public, and how these peaks and valleys correspond with events in Oxford's life.

Greene's first work, *Mamillia*, was entered with the Stationers while Oxford was at the peak of his influence at Court (October 3, 1580), shortly before he was banished for sexual misconduct, but the first (surviving) edition wasn't published until September 1583, three months after he was admitted back at Court. This was followed by five more pamphlets in 1584. Greene's output dwindled in 1585, the year Oxford spent working to get a military command in the lowlands, and it completely dried up the following year, the year we think he was most busy writing plays for the Queen's Men<sup>59</sup> and running a propaganda office for Walsingham at Fisher's Folly (See Appendix C page 49). Two Greene pamphlets were published in 1587, three in 1588 and three in 1589.

Then, in 1590, after almost a decade of romance tales, Greene's writing changes radically in subject matter, style, and frequency of publication, right at the same time that, after almost a decade of (relative) security, Oxford's luck runs out, his debts are called in by the Court of Wards, he's forced to sell both his City manors, and to let go of most of his staff. How interesting that when Oxford's reputation with the Garter community tanks and he's no longer able to raise the kind of funds required to get plays produced, suddenly the theme of Greene's pamphlets changes from romance to repentance, from frolic to remorse, while with Oxford out of work, they double in quantity. With four pamphlets published in 1590, and another four in 1591, in the eight months of 1592 that Greene was still functioning, a year when Oxford was at loose ends, Greene published six pamphlets, more than in any other year, with several attributed to others that sound as though they too were written by Greene.

Having lost many of those closest to him, his wife, his infant son, his little daughter, his mother-in-law, his oldest friend (Rutland), not to mention Walsingham,

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<sup>59</sup> Although there is no record of Shakespeare's involvement with the theater or with the world of publishing until the 1590s, Scott McMillin and Mary Beth Maclean, in their exhaustive examination of the royal company of the 1580s, the Queen's Men, conclude that, because six of Shakespeare's plays were based on plays known to belong to the Queen's Men, he must have been writing for them during the 1580s (xv), the same period when the company was also performing Robert Greene's *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay* and also his *James IV* (86, 92). According to our view, at least half the plays performed by the Queen's Men during this period were by Oxford.

his patron for the past decade,<sup>60</sup> the outpouring of Greene pamphlets may also show him clinging to the one thing he had left, his Greene audience.

### Greene's autobiography fits Oxford

In each of the so-called renunciation pamphlets of the '90s Greene tells a slightly different version of the same story: a prodigal son, raised by sober, respectable parents (the Smiths and the Cecils), throws over his loving wife and child (Anne Cecil and his daughter Elizabeth) for a temptress (Ann Vavasor first, then Emilia Bassano) who leads him down the primrose path to ruin. In both of the versions where he assigns a definite length of time to the separation between the prodigal and his wife, *Francesco's Fortunes* and *Groatsworth*, the time given is six years, the same length of time that Oxford was (officially) separated from Anne—1576 to 1582.<sup>61</sup>

Although most of Shakespeare's works can be dated only by conjecture, there are two that can be dated precisely, *Venus and Adonis*, published in 1593 and *The Rape of Lucrece*, published in 1594. Although dating the *Sonnets* will probably always be an issue, logical dates have been established by various scholars who, working independently of each other, have placed most of them close in time to *Venus and Adonis* and *Lucrece*, due to similarities in usage (Schaar 183).

In the version of the prodigal son story that so obsessed Greene at this time, we find features that echo the *Sonnets*, in particular the final one in *Groatsworth*, in which the prodigal sets an innocent youth on the path to ruin by introducing him to a temptress similar to the Dark Lady, a situation that echoes that found in *Sonnets 40-42*. In this, Greene's final version of the prodigal son, which he admits towards the end is his own story, we can also see a reflection of Oxford's life at this time. Gorinius, the father figure of *Groatsworth*, is, in every detail but one, an angry caricature of Oxford's guardian and father-in-law, Lord Burghley. As Greene describes him, Gorinius was

an old new-made gentleman of no small credit, exceeding wealth and large conscience . . . the architect of his own fortunes, he had acquired his wealth by usury, and had been the ruin of many poor men and women. But he held a high position in the city, for he bore office in his parish and sat as formally in his fox-furred gown as if he had been a very upright dealing Burgess; he was religious too, never without a book at his belt and a bolt in his mouth, ready to shoot through his sinful neighbor. He was in his 88th year, and being cruelly afflicted with gout  
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<sup>60</sup> See Appendix C, page 50.

<sup>61</sup> Greene scholars have pointed out the difficulties with this particular bit of Greene's biography, since he couldn't, by his own reckoning, have married earlier than 1583. With Oxford as Greene the problem vanishes.

Though Burghley in 1592 was only seventy-two, the rest fits like a glove.<sup>62</sup> He was said to carry The Book of Common Prayer at all times, from which he was prone to declaim religious homilies. He is known to have suffered from gout. He was also charged by his enemies with practicing usury; which, he remarked, in a copy of a letter to Sir Thomas Smith found among his papers, he believed should be legalized, only he “durst not allow” it (Read 274). Rabbi Bilissi, the prodigal’s father in *Greene’s Mourning Garment* (1590), reflects Burghley’s nature when he praises withdrawal and secrecy, saying “hide all thy thoughts in thy heart’s bottom” and “ever dissemble thy thoughts to a stranger,” while his bookish son Philador craves openness and directness. In 1590-92, Oxford would have been extremely angry with his father-in-law, who may have been largely responsible for the size of his original debt to the Court of Wards, and, more immediately, for not protecting him from the bankruptcy that was its result.

The travels of the Palmer in *Greene’s Never Too Late* follow closely Oxford’s own continental journey, as the Palmer describes his journey from Dover to “Callis,” commenting on the French King and his Court, and the nature of the French people; then through Lyon to Germany, with more commentary on the Germans; then to Vienna, “and from thence coasted up into the borders of Italy” and on to Venice, his primary goal, all known stops on Oxford’s 1575 tour of France and Italy.

The dedications to *Greene’s* pamphlets are couched in conventionally humble terms, but they are of a somewhat different sort than those of other writers to members of the aristocracy. Though dedicated to the cream of the liberal nobility, they neither grovel nor praise in the sort of abject terms used by writers like Chapman, Daniel, and Bacon. They are far more humble about the imperfections of the gift than the lowly status of the giver. Not only are they more graceful, they are also briefer, breezier, and, on occasion, almost familiar. They sound more than anything like, well, the sort of thing one peer might write to another.

After 1590, the changes in *Greene’s* writing can be seen in every respect to reflect Oxford’s fall from grace with his community and with his in-laws. In 1589, Burghley unleashed the authority of the Court of Wards to collect Oxford’s youthful debt, some £40,000, and for the first time since Oxford came of age, declined to vote for him in the Garter Assembly, nor did any other member; nor would Oxford receive a single vote from his fellow peers in the Assembly throughout the ’90s, harsh evidence of his loss of their esteem.<sup>63</sup> The darkening of the characters of the father figures in

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<sup>62</sup> The number 88 may have had some other significance, as do most details of the pamphlet satires of this period. Perhaps Oxford got tired of hearing about the year the English conquered the Spanish; perhaps Burghley (as was his wont) gave the impression that he regarded the Amada defeat as a personal victory, when if it was to be credited to any single individual it would certainly be to Walsingham.

<sup>63</sup> “Oxford’s loss of his father-in-law’s vote is easily explained by Anne Cecil’s death in 1588, but his failure to get anyone else’s vote seems to indicate that he was living under something of a cloud in this period,” writes Peter Moore in the Spring 1996 issue of the *Shakespeare Oxford Newsletter*. He suggests that it was Oxford’s involvement in the theater that caused his loss of reputation, and quotes *Sonnet 110*: “Alas, ‘tis true I have gone here and there/ And made myself a motley to the view” (8-11). But Oxford’s community had known about his theatrical doings for many years, so there had to be more to his loss of favor at this time than some sudden awareness of his theater projects. Perhaps his sugar’d sonnets to the young Earl of Southampton were distributed a little too recklessly. Perhaps his adventure with that

Greene's "renunciation pamphlets" can easily be seen as a reflection of Burghley's change of heart towards Oxford at this time and, consequently, Oxford's bitterness (whether fair or not) towards his former guardian and father-in-law.<sup>64</sup>

### Alas, poor Oxford

The strange fact of Greene's self-condemnation for writing "profane" pamphlets when his works were anything but profane can be much more easily understood if seen as the work of an aristocrat upon whose shoulders rested the moral standards of his society. If he had to write, the moral tracts that he continually promised but never produced were the sort of thing that the Reformation councillors who ran the government would have considered appropriate for someone in Oxford's position to write, given his education and training, the sort of thing his Calvinist uncle Arthur Golding, once urged him to write, that would have brought him the respect of his tutors and his in-laws.

While a man like the real Robert Greene would have had no cause to feel shame at earning himself a living by writing the sort of innocent romances that bore his name, a man of Oxford's stature may have suffered from knowing that in his world such frivolities were considered mere "toys," a pastime for youths, not something that a mature man of his learning and exalted social status ought still to be doing in his thirties and forties.

It may be that every time he took up his pen, determined to write something respectable, out came another romance, another fable, another "wanton" sonnet, another twist on the prodigal son story. Great and passionate humanist that he was, he was delving in the mines of myth and fable, the only source of psychological truth in his time, for those subliminal realities that he would be needing soon for the plays of Shakespeare. In helpless bondage to his Muse (much like Robert Greene's bondage to his courtesan) the great poet struggled against his own nature, struggled and failed, struggled and failed. But out of that struggle were born works of everlasting value.

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"painted sepulchre," the Dark Lady, was a little too obvious. Perhaps there were other scandals that we "wot not of."

<sup>64</sup> Was there a reason why the name *Robert Greene* would attract Oxford? During the years when Oxford was a youth at Elizabeth's Court, there exist payments in the Privy Purse Account for 1559 through 1569 "for one 'Robert Grene, Court Fool,' described as a dwarf" (Chambers 4.48). Oxford's role as Elizabeth's "Feste," her "allowed fool," may have given this name a special meaning, to him and to those of his friends that understood the reference. Other resonances include the Latin "vireo" meaning "green, verdant, filled with life force"; also the Latin "vir" meaning "man" or "virtuous man" (originally from the Sanskrit word for "hero") a homophone of his own name, Vere.

