

# Robert Greene's Wit Re-evaluated

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The crucial phrase from *Greene's Groatsworth of Wit*, “that with his tygres heart wrapt in a players hyde,” may have nothing at all to do with the author Shakespeare, but to some other unknown and as yet unpublished actor and playwright that the Bard is theorized by traditional scholars to have been in 1592.

Those acquainted with *Groatsworth* will recognize the traditional argument that the pamphlet refers to William Shakespeare in this sentence:

Yes, trust them not [the players for whom Greene and other playwrights had labored]; for there is an upstart crow beautified with our feathers, that with his *tygres heart 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.

I will focus on the most important phrase of this sentence, “that with his tygres heart wrapt in a players hyde,” which orthodox scholars believe was a direct quote from Shakespeare’s *3 Henry VI*, Act I, Scene 4: Oh tygres heart wrapt in a woman's hide. They tie that “fact” with the other allusions in the sentence and claim it not only quotes the Bard, but also refers directly to him as an upstart actor-playwright. Since this reference occurs approximately one year before Shakespeare’s first published work, *Venus and Adonis* in 1593, and because Greene is interpreted as accusing the scorned actor of plagiarism (the Stratfordian interpretation of “beautified with our feathers”), Stratfordian scholars feel justified in using this to prove that Shakespeare started as an actor, worked his way up as a plagiarizer of others’ works and Jack-of-all-trades in the theater (their interpretation of “Johannes fac totum”), and became by the early 1590s a threat to established playwrights like Greene and those to whom Greene supposedly addressed his “confessions.” They then build upon this assumption the foundation for their biographies of William Shakspeare of Stratford-upon-Avon (whom I distinguish from William Shakespeare, the dramatist).

For instance, Gerald Bentley argues that because Shakspeare did not attend a university, yet came from a group that had its roots in the theater, he had the

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right background to become the greatest writer in the English language. Therefore:

...[Shakspere], in spite of his various nondramatic activities, was *the most complete man of the theater* in his time ...the *comprehensiveness of his participation in all aspects of the theatrical enterprise*, as professional playwright, as actor, as ‘sharer,’ and as theater owner. The theater was *clearly his chosen environment*, and when we direct our attention to [Shakspere] *the playwright*, we have come to the essential man (Bentley1, 120). (emphasis added)

I emphasize Bentley’s direct dependence on arguments from the traditional interpretations of what is in the “important part” of *Groatsworth*, and for which there is no independent verification.

It is doubtful Shakspere fit any of Bentley’s descriptions, with the possible exception that, as a theater company investor, he may have been part owner of a theater. Without *Groatsworth* and their interpretations of it, Stratfordians have no evidence during Shakspere’s lifetime that he was an actor, let alone a playwright or poet. The orthodox theory therefore must have *Groatsworth* refer specifically to Shakspere, or at least Shakespeare. Any convincing denial of that undermines their case.

To start, there is the lack of firm evidence about the date of composition of *3 Henry VI* and its linked plays (*2 and 1 Henry VI* and *Richard III*, respectively). For instance, Eric Sams proposes that parts of *Groatsworth* were written as early as 1589 (Sams, 80-81), while Bentley has proposed that 1591 was the latest likely date of composition for *3 Henry VI* (Bentley1, 230). Thus, by some Stratfordian accounts, the earliest likely date of *Groatsworth* comes before the latest likely date of *3 Henry VI*.

With a gap of two full years providing the distinct possibility that parts of *Groatsworth* were written before *3 Henry VI*, it is simply false to state that it was “clear” (Bentley1, 95) *Groatsworth* referred to a line in *3 Henry VI* and thus to Shakespeare the dramatist. They refuse to acknowledge the real possibility that the reverse is true—that Shakespeare later paraphrased a line from *Groatsworth* or from a source common to both.

