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Was Robert Greene's "upstart Crow" the actor Edward Alleyn?

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"The first mention of William Shakespeare as a writer occurred in 1592 when Robert Greene singled him out as an actor-turned-playwright who had grown too big for his britches."

Such is the claim made by all Shakespeare biographers. However, a closer look at the evidence reveals what appears to be an unfortunate case of mistaken identity.

Near the end of *Greene's Groatsworth of Wit* (September 1592),¹ Robert Greene, in an address to three fellow playwrights widely agreed to be Christopher Marlowe, Thomas Nashe and George Peele, says that an actor he calls an "upstart Crow" has become so full of himself that he now believes he is the only "Shake-scene" in the country. This puffed-up actor even dares to write blank verse and imagines himself the equal of professional playwrights.

In his address to Marlowe, Nashe, and Peele, Greene reminds them that actors owe their entire careers to writers. He warns his fellow playwrights that just as he has been abandoned by these actors, it could just as easily happen to them. He urges them not to trust the actors, especially the one he calls an "upstart Crow." Finally, he pleads with them to stop writing plays for the actors, whom he variously calls "Apes," "Anticks," and "Puppets."

Here is Greene's warning to his fellow playwrights [following immediately from Appendix B]:

Base minded men all three of you, if by my misery you be not warned: for unto none of you (like me) sought those burres to cleave: those Puppets (I mean) that spake from our mouths, those Anticks garnished in our colours.

Is it not strange, that I, to whom they all have been beholding: is it not like that you, to whom they all have been beholding, shall (were ye in that case as I am now) be both at once of them forsaken?

Yes trust them not: for there is an upstart Crow, beautified with our feathers, that with his *Tigers hart wrapped in a Players hyde**, 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: & let those Apes imitate your past excellence, and never more acquaint them with your admired inventions.

*("O tiger's heart wrapped in a woman's hide!" *Henry VI, Part III*, Act I, Scene iv, 137)

If we focus solely on the third paragraph, the reference to an upstart player who presumes to be a playwright does bring Shakespeare to mind. The allusion to *Henry VI, Part III*, a Shakespeare play, adds to the suspicion. The use of the prefix "Shake" to describe the actor in question clinches it in scholars' minds – Greene is talking about Shakespeare, making waves as he overtakes his peers in reputation. This interpretation has long since become a permanent, indispensable fixture of Shakespeare scholarship, rendering sober second thought non-existent.

The absence of debate on this issue is unfortunate, since even a superficial examination reveals that the actor Edward Alleyn is at least as good a candidate as Shakespeare. A.D. Wraight, in her 1993 book, *Christopher Marlowe and Edward Alleyn*, put forward a detailed argument for Alleyn as the Shake-scene, one that should have been impossible to ignore. Perhaps not suprisingly, her arguments have attracted little attention from the mainstream. This article takes as its starting point Wraight's discussion, and adds several details that make the case even stronger.

Alleyn was the lead actor of Lord Strange's Men in 1592 while they were performing *Henry VI, Part III*. Alleyn would have played the lead, Richard Duke of York, the character who spoke the "tiger's heart" line. For Greene's readers, the image invoked by his use of this line would have been of Edward Alleyn, in the role of York, in the play's most memorable scene: beset by foes, about to die, defiant to the last.

Edward Alleyn was the unchallenged leading actor of his generation and quite rightly may have thought himself the only man capable of "shaking a scene" in the country. And while there is no evidence of any relationship with Shakespeare, Greene's documented dislike of Alleyn dates back to 1590 when he chastised Alleyn for being "proud with Aesop's crow, being pranced with the glory of other's feathers."² This is the same charge he makes against the "upstart Crow" in 1592 – "Your success derives from the work of others."

Groatsworth of Wit was Greene's farewell to the world. In September 1592 he had been sick for some time, broke, no friends were visiting, no one would give or lend him money for his care; he was in his words "at [his] last end, been left thus desolate." And, as he tells Marlowe, Nashe and Peele, he felt "forsaken" by his former employers, the actors, who had gotten rich through speaking his words. It is against this backdrop that Greene leads us through an allegorical story of his life,

with himself cast as Roberto, whose experience Greene confesses near the end has “most parts agreeing with mine.”

Left with nothing after his father’s death but one “Groat,” a small denomination coin which his father tells him to use to buy some wit, Roberto attempts to obtain wealth through conning schemes, but ultimately ends up with nothing. The unemployed scholar, destitute, alone and aimless, despairs about his state. Then Roberto’s tale takes a remarkable turn. Greene tells us how Roberto came to be a playwright: he was approached by a wealthy Player and asked to write plays for him and his company [see Appendix A]

Overhearing Roberto’s lamentation, a well-dressed gentleman draws near, guesses that Roberto is a scholar, and tells him it is a pity that men of learning should live in poverty. He offers Roberto a chance at gainful employment. Roberto is intrigued by the proposition, for the stranger appears to be a man of considerable means. Curious, Roberto asks, “How do you mean to employ me?” Promising that the work will be light, yet pay very well, the Player replies, “Why easily, and greatly to your benefit.”

