

# The Man Who Insulted Shakespeare

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**S**HAKESPEARE'S ARTISTIC PREEMINENCE now seems so evident that we have trouble imagining anybody feeling any other way. But many of his contemporaries would have disagreed. The reigning London literati met his first poems and plays with derision and scorn. Most vehement of all was their acknowledged dean, Robert Greene, known by his scribbling peers as "head of the company." In an ironic reversal, Greene—the most successful commercial writer of his day—is now remembered less for his own accomplishments than for his insulting sally against his younger competitor.

Greene and his fractious but close-knit cadre of fellow writers had come up the hard way themselves, and they were fiercely proud of their accomplishments: their university degrees, their grounding in classical Latin, their anti-bourgeois independence, their strenuously curated personal styles. Cambridge had been the crucible of their ambition, instilling habits of competition and revelry, together with enduring friendships and equally enduring animosities. They were, for the most part, "new men," first in their families to attend universities and working their way through with scholarships and special bursaries. Not for them were the traditional careers awaiting university graduates; they disdained the minor posts awaiting them as vicars or schoolmasters or as secretaries within governmental bureaucracies. Regarding themselves as humanist-intellectuals, they set out to create a new kind of literary career, and London was their magnet.

In London, their lofty aspirations collided with marketplace realities. The old system of aristocratic literary patronage was on the wane; Greene and his friends still sought patronage by attaching fulsome dedications to their works, but with slender or no results. This was a society that wanted enlivened prose and hungered for theatrical diversion, but with minimum financial outlay. Greene and his friends responded by re-creating themselves as pens for hire,

issuing torrents of pamphlet prose, popular romances, and, of course, plays for the new and burgeoning theatrical scene. One of their leaders, Thomas Nashe, would put it baldly: “I prostitute my pen in hope of gain.” Down and out in poor wards like Dowgate or slummy suburbs like Shoreditch, exploiting their friendships and each other, they would write anything for a few pounds, or, failing in that, a few groats. Only an insanely high rate of productivity enabled them to carry on. At its best, this was a borderline life, a life that put its practitioners on or near the street, with all its temptations, dangers, and tawdry allure.

The literary scene over which Greene presided was a cauldron of burning ambitions and unfulfilled aspirations. Its ranks include Thomas Nashe, a fellow Cambridge man who wrote the first picaresque novel in English, championed Greene after his death, and expressed his own disdain for literary newcomers who didn’t know enough Latin to save themselves from hanging by reciting a “neck-verse.” The stuffy and reserved Gabriel Harvey (otherwise known as “Pedantius”) lived hand-to-mouth but paraded himself as a man of fashion, garbed in black velvet and deriding his fellows as “piperly make-plays.” The great Christopher “Kit” Marlowe, pioneer of Shakespeare’s blank verse and now only a year or two away from the “great reckoning” of his own death in a sordid tavern brawl, was among them, together with the witty George Peele who wrote warmhearted comedies while whoring and drinking himself to death. Fascinating bit players like Henry Chettle, who authored parts of 55 plays but never earned more than five shillings a throw, came “sweating and blowing, by reason of his fatness,” onto the scene. Greene’s literary and social milieu also embraced a host of notorious non-literary figures from London’s demi-monde, the odd madcaps with whom Greene mingled, including his girlfriend Em Ball (at whose house the actor Richard Tarlton, portrayer of clowns and rustics and composer of doggerel verse, had recently died). She was not only mother of Greene’s unpropitiously-named son Infortunatus, but sister of the notorious Cutting Ball, menacing knife-wielder and arch-thief of London.

At the unstill center of it all was Greene himself, whose traits and accomplishments would command interest even if he had never picked a quarrel in his life. He was a flamboyant literary intellectual, his own era’s equivalent of a medieval Goliard, a French *poète maudit*, a beatnik of the past American century, or a raffish but talented hanger-on at Warhol’s Factory late in our previous century. His signature attribute was a spectacular red beard, described by his friend Thomas Nashe as a spire-like “red peak, that he cherished continually without cutting, on which a man might hang a jewel, it was so sharp and pendant.” He perambulated London in a “fair cloak with sleeves of a grave goose turd green.” He was a neuromancer of revels, never without “a spell in his purse to conjure up a good cup of wine.” According to a friend “he pissed as much against the walls in one year”



