

Henry Chettle's Apology Revisited

by Robert Detobel

In Chapter 7 of *Shakespeare Beyond Doubt*¹ ("Allusions to Shakespeare to 1642"), Stanley Wells writes: "What is usually taken to be the first printed reference to Shakespeare comes in a book named *Greene's Groatsworth of Wit Bought with a Million of Repentance* of 1592, written ostensibly by the popular playwright, poet and prose writer Robert Greene, but possibly in part or in whole by Henry Chettle.... Soon after the book appeared Chettle published *Kind Heart's Dream* with a preface in which he offered an apology for not having toned down the criticism made in the earlier book. He says that two men had been offended by the attack. He cares nothing for what one of them (usually supposed to be Christopher Marlowe) thinks, but regrets having offended the other, 'because myself have seen his demeanour no less civil than he excellent in the quality he professes. Besides, divers of worship have reported his uprightness of dealing, which argues his honesty, and his facetious [skilful] grace in writing that approves [demonstrates] his art.' The cryptic nature of the attack in the *Groatsworth of Wit* means that we cannot say definitively that it refers to Shakespeare."

I will argue that Wells' rendition of Chettle's account is only approximately exact and neither the letter in *Groatsworth* nor Chettle's apology is as cryptic as many orthodox scholars have held. From Edmund K. Chambers, for instance, we have this assessment: "It is probable that the first play-maker here referred to is Marlowe and the second Shakespeare, although this implies some looseness in Chettle's language, since Greene's letter was obviously not written to Shakespeare. But there is nothing in the letter as we have it which could be offensive to any play-maker except Marlowe, who is spoken of as an atheist and Machiavellian, and Shakespeare, who is openly attacked. The others, presumably Peele and Nashe, 'young Iuvenall, that byting Satyrlist'... are handled in a more friendly spirit."² Chambers' underlying argument is that Marlowe was obviously offended, but the two other playwrights Greene addressed could hardly feel offended. On the contrary,

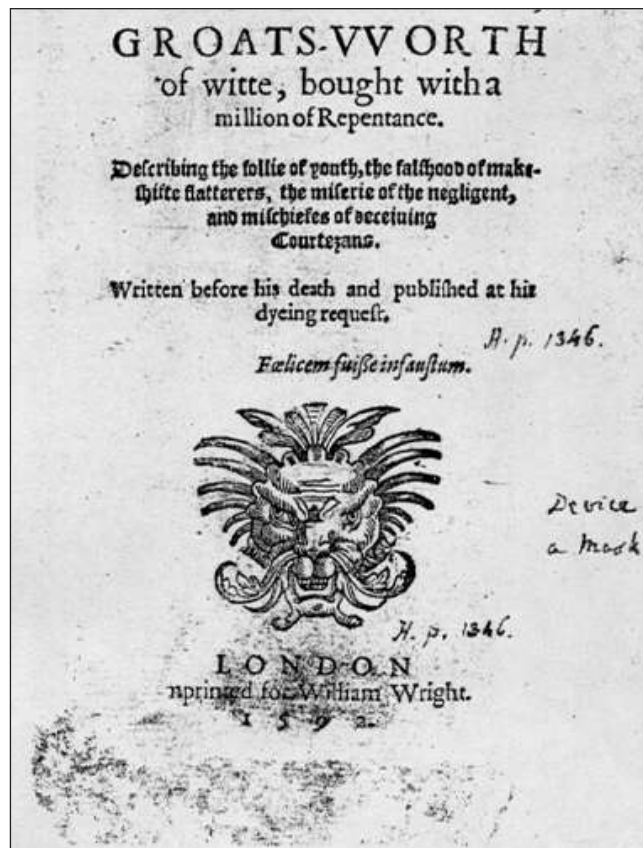
the invective against "Shake-scene" (Shakespeare) was offensive; therefore the intervention of the "divers of worship," maintaining, as Chettle relates, of whom the "divers of worship" "reported his uprightness of dealing, which argues his honesty, and his facetious grace in writing, that approves his Art" must have been Shakespeare, alias Shake-scene.