Robert Greene then has the Player deliver this blunt admission: “Men of my profession get by scholars their whole living;” thus providing the reader with an explanation of what Greene means when he later says that the “upstart Crow” is “beautified with our [playwrights] feathers.” The “upstart Crow,” like Roberto’s Player, gets his whole living from the work of scholar/poets. This sets up a repeated theme of the story, and a warning to other playwrights: “They are beholden to us, yet they’ve abandoned me in my hour of need, and they’ll eventually do it you.”

Still unaware with whom he is speaking, Roberto asks the man his profession. “A Player,” he replies. Roberto, surprised that a Player could appear so prosperous, confesses, “I took you rather for a Gentleman of great living.” The Player tells him that he is indeed a man of substance and that his share of the company’s playing apparel alone is worth over £200 (enough to pay the salaries of ten Oxford-educated schoolmasters). Roberto says he is surprised a man could become that wealthy through such a “vain practice” as acting, especially since (here Greene cannot resist a dig at the Player’s vocal attributes) he finds the Player’s voice “nothing gracious.”³

The Player takes exception to Roberto’s judgment of his speaking voice, and begins to list the roles he is famous for, including – and now Greene effectively reveals the identity of the Player – “The *Twelve Labors of Hercules* have I terribly thundered on the Stage.”

To Greene’s 1592 audience, only one man fit this description, only one Player could be described as “thundering on the stage” – Edward Alleyn. Greene’s later description of an actor who thinks himself a “Shake-scene” and “bombasts” out blank verse only reinforce to his readers that Edward Alleyn is the intended target. Naming him would have been superfluous.

Now that Roberto has a better understanding of the Player, he asks him, “but how mean you to use me?” The Player responds, “Why sir, in making Plays, for which you shall be well paid, if you will take the pains.” Here is another clue to Greene’s grievance: he was promised to be well paid, yet now here he is, in pain, possibly dying, debt-ridden, at the same time that Alleyn and his players are cashing

in with ongoing performances of his plays. Greene's later condemnation of the actor he calls an "upstart Crow" would have been understood by his readers as a continuation of this first encounter with the Player.

The case for Edward Alleyn as the Player/Shake-scene looks strong, but the key point of contention is that the "upstart Crow" presumes to be a writer. It turns out that the Player who offers Roberto employment also claims to be a writer. The Player brags to Roberto that he is a "country author" who wrote morals such as the *Moral of Man's Witte* and the *Dialogue of Dives*.

What was the Player/Alleyn's motivation in asking Roberto/Greene to write plays for him? The Player explains, "Now my almanac is out of date." His plays are old, and fallen out of fashion. He needs new plays, and the Player knows that a "country author" cannot meet the demands of the city's playgoers. The stakes are higher, the customers more fickle, the competition more fierce. He needs new material, good material, as good as the competition, and so he asks Roberto, a scholar, to supply him with new plays to perform.

We can also infer from the conversation that the Player is the leader of his troupe. His status as leading actor makes his importance obvious. He has the authority, as well as the money, to propose a business arrangement with Roberto and to set him up in accommodations. He calls the company's catalogue of plays "my almanac," not "our almanac." And, his great wealth suggests he is the principal shareholder.

Greene's Player has little in common with the man from Stratford. Of Shakespeare between the years of 1585, when his twins were born, and 1593, when *Venus and Adonis* was published by fellow Stratfordian Richard Field, we know nothing. If he was involved in some note-worthy activity, there is no record of it. It is not until 1594 that he is first recorded as a member of a playing company. But even after 1594 Shakespeare was never the leading actor, and although he was one of several sharers in the company, he was not the leader.

Alleyn, on the other hand, left us a trail of evidence of dramatic involvement before 1592. He is first recorded as one of the members of the Earl of Worcester's Men in Jan 1583, at the age of sixteen.⁴ Since sharers were generally the only members mentioned in lists of players, this means Alleyn was likely wealthy at an incredibly early age. He is still a sharer in Worcester's Men in documents dating from 1589.⁵ By Feb 1592, when Lord Strange's Men began playing at Philip Henslowe's Rose theatre, Alleyn was their leading actor and as W.W. Greg tells us, "there is every reason to believe that Edward Alleyn, now twenty-five years of age, had already become manager of this company now emerging into fame."⁶

This is the Edward Alleyn known to Londoners at the time Greene wrote *Groatsworth of Wit*: precocious, wealthy, the nation's leading actor, a bombastic towering orator proudly "thundering on the stage," the manager/director of England's top company of players, famous in the leading roles of plays by Marlowe, Greene, Peele and the *Henry VI* plays.

Greene's characterization of the Player/Shake-scene would not have confused the London audience. There would have been no debate in the streets about whom

Greene was referring. Greene had left them with no doubts – the “upstart Crow” was the most famous “Crow” of them all – Edward Alleyn.

Now we can turn to Greene’s later charge against the “upstart Crow,” that he “supposes he is as well able to bombast out a blank verse as the best of you.” If the Player/ Shake-scene is Edward Alleyn, what could have led Greene to make this accusation? The Player claimed to be a “country author,” but writing bombastic blank verse fit for a London audience in the style of the University Wits was another matter entirely. This was not an enterprise for amateurs.