Woodcut depicting Robert Greene, still scribbling in his burial shroud, from the title page of John Dickenson, *Greene in Conceit* (London, 1598). Public domain.

as his whole band of detractors in three. Other estimates were, naturally, mixed. Fellow playwright Chettle described him as an eccentric longhair but, nevertheless, “the only comedian of a vulgar writer in this country”—that is, as the most entertaining writer in the English tongue. His printer Cuthbert Burbie regretted his lascivious life but pled on his behalf that “the purest glass is most brittle” and “the highest oak most subject to the wind.” Of course, anybody as flamboyant as Greene would have his detractors too. His most resolute adversary, Harvey, railed at “his impudent pamphleting, fantastical interluding, and desperate libeling, his keeping of a sorry ragged queen [prostitute] of whom he had his base son Infortunatus Greene, his forsaking of his own wife, “too honest for such a husband,” and much more. “Particulars,” Harvey wailed, “are infinite.”

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Mad with language and a desire to write, they were all looking for a “way in,” a way to gain prominence (or at least make a living) by their pens. They were all knocking on different doors, hoping one would open. How appropriate that the literary forms available to these writers also sat at the borders of traditional literature: new, louche, unsanctioned, experimental through and through. Greene first wrote prose romances, then scurrilous and “true crime” pamphlets, and finally plays. Nashe wrote pornography, religious tracts, an interlude, various tirades, and the first rogue adventure in English. As older and more genteel systems of literary patronage and cultivated amateurship imploded, they continued to explore new possibilities of writing for personal profit: penning pamphlets, tracts, and romances for the burgeoning London book trade, and (most lucrative of all) writing for players' companies seeking new theatrical material. The young writers made the best of it with a fragile new network of fly-by-night printers, stationers' shops, and emerging theaters. Their writings seethed with energy, but harbored resentments they could not conceal. They cultivated their new audience, but scorned and insulted it too. They flailed about in a culture of insult not only aimed at interlopers like the young Shakespeare but each other as well. They stole unreservedly from each other, trafficking in women and goods but also in plots and lines of verse. Most of them—Greene, Nashe, Marlowe, Peele—were dead in their 20s or 30s. Only a handful, like Thomas Lodge (who collaborated on a play with Greene but then pulled out and become a physician) enjoyed normal spans of life. For all their anger and resentment, their writings pulsated with verbal energy and expressed the joy of unrestrained experimentation.

Their privileged milieu was the pamphlet. About half the residents of England had become literate, and demand for inexpensive and easily accessible reading matter had burgeoned. The printshops in and around Paternoster Row and St. Paul's were doing a land-office business straight over the counter, and were dealing directly with writers eager to sell their wares. Quarto sized (a paper-maker's standard page folded twice over) and unbound, a pamphlet could be had for the price of a theater ticket or an ordinary meal. “My dirty day labor,” Nashe called

them, and he paid tribute to Greene as the prince of scribblers, the man who could “yark you up a pamphlet” overnight if need arose. Nashe was not lying about Green’s productivity. In the frenetic last year of his life, impoverished and ill, he yarked up a dozen dozen different pamphlets, including the *Groatsworth of Wit* (which contains his attack on Shakespeare), and a half-dozen of his popular pamphlets on “cony-catching.” In these racy pamphlets he turns his own street-wise life-experiences to account, vigorously deploring, but also tacitly admiring and celebrating, the activities of “cony” or “rabbit” catchers (swindlers who live by their wits, taking advantage of trusting innocents) as well as “foists” (pickpockets), “cross-biters” (who live by entrapment), and others.

Marked by slangy invective and disdain for marks and fools as well as literary rivals, these pamphlets were always on the attack.<sup>1</sup> In *Pierce Penniless* Nashe calls Harvey “a shame-swollen toad.” Harvey assails Greene’s honored predecessor John Lyly over “the carrion of thy unsavory and stinking pamphlet,” and calls Nashe a “sluttish pamphleteer.” Nashe hurls a taunt at Harvey’s “dung-voiding mouth,” and dares him (or anybody else) to bring it on: “write of what thou wilt, in what language thou wilt, and I will confute it and answer it.” Greene mocks Harvey as a low-born ropemaker’s son, and Harvey crows over Greene’s death “from a surfeit of pickled herring and rhenish wine.” Right in the thick of this insult-blizzard was the crucial one, the dying Greene’s *Groatsworth of Wit*.