A further resonance may be perhaps be found in the Celtic nature god known as the Green Man, whose wild-eyed visage and unkempt hair (à la Robert Greene?) decorated many sixteenth-century architraves and corbels, and which was also frequently incorporated into the ornamental designs on the title pages of books, sometimes with a face that's half human, half animal, whose nature is reflected in works of the Middle Ages such as the anonymous "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight." His Dionysian nature was closely related to the prehistoric nature gods who died in the fall along with the vegetation, to be reborn once again in the spring; and to their primordial rites, vestiges of which still remained in the seasonal revels throughout England, including at Court where they were incorporated into festival dramas written for them by Shakespeare, rites reflected in plays like *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *As You Like It*, *Love's Labours Lost*, *The Merry Wives of Windsor* and *Twelfth Night*. And finally, *Vere* is the French word for *Green*.

And so it must ever be, for nothing of value in this world can ever come forth without a struggle—the greater the value, the greater the struggle.<sup>65</sup>

Once it became evident that he could take the charade no further without causing serious trouble, Oxford had to rid himself of Greene as quickly as possible, while at the same time silencing all inquiry—a task which must have taken some doing, given the level of interest he'd aroused among readers.<sup>66</sup> To this end it was necessary to make him as distasteful as possible so that no one would have any desire to mourn him, give him a funeral, or attempt to discover any further details of his life. At the same time, it was important to squeeze every possible drop of moral significance out of the situation; thus the increasingly loathsome Greene was blessed by the halo of a last minute reformation in the flurry of posthumous pamphlets that followed his demise.<sup>67</sup>

### That fatal banquet

The outer circle of Robert Greene's well-bred, educated readers, whose lives never took them to the foul haunts he claimed to frequent, would have no way of knowing that the author wasn't actually to be found there, while those who were to be found there would not be likely to know anything about Robert Greene or his pamphlets, since few or none of them could read.

On the other hand, those who were in a position to know the truth, or some part of it, i.e., Oxford's own coterie, his patrons, a handful of occupants of the Inns of Court, actors, theater-goers, men-about-town, the cognoscenti who gathered to gossip at the Steelyard and the Boar's Head and other insider hangouts, plus one or two of the other pamphleteers and one or two of the printers of pamphlets, these would hardly be likely to discuss the truth about Greene with anyone but each other. Though they might delight

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<sup>65</sup> In the prodigal son story in the first section of *Groatsworth*, Greene says of Roberto (soon to be revealed as himself) "If he could get credit on scores he would then brag his creditors carried stones, comparing every round circle to a groaning O, procured by a painful burden." In other words, the tally, which showed that he had paid nothing on his account, would show a zero, which he calls a "groaning O," representing perhaps a groaning Oxford, beleaguered by creditors. Churton Collins notes:

*In England's Parnassus* [a collection of quotations from the works of poets of the preceding hundred years, published in 1631] there are no less than thirty-two quotations derived, or purporting to be derived, from [Greene's] writings. . . . Of these, however, three belong to Spenser. [Robert] Allot, the editor of that Anthology is, it may be observed, a most misleading guide. He quotes, for example, two passages from Greene's *Menaphon*, assigning one to Lodge and another to 'E.O.'" (Collins 59) Writing in 1631, Allot may have had access to an oral tradition that has since been lost.

<sup>66</sup> All unwittingly, Oxford (with Nashe's help) had created the first serial publication in English history, inaugurating a new industry, the English periodical press.

<sup>67</sup> Robert Greene had to die because he was becoming too well-known. Too many people were beginning to wonder about him, even as we wonder today. For his identity to be revealed, even for it to be called into question, may have been considered a danger to the government and the work they did in secret. That Robert Cecil was connected with Robert Greene in some way can be guessed from the fact that Greene's last motto, *Sero Sed Serio* (translated as "late but in earnest"), was adopted by Cecil as one of his own after Greene's departure from the literary stage. Either that, or Oxford, furious with his treatment, took what he knew to be Cecil's motto and lent it notoriety by publicizing it as Greene's.



in making sly references to it in company, they wouldn't think of letting the unworthy in on the joke. After all, there was no real harm in it. It was only a prank, a jape, a practical joke, *une folie*, a Tarletonism, a bit of "pickle-herring."

That Greene's fatal illness has been blamed on a "surfeit of pickled herring" (and not what would seem the more likely culprit, the plague that was currently killing a thousand a week), is (apparently) Gabriel Harvey's doing. In the "Second Letter," which Harvey claims was written the day after Greene's funeral, he states that Greene died "not of the plague, or the pox, as a Gentleman said, but of a surfeit of pickle herring and Rhenish wine, or as some suppose, of an exceeding fear . . ." Greene's fear being, as Harvey explains, that he was about to be sued for libel.

It does seem astonishing that even Harvey,<sup>68</sup> wretch that he was (or as he was made out to be by whoever actually wrote *Four Letters*) could be so thick as to flaunt his personal pique in this fashion in the face of genuine death. Thus Harvey's diagnosis of Greene's death, which has been taken at face value by every commentator since (excepting a handful of perceptive Baconians), must be examined more closely. Sure enough, from further reading it doth appear that any reference to *pickled herring*, or "pickle herring," in the literature of the time, is the written equivalent of a wink.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> With so much shape-shifting going on, it's worth questioning the authenticity of any names involved in the pamphlet duels of this time. That Gabriel Harvey was in fact the author of the pamphlets that bore his name in the early '90s is particularly questionable since he was in no position then to take such risks. He had just lost his position at Cambridge, he was up to his ears in a lawsuit with his sister-in-law over the estate of his brother John, who had just died. He had already played the goat back in 1580 when "Immerito" published his private letters without his agreement and ever since had been treated as a figure of ridicule. It makes a good deal more sense to see him as the unwitting victim in a game being played by persons he dared not challenge, a game way over his head.

<sup>69</sup> Wherever the words "herring," "red herring," or most particularly, "pickle herring" appear, scholar beware, your subject may be pulling your leg with a four-hundred-year-old joke. *Pickle-herring* was a clown character of the day, similar to *Punch* or *Scaramouche* some time later. *Pickle-herring* was popular in England but even more popular in Germany, where the clown often achieved the status of the main character in comedies. As with *Scaramouche* or *Harlequin*, a number of popular actors, (among them the Englishman John Vincent) made their livings by their interpretations in the market towns and fairs of Germany of "Pickle-herring the clown." According to Funk and Wagnall's, *Pickle-herring* in German still means a fool or clown.

In the year of the festivities at Graz, Robert Browne of Southwark was bequeathed by the famous comedian Will Sly his share in the Globe [Theater], with remembrances to his wife Cicely and daughter Jane. Jane married Robert Reynolds, of the Queen's Men, the most famous of all overseas comic actors who wrote comedies of Pickle-herring. In 1610, Brown turns up with Richard Jones as one of the patentees of the King's Revels company; in April 1612 he wrote to [Edward] Alleyn...." (Bradbrook 154)

What could there be about pickled herring that is suggestive of foolery? One guess, based on ideas from modern cultural anthropology (and from Nashe), is that herring was what people lived on when times were hard. While all meat was expensive, herring was a cheap and plentiful form of protein. When the herring run took place in the spring, while the fish swarmed in hordes up the rivers and streams to spawn, anyone could go out with tubs and buckets and take huge quantities fresh from the sea. Which of course wouldn't do them much good unless they had some way to preserve the quickly spoiled fish. While salt was expensive and smoking was tasty but required a quantity of expensive wood or charcoal, vinegar was cheap and plentiful. Whenever food supplies and cash were low, out came the good old pickled herring, something got for free that staves off suffering—like a good joke.

## That deadly Pickle Herring

What Harvey meant by the “surfeit of pickle-herring” that caused Greene’s death, was that he “died” from an overdose of *foolery*, the “may games” and satires in the Robert Greene pamphlets that had led to imitation, retaliation, and a ramping up of public invective as seen in the Mar-prelate controversy. Thus Greene’s “exceeding fear” was not of being sued for libel, as Harvey claimed, but of being unmasked, of having his identity revealed, a thing that only someone of Oxford’s social standing, and his patrons on the Privy Council, would have cause to fear.

Harvey follows this analysis by accusing Nashe “who was a principal guest at that fatal banquet of pickle herring”—in other words, of being a party to the increase in foolery—of abandoning a fellow writer in his final hour. Nashe’s immediate reaction to Harvey’s pamphlet was to deny any connection with either Greene or *Groatsworth*, but by January 1593, in *Strange News of the Intercepting of Certain Letters*, he concedes that, “I and one of my fellows, Will. Monox (hast thou never heard of him and his great dagger?) were in company with [Greene] a month before he died, at that fatal banquet of Rhenish wine and pickled herring (if thou wilt needs have it so) . . .”

With a deadpan every bit as unwinking as pseudo-Harvey’s, Nashe precedes this with the somewhat threatening sounding reference to “Will. Monox,” whom no orthodox student of the period has ever been able to pinpoint, but whom Oxfordians readily identify as Oxford: “Will [Spenser’s Willy?], M[y] N[oble lord of] Ox[ford] with his great dagger,” meaning either his spear/pen; or possibly the symbolic sword which he was known to have carried on State occasions in his official role as Lord Great Chamberlain, or most likely, the traditional wooden sword carried by the stage character, the Vice, in the old comedies—or most likely, a conflation of all three.<sup>70</sup>

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All cultures have a humorous respect for those poor staples on which they are forced to depend for sustenance when times get hard, and which, when times improve, they honor with a special place at the festival table, like the bitter herbs at the Jewish Seder. And *festival* in the days of Shakespeare, Marlowe, Greene and Nashe still meant revels, clowning, disguising and every sort of foolery. For an English clown to take a name like “Pickle Herring” would be similar to a comedian on the Black Vaudeville Circuit of the twenties calling himself “Cornpone” or “Grits’n Gravy.”

As for the red herring, it most probably meant then what it means today, the means by which a trail is confused so that it cannot be followed, referring no doubt to the practice of dragging an overripe fish across a trail of men and horses so as to throw pursuing hounds off the scent. Thus the term “red herring” is always a clue that something hidden is being protected, that a trail is being obscured.