At first glance this might seem plausible. It follows Edmund Malone, who saw in the invective against Shake-scene, the "upstart crow," a charge of plagiarism, of "dishonesty, whereas there seems to be no such reproach in the words to the other playwright in the letter: 'And thou no lesse deserving than the other two, in some things rarer, in nothing inferiour; driven (as my selfe) to extreme shifts, a litle have I to say to thee: and were it not an idolatrous oth, I would swear by sweet S. George, thou art unworthy better hap, sith thou dependest on so meane a stay.'"

No reproach of "dishonesty" seems to be contained in these words. Whereas the invective against Shake-scene can be interpreted as implying dishonest behavior, namely stealing from others' works, nothing like that can be deduced from the address to the second playwright

(actually, the third playwright, as he will be referred to here). Chettle, too, revokes a reproach by stating that his demeanor ("behavior") is civil.

In part C of this article I shall expound that the word "honest" used by the "divers of worship" is synonymous with the word "civil" used by Chettle; in the 16th and 17th centuries both terms denoted a quality of proper social behavior. Although "honesty" could have the modern sense of "without deceit," that was not its principal meaning. In part B I will show that the legal background of the early modern period leads to the conclusion that the third playwright in Chettle's account must have been an aristocrat, ruling out George Peele. Part A is a summary of the reasons why "Shake-scene" points to Edward Alleyn rather than



to Shakespeare. In part D I contend that the aristocratic third playwright was not only a playwright but, at least during a certain period, also a regular player. Finally, in part E I argue that the information we can draw from Chettle's apology is compatible with what John Davies of Hereford tells us about "Will. Shakespeare, our English Terence."

A. Shake-scene

The word "Shake-scene" can be understood as a pun on the name Shakespeare, but so can the name "Shakebag" in the play *Arden of Feversham*. The occurrence of the verb "shake" is not enough to pinpoint the allusion. It can also be understood as an aptonym, a name "that matches its owner's occupation or character," for instance, "Sir Midas Mammon" for a miser or usurer.³ In that case it would allude to a famous player who could "shake a stage," as Edward Alleyn was considered by his contemporaries (Thomas Nashe twice refers to him in *Pierce Penniless* in 1592, Evrard Guilpin in *Skialetheia* in 1598). No one else in 1592 fits Chettle's characterization, "in his owne conceit the onely Shake-scene in a country," as well as Alleyn. Only a few documents of the time mention names of actors; an actor named Shakespeare is found nowhere. Of course, the letter in *Groatsworth* clearly paraphrases a line from Shakespeare: "A tiger's heart wrapp'd in a woman's hide." But that line is not only contained in *3 Henry VI*, it is also found in *The True Tragedy of Richard Duke of York* (also known as *The second part of the Contention betwixt the Houses of Lancaster and York*), first published anonymously in 1595. It was published again in 1600, still anonymously.

It was not until 1619 that the play was attributed to William Shakespeare on the title page. Moreover, Edmund Malone and others have suspected that Christopher Marlowe had a hand in it. *The second part of the Contention betwixt the Houses of Lancaster and York* could have come from Marlowe, at least in part, in view of the substantial differences between it and Shakespeare's *3 Henry VI*. One phrase of which Marlowe seems to have been fond is "thickest throngs." It is not found in Shakespeare. It occurs once in the first and in the second part of *Contention*. It also occurs once in Marlowe's *Tamburlaine Part II* and *Dido, Queen of Carthage*. Edward Alleyn was also a businessman and along with his stepfather, Philip Henslowe, a moneylender. The term *Johannes fac totum* may be applied to him. Finally, the characterization of moneylenders as usurers may explain the phrase "I knowe the best husband of you all will never prove an Usurer, and the kindest of them all will never prove a kind nurse."