If the pamphlet was the vehicle of Greene’s attack, another genre—the emergent Elizabethan professional stage—was the cause of his quarrel with Shakespeare. The professional theater provided the most attractive opportunities for freelance writers of the day. A motivated playwright with a spark of wit could earn close to a living wage: instead of £2-£4 for a pamphlet or the uncertainties of writing a poem for an inconsistent patron, sole authorship of a play for a robust company might yield as much as £20 for several weeks of work, equivalent to twenty or thirty times that amount today. This opportunity was seized by Greene himself, together with his friends Lyly, Peele, Nashe, and Lodge, as well as the mercurial and slightly sinister Christopher “Kit” Marlowe. Marlowe had shown them the way with his *Tamburlaine*, and within months Greene had composed his own highly imitative flop, *Alphonsus*. He was a rapid learner, and soon hit his stride with several plays, including the historical *James IV* and the madcap *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay*, almost as good as Marlowe’s.

Agitated, Greene and his friends found themselves able, in this promising new circumstance, to collaborate on projects. Greene and Peele probably had a hand in early renderings of what would (in an ironic twist) evolve into Shakespeare’s own *Henry VI* plays. Generous sharers among themselves, Greene and his fellow playwrights were unready to tolerate competition from a new and unexpected quarter,

1 The language of their pamphlet wars became so intemperate that the Archbishop of Canterbury banned those of Nashe and Harvey from print and ordered existing copies destroyed.

and especially not from the unlikely ranks of the mere actors and entertainers for whom they wrote their plays. No wonder that Shakespeare's emergence was a painful annoyance to them. Winning their position by ingenuity, perseverance, and economic sacrifice, they were not about to make way for an uncredentialed and barely educated stranger from the provinces who was, worse still, a mere actor and dabbler besides. *They* were the wordsmiths and authors; actors were expected to memorize and parrot lines, and to season them with low buffoonery, rather than compose them on their own behalf.

And so, ill and near death, Robert Greene scribbled his *Groatsworth*, a pamphlet in which his personal frustrations and competitive animosity toward his younger competitor got the upper hand. There he lets fly in the intemperate language for which he is best remembered today—the language of the man who insulted Shakespeare.<sup>2</sup> Greene warms to his subject by expressing his general scorn for actors, whom he characterizes as mere puppets, parroting the lines with which the playwrights (with their superior educations) have provided them: “those puppets . . . that speak from our mouths, those antics garnished in our colours.” They are, he says, mere “antics”: clownish vaudevillians, with no worthy sentiments of their own, reliant on words loaned or borrowed rather than entitled or securely possessed. Then he proceeds to the more personal insult. “There is,” he says,

. . . an upstart crow beautified with our feathers, that with his *tyger's head, wrapt in a player's hide*, supposes he is as well about 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.

This actor—an inappropriate and unwelcome aspirant—has not only clad himself in borrowed feathers or scripted words, but has presumed to strive beyond his own meager qualifications by composing blank verse (of a particularly bombastic or overwrought nature) on his own behalf. Greene next maliciously paraphrases a line from one of Shakespeare's early efforts—a line from *Henry VI*, part 3, to which the young poet had contributed as co-author—with the doomed duke of York, in this case, accusing his adversary Margaret of possessing a “tiger's heart wrapp'd in a woman's hide” (I, iv, 137). Greene then proceeds to attack Shakespeare as a mere “Johannes Factotum” or Jack-of-all-trades, and concludes by labeling him “the only Shake-scene in the country,” a term coined to cast his rival as a lowly actor and player in dramatic scenes, as well as an overly-strident composer of them.<sup>3</sup>

Aware today of Shakespeare's utter preeminence, we wonder at Greene's presumption in supposing himself a possible rival. Had Greene lived on to witness his competitor's full emergence, how galling would have been the realization that—by the example of his own career and by bolstering the literary theatrical institutions on which his

2 Greene's celebrated insult has, in recent years, even served as the basis for a British comedy/costume drama entitled *Upstart Crow*, featured for multiple seasons on BBC2 and Netflix—fully furnished with laugh track and slightly suggestive East Enders' humor.

