

1. Robert Greene on Shakespeare's Plagiarism

1592

Greenes Groats-worth of Witte, bought with a million of Repentance (1592), a pamphlet purportedly written by the dramatist Robert Greene (1558-92), was most likely forged or edited by Henry Chettle (1564-1606), who arranged for its posthumous publication. The three base-minded men are usually identified as Marlowe, Peele and Nashe.¹ It is notable, however, that in *Palladis Tamia* (No. 2, below), Francis Meres remarks: "As Achilles tortured the deade bodie of Hector, and as Antonius, and his wife Fulvia tormented the livelesse corps of Cicero: so Gabriell Harvey hath shewed the same inhumanitie to Greene that lies full low in his grave."

Groatsworth's most famous passage has been endlessly read and ingeniously interpreted. Apart from its apparent reference to Shakespeare, called "Shake-scene" and supported by an ironical paraphrase from *3 Henry VI*, it is notable for the allegation that he is an "upstart crow" who has beautified himself in others feathers. One reading of this is that he is a plagiarist. The writer damns Shake-scene as an actor and a dramatist, a Jack of all Trades, who imagines he can write as well, and perhaps even better, than Greene and his fellow playwrights. He is ruthless and believes himself to be the only game in town.

Base-minded men all three of you, if by my miserie you be not warnd: for vnto none of you (like mee) sought those burres to cleaue: those Puppets (I meane) that spake from our mouths, those Anticks garnisht in our colours. Is it not strange, that I, to whom they all have beene beholding: is it not like that you, to whome they all have beene be-holding, shall (were yee in that case that I am now) bee both at once of them forsaken? Yes trust them not: for there is an vpstart Crow, beautified with our feathers, that with his *Tygers hart wrapt in a Players hyde*, supposes he is as well able to bombast out a blanke verse as the best of you: and beeing an absolute *Iohannes factotum*, is in his owne conceit the onely Shake-scene in a country.

¹ D. Allen Carroll (ed.): *Greene's Groatsworth of Wit* (Binghamton, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1994) pp. 84-85. Carroll cites W. B. Austin: 'A Computer-Aided Technique for Stylistic Discrimination: The Authorship of *Greene's Groatsworth of Wit*' (Washington, DC: U. S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, Office of Education, Bureau of Research, April, 1969) to show that *Groatsworth* was almost certainly written by Henry Chettle, a case also persuasively advanced by Diana Price: *Shakespeare's Unorthodox Biography* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2001), pp. 28ff., and John Jowett: 'Johannes Factotum: Henry Chettle and *Greene's Groatsworth of Wit*,' *Proceedings of the Bibliographical Society of America* 87 (1993), pp. 453-86.