It turns out we have evidence that Edward Alleyn did write a bombastic blank verse play for the London audience, and had been acting it for several months preceding Greene’s tirade. In *Christopher Marlowe and Edward Alleyn* (1994), A.D. Wraight pointed to a play called *Tambercam* that Rose theatre owner (and Alleyn’s step-father to be) Philip Henslowe paid Edward Alleyn forty shillings for.⁷ Here is how the entry appears in *Henslowe’s Diary*:

pd vnto my sonne E Alleyn at the a poynt
ment of the company for his Boocke
of tambercam the 2 of octob³ 1602 the some of }xxxx^s⁸

Wraight showed that Alleyn had been paid by Henslowe for several other books as well, but those payments were always to Alleyn for “a Boocke” or “the Boocke.” Only with *Tambercam* was the book in question referred to by Henslowe as “his Boocke.” The play has not survived, but no other author for *Tambercam* has been mentioned, and it is clear from the title that the play is an attempt to rival Marlowe’s *Tamberlaine* (1587), in which Alleyn played the lead. We should remember it was the combination of Marlowe’s perfection of dramatic blank verse in *Tamberlaine* with Alleyn’s wondrous talent in the title role that catapulted both men to the top of their professions.

What Wraight did not discuss in her book was the fact that *Tambercam, Parts I and II*, instead of the original *Tamberlaine, Parts I and II*, were part of Lord Strange’s Men’s repertoire in 1592 while Alleyn was their lead actor.⁹

Philip Henslowe’s Diary begins recording performances by Lord Strange’s Men at his Rose theatre on February 19, 1592. Beginning on April 28, 1592 and continuing through June 1592 (when the theaters are closed until December), *Tambercam Parts I and II* are part of the rotation.¹⁰ This, I believe, is the key to Greene’s “upstart Crow” charge against the “Shake-scene.”

Since Alleyn was the actor who had played *Tamberlaine*, he had within his memory all of the lead speeches of Marlowe’s two-part tragedy. It would have been easy for Alleyn to create a variation on *Tamberlaine* – with different characters, a different plot, and speeches modified to his own liking, and claim that he had written a new play under a new name, *Tambercam*.

The fact that Henslowe calls *Tambercam* “Alleyn’s book,” and paid him for it, is good evidence that Alleyn wrote *Tambercam*, and was acting the title role at the very time Greene sat down to write his “upstart Crow” charge. His crime? Alleyn, an

actor, a “country author,” was performing a play he had written alongside “real” plays written by scholars such as Christopher Marlowe, Thomas Nashe, George Peele, and Robert Greene, as if he were in their league.

Alleyn, by age twenty-five, was leading actor, manager, wealthy businessman, and now added to this astounding list of accomplishments, a writer of blank verse plays. Edward Alleyn was a man who truly believed he could do it all, a veritable “Johannes fac totum,” a “Jack of all trades,” exactly how Greene sneeringly described the “upstart Crow.”

Alleyn’s authorship of *Tambercam* fits perfectly with Greene’s charge that the “upstart Crow” thought he could “bombast out a blank verse *as the best of you*.” The “you” Greene addresses are Marlowe, Nashe, Peele, and more generally all other working playwrights. The best of them, without question, was Christopher Marlowe. Singling Marlowe out in this way makes sense if Alleyn’s *Tambercam* was an attempt to imitate Marlowe’s most famous work.

This might also help to explain why Greene begins his address to the playwrights with Marlowe, the famous “gracer of tragedians.” If Greene felt that Alleyn had wronged Marlowe with the writing and performance of *Tambercam*, he would have seen Marlowe as the one most likely to take his side against Alleyn. Alleyn’s writing of *Tambercam* might also be explained as part of a possible falling out between Alleyn and Marlowe that Greene hinted at in 1590 when he admonished Alleyn to “d disdain not thy tutor [Marlowe] because thou pratest in a King’s Chamber.”

Why did Greene choose to address Marlowe, Nashe and Peele in his appeal for playwrights to stop selling plays to actors? We know that Alleyn had a long professional relationship with Robert Greene, as well as Marlowe and Peele:

In the 1590s, besides Talbot [*Henry VI, Part I*] he [Alleyn] made famous the roles of Orlando in Robert Greene’s *Orlando Furioso*, Marlowe’s Tamburlaine, Dr Faustus, and Barabas in *The Jew of Malta*, Muly Mahomet in George Peele’s *The Battle of Alcazar*, and Tamar in the anonymous *Tamer Cham*.¹¹

But Alleyn performed plays written by many writers. Why would Greene single out these three men in particular? I believe the answer is found in his decision to use the “Tigers hart wrapped in a Players hyde” line from *Henry VI, Part III*, to insult the “Crow.”

Among the many plays Strange’s Men performed, in the spring of 1592 at the Rose, were three known to have been written by Robert Greene: *Orlando Furioso*, *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay*, and *A Looking Glass for London*. But it was the *Henry VI* plays that captured the spirit of the age, and the crowds, with their sweeping pageantry and patriotic appeal.