3 In their scorn for Shakespeare as an uncredentialed and undereducated striver, Greene and his friends shared common ground with modern Shakespeare-deniers, who doubt that great poetry could have issued from a mere tradesman's son and seek among the ranks of educated nobility for a more palatable alternative.

rival would depend—he had unwittingly been setting Shakespeare’s table all along. After all, he knew Shakespeare only from his earliest days of trial and error, as author of amatory poetry and as contributor to what would have seemed unexceptional historical drama. For Shakespeare, following Greene some half dozen years later, had his own days of trial and error, variously trying his hand as an unheralded contributor to the *Henry VI* plays and, concurrently, as a dabbler in culturally elite poetry for select patrons and a coterie audience.<sup>4</sup>

Doubts about Shakespeare’s seriousness and staying-power abounded in his early days. A trilogy of academic dramas enacted at Cambridge at the turn of the seventeenth century depicts two young university graduates trying to make their way in the literary world of the day. These are the three “Parnassus” plays, so named for the ambition of the main characters to ascend Parnassus by pursuing the ideals of high art. They doggedly (and ultimately unsuccessfully) seek literary careers that will enable them to enact their ideals, without sinking to pamphleteering, playwrighting, or other kinds of bottom-feeding pursuits.<sup>5</sup>

In the course of these plays, the young university performers are free with their topical opinions, expressing a good many literary judgments for both good and ill. Their characters are, in turn, revealed by the quality of their own literary opinions. One of them, the brash and ranting Gullio, reveals his shallowness by preferring the young Shakespeare to established greats like Chaucer and Spenser:

Let this duncified world esteem of Spenser and Chaucer,  
I’ll worship sweet Mr Shakespeare, and to honor him will  
lay his Venus and Adonis under my pillow, as we read of  
one (I do not well remember his name, but I am sure he  
was a king) slept with Homer under his bed’s head.

Meanwhile, more thoughtful characters are critical in their evaluations, giving the young Shakespeare cautious or even negative reviews. Here, for instance, is the comment of an admired character, Judicio, on the young Shakespeare:

Who loves not Adons love, or Lucrece rape?  
His sweeter verse contains heart-robbing lines.  
Could but a graver subject him content,  
Without love’s foolish lazy languishment . . .

He concedes the merit of “Venus and Adonis,” and “Lucrece,” as poems of what he calls love’s “languishment” . . . but also wishes Shakespeare a graver subject, something more worthy of his talent.

Other critics, like Ben Jonson, took the line of Sir Philip Sidney in his *Apology for Poetry*, critiquing Shakespeare for violations of the classical unities of time and place in his dramas, switching from locale to locale, allowing people to age onstage, and the like. This was not, of course, the position of Greene, who wrote for the popular

4 Orderly-minded literary historians argue that Shakespeare turned to poems during the brief period in 1592-3 when the theaters were closed. More likely, though, he was doing what everybody did: experimenting with multiple options and aiming at varied audiences and publics, trying to figure out what worked best.

5 In the third play of the series, *Return from Parnassus*, the foiled heroes are reduced to soliciting theatrical entrepreneurs Burbage and Kempe for employment as playwrights. Burbage and Kempe, actors themselves as well as theatrical tastemakers, consider them over-classicized for employment; as Kempe says, “Few of the university pen plays well, they smell too much of that writer Ovid, and that writer Metamorphoses, and talk too much of Proserpina and Jupiter.” Their “fellow” Shakespeare is their favorite—“Why here’s our fellow Shakespeare puts them all down”—a man of their own trade untrammelled by Classical models and university airs.

theatre himself. But Greene did feel in familiar company—the company, that is, of university-educated literati—in believing that his rival was out of his depth, out of place, lacking in seriousness, and, certainly, quite uncredentialed for the writing tasks he was taking in hand.

Even though they now look dogged and rather foolish, Shakespeare's early detractors were not foolish men. Pioneers in their own right, England's first professional writers, they opened a possibility and—without exactly meaning to—pointed the way to Shakespeare's own subsequent triumphs. Not simply his adversaries, they were also his paradoxical enablers. They invented the blank verse in which he wrote, bolstered theatrical institutions, and expanded the audience that would fund and support his efforts. They created the possibility of a writerly and theatrical vocation considered marginal and lowbrow in its own time, but in which their unwelcome rival would produce the greatest literary masterpieces the world has known.

