
The Elizabethan Review

Patterson stresses, despite a renewal of interest in the politics of Elizabethan drama among contemporary critics, “there is as yet no systematic account of the strategies of indirection” employed in public modes of discourse—in sermons, speeches or poetry as well as theater. (53) Although Patterson sets forth a blueprint for the development of such a comprehensive account, by admission of the 1992 introduction, her present book surveys only a fraction of the relevant territory. Patterson’s work opens new vistas in Shakespeare studies that are destined to be explored by the many students of her ideas, who will, as “time unfolds what pleated cunning hides,” more and more count themselves, overtly or covertly, as apostates to a withering Shakespearean orthodoxy.

Notes

- Arendt, Hannah. “Lying in Politics,” *Crises of the Republic* (1969).
- Looney, John Thomas. “Shakespeare” Identified in Edward de Vere, the Seventeenth Earl of Oxford (London, 1920).
- Hatto, A.T. “Venus and Adonis—and the Boar,” *Modern Language Review*, XLI (October 1946) 353-361.
- Ogburn, Charlton Jr. *The Mysterious William Shakespeare: The Man Behind the Myth* (1984).
- Stevens, The Honorable John Paul. “The Shakespeare Canon of Statutory Construction,” *University of Pennsylvania Law Review*, (1992) 140: 1372-1387.
- Womersley, David. “Sir Henry Sayville’s Translation of Tacitus and the Political Interpretation of Elizabethan Texts,” *Review of English Studies*, XLII (1991) 167: 313-342.

A Groatsworth Variorum

Greene's Groatsworth of Wit.
edited by D. Allen Carroll. 1994.

Reviewed by David Chandler, a doctoral candidate in English at Corpus Christi College, Oxford University.

Greene's Groatsworth of Wit became suddenly, almost explosively, interesting in 1778, when the following note, communicated by the scholar Thomas Tyrwhitt (1730-86), was published in George Stevens’s revised edition of Johnson’s Shakespeare:

Though the objections, which have been raised to the genuineness of the *three plays of Henry the sixth*, have been fully considered and

answered by Dr. Johnson, it may not be amiss to add here, from a contemporary writer, a passage, which not only points at Shakespeare as the author of them, but also shews, that, however meanly we may now think of them in comparison with his later productions, they had, at the time of their appearance, a sufficient degree of excellence to alarm the jealousy of the other playwrights. The passage, to which I refer, is in a pamphlet, entitled, *Greene's Groatsworth of Witte*, supposed to have been written by that voluminous author, Robert Greene, M.A. and said, in the title-page to be *published at his dying request*; probably, about 1592 [Greene died early in September 1592]. The conclusion of this piece is an address to his brother-poets, to dissuade them from writing any more for the stage, on account of the ill treatment which they were used to receive from the players. It begins thus: *To those gentlemen, his quondam acquaintance, that spend their wits in making playes, R.G. wishesth a better exercise, & c.* After having thus address himself particularly to *Christopher Marlowe* and *Thomas Lodge*, (as I guess from circumstances, for their names are not mentioned;) he goes on to a third (perhaps *George Peele*); and having warned him against *depending on so meane a stay* as the players, he adds: *Yes, trust them not; for there is an upstart crow beautified with our feathers, that with his tygres head [sic] wrapt in a players hyde, supposes hee is as well able to bombaste out a blanke verse as the best of you; and being an absolute Johannes fac totum is in his own conceit, the onely Shake-scene in a countrey.* There can be no doubt, I think, that *Shake-scene* alludes to Shakespeare or that *his tygres head wrapt in a players hyde* is a parodie upon the following line of York's speech to Margaret, *Third Part of Henry the Sixth*, act I, sc. iv: *Oh tygres heart, wrapt in a woman's hide.* (Vol. 6, 565-6)

Tyrwhitt's was a sensational discovery barely done justice in its brief mention in Samuel Schoenbaum's *Shakespeare's Lives*. His was a sophisticated reading too; not only did he infer the reference to Shakespeare (a point that few have disputed), but he correctly identified the parodied line (he had clearly seen only a late quarto that substituted "head" for the original "heart," the latter being even closer to the line in *3H6*), and accurately guessed the identity of the playwrights addressed (Marlowe and Peele are still accepted, modern critics tend to favor Nashe as the third, but Lodge still has his supporters). Altogether, it was an astonishing piece of scholarship. Yet Tyrwhitt hardly seems to have recognized the full significance of his discovery, for while he saw the *Groatsworth* reference as primarily solving a textual problem, it soon became evident that it was a godsend to the skeletal state of Shakespeare biography. Malone welcomed it as such in the same edition: "That Shakspeare [sic] had commenced a writer for the stage, and had even excited the jealousy of his

contemporaries, before September 1592, is now decisively proved..." (Vol. 1, 277)