The *Henry VI* plays are also among early Shakespeare plays that have long been the subject of speculation about co-authorship. It now seems no coincidence that the names one hears most often as collaborators on these plays are Christopher Marlowe, Thomas Nashe, George Peele and Robert Greene. Here follows a sampling of comment on the authorship of the *Henry VI* plays:

Among the plays assigned to Shakespeare there are four of which it is practically certain that Marlowe was a part author; they are of course, *Henry VI*, parts *I*, *II* and *III*, and *Titus Andronicus*.¹²
(Verity 1886)

[Shakespeare's] first dramatic work that went before the public was, I am of the opinion, a part of two plays called "The Contention of the Houses of York and Lancaster," and "The True Tragedy of the Duke of York," which he wrote in collaboration with Christopher Marlowe, George Peele, and probably Robert Greene.¹³
(White, 1895)

It is as nearly certain as anything can be which depends chiefly upon cumulative and collateral evidence that the better part of what is best in the serious scenes of "King Henry VI" is mainly the work of Marlowe. That he is, at any rate, the principal author of the second and third plays passing under that name among the works of Shakespeare, but first and imperfectly imprinted as "The Contention between the two Famous Houses of York and Lancaster," can hardly be now a matter of debate among competent judges.¹⁴
(Swinburne, 1908)

In [*Edward II*], and perhaps in the early sketches of 2nd and 3rd *Henry VI* for the same company, Marlowe turned to English history.¹⁵
(Brooke, 1930)

The Phrase, a *Tyger's heart*, etc., is parodied from a line in *III K.H.VI* (V,iv,137), a play perhaps originally by Marlowe, but revised by the young Shakespeare, who is directly pointed at in the pun on his name, "Shakescene."¹⁶
(Parrott, 1934)

In the relation of master and apprentice, the two [Shakespeare and Marlowe] may even then have been busy revising the two earlier plays which were to become the *Second and Third Parts of Henry VI*.¹⁷
(Bakeless, 1942)

It is mainly [*Henry VI*] *Part One* that continues to be seen as not wholly by [Shakespeare], with recent assessment assigning co-authorship to Nashe, and possibly George Peele and others.¹⁸
(Martin, 2001)

And finally, we have this summary of recent scholarship from the introduction to *Henry VI, Part I* in *The Arden Shakespeare: Complete Works* (2001):

Like the present Arden editor, Edward Burns, many have come to believe [*Henry VI, Part I*] was a collaboration – as were so many Elizabethan plays – written by Shakespeare and Nashe and two other dramatists, perhaps Robert Greene and George Peele.¹⁹
(Proudfoot, et al., 2001)

If we look at the scholarship of the *Henry VI* plays from a historical perspective, a remarkable shift can be seen. During the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth centuries, the primary collaborator mentioned is Christopher Marlowe, part of a larger trend identifying Marlowe's hand as a part author in several of the early Shakespeare plays. For those earlier commentators, the similarities of the early Shakespeare canon to the plays assigned to Marlowe were explained as collaboration between the two men.

However, sometime in mid-century this interpretation fell out of favour. In its place emerged the theory that Shakespeare began his career *emulating* Marlowe, thus eliminating the need to imagine Marlowe taking an active hand in the early Shakespeare plays. This new critical stance toward the *Henry VI* plays is demonstrated by F.E. Halliday in *The Life of Shakespeare* (1961):

Shakespeare, too, must have seen *Tamburlaine* at the Rose and been swept away on the torrent of Marlowe's verse. . . . perhaps [Shakespeare's] reaction to *Tamburlaine* was the rewriting of part of a new history of *Henry VI*. His opening lines were certainly inspired by that play, and a finer tribute to Marlowe than anything written by the University Wits.²⁰ (Halliday, 1961)

Since Halliday, Marlowe is almost never mentioned as a collaborator, and is now spoken of only in terms of his overwhelming influence on Shakespeare, as summarized by Robert Logan in his recent book *Shakespeare's Marlowe* (2007):

Shakespeare himself had a kind of tunnel vision when he saw or read Marlowe's works. He evidently experienced an intense degree of engagement, an infatuation of sorts, which accounts ultimately for the power, complexity, and duration of Marlowe's influence on his artistry.²¹

Of greater significance than the point at which the sense of emulation emerges as documentable evidence is the firmness with which Marlowe's influence rooted itself in Shakespeare and developed, for it continued to thrive for 18 years after Marlowe's death, roughly from 1593-1611, the remainder of Shakespeare's career. . . . Such an influence, amazing in its own right, is too forceful and persistent to be neglected or taken lightly.²²

Shakespeare's deliberate absorption and imitation of Marlowe's style, so went the new criticism, is what had confused all of the scholars who'd gone before. It was not the actual presence of Marlowe's hand in Shakespeare's work that scholars had been noting, but Shakespeare himself, *writing in a Marlowesque manner*.

But was the judgment of the older commentators wrong? Are Logan and his peers wrong? Perhaps they are both wrong. There is a third possibility which eliminates all confusion: Instead of the *Henry VI* plays being the product of a Marlowe imitator, they were in fact written by Christopher Marlowe. It simplifies our understanding of Greene's reference when we consider the likelihood that Greene had never heard of Shakespeare, and that the *Henry VI* plays had been authored, not by

Shakespeare, but written primarily by Marlowe, with co-authorship by Nashe, Peele and Greene.