The phrase "supposes he is as well able to bombast out a blanke verse as the best of you" turns the scales definitively in favor of Edward Alleyn. Alleyn is known to have "bombasted out," or filled up a play, with blank verse of his own. Among Alleyn's papers at Dulwich College is "a manuscript of the part of Orlando in Robert Greene's *Orlando Furioso*, probably played by Edward Alleyn.... It is written in the hand of some scribe, with corrections and insertions, some of which certainly, and probably all, are by

Alleyn.... The play which was printed in quarto in 1594, appears to have originally belonged to the Queen's men, and probably passed to Lord Strange's company at the end of 1591. It was played by them at the Rose on 21 (22) Feb. 1591/2."⁴

So this play by Robert Greene, staged in February 1592, only months before *Greene's Groatsworth of Wit* was written, had been "bombasted out" by Edward Alleyn; indeed, the actor had had the temerity to add some 530 lines of his own. Moreover, Alleyn was the owner of the play *Tamar Can* and likely to have been the author or at the very least a collaborator. Greg comments: "I have little doubt that it [*Tamar Can*] was written as a rival to *Tamburlain*

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which belonged to the Admiral's men."⁵ Like Marlowe's *Tamburlain* the play consisted of two parts. Only the plot of the first part is extant. The second part was staged by the Lord Admiral's men on 28 April 1592. Thus, in the months leading up to the composition of *Groatsworth*, the famous actor Alleyn had manifestly dared to rival both Greene and Marlowe at playwriting.

B. "One or two of them"

It may look like hair-splitting, but Stanley Wells is inac-

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(Chettle's Apology, cont. from p. 15)

curate when he states that Chettle "says that two men had been offended by the attack." That is not what Chettle actually wrote: "About three moneths since died M. Robert Greene, leaving many papers in sundry Booke sellers 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...." In other words, Chettle is unable to state with certainty that a second playwright was personally offended. Clearly, one of them (in all likelihood Marlowe) had approached Chettle in person and required an apology from him. It is a small difference, but it is a crucial one. I do not accuse Stanley Wells of deliberate distortion. Probably most people would overlook the word "or" and attach no importance to it. I myself did not until the umpteenth reading of the apology. It seems to have escaped D. Allen Carroll, an expert on *Groatsworth of Wit*, in his extensive study in 1994.⁶ But he draws the attention to it ten years later:

Naturally the Star Chamber assumed jurisdiction in all cases in which its rules on this matter had been infringed; and this led it to regard defamation as a crime. Borrowing perhaps from the Roman law as to *Libella Famosa*, it treated libels both upon officials and private persons as crimes. The former were seditious libels, and directly affected the security of the State; and the latter obviously led to breaches of the peace.

Why 'one or two'? That Chettle intended to comment on 'two' of those alluded to in the attack must have been as clear to Chettle as it is to us, and if the 'two' were Marlowe and Peele, the scholar-playwrights to whom the letter was addressed, why not simply say 'two'? I am not sure. Certainly Marlowe and Peele were both gentleman scholars, but there was motive for saying 'one or two' if Shakespeare was the one praised. By blurring the social distinction and lumping together two playwrights — one a gentleman (Marlowe) and one not (the actor Shakespeare) — he can flatter Shakespeare, allowing the reader to suppose that Shakespeare was gentleman, elevating him in rank to compensate for the attack and perhaps to recognize Shakespeare's growing importance on the theatrical scene.⁷

This is the kind of wounded tale one encounters when trying to integrate the contents of a document with the traditional story of William Shaksper of Stratford. Carroll omits to consider

some important aspects. If Chettle did not know whether the third playwright was actually offended, then the third playwright must not have personally approached him to require an apology. Nor had the "divers of worship" informed Chettle whether the third playwright was personally informed. The offense was an objective one, independent of what the third playwright might have personally felt.