Nashe was particularly fond of references to herring, both red and pickled. It may be that the second part of the title of his 1599 book, *Nashe’s Lenten Stuffle, In Praise of the Red Herring*, was meant to trick his audience into thinking that he had some juicy gossip to allude to. Upon reading it, they would find (to their chagrin, perhaps) that it was just what it claimed to be, a perfectly straightforward treatise in praise of this cheap and ample food supply and the good folk who culled it from the sea near Yarmouth (whence Nashe had allegedly fled to escape the wrath of the authorities in London); and not the foolery promised by the title, so that the joke was on the reader. In the satiric shorthand that so delighted Nashe, the first part of the title may have been shorthand for “Some Writing By Nashe, Nothing Fancy, But Providing Nourishment In Hard Times”; the hard times presumably meaning times when there was little in the way of entertainment, for by 1596, when *Lenten Stuffle* was published, the University Wits, and their hilarious word battles, were a thing of the past.

<sup>70</sup> Just to complicate, there was a Sir George Monoux in Essex at that time (Emmison *Disorder* 61)

Thus, though Nashe concedes to some degree of involvement with Greene, he protects himself by dropping the name, however disguised, of a figure of authority, one calculated to make a discerning reader think twice before getting involved in something beyond his social level. Pseudo-Harvey too must have been aware of Oxford's involvement, so when Nashe, under pretense of informing him, reveals it to the insiders in his audience, it may be because their curiosity had reached a point where Nashe felt they had to be let in on the secret just enough to keep them quiet.<sup>71</sup>

Whatever doubts may adhere to the identification of "Will. Monox" as Oxford, there can be no doubt whatsoever that it is Oxford that Nashe refers to a few sentences earlier when he attempts (or more likely pretends) to shame Harvey with the statement that Greene "would have drunk with thee for more angels than the Lord thou libelst on gave thee in Christ's College, and in one year he pissed as much against the walls as thou and thy two brothers spent in three." Nashe, who was just beginning his one-sided pamphlet war with the Harvey brothers, is charging Pseudo-Harvey with repaying Oxford's generosity during undergraduate days at Cambridge with mean-spirited libels. Anyone reading *Strange Newes* who was a member of the Court circle would be aware of Harvey's earlier send-up of Oxford in his poem "Speculum Tuscanismo," published in 1580 in *Three Proper and witty, familiar letters*, and so would know exactly who Nashe meant by "the Lord thou libelst on."

If Oxford had nothing whatsoever to do with Robert Greene or with his death, why did Nashe bring him into the discussion? What would be the point?

## The Death of Tarleton

The death of Greene as reported by Harvey in the "Second Letter" parallels in a number of suspicious ways the published details of the death of the popular comic actor Tarleton in 1588, including Greene's relationship with the sister of one Cutting Ball, in whose house Tarleton supposedly died.

Pseudo-Harvey seems to be assisting his perhaps overtaxed imagination with a generous helping of details from the death of Tarleton. His opening statement in the "Second Letter": "I was suddenly certified, that the king of the paper stage (so the Gentleman termed Greene) had played his last part, & was gone to Tarleton . . . ." would seem to indicate that there was more to it than sheer whimsy. By mentioning the popular clown, was "Harvey" playing the same game as Nashe, providing the greater percentage of readers with a plausible story while at the same time signaling to a select group that Greene's death was really just a Tarletonism, in other words, a joke? Harvey's reference to Greene's son as "Infortunatus" has caused four hundred years of frowns on his poor taste; yet if Harvey knew that little Fortunatus was no more real than his papa, his tasteless quip may be seen in a somewhat different light.<sup>72</sup> For in fact, if our theory is

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<sup>71</sup> This is a technique Nashe used frequently in the game he played with his audience and the authorities whose beards he so deftly pulled. He would rouse curiosity to fever pitch with his allusions, then cool them just enough by tossing in a tiny piece of real information, veiled enough to prevent identification by all but the insiders, but not enough to hide it from those who knew enough to guess.

<sup>72</sup> Shortly after mentioning *Infortunatus*, Harvey finds occasion to comment on George Gascoigne: "I once bemoaned the decayed and blasted estate of Mr. Gascoigne, who wanted not some commendable

correct, rather than one of the most egregious examples of bad taste ever penned, Harvey's account of Greene's death is both very clever and very funny. If actually written by Oxford himself it is a practical joke of monumental proportions, on Greene's audience, on Gabriel Harvey, and on subsequent generations of befuddled Holoferneses.

### Did Oxford write *Greene's Groatsworth*?

That it was Oxford, who, in his final performance as Robert Greene, stated author of plays popularized at the Rose by Edward Alleyn, railed against his former associates for their ingratitude, solves that minor mystery rather neatly. As an artist concerned more with his art than with either its cost or his own profit, and also as an aristocrat who had inherited estates worth thousands of pounds a year (on paper), and whose lifestyle had indebted him by thousands of pounds, Oxford may very well have paid no attention to the financial/contractual aspects of his early ventures into commercial public theater; but continued to do just as he did when he produced entertainments at Court or for private theaters like Blackfriars, contribute his writing, his theatrical genius, and his funds, or at least his nobleman's credit, towards the creation of an exciting theatrical experience.<sup>73</sup>

It should be easy to see how a budding genius (and ranking Earl, used to having his way) might find himself at odds with a powerful stage personality like Alleyn, who, if he wasn't an Earl, was more than able to behave like one on his own turf. Working relationships created during the rush to mount a theatrical propaganda attack on the Spanish in the mid-80s could easily have become strained once the crisis was over. New stresses created by the commercial success of the theater, such as demands by the actors and theater-owners for a greater share in decision-making, would cause old alliances to break apart and reform. This is the most likely background to most of the rapid and confusing changes that took place in the world of the infant commercial theater of the late 1580s and early '90s.

Finding himself without recourse in this "brave new world" of middle-class entrepreneurship, either to public opinion or the law, and with his identity to protect, Oxford broke off with Alleyn and his players, salving his hurt feelings as publicly as he dared in the closing paragraphs of Robert Greene's swan song. Two years later, a sadder

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parts of conceit and endeavor. But unhappy Mr. Gascoigne, how Lordly happy, in comparison of most-unhappy Mr. Greene?" In the double-talk favored by Harvey, Nashe and Greene (all three covers for Court writers), this mention of Gascoigne is meant to connect Robert Greene with George Gascoigne in more ways than just his unhappy fate as a "conceited" writer. The Court audience from Harvey and Oxford's generation would immediately connect the words *Infortunatus*, *happy*, *unhappy*, and *Gascoigne* with the publication in 1575 of "The Adventures of Master F.I."; "F.I." standing for *Fortunatus Infoelix*, meaning "the Fortunate Unhappy One," a take-off by the author on the phrase *Infortunatus Foelix*, meaning "the Unfortunate Happy One," a motto favored by Christopher Hatton during his attempt back in the 1570s to woo Queen Elizabeth. Hatton's suit was seen as ridiculous by this party of Court jesters, one of whom would render it for eternity in *Twelfth Night*.

<sup>73</sup> I am guessing that the nobility of the sixteenth-century enjoyed the same privilege that they did in the eighteenth in that merchants were not allowed to refuse them credit, however dim the likelihood of actually receiving payment.

but perhaps wiser entrepreneur, he got together with the Burbages and his father's old friend, Henry Carey, Lord Hunsdon, Lord Chamberlain of the Household (and thus in charge of Court entertainment), plus a group of hand-picked associates, including the Stratford proxy, to form the Lord Chamberlain's Men.

[Rather than rewrite this section, written in 1997, new information (new to me) acquired in 2009 requires that it be revised and expanded. Since I was on the right track then, I think it's more interesting to leave it as is, appending the update as Appendix C, page 49.]

### The hypothesis in a nutshell

This then is the hypothesis in brief: the name, borrowed or rented from a real Robert Greene (see Appendix B, page 45), was used off and on from 1580 to 1592 by the Earl of Oxford as a cover for publication of works of government propaganda, for the romances and tales he had written for the ladies of the Court and the gentlemen of the Inns of Court (some considerably earlier), and later for the plays that he wished to protect from being performed by other troupes or published by pirates. The shift in tone in 1590 reflects his troubles of that period: the death of Walsingham, his financial reverses, the loss of his staff and his function as head of Walsingham's secret public relations department, his remorse over the death of his wife, his sorrow over the deaths of old friends, over the loss of Fisher's Folly and Vere House<sup>74</sup>, the loss of favor with Burghley and with his community of patrons.

The University Wits—most of them recruited and trained by him in the early to mid-'80s to provide official and unofficial entertainment for the City and the Court, and for government propaganda as needed—were disbanded. Government forces, now under the authority of his brother-in-law, Robert Cecil, began actively working to get rid of those they perceived as out of control and a danger to the State. Some of the plays written for the Queen's Men and other companies were lost to him at this time, probably through negotiations made with them by the Lord Chamberlain's Men in a deal that allowed them to keep those plays that they and Oxford thought were worth rewriting, plays that someday would be known as Shakespeare's.

*Greene's Groatsworth*, like all of Greene's pamphlets, was written by Oxford, as were the various posthumous Greene pamphlets published as though by Chettle, Burby, "R.B.," "B.R.," and so forth, but which were actually his response to ongoing efforts by his Greene audience to locate the source of his pamphlets or by enemies to out him. He may also have been doing what he could to patch up Greene's posthumous reputation, partly for the sake of twelve years of published writing, almost his entire prose canon up to then. The diatribe in *Groatsworth* against the upstart crow was an angry parting shot at Edward Alleyn and his fellow actors at The Rose for what Oxford perceived as their callously commercial mistreatment of himself, his patrons, and the Burbages.

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<sup>74</sup> Oxford was also forced that year to sell his family City manor, Vere House by London Stone, ironically (or perhaps not) to the Lord Mayor, Sir John Hart, a bitter enemy of the London Stage.

I believe that the strength of this hypothesis is shown by the way it tends to clear up most if not all of the mysteries outlined at the beginning of this paper.