Greene addressed these three men because he saw himself as part of this elite group of poet/scholars, united by their triumphant collaboration on the brilliant *Henry VI* trilogy, now made famous by Lord Strange's Men with Alleyn as star performer. The *Henry VI* plays would later become the property of the Lord Chamberlain's Men (formed in 1594 from the remnants of Lord Strange's Men), in which Shakespeare was a founding partner, eventually finding their way into the First Folio as "Shakespeare" plays.

The story that emerges suggests something like this: When Robert Greene set out to write *Groatsworth of Wit*, he saw Alleyn and his company of actors raking in piles of cash from the performance of his plays, while he suffered in a declining illness as his debts mounted. As far as Greene was concerned, he had helped make, and was continuing to make, Alleyn a rich man. Alleyn had promised to take care of Greene when he made his offer to employ him as a playwright, but now that he was in need, Alleyn and his colleagues had forsaken him. The contrast of Alleyn's accolades and wealth to his penury and abandonment was a bitter pill. Greene was angry and lashed out the only way he knew how – by attacking Alleyn with his pen.

There is some independent support for this theory. In early 1592, Alleyn's fellow actor Richard Jones (not to be confused with the printer, Richard Jones) was heading to the continent to perform with the Admiral's Men. He needs a new suit of clothes and a new cloak, but he has no money. He writes to Alleyn and asks him for a loan of £3. But before this, he begins the letter with a surprising note of thanks; apparently, Jones had recently suffered an illness and had been supported by Alleyn during his recovery:

Mr. Allen,

I commend my love and humble duty to you, giving you thanks for your great bounty, bestowed upon me in my sickness, when I was in great want. God bless you for it. . . .

Your poor friend to command,

Richard Jones

Feb 1592²³

Greene would have been well aware that Alleyn was in the habit of supporting his friends in times of need. It is easy to imagine that when he took ill, he too, following Richard Jones example, petitioned Alleyn to help him. But Alleyn said no. From our perspective, we can imagine why Alleyn refused – Greene did not pay back debts, and Roberto (read "Greene") had bragged earlier in *Groatsworth* that, "when I am paid anything aforehand, I break my promise."

In spite of any unpaid obligations he may have had with Alleyn, Greene felt that Alleyn should continue to support him because he and his company were continuing to make money through performances of his work.

As for Marlowe, Nashe, and Peele (and possibly Robert Greene), their work in the *Henry VI* plays was further enhancing Alleyn's reputation and making his company large sums of money. Greene warns these playwrights to learn from his

example, saying that if they were in his position, they too would be abandoned. Greene pleads with them to stop selling their plays to these ungrateful actors and let them make do with the plays they already have, to “let those Apes imitate your past excellence, and never more acquaint them with your admired inventions.”

When we weigh the arguments for Edward Alleyn as the “Shake-scene” against the traditional arguments put forward that William Shakespeare is “Shake-scene,” the scale tips in Alleyn’s favour.

According to the accepted narrative, Greene was jealous that Shakespeare, an actor, was becoming as popular a playwright as real playwrights like himself, but there is no evidence for this. When he wrote *Groatsworth*, Greene was sick, feared death was close, (he signs off with “Desirous that you should live, though himself be dying:/ Robert Greene”) and he was broke, unable to afford proper medical attention. What he wanted, and did not receive, was money from his former benefactors – in recognition of their continued performance of his work – to try and get well. Yet accepted scholarship holds that Greene’s final obsession was with being upstaged by another playwright. Considering his circumstances, could anything seem more trivial?

Given his situation, this explanation defies logic. In *Groatsworth*, Greene was making the case for *residual payments* for the ongoing performance of his work – a familiar concern for writers in the performing arts ever since. When Greene says that the upstart Crow is “beautified with our feathers,” the Shakespeare narrative interprets this as a reference to Shakespeare borrowing material from other playwrights, instead of what now appears obvious – Edward Alleyn was rich and famous because of the beautiful words he spoke as he strutted on stage, words written *for him* by Greene and his peers.

The case for Edward Alleyn is detailed, precise, and backed by converging lines of compelling evidence. The case for Shakespeare, on the other hand, is vague, unsatisfactory, and depends for its existence on its proponents not looking too closely.

And what of the man himself, Edward Alleyn? What did he think when he read *Groatsworth of Wit*? There can be little doubt that he did. *Groatsworth* made quite a splash. Everyone was talking about it. No matter what we may think of Greene’s intentions 400 years after the fact, Alleyn would have seen a clear picture of himself in the description of both the “Player” and the “upstart Crow.”

Whoever he was, the “upstart Crow’s” feathers had been ruffled, and with Greene dead, he looked for someone living to blame. Thomas Nashe, one of the writers Greene addressed, his good friend and long time associate, and a playwright well known for his satiric prose, was rumoured to be involved. Nashe issued a statement in the preface to his 1592 printing of *Pierce Pennilesse*, forcefully denying any involvement and distancing himself from the insults:

Other news I am advertised of, that a scald trivial lying pamphlet called *Greene’s Groatsworth of Wit* is given out to be of my doing. 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.²⁴

Nashe wanted to put a quick stop to any suggestion that he was the author. He would not have needed to put this in writing unless he had reason to fear, and his vehemence – he swears on his immortal soul – tells us the situation was serious.