It must be noted that the first publication of the crucial “tygres heart” line is not to be found until the 1595 quarto of the Pembroke’s Men’s play, *The True Tragedie of Richard Duke of Yorke*, with no author listed on the title page (Allen & Muir, 75-87). The first time the play bearing the crucial line was attributed to Shakespeare was in 1623, with the First Folio’s publication.

Yet most scholars seem set to embrace the assumption that Shakespeare must have been the author or originator of the crucial line, that Shakespeare’s play must have been the first source to ever feature that or any lines sufficiently similar to it, and that it must have preceded *Groatsworth*.

What is meant when Bentley or other scholars state or imply it is “clear” that *Groatsworth* refers to Shakespeare? They mean there are no alternatives worth considering. We should, however, do just that.

For instance, we know from contemporary sources that Robert Greene dined on pickled herring and Rhenish wine with “Will Monox” and Thomas Nashe sometime in August of 1592, then took ill. Then, while Greene was on his death bed on September 3, 1592, he is said to have written or dictated the pamphlet we know as *Groatsworth*. On September 20, 1592, following Greene’s death by only a few days, Henry Chettle rushed those “confessions” into publication, doubtlessly in order to capitalize upon the notoriety of Greene’s death. Orthodox scholars would have us believe that all important references in *Groatsworth* were written on Greene’s death bed, because if those could be argued to have been written over a longer period of time, or not all at the same time, the possibility that they all refer to one individual (Shakespeare) is greatly diminished.

The Stratfordian inference is that, near death, Greene had no one else on his mind, and in a single act before dying, gave his confessions.

I argue that Greene was occasionally ill over a period of years before his death in September 1592. As Greene himself allegedly said, he returned from an excursion to Italy “accompanied with multitude of abhominable vices,...vaine glory, selfe loue, sodomie and strange poisonings.... Yong yet in yeares, though olde in wickednes, I began to resolue that there was nothing bad that was profitable: whereupon I grew so rooted in all mischief...From whordome I grew to drunkennes, from drunkennes to swearing and blaspheming...” (Crupi, 6-7). Drunkenness particularly weighed on his conscience.

In his later years, Greene might have had any of a number of disorders (stomach cancer, bleeding ulcers, cirrhosis of the liver) which would show symptoms periodically over years, ending in death. There is certainly much about Greene’s biography to suggest that he was an alcoholic, with associated disorders not unlikely.

It is as likely that Greene had many illnesses which, each in its time, seemed to him fatal. And each time he would write his confessions, only to recover and store it away. Except for the last time. Then, as his editor and publisher, Henry Chettle, admitted in *Kind-Hart’s Dreame* on December 8, 1592, Chettle collected the papers Greene had at his death and fashioned them into *Groatsworth*. There’s little likelihood that, during these illnesses, Greene would have been concentrating specifically on William Shakespeare.

Even if a line from Shakespeare is being paraphrased by *Groatsworth*, the “tygres heart” reference doesn’t necessarily mean that any of the other names in *Groatsworth* refer to Shakespeare, any more than use of “veni, vidi, vici” necessarily means other references in a line must be to Julius Caesar. I believe that “tygres heart” was simply a well known line that fit the vituperative intent of Greene/Chettle, with the then unpublished, unremarked-about Shakespeare barely being known to the paying readers of the pamphlet.

Disregarding the true history of the death of the Duke of York in 1460 (who died in battle), the author of the line from *3 Henry VI* has it spoken by York just before he was to be executed. For added drama, it is spoken to and about

Queen Margaret, who presided over the defeat of the Duke's army, a most unfeminine thing to do in those days. The Queen has just cruelly displayed to the Duke a cloth soaked with his own son's blood:

“She wolf of France, but worse than wolves of France,  
Whose tongue more poisons than the adders tooth!...  
Thou art as opposite to everie good  
As the antipodes are unto us,  
Or as the south to the septentrion.  
O tiger's heart wrapp'd in a woman's hide!  
How couldst thou drain the lifeblood of the child,  
To bid the father wipe his eies withal,  
And yet be seen to weare a woman's face?...”