- Robert Greene's rich biography could not be substantiated by the most diligent research because it was 100%, or at least 99%, fiction.
- Robert Greene wrote like an aristocrat and not like a proletarian, because he was an aristocrat (and not a proletarian).
- Robert Greene sounds like Shakespeare because he was Shakespeare.
- Robert Greene wasn't mentioned as a playwright until after his "death" because his true identity could not be revealed, and because plays, unlike pamphlets, did not require an author's name; not, that is, until such time as they had to be published. Once Greene was gone where none might follow, his name was used as a handy cover for the publication of some of Oxford's plays plus others that are clearly not in his style (for example, *The Pinner of Wakefield*).
- Shifts in style that are hard to understand in the context of a hack writer, chiefly interested in getting paid, are easier to see as the complex record of one who had many and varied reasons for publishing, some personal, some political, some with publishing important works by others, but never as a means of making money for himself.
- The peculiar charge of *ingratitude* with which he condemned the actors and their manager rather than for some violation of business practice makes sense when seen as relating to transactions that an aristocratic upbringing outside the world of commercial realities took to be based upon either good fellowship and unspoken understandings of a social nature, or else the traditional service due a Lord by his retainers; transactions which Alleyn and his fellow actors saw in the cold light of commercial reality. (See Appendix C, page 49.)
- John Lyly's failure, either to reprehend Robert Greene and/or Thomas Lodge for adopting both his style and the name of his famous character, or to make further use of them himself, is best explained by his not having written *Euphues* in the first place, while the man who did write it continued to write without a break about Euphues in the same euphuistic style, with the same kinds of plot and themes, and without blinking when he himself was referred to as "Euphues" in various dedications to the works which he was published under the name of Robert Greene. (We will deal more fully with Lyly at another time.)
- Robert Greene's supposed imitations of Marlowe, the plays that scholars think he attempted in Marlowe's style, and about which he revealed a sour grapes attitude because they failed at the box office (*Alphonsus*, *Orlando*, *A Looking Glass for London*), were in reality either by Oxford or by Marlowe, written, while studying with Oxford, in imitation of his style, their plots and characters supplied by Oxford.

This reading also justifies the otherwise naive demand by Robert Greene that his fellow playwrights cease to produce plays for the ungrateful actors, for if these writers,

Marlowe, Nashe and Peele, had been recruited by Oxford in the first place, and possibly trained by him as well, it is easy to see how he might feel justified in asking them to back him in a boycott of Alleyn's company. There seems to be an implication that if they stick by him he'll see to it that they're taken better care of than if they remain with those bad "husbands" and "nurses," the actors (Appendix D, page 57).

We can easily agree with Grosart that "Shakespeare saw what Greene meant," when he said that the "partial expression" of Oberon and Bohan in *James IV* did indeed find "more articulate expression" later in Shakespeare's "Jacques" and "Prospero"; but rather than one writer reworking another's concept, we see the more articulate and polished expression of a mature writer reworking his earlier efforts.

But to return to the two original questions: First, why would Oxford do such a thing as to adopt the persona of Robert Greene? If at that point in the mid-80s when Oxford was given his £1000 per annum warrant in part to support a stable of government-backed propagandists, he would most certainly have done so under an official mandate to remain hidden in his role as chief Court propagandist. This project would of course be something that the Queen and her councillors would wish to be kept under wraps.

Second, it should be clear that a man whose social position required the most upright and conservative image possible would have to find some such method of hiding the fact that he spent the greater part of his waking hours writing pamphlets and plays to entertain the public, both perceived by his fellow courtiers as not much higher on the scale of human endeavor than operating a tavern or a bawdy house.

And finally, how did he get away with it? Well, as we have seen, he may have come very close to not getting away with it, which is a pretty good explanation for his next step, which was to join a company of actors and businessmen as a closed corporation, and to hire an illiterate yeoman from a market town as far as possible from London, as his next—and final—cover.

## In conclusion

Doesn't it make a great deal more sense in terms of what is actually humanly possible, to consider the very similar and sometimes identical styles, plots, and characters of the Euphues books, the pamphlets, poetry and plays of Robert Greene, and the plays and poetry of Shakespeare, as the work of one evolving writer, particularly a writer with such cogent reasons for hiding his identity? Doesn't it seem much easier to swallow a few fake names on title pages, requiring a simple substitution on the part of the compositor, and the complicity of the printer and perhaps a clerk or two at the Stationer's Registry, than an entire style faked, not just once, but over and over, by two, three, four, or even five different writers: Arthur Brooke (*Romeus and Juliet*), Arthur Golding (translation of Ovid), George Gascoigne (poems, one tale), George Pettie (*Petite Pallace*, tales, poems, translation of Stephano Guazzo), Barnabe Riche (*His Farewell to the Militarie*: tales), John Lyly (Euphues novels), Thomas Watson (Latin sonnets), Thomas Lodge (*Rosalynde*), Robert Greene (*Pandosto*, tales, poems, plays), Shakespeare (poems, plays).

Of all the many commentators on Greene, there are few, perhaps none, who have accepted all aspects of his story, who believe that his bathetic autobiography is true at all points, that his coney-catching pamphlets were written from real experience, that he

composed *Groatsworth* in his death agonies, and that everything printed with his name on it was actually written by him. Most can only accept that some of it is true, though each chooses different aspects to mistrust. Is it then such a terrific stretch to propose that *none* of it is true?

And so, to reduce the thesis once again to a single statement:

Seeing that Shakespeare lacks the biography of a writer, and has no early works or history of early literary or theatrical effort, appearing as a fully-matured artist, and seeing also that he is immediately preceded in time by Robert Greene, who also lacks a believable biography, and who struggles through a twelve-year process of growth and development, which takes him to exactly the same place in terms of style, content, form, and even to the same moment in time—Greene departing “the paper stage,” as Harvey called it, a matter of eight months before Shakespeare makes his entrance—we think it highly unlikely that these two personas represent anything other than the two halves, early and late, of the career of a single great artist, Edward de Vere, Earl of Oxford.



## APPENDIX A

### Robert Greene and early Shakespeare: similarities of style

Numerous books and papers have been written on the many correspondences between the works of Robert Greene and Shakespeare. We can only touch on a handful here, in hopes that readers of Shakespeare will be interested enough to read Greene and make their own comparisons:

Similar, often identical, thematic obsessions:

- *the prodigal son*: Prince Hal and Bertram are more polished versions of the many wayward sons created by Greene;
- *the passionate love that defies convention*: To name only the most obvious: Romeo and Juliet, the Fair Youth and the Dark Lady of *The Sonnets*, Tarquin and Lucrece, Anthony and Cleopatra, Richard III and Anne, Othello and Desdemona, Hermia and Lysander, even Pyramis and Thisbe, all reflect in different ways the theme of forbidden or dangerous love that Greene dealt with from first to last;
- *male jealousy and the horrors it causes*: Othello and Leontes are more fully realized versions of the various insanely jealous husbands in the Greene canon;
- *the patient and saintly devotion of women*: Hero of *Much Ado*, Helena of *All's Well*, Mariana of *Measure for Measure*, are all riper versions of Mamillia and Dorothea;
- *madness brought on by grief, remorse, or frustrated love, frequently ending in suicide*: Othello, Ophelia, Hamlet, Timon, and Lear;
- *passionate internal debates over moral issues*: as found in Shakespeare (the soliloquies of Hamlet and Macbeth) these are but an echo of the extended internal debates of Greene's characters, but they have the same characteristics, an energy and a believability that grip us (despite, in Greene, their infernal length).

Certain themes and images are constant with both: both are fascinated by the sea; both use shipwrecks and banishment as frequent plot devices; both compare women to falcons; both believe that love enters the heart through the eyes; both are fascinated with the silencing of virtue by cutting out the tongue, often by retelling or referring to the myth of Philomene as told by Ovid; both show a concern with and interest in women (Greene often addressing them, unusual in male writers of the time; both deal again and again with conflicts between the restless young and their parents.

Greene shares a number of plot devices with early Shakespeare: an aristocrat and his servant exchange clothes and identities; two characters, usually lovers-to-be, engage in an argument consisting of rhyming couplets; both use framing devices, sometimes several at once, like nesting boxes; both use double plots in their comedies, one on an aristocratic level, one on a working class level, that touch at some points, but remain relatively separate.

In both Greene and early Shakespeare a great deal of reading of ancient history and literature is combined with an equal disregard for precise use of historic, geographic,

or scientific fact. They share the same literary sources: Greene hardly goes a paragraph without mentioning Ovid or Tully. He frequently refers to literary or historical characters that will appear later in Shakespeare's works: Timon, Caesar, Antony, Cressida.

Similarities pointed out by other commentators include passages in *Mamillia* that closely paraphrase speeches in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Merchant of Venice*. Crupi also finds echoes of the unconventional theme of the "sweet uses of adversity" from *As You Like It* in *Perimedes the Blacksmith*. Greene's characterization of Cressida in *Euphues His Censure* is essentially identical to her portrayal in *Troilus and Cressida*.

In *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay* we find a great deal that reminds us of Shakespeare's early plays: a buddy plot and love triangle similar to that of *Two Gents*; a nobleman switching places with his servant for purposes of romance as in *Taming of the Shrew*; an erudite milkmaid with Latin aphorisms ever at the tip of her tongue; an argument between lovers consisting of witty exchanges of rhyming couplets; a lack of concern with the classical unities; a considerable knowledge of classical literature, myth and folklore together with an utter disregard for how it is used; aristocrats who speak in iambic pentameter (except when clowning or talking to servants) and working class clowns who speak in prose (except at moments of passion when they revert to meter); two exciting duels and various other stage effects that are also found in Shakespeare.

Of *James IV*, J.M. Brown (1877) finds it "worthy to be placed on a level with Shakespeare's earlier style." Certainly if this play had been published with Shakespeare's name on it, scholars would have no problem with accepting it into the canon. The scenes with Oberon, King of the Fairies, and his sidekick, and their teasing of a band of country clowns, would be accepted without a murmur as early versions of similar scenes in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*; while Slipper from *James IV* and Launce from *Two Gents* are in every respect the same character.

With the King in *James IV*, as with all of Greene's prodigal sons, Duty loses out in its battle with Desire (until the obligatory happy ending), while the chaste Dorothea is cut from the same cloth as any one of Shakespeare's roster of noble female victims (Mariana, Hero, Helena). Like Rosalynde in *As You Like It* (and its precursor, Lodge's *Euphues Golden Legacy*), Dorothea escapes a threat to her life by dressing as a man, and while thus transformed, must deal with both a Countess and a country maid who fall in love with her, just as Viola must deal with Olivia in *Twelfth Night* and Rosalynde with Phoebe in *As You Like It*. The final scenes of *James IV* and *As You Like It* are almost identical.