Suspicion then fell on Henry Chettle. After Greene's death, the booksellers who owned *Groatsworth of Wit* asked Chettle to re-write Greene's copy and edit the text to make it fit for licensing,²⁵ a job Chettle tells us below he was well-practiced in. He reports that two play-makers were offended by what he neglected to remove from Greene's letter. The first is taken to be Marlowe, since Greene had called him out as an atheist in very strong terms, and told him to repent. The other is our "upstart Crow."

According to Chettle, he copied Greene's text faithfully; the only changes he made were to remove some offending passages in the letter written to the playwrights, but, in hindsight, not enough.²⁶ Chettle could not deny his involvement, and was compelled to print an apology for not going far enough in his editing of Greene's attack on the "upstart Crow." In a mea culpa delivered for the offended party, Chettle writes:

With neither of them that take offence was I acquainted, and with one of them I care not if I never be.

The other, whom at that time I did not so much spare as since I wish I had, for that as I have moderated the heat of living writers, and might have used my own discretion (especially in such a case), the author being dead, that I did not, I am as sorry as if the original fault had been my fault, because myself have seen his demeanour no less civil than he excellent in the quality [acting] he professes. Besides, divers of worship have reported his uprightness of dealing, which argues his honesty, and his facetious grace in writing, that approves his art.²⁷

Chettle's grovelling tone is similar to Nashe's, and we can infer that both men were strongly motivated to denounce Greene's attack on the "upstart Crow." In an act of contrition, Chettle publicly announces that the "Crow" was unfairly targeted by Greene, and dutifully reports that the "Crow" conducts himself with the same gentlemanly demeanour that he portrays on stage. Chettle tells us the "Crow" is well respected as an honest businessman, and that his writing, which Greene had dismissed, is good enough to complement his stagecraft.

It is also noteworthy that Chettle implies he is *not* sorry for leaving in Greene's offending passages about Marlowe, saying he does not know him, and does not care to know him. This tells us something of the state of Marlowe's already declining reputation, and again reinforces the notion of a rift between Marlowe and Alleyn, as well as with Lord Strange's Men in general.²⁸

The accepted narrative assumes that Chettle's apology is to Shakespeare, and asserts that some very important person(s) had put pressure on Chettle to make it. This from Michael Wood's *Shakespeare* (2003):

Chettle's apology had demonstrated that by the winter of 1592 Shakespeare already had friends among the well-to-do who would act for him to bring pressure against a publisher.²⁹

Keep in mind that as of this date, Shakespeare's name had not appeared in association with writing or any other dramatic activity. There is no external evidence that Chettle or Nashe was pressured by anyone who knew Shakespeare. There is, however, a well-documented explanation for Chettle's apology, and Nashe's statement, if the target was Edward Alleyn. Chettle had registered *Groatsworth of Wit* in September 1592. Then, a month later, on October 22, Edward Alleyn married Philip Henslowe's step-daughter Joan Woodward.³⁰

Henslowe owned the Rose theatre where Alleyn and Strange's Men performed. Alleyn was an important man before October 1592, but far more so after joining his name and business affairs with Philip Henslowe. Henslowe was not a man you wanted as an enemy, not if you needed to work in the London theatre. He was a powerful businessman with diversified interests, and he was well respected in the community. *Now* the insult was not just against Alleyn, but against Henslowe and his daughter as well. This would not have been acceptable to Henslowe, and he had the power to do something about it.

Chettle and Nashe knew which side their bread was buttered on, and they made good on distancing themselves from Greene's attack. Thomas Nashe is later recorded as being paid for plays by Henslowe.³¹ And Henslowe's diary subsequently records a long and extensive business relationship with Henry Chettle, with commissions and payments to him for four dozen writing projects.^{32,33}

It is hard to imagine how the received "Shake-scene was Shakespeare" interpretation has proliferated virtually unchallenged for decades. Readers are assured time and time again that this is a solid assumption, and therein lies the problem. The accepted narrative is now so integral to every study of Shakespeare's literary life that the prospect of questioning it grows more remote as each new generation of scholars comes of age. It has simply become too deeply embedded to face challenge. Too much depends on it. But readers need to be warned that all of the assumptions scholars have built, and continue to build, on the foundation of the "Shake-scene" reference, are suspect.

One can see an obvious parallel here. The questioning of the assumed identity of the "Shake-scene" is a kind of "Shakespeare Authorship Debate reduced." In light of the easily exposed weaknesses in the story, if the entire Shakespeare establishment can claim with certainty that there is "no doubt" that Greene's "upstart Crow" was the actor and future shareholder William Shakespeare, this raises concern about their capacity for self-criticism. And if the Shakespeare establishment can resist the flaws in reasoning behind this piece of dogma, one wonders if the unquestioning acceptance of the Stratford man's authorship of the works of Shakespeare might be similarly flawed.

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Notes

¹ *Greene's Groatsworth of Wit Bought With a Million of Repentance* was entered in the Stationers' Register to William Wright "upon the peril of Henry Chettle" on 20 September 1592, and was printed for Wright by John Danter and John Wolfe.