And the scene ends with Queen Margaret exulting:

“Off with his head, and set it on York gates;  
So York may overlook the town of York.”

If we assume that Shakespeare must have been the author of the 1595 quarto of *The True Tragedie of Richard Duke of Yorke*, how many of the above lines were created by Shakespeare, and how many were traditional, anecdotal, or even historical? So, must we believe that Shakespeare invented those lines, or might he have drawn on previous material or traditions about the deaths of the Duke of York and of Caesar (even though history showed the traditions to be false)?

Similarly, the circumstances of York's death in 1460 are historical facts, yet York's death was doubtlessly surrounded with stories, especially since he was defeated by a woman. So, traditions that York's last known words included his calling Queen Margaret a “She wolf” and a “tiger's heart wrapp'd in a woman's hide” (not necessarily in her immediate presence as in the play, but as he directed his troops on the battlefield) are quite possible, even likely, but would only be anecdotal until other information emerged to corroborate them.

Shakespeare may have simply been only one of the first to put the apt phrases into the new media of drama, and the phrases subsequently were preserved through the accident that the works of Shakespeare were considered worth preserving. But what of other early authors who may have written examples of these anecdotal lines, some of whom may have been significantly earlier than Shakespeare, and perhaps even borrowed from by Shakespeare? The answer is simple: their lines weren't preserved because their works were inferior or because later generations did not venerate them as they did Shakespeare's. Otherwise, we'd now be claiming that Shakespeare “stole” 3 *Henry VI*, or parts of it, from Kyd's “Ur-Henry VI” (very similar to the approach Stratfordians have adopted for a hypothetical early play which they dub “Ur-Hamlet”). There would be factions claiming that *Groatsworth* was really an attack on Kyd.

However, I am not the first to doubt that the “tygres heart” reference referred to Shakespeare. Winifred Frazer has written:

The 'tiger's heart' metaphor...probably originated in Holinshed's account of the death of seven traitors on the gallows, whose bodies, after hanging, were to be severed and 'their tigers hearts burned in the fire'...Adolphus Ward in *A History of English Dramatic Literature* (1899) writes that Greene's parody of the line 'may quite conceivably have been introduced, more or less by accident, merely by way of allusion to a familiar stage phrase of the day (II,60).' Certainly no critic has accused Samuel Nicholson in *Acolasus* in 1600 (*The Shakespeare Allusion Book*, 1970, p. 74) of referring to Shakespeare when he uses his version: 'O woolvish heart wrapt in a womans hyde' (Frazer, 7-8).

I was also unable to find any reference to Shakespeare as originator of "tyger's heart" in the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED, The Compact Edition of 1971). Though I did find the following on pgs. 3320-21, each referring to a tigerlike, monstrous woman in a violent context:

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|------|-------------|--|
| 1573 | L.Lloyd     | <i>Marrow of Hist.</i> (first published 1653), pg. 265, Her cruel and Tigrish heart.   |
| 1576 | Gascoigne   | <i>Philomene</i> (xxx. (Arb.)), 107, (Tygrelike) she toke The little boy. [note that the <i>3 Henry VI</i> extract refers to a "child," York's son]. |
| 1576 | Sidney      | <i>Arcadia</i> (1622), 467, Were thy eyes so stonie, thy breast so tygrish [note the extract from <i>3 Henry VI</i> refers to "eies"].               |
| 1581 | Pettie      | <i>Guazzo's Civ. Conv. III</i> (1586), 124, So monstrous a creature...that it was doubtfull whether she were a woman or a tigar.                     |
| 1587 | Turberville | <i>Trag. T.</i> (1837), 67, The tyrants mother Calvis, tygreleeke, Procurde her plagues.   |

Each reference preceded any postulated dating for the authorship of *Groatsworth* of 1589-92 (Sams, 80-81); each preceded the earliest likely date for Shakespeare's *3 Henry VI* or its direct predecessors (1590-91 Bentley1, 230); and each preceded the 1595 publication of *The True Tragedie of Richard Duke of Yorke*, which may have been written as early as 1589 (Sams, 72).

