

The 'Secret' of the Early Shakespeare

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The basic objective of the present task is to shed some light on Shakespeare's puzzling beginning as an artist. The following essay, therefore, digs very deeply towards whatever reputation Shakespeare had in the literary world of London in the decade, or so, following his advent in 1587. ¹ Such an effort, it is assumed, may reveal the proper pointers to the ways in which Shakespeare's artistic genius was developing; it may 'bring us exhilaratingly close to Shakespeare himself to find him sometimes anticipating our comment or making our point for us.' ²

In a brief article, 'Richard Barnfield, Marlowe, and Shakespeare,' Charles Crawford makes an interesting argument concerning Shakespeare's early career. He points out the wonderful impression the latter rapidly made on his contemporaries, particularly Barnfield who was to become 'a diligent student' of his work. Crawford argues that Barnfield had a deep-rooted desire to imitate Shakespeare's poetic style. 'As no earlier imitation of Shakespeare's work has been found than that in Barnfield,' Crawford finally suggests, 'we may claim the latter to be the first of his contemporaries to voice the praise of Shakespeare by imitating him.' ³

Much of Barnfield's verse, in fact, assimilates many touches of Shakespeare's early style, his 'hony-flowing Vaine,' as Barnfield himself labels it -

And Shakespeare thou, whose hony-flowing Vaine,
(Pleasing the World) by Praises doth obtaine ... ⁴

For such a 'pleasant' style, as far as I can discover from the

records of the time, Shakespeare had had a reputation in London since the early 1590s.

The first clear reference to Shakespeare, however, comes as an attack on his 'conceited' style of acting and playwrighting. It occurs in Robert Greene's much quoted autobiographical pamphlet of 1592, Groats-worth of Wit. Greene was a man of peculiar personality. He was a Cambridge graduate who had written several successful plays. Such plays made him the most popular author of his generation. Greene was, nonetheless, an 'egotistical, irascible man, proud of his academical honours and jealous of his literary fame in London.'⁵ Twice he wrote with sheer hostility and unkindness: when Christopher Marlowe first showed the power of blank verse in dramatic writing, and when Shakespeare transferred from acting to playwrighting.

On the first occasion, Greene produced the Menaphon, a prose work of 1589. His position as the 'arch-playmaking poet' of rhymed plays was then shaken by Marlowe's Tamburlaine. Greene even engaged young Thomas Nash in this minor war of the theatre. The latter, at once, furnished Greene's work with a prefatory epistle, a 'Preface to the Gentlemen Students of Both Universities,' in which he attempted to cover up Greene's failure to rival Marlowe's plays by counter-attacking the more successful dramatists. He began by referring to those 'idiote art-masters, that intrude themselves ... as the alcumists of eloquence, who (mounted on the stage of arrogance) think to outbraue better pens with the swelling bombast of bragging blank verse.' Then he said about the dramatists whose scholarship seemed deficient to him:

It is a common practice now a dayes amongst
sort of shifting companions, that runne through
euery Art and thriue by none, to leave the

trade of Nouerint, where they were borne, and busie themselves with the indeuours of Art, that could scarcely Latinize their neck verse if they should haue needed, yet English Seneca read by candlelights yields many good sentences, as Blood is a beggar, and so forth; and so forth; and if you intreate him faire in a frostie morning, hee will afford you whole Hamlets, I should say handfulls of Tragicall speeches. ⁶

That Shakespeare might have been a target of attack is out of the question. He was neither a rival dramatist, nor a scholarly 'playmaker', like 'the son of the scrivener' or 'the cobbler's eldest son,' to use Greene's contemptuous epithets of Thomas Kyd and Marlowe in the Menaphon. It may, however, be interesting to associate Shakespeare, who was 'haunting' the London theatres by then, with the actors whom Nash impertinently described as 'dressed in the feathers of the dramatists.' Such an epithet was to be actually applied to Shakespeare by Greene himself three years later. In the 'Preface' Nash said: 'Sundry other sweete gentlemen I doe know, that haue vaunted their pennes in priuate deuices and tricked up a company of taffaty fooles with their feathers.' And he added the further detail (which Greene was to incorporate in his Groatsworth later) that actors played such pieces as Belphrigus and the King of the Fairies, till the 'scolars' provided them with real dramas. ⁷

The date of Shakespeare's settling in London as Dreighton and successive scholarship suggest 'was not later than 1557, and probably not earlier than 1586.' ⁸ One should, therefore, imagine Shakespeare at work one way or another for some five or six years. One should imagine once more Shakespeare getting employment inside the playhouse, 'The Theatre' or the 'Curtain,' the only two theatres that existed in London at the date of his arrival from Stratford.

This means to approve one of two explanations proposed by Sidney Lee and S. Schoenbaum. The former indicates that the two chief companies of actors, Lord Leicester's and the Queen's, accommodated Shakespeare, the 'homeless lad' on learning rumours about his assiduous search for employment about the London theatres. Schoenbaum points out that one of those touring companies, the Queen's men, lacked a player in the summer of 1587 and had to fix Shakespeare up.⁹ In either case, the indication that Shakespeare might have succeeded in obtaining a job inside the theatre is there. From such incidents seems to have sprung the opportunity which offered Shakespeare fame and fortune. It is not totally improbable, then, to hypothetically include Shakespeare among those fellow-actors who had been exposed to Greene's venomous attack and to Nash's biting satire.

