

Greene's Groatsworth of Wit

By Samuel L. Blumenfeld

One of the historical resources Stratfordians use to prove that Shakespeare was a known actor and playwright before 1592 is Robert Greene's pamphlet, *Greene's Groatsworth of Wit, Bought with a Million of Repentance*.

Greene, born in 1560, had been at Cambridge from 1575 to 1583, thus overlapping the years when Marlowe had been there. Marlowe, born in 1564, had entered in 1580. Thus, both men, who became aspiring playwrights, were well acquainted with each other. In fact, later, Greene was so impressed with Marlowe's *Tamburlaine* that he wrote a play, *Alphonsus King of Aragon*, in imitation of Marlowe's style. But it was a flop, and in 1588 he attacked Marlowe in a pamphlet, *Perimedes the Blacksmith*.

In 1592, Greene, down and out and suffering from a fatal disease, wrote a largely autobiographical pamphlet, *Greene's Groatsworth of Wit*, which was published posthumously. In it he lashed out at those in the theater business who had used him and then left him to die in poverty. Obviously, he was referring to Edward Alleyn, who had acted in his plays, and Philip Henslowe who had produced them. He wrote:

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 that I am now) be both of them at once forsaken? Yes, trust them not: for there is an upstart crow beautified with our feathers, that with his *tyger's head, wrapt in a player's hide*, supposes he is as well able to bombast out a blank verse, as the best of you: and being an absolute *Johannes Factotum*, is in his own conceit the only *Shake-scene* in a country. Oh, that I might intreat your rare wits to be employed in more profitable courses: and let these apes imitate your past excellence, and never more acquaint them with your admired inventions.

It is obvious that Greene was trying to warn his fellow playwrights about the predatory practices of actors and producers, namely Alleyn, the well-known Shake-scene, and Henslowe, his father-in-law theater owner. Alleyn became so wealthy that he was able to endow Dulwich College as a depository for Henslowe's archives.

Greene's pamphlet would have been largely forgotten had it not been read in 1778 by a classical scholar named Thomas Tyrwhitt (1730-1786) who was convinced he had made a significant discovery. He wrote: "There can be no doubt, I think, that Shake-scene alludes to Shakespeare." He also observed that the reference to the "tyger's heart" was taken from *Henry VI, Part 3*, the authorship of which in 1778 was still questioned. We can be sure that Greene knew who wrote it!

Of course, in 1778 very little was known about Shakespeare, and the authorship question had not even arisen. But now that we know much more, it is obvious that Shake-scene refers to Edward Alleyn and not William Shakespeare who was a totally unknown entity in 1592. Indeed, his name first appears in print on the dedication page of the poem *Venus and Adonis* in 1593, after Marlowe's supposed demise. His name does not appear on the title of a play until 1598, when it appears on *Love's Labour's Lost*, "newly corrected and augmented by W. Shakespere." That play had to be written by a university wit, and not a country bumpkin with no documented education of any kind.

Yet, Stratfordians have used Greene's pamphlet as proof that Shakespeare was a well-recognized actor and playwright before 1592. Nothing could be further from the truth. In fact, the Stratfordian claim has made it difficult to accurately date the plays written before 1593 or designate their true authorship.

Stratfordians have written all of their biographies on the dubious foundation of Greene's pamphlet, never questioning Tyrwhitt's assumption. Indeed, Stephen Goldblatt, in his much acclaimed biography of the Bard, *Will in the World*, goes so far in his book as to remove the hyphen in Shake-scene, thus giving the impression that Shakescene is indisputably Shakespeare. In doing so, he not only violated his profession as a scholar, but also perpetuated a gross historical error. Greene would have never used Shake-scene to refer to the name of an actual individual, since nowhere in the pamphlet does he refer to anyone by name.