Thus, following orthodox reasoning as applied to *Groatsworth*, we should infer that Shakespeare, or whomever he may have borrowed from, wrote *3 Henry VI* as early as 1573, so that the above authors could each paraphrase his line, just as Greene/Chettle did. That approach is unfounded.

The crucial "tygres heart" line is simply an example of a familiar type of metaphor. In the late 1100s we had a similar metaphor in Richard "Coeur de Lion" (the Lion-hearted), whose mother, Queen Eleanor of Acquitaine, had ridden off to war in the Second Crusade. The OED indicates that the word "tiger" and its variants were introduced into English at least as early as the year 1000. Aesop wrote his fable of the wolf in sheep's clothing 500 years before Christ (compare this to "She wolf"). The lion mauling Thisbe's cloak (or her woman's

hide) is an image not impossibly attributed by Shakespeare's clowns in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* to the times of Nineveh, which was destroyed 600 years before Christ. And we shouldn't overlook the Homeric myth about Achilles being disguised by his mother Thetis as one of the concubines of King Lycomedes, hiding him in women's clothing to avoid his having to go to Troy (Hamilton, 181). Another possible connection (OED, 3321) is the tradition of calling an outdoor boy servant a tiger; if this phrase was used on the Elizabethan stage, the boy actor playing Queen Margaret would then have had a "tyger's" heart wrapped in a Queen's hide.

Even if Shakespeare was the first to put the phrase into writing, and in the context now preserved in *3 Henry VI*, it is still probable that every man who walked the streets of London had many times heard versions of the earlier "She wolf" and "tygres heart" allusions listed above, and they reverberated when appropriate contexts arose (such as when the landlady demanded the overdue rent!). In 1592, it was far more likely that those who could read would associate *Groatsworth's* usage with one of these common phrases than with an obscure young actor-playwright.

Before we end this discussion, some might ask, "If Greene/Chettle weren't referring to Shakespeare/Shakspeare, who else could they have possibly been referring to?" I offer four theories by other scholars which provide more plausible alternatives to Shakespeare/ Shakspeare.

A compelling theory is by Winifred Frazer, who noted that upon the death of Richard Tarlton in 1588, the comedic actor Will Kemp became Tarlton's successor in the popular role of *The Crow Sits Upon The Wall*, the text of which was first published in 1592. This makes Kemp the "upstart Crow," or newly pretentious Crow who took over from Tarlton's Crow (Frazer, 3-5).

Another aspect of Frazer's identification of Will Kemp--the multi-faceted actor, clown, acrobat, musician, morris dancer, self-promoter, and sometime author--was that he was indeed a "Jack of all trades" (Johannes fac totum) and likely quite a bit more popular with his audiences than with his fellow actors. Kemp would have not been very popular with playwrights, whose lines he made a habit of extemporizing, so that cues would be botched and timing destroyed, all for a few vainglorious laughs. Frazer argued that in the 1586 tour of Leicester's Men in the Low Countries, Kemp likely would have performed numerous parts with the name of John, Jahnn, or Johan (Frazer, 4-5). Some may not be convinced that Kemp was enough of an actor, as opposed to a comedian, to make him the scorned actor, but this seems a rather mild objection.

As for "Shake-scene," Kemp or any other acrobatic or overly energetic actor would have "shaken the scene" with their antics. So, this need not be aimed at only Shakespeare or Shakspeare.

Although Nina Green avoids a direct theory of what "Upstart Crow" means, she does analyze why it should not apply to Shakespeare:

"Having paid the author of *Henry VI* the compliment of alluding to a line from his deservedly-popular play, does Greene then go on to refer

to him as an 'upstart Crow'? Surely not. It appears quite evident from the text that the allusion to the line from *Henry VI* has nothing to do with identifying either the author of the play or the 'upstart Crow'; its purpose is merely to convey to the reader a forceful impression of the upstarts personality" (Green, 2).