Before turning to the solution — which is quite straightforward — attention should be drawn to another aspect which, as far as I know, is always neglected. While Chettle addresses a personal excuse to the first playwright, the apology contains no such excuse to the third playwright. "For the first, whose learning I reverence, and at the perusing of Greenes Booke, stroke out what then in conscience I thought he in some displeasure writ: or had it beene true, yet to publish it, was intollerable: him I would wish to use me no worse than I deserve." In vain do we search for a similar excuse to the third playwright. The explanation is that such an excuse did not matter, as becomes rapidly clear from an article by the eminent law historian William Holdsworth. It deals with the law of libel:⁸

But, while the development of the tort of defamation was thus being warped by the action of the Common Law Courts, a wholly new conception of this offence was being developed in the Court of Star Chamber. The [Privy] Council and the Star Chamber had, in the interests of the peace and security of the State, assumed a strict control over the Press. Naturally the Star Chamber assumed jurisdiction in all cases in which its rules on this matter had been infringed; and this led it to regard defamation as a crime. Borrowing perhaps from the Roman law as to *Libella Famosa*, it treated libels both upon officials and private persons as crimes. The former were seditious libels, and directly affected the security of the State; and the latter obviously led to breaches of the peace.

From thence it follows that libels upon peers and other high-ranking persons were not dealt with the same way as those upon private persons; it also follows that libel of a peer or an officer of state and the ensuing restitution of honor was not the private affair of the one offended: it was an affair of state, touching the principles of social and political order:

Unless the defamation was of a sort which came within the statutes which created the offence of scandalum magnatum, the mediaeval common law gave no remedy. For all other defamation the suitor was obliged to go to the Ecclesiastical Courts (p. 304).

Chettle's libel on Marlowe no longer fell under the jurisdiction of the Ecclesiastical Courts; Marlowe would now have had to recur to the Court of Star Chamber. However, had Marlowe been a peer or a state official, the libel would not have been his private affair; the case would have, according to several statutes from the reign of Richard II to the reigns of Mary I and Elizabeth

I, been taken by the Privy Council (the Privy Council had jurisdictional powers).⁹ Had it no longer been Marlowe's private affair but a case of sedition, of attack on the security of the state, there was no need for Chettle to address a personal apology to him, nor for Marlowe to personally request one from Chettle. But this was, of course, not the case for Marlowe. And had the third playwright been George Peele, Peele would have been in the same position as Marlowe and would have had to do what Marlowe did: require a personal apology. But if the third playwright was a man of high rank, the defamation or libel would be punishable under the statutes which created the offense of scandalum magnatum. Regardless of whether the third playwright was personally offended or not, the libel was not his private affair, it was an affair of state and Chettle could not know if he was personally offended. The "divers of worship" would not have told Chettle whether he was personally offended, they would have told him that he had violated the statutes and ought publicly to recant. We may conclude that the "divers of worship" were members of the Privy Council.¹⁰

C. Honesty and Civility

As said, Chettle revokes by saying that the third playwright's demeanor (behavior) was civil. The "divers of worship" refute an unidentified reproach by affirming that the third playwright's "uprightness of dealing argues his honesty."

The terms "honest/honesty" covered a very broad semantic field. Cotgrave's French-English dictionary (1611) lists the following meanings for the French adjective *honneste*: honest, good, vertuous; just, upright, sincere; gentle, civil, courteous, worthy, noble, honorable, of good reputation, comelic[y], seemelic[y], handsome, wellbefitting. But the word "honesty" had not only the modern narrow meaning of "sincere." It covered a broad semantic field. It was not uniquely applicable to aristocrats. Of Aulus Persius Flaccus, Francis Meres writes in the "Comparative Discourse" within *Palladis Tamia* that he was of "an honest life and upright conversation"; "conversation" here does not mean "colloquy," but general

behavior. Of Michael Drayton, whom Meres compares to Aulus Persius Flaccus, it is said that he is of "honest conversation and well-governed carriage." Though not uniquely applicable to an aristocrat, it was in the first place intended for an aristocrat, "a governor" as Sir Thomas Elyot calls