In discussing *James IV*, J.M. Brown says, "In Oberon we have the germ of a Prospero, in Bohan the germ of a Jacques, in both the embodiment of philosophic contemplation of life . . . . There cannot be the smallest doubt that Shakespeare saw what Greene meant, and that the *Midsummer Night's Dream* only gave more articulate expression to what found partial expression in the interlude sections of the play."

Brown believes he sees the hand of Greene in *The Taming of a Shrew*, and notes a similar stylistic correspondence between *The True Chronicle of King Leir and his Three Daughters* and *A Looking glass for London and England*, attributed to Greene in partnership with Lodge.

There are strong similarities between the poetry of Greene and that of Shakespeare. Most of Greene's poetry, which he scattered through his romances as songs sung by his characters, was of the same light-hearted nature of many of the songs

found in Shakespeare's comedies. They vary widely in form, reflecting Greene's versatility and eagerness to experiment, so that in many ways the only comparisons that can be made are their excellence, their energy, and a general similarity of subject, tone and language. Yet where the same forms are used, the similarities are too obvious to ignore, as in the following (Venus is a favorite subject of Greene's, paired with either Cupid or Adonis):

by Robert Greene:

In Cypress sat fair Venus by a Fount,  
Wanton Adonis toying on her knee,  
She kissed the wag, her darling of accopt,  
The Boy gan blush, which when his lover see,  
She smiled and told him love might challenge debt,  
And he was young, and might be wanton yet.

The boy waxed bold, fired by fond desire,  
That woo he could, and court her with conceit.  
Reason spied this, and sought to quench the fire  
With cold disdain, but wily Adon straight  
Cherd up the flame, and said "good sir, what let?  
I am but young, and may be wanton yet."

Reason replied that beauty was a bane  
To such as feed their fancy with fond love,  
That when sweet youth with lust is overtane,  
It rues in age; this could not Adon move.  
For Venus taught him still this rest to set  
That he was young, and might be wanton yet.

Where Venus strikes with Beauty to the quick,  
It little vails sage reason to reply;  
Few are the cures for such as are love-sick  
But love; then though I wanton it awry  
And play the wag; from Adon this I get,  
I am but young, and may be wanton yet.

By Shakespeare:

Look, how a bird lies tangled in a net,  
So fastened in her arms Adonis lies;  
Pure shame and aw'd resistence made him fret,  
Which bred more beauty in his angry eyes;  
Rain added to a river that is rank,  
Perforce will force it overflow the bank.

Still she entreats, and prettily entreats,  
For to a pretty ear she tunes her tale;  
Still is he sullen, still he low'rs and frets,  
Twixt crimson shame, and anger ashy pale;  
    Being red she loves him best; and being white,  
    Her best is better'd with a more delight.

\* \* \* \* \*

Never did passenger in summer's heat  
More thirst for drink, than she for this good turn.  
Her help she sees, but help she cannot get;  
She bathes in water, yet her fire must burn:  
    'O, pity,' 'gan she cry, 'flint-hearted boy!  
    'Tis but a kiss I beg; why are thou coy?

Same subject (*Venus and Adonis*), same rhyme scheme, same sexy, mocking tone; while the only difference is the greater psychological depth, the more complete story, and the higher polish of the Shakespeare poem.

## APPENDIX B

### The Facts

I should note that, as the great linguist and thinker upon literary matters Noam Chomsky points out, there is a clear distinction between a *writer* and an *author*. The words *writer* and *author* are not synonymous by any means. A writer is not an author until he or she gets published (by someone other than themselves). With publication he/she becomes an author, or to put it another way, out of the writer an author is born.

An author is not a “real” person, in that he or she is really only a projection by the reader onto the name and published biography of a writer. As a being that exists only on paper, an author is midway between something real and something fictional. Many female writers have created male authors (some even vice versa, mostly romance writers). The writer lives, breathes, commits words to paper, loves, hates, suffers, and dies, while the author, though obviously influenced by his or her creator, remains apart.

Having created bodies of work, great writers create authors that may live for centuries when they themselves are long gone. Most writers do not attempt to create more than one body of work in a lifetime, but there are some who, having moved from one genre to another, have created more than one author. This method of dealing with the problem of changing genres is handled easily and routinely in today’s world by giving the writer a different name, a process that, though readers may be unaware, shocks no one who knows about it. No one considers it a “conspiracy” that Mary Ann Evans called herself George Elliot or that Samuel Clemens called himself Mark Twain.

### What facts we have about the various Robert Greenes

The date and place of Robert Greene’s birth remain unknown. He gives his birthplace as Norwich in one pamphlet, and in another as York, but according to Crupi, although there are a number of Greenes to be found in the baptismal records of both those cities, there isn’t one that can be taken for certain as the author (3). There were Robert Greenes, Greens, or Grenes, all over England at that time. Grosart (online) is the best source for these.

Of relatively solid facts there are six: 1) Robert Greenes are recorded as having matriculated as a sizar at St. John’s College, November, 1575r; 2) as having received a B.A. in 1580; and 3) as getting an MA from Clare College in 1583, dates that conform with the registration and publication of the writer’s earliest work, *Mamillia*. 4) In July, 1588, a Robert Greene received a degree from Oxford. 5) A Robert Greene received payment for a book from Leicester in 1585, the year Greene’s *Planetomachia* was dedicated to him. And 6) There is a burial record for one Fortunatus Greene, the name that Pseudo-Harvey gave Greene’s son (September 1592 in *Four Letters*) in Shoreditch, August 12, 1593 (Crupi 4, 5, 9, Nelson Oxdox).

Of these six, only two appear to relate directly to what is known of the life of the writer Robert Greene: the burial record of what appears to be his son, and the M.A. from Clare College; this because the preface to *Mamillia*, entered with the Stationer’s in September of 1583, was signed, “from my study in Clare Hall, the 7th of July”—oddly, the same day that the University records show that sizar Greene received his M.A.

There are two other mentions of a Robert Greene in the records that merit consideration. First, in his introduction to his *Plays and Poems of Robert Greene*, Churton Collins briefly mentions finding in a church register a Robert Greene who was granted a license to marry one Isabelle Moyle on October 4, 1594; and second: a church register shows a Robert Greene, saddler, residing at the Savoy in 1594 (B1). The Robert Greene who was granted a license to marry Isabelle Moyle and who was described as a saddler, was also described as residing at the Savoy. Oxford is known to have rented rooms in the Savoy, which was used as a sort of residence hotel. If he maintained a crew of writers (as some think) it is very possible that occasionally he put them up at the Savoy. It has been suggested that if Harvey's "Second Letter" was written by Oxford, Isabelle Moyle may have been the inspiration for the name of Greene's landlady, Mrs. Isam = Isa . . . M . . . . This may have been the same Robert Greene that obtained payment of £8 for a "booke" from the Earl of Leicester.

This is not enough to establish him as the author of the Greene canon, which would require items of record on the level of that of Christopher Marlowe, Ben Jonson, George Peele, or Thomas Lodge, all of whose biographies clearly show what we can justifiably expect of the biography of a real writer from that period. What it does suggest is that this Robert Greene was in the same relation to the works published under his name as was William of Stratford to the works published as by Shakespeare, or John Webster to the works published in his name but written by Mary Sidney (Hughes "Spring").

### **Fortunatus Greene**

The only item at this point that adds any weight to Greene's autobiography is the burial record of Fortunatus Greene, August 12, 1593 (Crupi 9), (no parents or other names or information given) in the parish records of St. Leonard's Church, the Shoreditch Church that catered to the theater community of Norton Folgate, that stood just across the road from Burbage's Theatre. (Nelson *Oxdox*)

First, so far as we can see there is no confirmation by Greene or anyone else that Fortunatus, like the weath of bays or his wife Doll, was anything but a figment of Pseudo-Harvey's imagination. When by August of 1593 it had become necessary to have some confirmation of Greene's existence, we may be pardoned for conjecturing that the vicar of the church at Norton Folgate, or whoever kept the books, would have been susceptible to placing a false entry for a member of the local theater community, perhaps in exchange for a contribution to the poor box. That by then there was this level of need to cover Greene's trail would fit well with the numerous posthumous publications that seem driven to that same end. A burial notice would make the trail impossible to pursue any further. The death of a baby would have been much easier to conjure up than the death of the adult parent, who supposedly died the previous September, and whose burial record has yet to surface.

No church official was going to let questioners dig up a body, particularly since the baby, if in fact there was one, was buried during the worst month of the plague of 1593. Five others were listed as having been buried that day, six the day before, and six the day after (Nelson). Point being: during a heavy dose of the plague, it probably would have been fairly easy to find a dead baby in the back alley of one of the city's less upscale

neighborhoods, and just as easy to find someone who for a few shillings would take the baby to where bodies were being collected and recorded for burial.

That this is the one and only bit of external evidence to support Greene's patchwork biography as accurate (apart from the university degrees) is also suspicious. When it comes to evidence in a case so dubious, a single swallow, or even two or three, doth not a summer make. On the other hand there may actually have been an unfortunate baby, the result of somebody's backstairs romance (not necessarily Greene's). There often was in the kind of community that Norton Folgate had become in the 1590s, as described by Shakespeare in *Measure for Measure*. In any case, Fortunatus cannot be regarded as solid third-party evidence.

### Rooke Greene of Little Sampford

William of Stratford was a real person; so were Arthur Golding, George Gascoigne, George Pettie, Anthony Munday, and John Lyly. Some of these proxies are more easily connected to Oxford than others, but of all, Robert Greene is the most elusive. Nevertheless, there is a Greene-Oxford connection that may repay the effort when someone is able to do the kind of local research in Essex that's required.

Rooke Greene, Esq., as he was usually termed, was certainly a gentleman. As the son and heir of an Essex squire, Sir Edward Greene, he and his father and the numerous relatives who lived in the neighborhood of Hedingham Castle were descended from an ancestor who had acquired their manor, Sampford Hall, in the time of Richard II (Burke's 224). At a court hearing held in July 1585 to determine ownership of a manor formerly owned by Earl John<sup>75</sup>, Oxford's legitimacy as Earl of Oxford once again came into question, opening old wounds with regard to his father's mental condition and treatment of women. Among the five older witnesses called to testify was Rooke Greene, then about 60 years of age, in whose family home had occurred some of the scandalous events surrounding the marriage of the 16th Earl to Oxford's mother. In fact, the relationship may have had kinship overtones as it's possible the Greens were related to the de Veres through the Wentworth family and other alliances over the centuries.