Greene intriguingly discussed the difficult personality of Ben Jonson, who in 1592 would have been breaking into the playwright's scene from his acting career. Greene wrote that the 1584 libel, *Leicester's Commonwealth*, originated the scornful term "Dominus factotum" for the hated Earl of Leicester, a popular sobriquet used behind his back which the Earl bore even long after his death, and upon which the "Johannes Factotum" scorn would be a copy for a much less prominent person. More to the point, Greene draws attention to the "Jon" in Jonson and draws her conclusions about "Johannes" (Green, 1-5). But, as Frazer said about Greene's theory, "Ben...seems not to have left a record as a well-known scene-shaking clown in 1592." In spite of the gap in the record for Ben Jonson, Greene's theory still presents much more evidence for him than has been shown for Shakespeare (let alone Shakspeare) in regard to "Johannes Factotum."

The most comprehensive theory that I've encountered is by A.D. Wraight. Examining more of *Groatsworth* than just the crucial part, Wraight declares that the actor and stage manager Edward Alleyn is identifiable in the earlier part of the pamphlet as the player whom "Roberto" (later revealed as Greene himself) met on his travels. This player employed actors and playwrights. He had also written one or two plays, but needed other playwrights' material, for which he paid them badly and handled them deceitfully, inserting his own lines into others' plays. Thus (as John Rollett has pointed out), drawing upon the arguments of Leslie Hotson (Hotson, 143-146), "tygres heart" refers to the player's double-dealing and dishonesty. Since Shakespeare was unlikely to have been so concerned in the 3 *Henry VI* line, it would be unlikely that Greene was quoting or thinking of him.

Players were called "crows," and because Alleyn was younger than Greene, he was an "upstart crow" (Alleyn had married theater owner Henslowe's daughter, and with his help vaulted to the front rank over the other "crows").

From what we know to be true about Alleyn, I'm surprised that Shakspeare or Shakespeare would have ever been seriously proposed as the scorned actor.

However, we must still discuss Bentley's words about acting companies:

During the period 1590-1642 there were scores of companies on the road at different times, not only in the British Isles, but on the Continent as well. The majority of these touring troupes were not London companies, but peripatetic provincial organizations. Therefore most of the town and great house records concern troupes of players that seldom or never played in the London theaters (Bentley2, 177).

I believe that, although acting troupes were required by law to travel and perform under the protection of one of the lords, as did most of the London troupes, the law was routinely broken (as they were against begging and prostitution). Compared to the London troupes, little is known about the many outlying or illegal troupes, and less about their actors and about playwrights whose works didn't appear on the London stage. When Greene's own troupe went on tour, it could not help but come across these competitors, many of whose actors would no doubt have wanted to show up their betters.

In other words, when one of the well-known actors, such as Alleyn, Jonson, Kemp, or maybe even Shakspere, is considered to have been the "Upstart Crow," "Johannes Factotum," or "Shake-scene," we should remember that much play-stealing, extemporaneous bombasting, and scene shaking was being done by the provincial troupes as well. Unless we account for the possibility that one of their members was the one being criticized in *Groatsworth*, we simply haven't covered the field adequately.

Most likely, "tygres heart" was a common, traditional source for metaphors upon which both Shakespeare and *Groatsworth* drew, but which neither is likely to have originated in themselves or copied from the other. There is even a distinct possibility that *Groatsworth* preceded *3 Henry VI* in use of the crucial phrase. To say Shakespeare must have originated the phrase, and that anyone reading *Groatsworth* would have definitely associated the crucial phrase with the then probably unknown and certainly unpublished Shakespeare, is false.

We should take Thomas Nashe at his word when he excoriated *Groatsworth* as "a scald, lying pamphlet" just a few weeks after its publication. It more likely was an attack on a composite of scorned actors, possibly one of the three well-known actor-writers mentioned in this article.

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