But if this aristocratic playwright had also been playing on the public stage, he had violated the aristocratic code of behavior. Within the aristocracy he would at least for a time become an "outcast." To appear on the stage other than in private or at Court was not suitable, proper, "honest" or "civil" behavior, and our third playwright is likely to have been condemned by his peers ("disgraced in their eyes") and banished from court ("in disgrace with Fortune" [sonnet 29]). It was probably what was meant by "thou art unworthy better hap, since thou depend on so mean a stay."

him in *The Boke named the Governour* (1531), an educational handbook for the new aristocrat elite. Elyot applies the word "honest" to manners in general, learning, dancing, music, and any form of recreation. But, according to Elyot, the behavior of the emperor Nero was not "honest" because he played the whole day before the general public. Roger Ascham wrote another

educational guide for the aristocratic youth, *The Schoolmaster* (1570). Ascham, too, uses the words "honesty" and its derivatives in various contexts: singing, dancing, learning, manners in general. Ascham exhorts the aristocracy to set the example. "Take heed therefore, you great ones in Court, take heed what you do, take heed how you live. For as you great ones use to do, so all mean men love to do. You be indeed makers or marrers of all men's manners in the Realm."¹¹ Ascham, like Elyot, assigns to the aristocracy the role of being the living model of honesty as a basic legitimation to govern society. Shakespeare has Henry V echo Ascham: "Dear Kate, you and I cannot be confined within the weak list of country's fashion; we are the makers of a manners" (V.ii.287). If there was such a reproach in the address, it was not so "friendly" as Chambers would have it (see above), for it was to deny an aristocrat the capacity of being a "governor," a political leader.

Whatever the status of the third playwright within his own class, a commoner like Chettle could not meddle with affairs which were considered the province of the aristocracy. Chettle's words might have alluded to it: "The other, whome at that time I did not so much spare as since I wish I had, for that as I have moderated the heate of living writers, and might have usde my owne discretion (especially in such a case) the Author beeing dead...."

Does the "special case" refer to the author being dead, or does Chettle mean that, especially in the case of an author belonging to the aristocracy, he should have used his own discretion? At any rate Chettle clearly understood that the words to the third playwright contained a serious reprehension. In asserting the third playwright's "civil demeanor" he says the same as the divers of worship affirms his "honesty" for, see Cotgrave, "honest," "civil," "upright," "gentle," "comely" (gracious), were to some degree interchangeable, which is confirmed by Stefano Guazzo, whose book *La Civil Conversazione*, published in 1574 and soon to be translated into English, seems to have heralded the increasing use of "civil" for "honest": "You see then that we give a

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(Chettle's *Apology*, cont. from p. 17)

large sense and signification to this word for that we would have understood, that to live civilly, is not said in respect to the City, but of the quality of the mind. To be short, my meaning is, that civil conversation is an honest, commendable, and virtuous kind of living in the world."¹²

D. The aristocratic playwright was a player

Indeed, Chettle tells us that this playwright was also an actor. He writes that he is sorry "because my selfe have seene his demeanor no lesse civill, than he exelent in the qualitie he professes." In Elizabethan and Stuart times the phrase "quality he professes" denotes the profession of player. Thomas Heywood, himself a playwright and actor, uses the term "quality they profess" (to describe an actor's profession) several times in his *Apology for Actors*, published in 1611.¹³ The term is also regularly used in official documents.

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E. Will. Shake-speare, "our English Terence"

The profile of the third playwright developed here is compatible with Shakespeare. So far we concur with Don C. Allen. We do not concur with the identity Allen had in mind. The profile of the third playwright I have presented here is compatible with "Will. Shake-speare." as presented by John Davies of Hereford. Davies says about Shakespeare that had he not played kingly roles, he would have been a companion for a king, i.e., a courtier.