In Earl John's will of 1562, a John Grene is listed with 28 other "grooms" who are to receive bequests (40 shillings, about £1200 in today's currency).<sup>76</sup> All we know for certain from this is that this groom of the sixteenth Earl was of a working age in 1562 when the Earl's will was drawn up, so that if he had a son named Robert, he would have been of a proper age to be attending the universities c.1580-'83.

The name John Greene (or Grene, as it's often written) appears several times in Emmison as beneficiaries in wills from the late 1590s, too late to be the John Greene of Earl John's will, but probably related to him in some way, since these wills were made for people who lived in towns like Navestock, Toppesfield, Thaxted, and Gosfield, all located within a short distance of Castle Hedingham. So it's fair to assume that some of these John Greenses, perhaps all, were related to Rooke Greene, Esq., of Sampford Hall in Little Sampford.

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<sup>75</sup> "Rooke": [http://www.oxford-shakespeare.com/HuntingtonLibrary/EL\\_5870.pdf](http://www.oxford-shakespeare.com/HuntingtonLibrary/EL_5870.pdf)

<sup>76</sup> <http://www.oxford-shakespeare.com: THE NATIONAL ARCHIVES PROB 11/46, ff. 174-6v>

Rooke Greene and all his family were Catholics, recusants who suffered frequent fines and imprisonment for refusing to attend Protestant service. In 1564, Rooke sent his two older sons, William and Richard, along with four other youths from his neighborhood, to Caius (pron. Keys) College, Cambridge (Venn), then as a predominantly Catholic college. These youths apparently got their college prep training in the Greene household, often the case with the gentry, particularly the Catholics.

Although there is no known connection as yet between the family of Rooke Greene and a Robert Greene who might have acted as a cover for Oxford during the years he was publishing the love pamphlets that inaugurated the serial publication industry in England, there is one name connection that comes tantalizingly close.

### **Robert Greene, Oxford's copyholder**

On February 2, 1586, an agreement was drawn up between sixteen copyholders (tenants) of a manor known as Grays in Sible Hedingham, and Oxford, who, as their landlord, agreed that they had certain traditional rights so long as they paid their rents on time. (Nelson, *Oxdox*). Whether this had any connection with the previously mentioned lawsuit of July 1585 doesn't appear, although there must have been some problem that created the need for a signed agreement.

One of these 16 tenants was a Robert Greene, tenant of "one customary message or tenement, and nine acres of land, meadow, and pasture more or less, six shillings and eight pence." Sible Hedingham being located a short distance from Sampford, Thaxted, Navestock, and the other villages in which members of the Greene family lived during that period, it's fair to assume that this Robert Greene was a member of this same family.

The point, however, is that we now know that there was a Robert Greene who lived on land owned by Oxford during the period that pamphlets were being published as by a Robert Greene. Although this doesn't allow us to claim a personal connection between the copyholder and the Earl himself, when discussing who might have been the Robert Greene of the pamphlets, the one who was living in Oxford's home territory and holding a lease on several acres of his land certainly carries more weight than those (Crupi 3), whose connections are based on the least dependable evidence of all, statements found in the Robert Greene pamphlets.

### **Five Robert Greenes into one**

Ignoring the cordwainer and the saddler, (both notably located as far as possible from London), we have five records of one or more Robert Greenes who may or may not have acted as Oxford's cover for the ten years that he published the pamphlets under that name. These are 1) the Robert Greene who got his BA from St. Johns, Cambridge in 1580, 2) the one who got his MA from Clare Hall, Cambridge in 1583, 3) the one who got the donation from Leicester's chamberlain for his dedication to *Ciceronis Amor* in 1585, 4) the saddler living at the Savoy who married Isabelle Moyle in 1594, 5) and/or the copyholder at Sible Hedingham in 1585-6. Which or all of these were one and the same, or were involved in Oxford's attempts to hide his involvement in publication of the Greene canon will depend on archival research at the Essex Record Office.



## APPENDIX C

### Oxford's connection to Christopher Marlowe and Edward Alleyn

When I wrote the preceding text over a decade ago I could only guess at a connection between Oxford and Edward Alleyn. To me it was obvious that in 1592, with commercial theater still in its infancy, there was simply no one but Alleyn, just then moving into a managerial position at the Rose theater, who fit the character of Greene's *Shake-scene* and *Johannes fac totem*. With Oxford as Greene and *Groatsworth* as his way of getting rid of him, many things fall into place that otherwise seem to have no connection.

Yet what kind of relationship between Oxford and Alleyn would justify Greene's accusation of *ingratitude*? Oxford must have felt that Alleyn owed him something, which suggests that he had had something to do with Alleyn's career. With so much hidden about Oxford's involvement in the theater, how could we ever know? That Alleyn and Marlowe had a relationship must go without saying, since it was Marlowe's *Tamburlaine* that had made Alleyn a superstar, and Alleyn who made Marlowe's play a hit. But no one (till now) has offered any clue as to where and how they got together. And if Oxford was Shakespeare, there must have been some early connection between him and Marlowe, since scholars have found so many crossovers between their works. But, again, the cloud covering Oxford's career made it impossible to do anything but guess.

Several pieces of this puzzle have recently fallen into place that, though they don't clinch it, do make it easier to claim what until now has only been supposition. With these we can now connect not only Oxford and Marlowe, but Oxford and Alleyn, Marlowe and Alleyn, and all of them with Sir Francis Walsingham, not only in Time but also in Space, for during the 1580s, all four lived within shouting distance of each other.

### Enter Alleyn

In examining his biography in the 2004 ODNB I noted that he was "born on 1 September 1566 in the London parish of St. Botolph without Bishopsgate, 'near Devonshire House, where now is the sign of the Pye.'" By this time I was aware that what later would be the site of Devonshire House was in Oxford's time the site of Fisher's Folly. Eureka! Articles by the author of the ODNB bio (Susan Cerasano, an English professor at Colgate University) provided a great deal more information, but this was the essential fact, the missing piece, the one providing the necessary conjunctions of time, place, and motivation.

Alleyn's family owned the inn known then as the Pye (on later maps the Dolphin). Having lost their father, who apparently had some Court connections, by the mid-1570s, Edward's older brother John had taken over management of the family holdings, which apparently included several other nearby properties. With the arrival of Burbage's Theatre up the street at Norton Folgate in 1576, John Alleyn became involved, whether as just an actor it's hard to say, then moving on to working with other acting companies, and in the process, getting his younger brother involved. Property management was where John began, and where he would end eventually,

his younger brother taking over as the family artist, though, as his biography shows, Edward too was at least as interested in property management as he was in acting.

Cerasano's story jumps from 1580, with John as "servant to the Lord Admiral," to 1583 with Edward, then sixteen or seventeen, noted as being on tour with Worcester's Men, to 1589, at which point John has been labelled "servant to the Lord Admirals' Men," the same Lord Admiral,—Charles Howard—who will be Edward Alleyn's patron throughout the greater part of his theater career.

### **Enter Oxford**

With the addition of Oxford and his "lewd friends" to the Alleyn story a much more satisfying scenario begins to take shape than either our early guesswork or Cerasano's lineup of dates can provide. In 1580, Oxford and company take over Fisher's Folly, two doors up from the Pye. Any effort on Oxford's part to continue his work at Blackfriar's is hampered by the attacks on himself and his men by Knyvett's gang, leaving him without his access to the juvenile actors he needs for the roles of youths and women. It doesn't take much to see a situation whereby an obviously gifted young actor gets together with a writer-director living next door, one in need of just such an actor, the young man's family inn being so handy and the members of the bachelor establishment at Fisher's Folly so often in need of refreshment.

### **Enter Walsingham**

The second puzzle piece that got placed at this time was the realization that the Papey, the old priory where Sir Francis Walsingham, the Queen's Principal Secretary was living in 1583, was located just around the corner from both the Pye and Fisher's Folly. If we agree that Oxford was the author of the plays for the Queen's Men presently attributed to Robert Greene (*Friar Bacon, James IV*, etc.) as well as the early versions of the Shakespeare history plays (*Famous Victories, True Tragedies*, etc.), we would have to be blind not to see a connection between Oxford and Walsingham's organization of the Queen's Men in 1582-'83. Walsingham was not about to create a Crown acting company without the assurance that they would have the best playbook in London. Where was that playbook going to come from? Without Oxford, there is simply no answer to that question.

### **Enter Marlowe**

With these in place, the problem of when and how Alleyn and Marlowe first got together falls quickly into place. We know from the minutes of a Privy Council meeting of June 29, 1587, that the times Marlowe had taken off from his studies 1584-'87 were due to some honorable though undescribed service he was doing for Her Majesty (Warnicke ODNB). Since Marlowe was a brilliant writer, something Walsingham needed for the Queen's Men, this service was far more likely about creating plays for the new Crown company than the continually parroted notion that he was spying, for which there is no evidence whatsoever (Hughes *Reckoning*).

At twenty and twenty-one, Marlowe, despite his gifts, would still have required instruction in writing for the theater. That his instructor in this was the writer who eventually became Shakespeare helps to explain the similarity in their styles, at this point in time, notably in *Henry the Sixth* (an early version of *Henry VI Part One*), and the Robert Greene plays.

As Andrew Gurr explains, the picture of this period, murky at best, is particularly opaque surrounding the original production of *Tamburlaine* (*Companies* 232). Historians haven't been able to pinpoint when it was first produced. Considering the angry taunts hurled at Marlowe and Alleyn by members of the Folly group (i.e., Greene/Oxford and Nashe/Bacon) beginning with Greene's *Perimedes the Blacksmith* in early 1588, the most likely scenario is that it was with *Tamburlaine* that Henslowe opened his new theater, the Rose, for the summer season of 1587, creating a turning point in the direction of the early London theater. That it was instantly popular is evident from the box office takings it continued to bring in a decade later, as recorded in Henslowe's diary.