Even with Shakespeare's resounding emergence, and Greene's untimely death in 1592, memories of Greene would linger. In the decade after his death he kept reappearing as a ghost. We reencounter his specter in a half-dozen different texts and pamphlets, in stubborn pursuit of his main themes. One of them, *Greene in Conceit, New Raised from his Grave* (1598) even depicts him at his writing-table, clad in a shroud or winding-sheet, still scribbling, still settling scores.

For his part, although a potentially aggrieved party, Shakespeare would display nothing but generosity toward his deceased predecessor. In the exacerbated climate of the day, he might typically have replied to Greene's insults with an immediate blast, assailing him in a scurrilous pamphlet or broadside of his own. Nonetheless, his actual, eventual response to Greene was forbearing, respectful, and perhaps even slightly sentimental in tone.

One of Greene's pamphlet-sized prose romances was *Pandosto: The Triumph of Time*, a tale dealing with the destructive effects of jealousy, the effects of separation, the possibility of ultimate reconciliation. A mixed accomplishment, it is characteristic of what Greene himself called his "imperfect pamphlets," filled with emphatic mood shifts, pastoral fantasies, unruly and incestuous desires, and more. The barebones plot is that Pandosto, king of Bohemia, irrationally suspects his wife Bellaria of unfaithful intrigue with his friend Egistus of Sicily. The mad king's frenzies lead to her death, the flight and loss of their infant daughter Fawnia (who is raised incognito by a humble shepherd), the coincidences and sea journeys leading to her rapprochement with Egistus's son Dorastus (who, though of royal blood, is willing to become a shepherd for her sake), and a final revelation of identities and partial reconciliations.

Taking Greene's romance in hand and recasting it as his *Winter's Tale*, Shakespeare renamed characters and shuffled geography, but retained Greene's themes of headstrong guilt, separation, and



renewal. Like Greene, he preserved a sixteen-year time lapse between the play's two parts, as the respective children of Bohemia and Sicily grow up unknown to each other, prior to their romantic collision. Then, in his last two acts, he improvised much more inventively and freely, yet preserved and elaborated Greene's main themes—the healing effects of time, the amiable effects of pastoral dalliance, the reparative possibilities of love. Overall, as in several of Shakespeare's late plays, there is an effect of softening: most notably, he granted the mad king's wife, now renamed Hermione, a return to life.

Additionally, he created several new characters, among whom the most prominent is a winning rogue named Autolycus, an itinerant ballad-monger and shameless grifter. Although given to trickery and problematic pursuits, Autolycus is an ultimately attractive and amiable character. He enters the action of the play cheerfully singing “When daffadils begin to peer,” a ballad of springtime renewal, while confessing (no less cheerfully) to a variety of scams and misdeeds. Describing himself as a “snapper-up of unconsider'd trifles,” or petty thief, he attributes his own ragged condition to gambling and women: “With die and drab I purchase'd this caparison, and my revenue is the silly cheat.” We then immediately see him set out to cozen (cheat) a clown or rural simpleton, attributing (in a maneuver similar to those described by Greene in his own cony-catching pamphlets) his own ragged attire to a fictitious robbery, while picking the pocket of the clown who has come to his aid.

So here we have Shakespeare, deep in his own mid-life and twenty years after the death of Greene, turning to one of Greene's prose romances as his source. To be sure—in accordance with his own practice and the conventions of the day—he does not mention Greene by name, although *Pandosto* was a popular work and Shakespeare's indebtedness would have been recognized by many. More important than the simple fact of the adaption, though, is Shakespeare's affectionate rendering of an incorrigible rogue who—if not a literal portrait of Greene—certainly displays many of Greene's known attributes. Shakespeare not only grants him the boon of affectionate treatment but even, at the end of the play, grants him a post and an honest livelihood, which Autolycus accepts with pleasure and relief. The benign aspect of Shakespeare's nod to his one-time rival is heightened and confirmed by the tenor of the play itself, its emphasis on the healing effects of time, and the possibilities of reconciliation.

To treat the conclusion of the *Winter's Tale* as an act of explicit forgiveness of Greene's churlish insult might overstate the case. But Shakespeare does appear to advance the conciliatory spirit of the play by invoking his old rival in spirit of generous equanimity. Or, to put it differently: in one of his last plays, Shakespeare writes his own, bemused ending to Greene's intended quarrel. A