The question of the precise meaning of the "Shake-scene" passage soon led to controversy though; after having caused a stir in 1592 and then been forgotten, *Greene's Groatsworth of Wit* has, since 1778, provided much heated discussion. So much so that, in 1928, John Semple Smart was moved to declare, "This passage from Greene has had such a devastating effect on Shakespearean study that we cannot but wish it had never been written or never discovered." Traditional areas of dispute have been the biographical significance of the passage with respect to Shakespeare, what it has to say about Shakespeare's early writing practice (was he a plagiarist?), and to what extent the main narrative can be read as an (auto)biography of Greene (or Lodge). In our own century, the question of the authorship of the *Groatsworth* has come to the fore. Lesser areas of dispute include whether Lodge or Nashe is being addressed, and what the *Groatsworth* has to say about Marlowe. Then again there are two animal fables of disputed—but undeniable—significance. And more. For those of us who like to argue about literature instead of just reading it, the *Groatsworth* is an Elizabethan work *par excellence*.

Dr. Carroll's superb new edition—the first fully annotated one—is designed for such readers. For those who wish to approach the *Groatsworth* as a work of literary art (I suspect there are few), this edition offers little new; for those who wish to know the precise state of play on all the controversial points, as well as the history of diverging opinions, it will be absolutely indispensable. It is difficult to imagine any future edition that will not be simply a revision and updating of Dr. Carroll's. The painstaking tracing of what must be almost every thing ever written about the *Groatsworth* is, quite simply, breathtaking.

The last statement needs to be qualified only slightly. The views of Oxfordian and various other anti-Stratfordian critics have not been included, although they have broadened the realm of debate and dramatized the importance of correct reading. In 1984, for example, Charlton Ogburn declared: "The Stratfordian scholars pledge their fortunes and their sacred honor, if not their lives, upon its [the *Groatsworth* passage] proving that in 1592 Will Shakspeare of Stratford-on-Avon was recognized as both an actor and a writer of plays" (*The Mysterious William Shakespeare*, 56). Such an overstatement, of course, actually reveals how much Ogburn has staked on its *not* proving that. An entirely comprehensive account of the disagreements provoked by the *Groatsworth* would need to incorporate such unorthodox views (by way of partial compensation, and to stimulate curiosity, I include a brief account of, and challenge to, Ogburn's thesis in an appendix).

In other respects, this new edition is not afraid of controversy. Although the title-page diplomatically describes the work as "Attributed to Henry Chettle

and Robert Greene,” and although the arguments for Greene are put forward with commendably objective clarity, the much stronger case for Chettle’s authorship is not disguised. In this respect, Dr. Carroll actually agrees with Ogburn rather than Schoenbaum; the latter’s rather summary dismissal of the Chettle case must now appear something of a desperate rearguard action. One of the nicest touches of this new edition is, in my opinion, the way that Dr. Carroll delicately points out the romantic conceptions underlying the traditional tenacious clinging to Greene. The preface includes a beautiful quotation from J.A. Symonds that serves as a kind of nexus to this view: “we cannot withhold a degree of pity from the dying Titan [i.e., Greene], discomfited, undone and superseded, who beheld the young Apollo issue in splendour and awake the world to a new day.” If Chettle penned the attack on Shakespeare, such hellenistic romanticism becomes rather absurd, of course.

Dr. Carroll’s introduction is almost entirely concerned with the authorship question. There follow a description of all previous editions, a thoroughly annotated text, a list of variants in later quartos, a splendid series of appendices dealing with the major areas of dispute, a glossary, and a detailed index. There are a few minor errors in the published text, most of them insignificant. It is annoying to find, however, that the “Tygers hart” line that Chettle or Greene parodied from Shakespeare is said to be taken from “2H6” (84) when this seems to be the only full reference. It could also be wished that there was some sort of standard abbreviation for these plays, also given as “2Hen6” (86) and “2Henry VI” (140). But these are trifling faults in what is an exemplary edition. For anyone interested in Elizabethan literature, this is a book worth saving for.

Appendix. The Ogburn Thesis.

In his *The Mysterious William Shakespeare*, Charlton Ogburn attaches enormous importance to the *Groatsworth* passage discovered by Tyrwhitt, as will be seen from the quotation above. In the same paragraph he continues (almost apocalyptically): “the testimony on which these claims are based, on which Stratfordian biography rests, like a pyramid inverted upon its apex, collapses when we read what it actually says.”