That there was a break at some point between Alleyn and Marlowe and the Burbages is clear, both from the taunts by Nashe and Greene and from comments made in passing by Gurr (232), though he gives no citations (Chambers and relevant articles in the ODNB skip over the issue). The break must have occurred with Alleyn's shift to Henslowe by the summer of 1587. Why did Alleyn and Marlowe shift from Burbage's Theatre to Henslowe's Rose. As usual, for several reasons. Henslowe needed something really good to get his theater up and running and so offered them a better deal than they were getting from Oxford and Burbage. He also offered them the freedom to produce a show that would bring all of them fame and fortune. From Greene's remarks in *Groatsworth*, it's clear that Oxford foresaw trouble from the direction Marlowe's writing was taking, while Marlowe's rebellious jibe at the Queen's Men that opens *Tamburlaine* suggests that he felt cramped by what he was allowed to write for the Queen's Men.

## The scenario

In the summer of 1592, Oxford, pressured (perhaps by patrons Hunsdon and Howard) to bring an end to his pamphleteering, takes the opportunity offered by Greene's deathbed rant, to blast Marlowe as the "famous gracer of Tragedians," ranting for several paragraphs about Machiavelli and warning him that if he doesn't quit demonstrating his atheistic attitudes (lack of respect for Reformation principles), "little knowst thou how in the end thou shalt be visited."

He then wags a finger at "Young Juvenal" (Nashe-Bacon) accusing him only of getting a little too frisky, and then, even more gently, at poor George Peele, who, if we take "Greene" at his word is also now working for Henslowe, Oxford having lost the wherewithall to support him, and who will soon be begging Burghley for handouts. Oxford is easy with Nashe and Peele for it seems that his major reason for publishing this section is to woo them back into his service.

But he's far less easy with Alleyn, who by September of 1592 had completely deserted to the dark side, and who he may have blamed for Marlowe's desertion. In any case, actors in his view may have been a dime a dozen, while a good playwright was a rarity. Thus it is Alleyn, the "upstart crow, beautified with our feathers" (gentrified

by their writing, possibly also by the elegant costumes he gave or lent him)<sup>77</sup>, who is *Shake-scene* (a hammy actor) and a *Johannes fac totem* (one who thinks he can do everything). For anyone who read *Groatsworth* who had seen *The True Tragedy of Richard Duke of York* in which Alleyn would have played the Duke who utters these lines, the identification would be impossible to miss. Of all his blasts, this is the only one truly intended to wound. That Alleyn could be a jerk is evident from the exchanges his father-in-law, John Donne, was forced to have with him over his treatment of his wife, Donne's daughter.

So here we have nothing more than the age-old situation whereby apprentices, ready to test their wings on the wide world, depart the master's nest, taking some of his clients and hired men with them. Greene's charge of *ingratitude*, so bizarre in terms of business practice, makes sense if seen as a master's anger towards ungrateful apprentices. But Oxford was over a barrel in ways that no guildsman ever would have been, for they had rules and mechanisms for punishing miscreant apprentices and journeymen. Oxford however had no recourse. He could not admit that he was such a master. And Alleyn, well schooled in the ways of the working class world, was aware that he could not.

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<sup>77</sup> There's considerable evidence that in 1589 the Alleyns were building up their stock of costumes by buying them from needy actors and failing theater companies (ODNB).

## APPENDIX D

### Relevant portions of *Greene's Groatsworth of Wit*

Greene's Groatsworth of Wit bought with a million of Repentance.  
Describing the folly of youth, the falsehood of makeshift flatters,  
the misery of the negligent, and mischiefs of receiving Courtesans.  
Written before his death and published at his dying request.

*Foelicem fuisse infaustum*

("To know happiness, one must know unhappiness.")

#### *The Printer to the Gentle Readers*

I have published here Gentlemen for your mirth and benefit Greene's groats worth of wit. With sundry of his pleasant discourses you have been before delighted: But now hath death given a period to his pen; only this happened into my hands which I have published for your pleasures. Accept it favourably because it was his last birth and not least worth, in my poor opinion. but I will cease to praise that which is above my conceit, & leave it self to speak for itself, and so abide your learned censuring.

Yours W.W

#### *To the Gentlemen Readers*

Gentlemen: The Swan sings melodiously before death, that in all his lifetime useth but a jarring sound. Greene though able enough to write, yet deeper searched with sickness than ever heretofore, sends you his Swan-like song, for that he fears he shall never again carol to you wonted love lays, never again discover to you youth's pleasures. However yet sickness, riot, incontinence, have at once shown their extremity, yet if I recover, you shall all see more fresh sprigs than ever sprang from me, directing you how to live, yet not disuading you from love. This is the last I have writ, and I fear me the last I shall write. And however I have been censured for some of my former books, yet Gentlemen I protest, they were as I had special information. [*He protests that whatever was unseemly in his work was simply based on fact.*] But passing them, I commend this to your favo- rable censures, that like an embryo without shape, I fear me, will be thrust into the world. If I live to end it, it shall be otherwise; if not, yet will I commend it to your courtesies, that you may as well be acquainted with my repentant death, as you have lamented my careless course of life. But as *Nemo ante obitum felix*, [*Man should ever look to his last day (The Metamorphoses)*] so *Acta Exitus probat* [*The result justifies the deed*]; beseeching therefore so to be deemed hereof, as I deserve, I leave the work to your likings, and leave you to your delights.

[*Here follows another of Greene's prodigal son tales, which takes up the major portion of the pamphlet. This one purports to tell the story of one Roberto, prodigal son of a usurer father, and follows the same general plot as those told in A Farewell to Folly, Francesco's Fortunes and Never Too Late. Here the details that connect these prodigal son tales with the life of the Earl of Oxford are more pronounced, as in the following portait of Roberto's father:*]

. . . yet was not the father altogether unlettered [*Greene has explained that the father was not interested in books or literature*], for he had good experience [*as*] a Noverint [*a paralegal*], and by the universal terms therein contained, had driven many a young gentleman to seek unknown countries [*as Burghley may have done to Oxford by his oppressive oversight*]; wise he was, for he bore office in his parish [*Lord Treasurer and Principle Secretary of England*] and sat as formally in his fox-furred gown as if he had been a very upright dealing Burgess. He was religious too, never without a book at his belt and a bolt in his mouth, ready to shoot through his sinful neighbor. And Latin he had somewhere learned, which though it were but little, yet was it profitable [*Burghley's biographers admit that he was not one for languages*], for he had this philosophy written in a ring, *Tu tibi cura* [*care for thyself*], which receipt he curiously observed, being in self-love so religious, as he held it no point of charity to part with anything of which he living might make use. [*Himself not born to the nobility, Burghley did not hold with their tradition of prodigal hospitality, charity, and display, and according to his biographers, when offered an earldom by the Queen, refused it, saying he couldn't afford it*].

*[Then follows the typical variation on Greene's prodigal son plot; the father dies, leaving all to his younger son and nothing but a goat to the elder who disdains his father's usury and love of money and spends all his time reading and studying. Both sons get involved with a "painted sepulcher," a prostitute named Lamillia who brings grief to both of them. Roberto gets involved with a company of players, begins to write for them, falls in with evil company, etc, until at last he is brought to the same pass as the author, at which point the story shifts to present time:]*

Here (Gentlemen) break I off Roberto's speech, whose life in most parts agreeing with mine, found one self punishment as I have done. Hereafter suppose me the said Roberto, and I will go on with that he promised; Greene will send you now his groatsworth of wit, that never showed a mitesworth in his life: & though no man now be by to do me good: yet ere I die I will by my repentance endeavor to do all men good:

Deceiving world, that with alluring toys,  
 Hast made my life the subject of thy scorn,  
 And scornest now to lend thy fading joys,  
 To length my life, whom friends have left forlorn.  
 How well are they that die ere they be born,  
     And never see thy sleights, which few men shun  
     Till unawares they helpless are undone.

Oft have I sung of Love, and of his fire,  
 But now I find that Poet was advised;  
 Which made full feasts increasers of desire,  
 And proves weak love was with the poor despised.  
     What thought of Love; what motion of delight,  
     What pleasance can proceed from such a wight?

Witness my want, the murderer of my wit;  
 My ravished sense of wonted fury reft;  
 Wants such conceit, as should in poems fit  
 Set down the sorrow wherein I am left:

But therefore have high heavens their gifts bereft:  
Because so long they lent them me to use,  
And I so long their bounty did abuse.

O that a year were granted me to live,  
And for that year my former wits restored;  
What rules of life, what counsel would I give?  
How should my sin with sorrow be deplored?  
But I must die of every man abhored.  
Time loosely spent will not again be won,  
My time is loosely spent, and I undone.

[*It seems questionable that Greene would labor over rhymes and meter, seeking the apposite phrase with Death staring him in the face.*]

O *horenda fames*, how terrible are thy assaults: but *vermis conscientiae*, sore wounding are thy stings. Ah Gentlemen, that live to read my broken and confused lines, look not I should (as I was wont) delight you with vain fantasies, but gather my follies altogether; and as you would deal with so many paricides, cast them into the fire; call the Telegones, for now they kill their Father, and every lewd line in them written is a deep piercing wound to my heart; every idle hour spent by any in reading them, brings a million of sorrows to my soul. O that the tears of a miserable man (for never any man was yet more miserable) might wash their memory out with my death, and that those works with me together might be interred. But since they cannot, let this my last work witness against them with me, how I detest them. Black in the remembrance of my black works, blacker than night, blacker than death, blacker than hell. [*This is total hyperbole, since the first part of this publication differs in no way from those published earlier.*] Learn wit by my repentance (Gentlemen) and let these few rules following be regarded in your lives.

[*Then follow some tedious homilies, numbered one to ten, for living a good life, all in the voice of a reformist preacher.*]

Had I regarded the first of these rules, or been obedient to the last; I had not now at my last end been left thus desolate. But now, though to my self I give *Consilium post facta*; yet to others they may serve for timely precepts. And therefore (while life gives leave) I will send warning to my old consorts, which have lived as loosely as myself, albeit weakness will scarce suffer me to write, yet to my fellow scholars about this city, will I direct these few ensuing lines:

[*Now comes the part that Shakespeareans have been chewing over for 400 years.*]

To those Gentlemen his Quondam acquaintance, that spend their wits in making plays, R.G. wisheth a better exercise, and wisdom to prevent his extremities.