² "Why Roscius [Alleyn], art thou proud with Aesop's crow, being pranced with the glory of other's feathers? Of thyself thou canst say nothing, and if the Cobbler [Marlowe] hath taught thee to say 'Ave Caesar,' disdain not thy tutor because thou Pratest in a King's Chamber."

(From Robert Greene's *Francesco's Fortunes*, 1590)

³ Compare Greene's description of the Player's voice to Hamlet's advice to the visiting players. In Greene's account, an actor brags of "terribly thundering" on the stage, to which Greene responds that his voice is "nothing gracious." In *Hamlet*, Hamlet specifically warns the actors against the practice of bombastic declaiming, decrying its tendency to "split the ears of the groundlings." Hamlet sighs, "I had as lief the town-crier spoke my lines," which suggests a similar belief on the author's part that this mode of delivery was lacking in "grace." Both accounts describe the style of acting made famous by Edward Alleyn.

⁴ Greg, Walter W. ed. 1904. *Henslowe's Diary Part II: Commentary*. London: A.H. Bullen. (Reprinted 1969. Folcroft PA: The Folcroft Press, Inc.) p.9

⁵ Greg, 1904, Part II, p.82-3

⁶ Greg, 1904, Part II, p.83

⁷ Wraight, A. D. 1993. *Christopher Marlowe and Edward Alleyn*. London: Adam Hart Ltd. p.218

⁸ Greg, Walter W. ed. 1904. *Henslowe's Diary Part I: Text*. London: A.H. Bullen. (Reprinted 1969. Folcroft PA: The Folcroft Press, Inc.) p.171

⁹ Greg, 1904, Part I, p.13-15

¹⁰ See Greg, 1904, Part II, p.156

Note: Lord Strange's Men's performances at the Rose are documented beginning February 19th, 1592. On April 28, 1592, *Tambercam Part II* is recorded as a "ne" [new] play. *Tambercam Part I* is first recorded on May 26, 1592, although not recorded as "ne" and it would stand to reason that *Part I* had been written and performed before *Part II* made its debut on April 28, 1592. The two parts continued as part of the repertoire through June 1592, when the theaters closed. Both parts

reappear when playing resumes in December 1592 and are still being performed through January 1593.

¹¹ Taylor, Michael, ed. 2003. *Oxford World's Classics William Shakespeare Henry VI, Part I*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. p.4

¹² Verity, A. W. 1886. *The Influence of Christopher Marlowe on Shakespeare's Earlier Style*. Folcroft PA: The Folcroft Press, Inc. p.104

¹³ White, Richard Grant (Editor of the Riverside edition of Shakespeare's Works). 1895. *Studies in Shakespeare, (Eighth edition)*. Cambridge: The Riverside Press for Houghton, Mifflin and Company. p.21

¹⁴ Swinburne, A.C. From "The Age of Shakespeare" (1908) 1-14. Maclure, Millar, ed. 1979. *Marlowe: The Critical Heritage 1588-1896*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul. p.181

¹⁵ Brooke, C.F. Tucker. 1930. *The Life of Marlowe and The Tragedy of Dido Queen of Carthage*. London: Methuen & Co. Ltd. p.48

¹⁶ Parrott, Thomas Marc. 1934. *William Shakespeare: A Handbook*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons. p.38

¹⁷ Bakeless, John. 1942. *The Tragical History of Christopher Marlowe*. Hamden, CT: Archon Books. Bakeless, 1942, Vol I. p.98

¹⁸ Martin, Randall, ed. 2001. *Oxford World's Classics William Shakespeare Henry VI, Part III*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. p.129

¹⁹ Proudfoot, Richard, Thompson, Ann and Kastan, David Scott (eds.). 2001. *The Arden Shakespeare: Complete Works*. Cengage Learning EMEA Publishers. p.463

²⁰ Halliday, F.E. 1961. *The Life of Shakespeare*. London: Gerald Duckworth & Co. Ltd (reprinted with revisions 1964). p.65

²¹ Logan, Robert. 2007. *Shakespeare's Marlowe: The Influence of Christopher Marlowe on Shakespeare's Artistry*. Hampshire England: Ashgate Publishing Limited. *Acknowledgments*

²² Logan, 2007, p.8

²³ Greg, Walter W. 1907. *Henslowe Papers: Being Documents Supplementary to Henslowe's Diary*. London: A.H. Bullen. p.33

²⁴ A Private Epistle of the Author to the Printer in *Pierce Penilesse His Supplication to the Devil*. Imprinted by Richard Jones, dwelling at the sign of the Rose and Crown near Holborn Bridge. 1592.

²⁵ “About three months since died M. Robert Greene, leaving many papers in sundry booksellers' hands, among other his *Groatsworth of Wit*, in which a letter written to divers play-makers is offensively by one or two of them taken, and because on the dead they cannot be avenged, they wilfully forge in their conceits a living author, and after tossing it to and fro, no remedy but it must light on me. How I have, all the time of my conversing in printing, hindered the bitter inveighing against scholars, it hath been very well known, and how in that I dealt I can sufficiently prove.”
(Henry Chettle, “The epistle to the gentlemen readers,” in *Kind-Heart's Dream*, entered on the Stationers' Register to William Wright on 8 December 1592 and printed by Danter and Wolfe.)

