

Shake-scene and that Upstart Crow

Two killer arguments against Greene having intended to refer to Shakespeare

It is agreed that Greene's *Groatsworth of Wit, bought with a Million of Repentance* was written when he was destitute, and that the oft-quoted passage is addressed to several identified playwrights including Marlowe (but not Shakespeare). Greene's concern was that while he and those other playwrights had made actors in general – and one leading actor in particular – rich, none of them had come to his aid in his dire need. He had been “forsaken” and, regarding that as being totally unacceptable, his wish was to punish them all by breaking the unfair system under which the actors, but not the playwrights, flourished. So:

- 1) “Yes trust them not:” [actors in general] “for there is an upstart Crow,” [one particular actor] “beautified with our feathers, that with his *Tygers hart wrapt in a Players hyde*,” [in Elizabethan idiom ‘a wolf in sheep’s clothing’] “supposes” [implying he is mistaken] “he is well able to bombast out” [in the context of acting, ‘declaim’] “a blanke verse as the best of you:” [actors] “and being an absolute *Johannes fac totum* is in his own conceit the only Shake-scene in a countrey.” ‘The only Shake-scene’ in that context implies there were others; the ‘upstart Crow’ just had the arrogance to consider himself to be in a class apart. Accordingly, as Greene was using ‘Shake-scene’ as a generic description of any leading actor able to engross his audience, he was not referring to Shakespeare, then an unknown, and never an actor of leading roles.

Note: I believe Dolly Wraight was correct in identifying Edward Alleyn as the upstart Crow. In spite of having played many leading roles, he was only 26 in 1592 and so could reasonably have been viewed through Greene’s 34-year-old eyes as an ‘upstart;’ who was known for his arrogance and for his declamatory acting style; and who regarded himself, not only to be a leading actor, but also a playwright, businessman, and impresario, so meriting the aspersion that he was a ‘Jack of all trades,’ perhaps then as now, carrying the implication ‘and master of none.’

- 2) Greene then implores his fellow playwrights to boycott writing for the stage: “O that I might entreate your rare wits to be imployed in more profitable courses: [give up writing for the stage where the pay is derisory, and others come to own and benefit from your works] “and let those Apes” [the actors who live by your words rather than their own] “imitate your past excellence” [there is no way to recover the plays that have been sold] “**and never more acquaint them with your admired inventions**” [and that can only be understood as calling for a boycott.]

So if the so-called Orthodox, who believe Shakespeare wrote the plays published under his name, were right in their belief that Greene was directing his ire at Shakespeare and was out to punish him, how do they explain how

he could possibly be punished by being given, as a playwright, an open field cleared of all competition?

Much has been built on Greene's reference to 'Shake-scene' with it being claimed, in breach of academic rigour, as fact rather than as speculation, that it was a direct attack on Shakespeare, and the first time he was mentioned in print in a theatrical context. That claim appears to have been intended to establish that Shakespeare was 'known theatrically' before Marlowe is reputed to have died. In the light of the above paragraphs it is nonsense that needs to be rethought. There is so much more to this that still remains unexplored.

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