Ogburn accepts the allusion to Shakespeare (or “Shaksper”) in the passage, but denies that he is being referred to as a writer. His argument is that “bombast out a blanke verse” means to indulge in extempore stage elaboration, and he cites Hamlet’s advice to the players: “let those that play your clowns speak no more than is set down for them.” It is an interesting argument that may even seem supported by Dr. Carroll’s explanation of “bombast” as “rhetorical elaboration.” Had Chettle/Greene written simply “[Shakespeare] supposes he is well able to bombast out a blanke verse,” it would certainly be valid reading. But Chettle/Greene did not simply write that: he wrote “[Shakespeare] supposes he is as well able to bombast out a blanke verse *as the*

best of you" [my emphasis]. The difference seems to count crucially against Ogburn's reading, for if Chettle/Greene meant simply extempore rhetorical elaboration (i.e., on stage), Shakespeare's presumptuous supposition that he could do this as well as Marlowe, Peele and Nashe (or Lodge) would be pointless, as these men were not known actors, so would not have had a reputation for extempore stage elaboration. Thus, "As the best of you" must make the "bombast[ing] out a blanke verse" something that Shakespeare, Marlowe, Peele and Nashe all did, and that the latter three were esteemed for: and that can only be writing. The introductory parody of a line—preceded by the pronoun "his" [i.e., Shakespeare's)—from a play later known as Shakespeare's, cited in support of Shakespeare's alleged presumption, is also powerful testimony to the form that writing took, as Tyrwhitt, Malone and most readers since have allowed. Ogburn's argument leaves us with an odd coincidence that he does not attempt to explain—i.e., that it *just so happens* that the actor "Shaksper" is being condemned with a line parodied from the writer "Shakespeare." It is only by assuming that Shakespeare challenged the professional playwrights in their own field that his boastful claims and "conceit" make any sense.

I would actually suggest the very opposite of Ogburn, and urge that the "upstart Crow" is *not identified* as an actor. Greene warns "those Gentlemen... that spend their wits in making plaies" not to trust the actors, by whom they may be "forsaken." But he does not say that the actors *include* a playwright in their number; he implies, I think, merely that they have proved fickle and changed their allegiance. Arguments that make "those Anticks" include the "upstart Crow" rely on the tradition of Shakespeare's acting, but ignore the grammatical structure of the *Groatsworth* passage. As for the "our feathers," I would accept E.A.J. Honigmann's argument (quoted by Carroll on page 140) that this refers simply to "pilfered *sententiae* and examples." Ogburn's paraphrase of "the onely Shake-scene in a cuntry" as "the only actor of power in the country (57) is part of a circular argument; it is not self-substantiated at all.

I find no evidence at all for Ogburn's assertion that "[Greene] urged his *friends* to desert the actors... The implication surely is that the actors would then be left in the lurch." (58) "The implication" is, rather, that Marlowe, Peele and Nashe (or Lodge) will "be left in the lurch" if they do *not* desert the actors. Chettle/Greene writes simply, "let those Apes [i.e., the actors] imitate your past excellence, and never more acquaint them with your admired inventions... seeke you better Maisters; for it is pittie men of such rare wits, should be subject to the pleasure of such rude groomes." In other words, the "wits" are advised to withhold their (superior) productions, but for their own dignity, rather than for any trouble this will cause the actors. It is, of course,

Ogburn's own view of the situation—a view that denies that the “upstart Crow” is identified as a writer—that puts the actors “in the lurch.”

Books in Brief

Shakespeare, In Fact
by Irwin Matus. 1994.

Reviewed by Publius, an academic who prefers to remain incognito for reasons of professional safety.

Whatever digressions the author makes in pursuit of his game, Irwin Matus has written *Shakespeare, In Fact* in response to two powerfully challenging and complex books—*“Shakespeare” Identified in the Seventeenth Earl of Oxford* (Looney, 1920) and *The Mysterious William Shakespeare: The Myth and the Reality* (Ogburn, 1984). Of course, Matus has trained his eyes on B.M. Ward’s 1928 biography of the Earl of Oxford, and perhaps he’s even acquainted himself with William Fowler’s 1986 study of Oxford’s correspondence. What’s disturbing about all Matus’s reading, however, is that what passes before the eye seems to register so dimly in the representation which comes forth from the pen. Matus does not disdain to actually argue with his intellectual opponents; he simply pauses over their strong points with a sneer before moving to another topic on which he finds it easy to make them appear ridiculous.

In so doing, Matus takes enormous liberties with the views of those he actually cites for the purposes of refutation. In fact, his compulsion to construct straw men seems beyond hope of clinical intervention. For instance, Matus makes it appear that Ward claimed that the Earl of Oxford had written plays attributed to John Lyly. As the most sophisticated Oxfordian scholar since J.T. Looney, Ward is someone Matus cannot afford to let escape unscathed from his tirade against Oxfordian scholarship. But in mauling Ward, Matus misreads, and misrepresents, him.

Ward conjectured not that Oxford had authored the Lyly plays, but that they resulted from a “collaborative” relationship (275) between Lyly and his employer during the period 1579-1590—while Lyly was Oxford’s secretary. Ward offers this conjecture—and it is not, contrary to what Matus would have his readers believe, more than an aside from his major thesis—in pursuance of a more definite, important and ultimately decisive conclusion: there is an intimate association, documented in the researches of Albert Fucillerat, Warwick