Even if William Shaksper of Stratford had not been an actor, he could not have been a companion for a king, for he was a petty trader, and it was socially impossible for such a person to be a courtier. And that Shakespeare "sowed honesty," as Davies pretends, is, in fact, a reaffirmation of what the "divers of worship" told Henry Chettle. "Honesty," properly understood as a term covering a wide field of meaning; in the case of this epigram I would pick from Cotgrave's enumeration: comely, seemely, well-befitting.

Endnotes

- 1 Paul Edmondson and Stanley Wells, (ed.), *Shakespeare Beyond Doubt*, Cambridge, 2013, pp. 73-87.
- 2 Chambers, E.K., *William Shakespeare – A Study of Facts and problems*, 2 vol., Cambridge, 1930, vol. I, pp. 8-59.
- 3 *The Oxford Companion to the English Language*, ed. Tom McArthur, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992.
- 4 *Henslowe Papers*, ed. Walter W. Greg, London: Bullen, 1907, Appendix III, p. 155.
- 5 *Ibid.*, Appendix II, p. 144.
- 6 Carroll, D. Allen (ed.), *Greene's Groatsworth of Wit Bought with a Million of Repentance*, Binghamton, New York, 1994.
- 7 D. Allen Carroll, "Reading the 1592 *Groatsworth* Attack on Shakespeare," in *Tennessee Law Review*, Volume 72, Fall 2004, Number 1, p. 293.
- 8 "Defamation in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries" in *Law Quarterly Review*, No. CLIX, July 1924, p. 305.
- 9 The first statute to be enacted on *scandalum magnatum* was the Statute 3^d Edward I. (1275) c.34: "Forasmuch as there have been oftentimes found in the Country Devisors of Tales, whereby discord or occasion of discord, hath many times arisen between the King and the People, or Great Men of this Realm... It is commanded, That from henceforth none be so hardy to tell or publish any false News or Tales, whereby discord, or occasion of discord or slander may grow between the King and his People, or the Great Men of the Realm." The chapter was re-enacted in 2^o Richard II. (1378) as chapter 5. The "Great Men of the Realm," the class of "magnates" was more detailedly specified: "Prelates, Dukes, Earls, Barons, and other Nobles and Great Men of the Realm, and also of the Chancellor, Treasurer, Clerk

of the Privy Seal, Steward of the King's House, Justices of the one Bench or the other, and of other Great Officers of the Realm." The chapter was again re-enacted as chapter 11 of 12^o Richard II. (1388). A significant addition was made to the last phrase of the previous statute, "to be punished by the Advice of the Council, notwithstanding the said Statutes." "Notwithstanding the said Statutes," those of 1275 and 1378, means that the common law courts were no longer the sole venues for cases of slander of "Great Men."

- 10 Chettle's case in 1592 is comparable to that of Gabriel Harvey and his libel on Oxford and, mistakenly, on Sir James Croft, Controller of the Royal Household. In his *Four Letters* (1592) Harvey writes: "and the sharpest parte of those unlucky Letters had bene over-read at the Councill Table [Privy Council]; I was advised by certaine honourable and divers worshipfull persons, to interpretate my intention in more expresse terms..." (Gabriel Harvey, *Works*, 3 vol., ed. by A.B. Grosart, 1884, vol. I, p. 180). It is likely that the "divers worshipful persons" were the same as the "honourable favourers" who "pacified" Sir James Croft on Harvey's behalf, namely M. Secretary Wilson, second Secretary of State, and Sir Walter Mildmay, Chancellor of the Exchequer, both members of the Privy Council (*ibid.*, 182).
- 11 Rogar Ascham, *The Scholemaster*, London, 1570, p. 22-
- 12 *Ibid.*, p. 35.
- 13 Heywood, Thomas, *An Apology for Actors*, New York: Garland Publ., 1973. "And this is the action behoovefull in any that professe this quality." (p. 29). "... the King of Denmarke... entertained into his service a company of English actors... the Duke of Brunswicke and the Landgrave of Hessen retaine in their courts certaine of ours of the same quality." (p. 40). "I hope there is no man of so unsensible a spirit, that can inveigh against the true and direct use of this quality." (p. 50)