²⁶ “I had only in the copy this share; it was ill written, as sometime Greene's hand was none of the best. Licensed it must be ere it could be printed, which could never be if it might not be read. To be brief, I writ it over, and as near as I could, followed the copy; only in that letter I put something out, but in the whole book not a word in, for I protest it was all Greene's, not mine nor Master Nashe's, as some unjustly have affirmed.”
(Chettle, *Kind-Heart's Dream*, 1592)

²⁷ Chettle, *Kind-Heart's Dream*, 1592.

²⁸ In his letter to Lord Puckering, written sometime after June 1593, Thomas Kyd reported that once Lord Strange found out about Marlowe's atheism, he broke off all contact with him. “His Lordship never knew his service but in writing for his players, for never could my Lord [Strange] endure his name, or sight, when he had heard of his conditions.” Greene's public outing of Marlowe as an atheist may have been the event which prompted Lord Strange, and Lord Strange's Men, to break off relations with Marlowe.

²⁹ Wood, Michael. 2003. *Shakespeare*. New York: Perseus Books Group. p.147

³⁰ Greg, 1904, Part I, p.3

³¹ Greg, 1904, Part I, p.57, 62

³² Knutson, Roslyn Lander. 2001. *Playing Companies and Commerce in Shakespeare's Time*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. p.54

³³ Greg, 1904, Part I, p.59, 60, 86, 88, 93-5, 97, 104-5, 107, 111, 143, 166

Appendix A: Excerpt from *Greene's Groatsworth of Wit* "The Player offers Roberto employment writing plays."

On the other side of the hedge sat one that heard his sorrow: who getting over, came towards him, and brake off his passion. When he approached, he saluted Roberto in this sort.

"Gentleman, quoth he, (for so you seem) I have by chance heard you discourse some part of your grief; which appeareth to be more than you will discover, or I can conceive. But if you vouchsafe such simple comfort as my ability may yield, assure your self, that I will endeavour to do the best, that either may procure you profit, or bring you pleasure: the rather, for that I suppose you are a scholar, and pity it is men of learning should live in lack."

Roberto wondering to hear such good words, for that this iron age affords few that esteem of virtue; returned him thankful gratulations, and (urged by necessity) uttered his present grief, beseeching his advise how he might be employed.

"Why, easily," quoth he, "and greatly to your benefit: for men of my profession get by scholars their whole living."

"What is your profession," said Roberto?

"Truly sir," said he, "I am a player."

"A player," quoth Roberto, "I took you rather for a Gentleman of great living, for if by outward habit men should be censured, I tell you, you would be taken for a substantial man."

"So am I where I dwell," quoth the player, "reputed able at my proper cost to build a Windmill. What though the world once went hard with me, when I was fain to carry my playing Fardle a footback Tempora mutantur, I know you know the meaning of it better than I, but I thus conster it, its otherwise now; for my very share in playing apparel will not be sold for two hundred pounds."

"Truly," said Roberto, "'tis strange, that you should so prosper in that vain practice, for that it seems to me your voice is nothing gracious."

"Nay then," said the Player, "I mislike your judgement: why, I am as famous for Delphrigus, & the King of Fairies, as ever was any of my time. The twelve labors of Hercules have I terribly thundered on the Stage, and played three Scenes of the Devil in the High way to heaven."

"Have ye so?" said Roberto, "then I pray you pardon me."

"Nay more," quoth the Player, "I can serve to make a pretty speech, for I was a country Author, passing at a Moral, for twas I that penned the *Moral of Man's Witte*, the *Dialogue of Dives*, and for seven years space was absolute Interpreter to the puppets. But now my Almanac is out of date:

*The people make no estimation,
 Of Morals teaching education.*

Was not this pretty for a plain rhyme extempore? if ye will ye shall have more."

"Nay it's enough," said Roberto, "but how mean you to use me?"

“Why sir, in making Plays,” said the other, “for which you shall be well paid, if you will take the pains.”

Roberto perceiving no remedy, thought best in respect of his present necessity, to try his wit, & went with him willingly: who lodged him at the Town’s end in a house of retail, where what happened our Poet, you shall after hear.

Appendix B: Excerpt from *Greene's Groatsworth of Wit* “Greene speaks directly to Marlowe, Nashe and Peele.”

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.

[To Christopher Marlowe]

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 Machivilian policy that thou hast studied? 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 iubeo*, 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.

The broacher of this Diabolical Atheism is dead, and in his life had never the felicity he aimed at: but as he began in craft; lived in fear, and ended in despair. *Quam inscrutabilia sunt Dei iudicia?* 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*: and wilt thou my friend be his disciple?

Look but to me, by him persuaded to that liberty, and thou shalt find it an infernal bondage. I know the least of my demerits merit this miserable death, but wilful striving against known truth, exceedeth all the terrors of my soul. Defer not (with me) till this last point of extremity; for little knowest thou how in the end thou shalt be visited.

[To Thomas 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.

[To George Peele]

And thou no less deserving than the other two, in some things rarer, in nothing inferior; driven (as myself) to extreme shifts, a little have I to say to thee: and were it not an idolatrous oath, I would swear by sweet Saint George, thou art unworthy better hap, sith thou dependest on so mean a stay.

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