If woeful experience may move you (Gentlemen) to reward, or unheard of wretchedness entreat you to take heed, I doubt not but you will look back with sorrow on your time past, and endeavor with repentance to spend that which is to come. Wonder not, (for with thee will I first begin) thou famous gracer of Tragedians, that Greene, who hath said with thee (like the fool in his heart) there is no God, should now give glory unto his greatness, for penetrating is his power, his hand lies heavy upon me, he hath spoken

unto me with a voice of thunder, and I have felt he is a God that can punish enemies. Why should thy excellent wit, his gift, be so blinded, that thou shouldst give no glory to the giver? Is it pestilent Machiavellian policy that thou hast studied? [*This is the first published reference to Marlowe as a Machiavellian.*]

O peevish folly! What are his rules but mere confused mockeries, able to extirpate in small time the generation of mankind. For if *Sic volo, sic jubeo* ["I will it, I so order it," a quote from *Juvenal's Satires*], hold in those that are able to command, and if it be lawful *Fas & nefas* to do anything that is beneficial, only Tyrants should possess the earth, and they striving to exceed in tyranny, should each to other be a slaughter man, till the mightiest outliving all, one stroke were left for Death, that in one age man's life should end. [*One of the best ways of stating this fundamental argument made by pacifists for ending war, and one he probably got from one of the ancients.*] The broacher of this Diabolical Atheism is dead, and in his life had never the felicity he aimed at [*Machiavelli was never trusted to any office by any magnate after he wrote The Prince*], but as he began in craft, lived in fear, and ended in despair [*a harsh but popular view of the great ironist, in truth a very powerful revolutionary work*]. *Quam inscrutabilia sun Dei inducia.*

This murderer of many brethren had his conscience seared like Cain; this betrayer of him that gave his life for him, inherited the portion of Judas; this Apostata perished as ill as Julian [*Oxford knew Italian history well enough to know this wasn't true, but his purpose is to warn Marlowe of the kind of ignorance and prejudice he was up against*] and wilt thou my friend be his disciple? . . . Defer not (with me) till this last point of extremity; for little knowst thou how in the end thou shalt be visited.

[*Students of Marlowe can't help but be puzzled by the prophetic nature of the last sentence. But it's easy enough to understand as a warning by one who knows what troubles are building in the wings. He then turns to Nashe.*]

With thee I join young Juvenal, that biting satirist, that lastly with me together writ a comedy. Sweet boy, might I advise thee, be advised, and get not many enemies by bitter words. Inveigh against vain men, for thou canst do it, no man better, no man so well. Thou hast a liberty to reprove all and name none; for one being spoken to, all are offended; none being blamed no man is injured. Stop shallow water still running, it will rage, or tread on a worm and it will turn; then blame not scholars vexed with sharp lines if they reprove thy too much liberty of reproof. [*Most agree that he is speaking to Nashe here, certainly the most "biting satirist" of the time, though in gentler tones than he used with Marlowe. Then he turns to Peele.*]

And thou no less deserving than the other two, in some things rarer, in nothing inferior, driven (as myself) to extreme shifts, [*chiefly because he's been allowed no other way to play a part in the affairs of his time*] a little have I to say to thee; and were it not an idolatrous oath, I would swear by sweet St. George, thou are unworthy better hap, sith thou dependest on so mean a stay [*namely, that cheapskate lowlife Henslowe.*] Base minded men all three of you, if by my misery you be not warned; for unto none of you (like me) sought those burrs to cleave; those puppets (I mean) that spake from our mouths, those Antics garnished in our colors [*that wore our livery*]. Is it not strange, [*It was Lord Strange's men who opened the season at The Rose that year with Greene's play, Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay*] that I, to whom they have all been beholding [*a notable statement,*



one that hasn't been properly accounted for]; is it not [likely] that you, to whom they all have been beholding, shall (were ye in that case where I am now) be both at once of them forsaken? [This is fine rhetoric!]

[Now come the lines so often repeated.]

Yes, trust them not, for there is an upstart crow, beautified with our feathers, that with his Tiger's heart wrapped in a Player's hide, supposes he is as well able to bombast out a blank verse as the best of you; and being an absolute *Johannes fac totum*, is in his own conceit the only Shake-scene in a country. O that I might entreat your rare wits to be employed in more profitable courses, and let those apes imitate your past excellence, and never more acquaint them with your admired inventions. [Let them imitate your plays, but don't write any more for them.] I know the best husband [manager] of you all will never prove an usurer [an exploiter] and the kindest of them all will never prove a kind nurse [a benefactor]; yet whilst you may, seek you better masters [come back and work for me]; for it is pity men of such rare wits [high intelligence] should be subject to the pleasure of such rude grooms [ignorant servants].

In this I might insert two more, that both have writ against these buckram [pretend] Gentlemen, but let their own works serve to witness against their own wickedness, if they persevere to maintain any more such peasants [two who have written against the actors will witness against themselves if they continue to write for them]. For other newcomers [Jonson and Marston], I leave them to the mercy of these painted monsters [the actors], who (I doubt not) [he hopes] will drive the best minded to despise them. . . .

But now return I again to you three, knowing my misery is to you no news [apparently Greene's illness, but probably Oxford's financial problems and disputes with the actors], and let me heartily entreat you to be warned by my harms. . . . and when they sooth you with terms of Mastership [flatter you with honorifics], remember Robert Greene, whom they have often so flattered, perishes now for want of comfort. Remember Gentlemen, your lives are like so many lighted Tapers, that are with care delivered to all of you to maintain; these with wind-puffed wrath may be extinguished, which drunkenness put out, which negligence let fall; for man's time is not of itself so short, but it is more shortened by sin. The fire of my light is now at the last snuff, and for want of wherewith to sustain it, there is no substance left for life to feed on. Trust not then (I beseech you) to such weak stays [the actors], for they are as changeable in mind as in many attires [costumes]. Well, my hand is tired, and I am forced to leave where I would begin; for a whole book cannot contain their wrongs, which I am forced to knit up in some few lines of words.

Desireous that you should live, though he himself be dying, Robert Greene.

[Then follows the tale of the Grasshopper and the Ant, rendered neatly in seven well-polished stanzas of verse. Is the reader to understand that this poem was an earlier effort by Greene added by the editor? Or are we to assume that Robert Greene managed to stave off the Grim Reaper long enough to make sure that the lines scanned?]

With this the Grasshopper, yielding to the weather's extremity, died comfortless without remedy. Like him myself; like me, shall all that trust to friends' or time's inconstancy. Now faint I of my last infirmity, beseeching them that shall bury my body, to publish this last farewell written with my wretched hand: *Foeliciem fuisse infaustum*.

## Appendix E

### Authorship of *Groatsworth*

There is almost no part of the *Groatsworth* story that hasn't been questioned, including, right from the moment it hit the booksellers' stalls, who wrote it. (Writing in 1986, Crupi lists twelve publications from the 20th century alone that discuss the arcane issue of the authorship of *Groatsworth*.)

In *Four Letters*, published two weeks after Greene's departure for the hereafter, Harvey accused Nashe of writing it, to which Nashe snarlingly replied in the dedication to the second edition of *Piers Penniless* (published early '93), that it was a "scald, trivial lying pamphlet" adding, "God never have care of my soul but utterly renounce me, if the least word or syllable in it proceeded from my pen, or if I were any way privy to the writing or printing of it." Numerous scholars in the centuries since have disbelieved Nashe's hot denial, and he remains one of the chief contenders for authorship. When dealing with Nashe, it must be kept in mind that his most deadly responses to perceived injury always comes in the form of satire; whenever he appears to be frothing at the mouth over an insult it is usually a dodge of some sort. Nashe is second only to Greene in the confusion he has caused commentators.

The second most popular contender for authorship is the purported publisher of *Greene's Groatsworth*, Henry Chettle. *Groatsworth* was the first thing ever published by him (so far as is known) and is the occasion for his first appearance in literary history. Chettle was working as a clerk for the Stationers' Register at the time, and as a printer's compositor. Probably in his mid-to-late-twenties, he had just gone into partnership with the printers William Hoskins and John Danter (familiar to Shakespeare scholars as the publishers of the first quarto of *Titus Andronicus*, 1594, and of *Romeo and Juliet*, 1597).

In *Kind Hart's Dreame*, his second pamphlet (ent/SR Dec. 1592), Chettle claimed that his only role in the writing of *Greene's Groatsworth* was the preparation of Greene's handwritten text for publication from "papers discovered" in Greene's rooms shortly after his death. This "discovery" of papers in someone's rooms after death or while away at sea was a dodge employed so frequently in an effort by writers to escape the "stigma of print" that wherever it appears it should sound an instant alarm to researchers.

In the preface to this pamphlet Chettle apologizes profusely to one who had been insulted by *Groatsworth*, no doubt the target of the upstart crow diatribe. Scholars would like this to be Shakespeare, but, again, if it was Edward Alleyn whom it was intended to insult, it is much more likely that it was Alleyn who was, in fact, insulted. Not long after this Chettle began working for Alleyn and Henslowe as a writer. It doesn't seem likely that one in Chettle's position would have purposely and rather pointlessly insulted one who would have represented a potential source of income to a fledgling writer, unless he had a very good reason for doing so.

That Chettle wrote *Greene's Groatsworth* himself seems highly unlikely. A poor man (son of a dyer), lacking a university degree, and never out of financial straits in later life, he would have been dependent all along on the goodwill of employers and other authorities, so that it is questionable that he would or even could fake Greene's style. A marginal note by the Victorian scholar, C.M. Inglesby responded to the suggestion

by John Payne Collier that Chettle forged *Groatsworth*: “An absurd conjecture. Greene’s work is full of genius, while Chettle is a poor stick and could hardly write English” (Carroll 25).

The diatribe against the players also seems unlikely coming from one in Chettle’s position, one who would soon be depending on them for part if not all of his income. Also, as pointed out by D. Allen Carroll, *Groatsworth* contained some very inflammatory material which he believes was aimed at Lord Burghley (notably “Lamilia’s Fable”). As one who promotes Chettle as the true author of *Groatsworth*, Carroll sees this as Chettle’s reason for hiding behind Greene’s name; but taking the political realities of the time into account, this level of risk seems way out of Chettle’s league, nor does Carroll offer anything in the way of a motive for Chettle to satirize the most powerful man in England.

Everything we know of Chettle’s history would indicate that he was no more than a paid instrument in the publication of *Groatsworth*, as in every other matter in which we know he was involved.

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