This was as far as the year 1589 was concerned. Unable to face Marlowe, Greene had to adopt the latter's poetic style and to accept him into the society of scholar-playwrights. But there was another threat yet to be faced - the rising star of Shakespeare. John Addington Symonds beautifully describes this memorable event. 'It was obvious,' he says, 'to the meanest capacity, indisputable by the grossest vanity, that Shakespeare was entering like a young prince into the dominions conquered by his predecessors, and that his reign would be extended far beyond the limits of their empire.'¹⁰ It was probably in the summer of 1592, after the successful productions of the Henry VI triad (particularly the First Part), when the popularity of Greene and his fellow-dramatists was endangered. Nash seemed aware of this impending danger. In his Pierce Penilesse (1592), he wrote describing the public success of such scenes in 1 Henry VI as the striking Talbot's death (IV.vi, viii):

How would it haue ioyed braue Talbot (the terror of the French) to thinke that after he had lyne two hundred yeares in his Tombe, hee should triumphe againe on the Stage, and haue his bones newe embalmed with the teares of ten thousand spectators at least (at seuerall times) who, in the Tragedian that represents his person, imagine they behold him fresh bleeding. ¹¹

In the autumn of the same year, therefore, Greene uttered a rancorous protest. While on his deathbed he addressed three nameless literary friends (possibly Marlowe, Nash and Peele), warning them to avoid his misfortunes:

Base minde men all three of you; if by my miserie ye be not warned: for unto none of you (like me), sought those burre to cleaue: those Puppits (I meane) that speake from our mouths, those Anticks garnisht in our colours. Is it not strange that I, to whom they all haue beene beholding: is it not like that you, to whom they all haue beene beholding, shall (were you in that case as I am nowe) be both at once of them forsaken?

'Yes trust them not,' Greene continued, 'for

there is an vpstart Crow beautified with our feathers, that with his gers heart wrapt in a Players hyde, supposes he is as well able to bum-bast out a blanke verse as the best of you; and being an absolute Johannes factotum is, in his owne conceit the onely Shake-scene in a countrie. ¹²

As observed by Schoenbaum, the punning reference to a 'Shake-scene' and the parody of a line from Henry VI ('Oh tiger's heart wrapp'd in a woman's hide') identify the victim unmistakably. ¹³

Greene attacks Shakespeare on three different scores. On an economical basis he links him with greedy players - the crew of 'puppets,' 'antics,' 'base grooms,' 'buckram gentlemen,' 'peasants'

and 'painted monsters,' as Greene calls them. On a literary basis, he charges Shakespeare with ignoring the line of demarcation that Greene felt should separate actor and dramatist. And on a 'stylistic' basis, he charges him with producing 'bombastic' drama. No matter how much hostile, these charges are flattering. They pay tribute to the promising competitor. Greene's complaint seems to arise from Shakespeare's capacity to 'bombast out' a blank verse as the best of the professional playwrights: namely, to fill out 'the spacious volubilitie of a drumming decasellabon;' for 'bombast' was the cotton wool of the time used in padding out fashionable clothing.¹⁴ Shakespeare, a mere actor, has picked up Greene's style and metre that made possible the glories of the late Elizabethan stage.

After Greene's death, his Groatsworth of Wit stirred protest which fell on the head of Nash. Thus before the year was out the latter had written in his Pierce Penilesse (published in October), hoping to clear the air:

Other news I am aduertised of, that a scold
triuial lying pamphlet, cald Greene's Groats-
worth of wit, is giuen out to be my doing.
God neuer haue care of my soul, but vtterly
renounce me, if the least word or sillable
in it proceded from my pen, or if I were any
way priuie to the writing or printing of it. ¹⁵

In December, Henry Chettle, Greene's publisher (who was then preparing the manuscript for the press) prefixed a handsomely full and frank apology for Greene's attack on the actor-playwright to Kind Hartes Dreame:

I am as sory, as if the originall fault had
beene my fault, because my selfe haue seene
his demeanor no lesse ciuill than he exelent
in the qualitie he professes: Besides, diuers
of worship haue reported his vprightness of

dealing, which argues his honesty, and his facetious grace in writting, that aprooves his Art. 16

Chettle's tract also includes a defence on behalf of Shakespeare. Greene accuses Shakespeare of dishonesty and greed in his dealings with playwrights: Chettle cites the testimony of men of standing to Shakespeare's honesty. Greene treats Shakespeare as a 'bombastic' playmaker: Chettle shows that men of education admire his art. Chettle's tract, above all, makes reference to Shakespeare's style, his 'facetious grace in writting, that aprooves his Art,' that is his 'witty and ingenious charm of style that ratifies his skill,' to borrow J.V. Cunningham's translation of the compliment in modern idioms. 17

Within a few months of Chettle's acknowledgement of Shakespeare's 'graceful style,' Shakespeare came out as a genuine poet with his 'Venus and Adonis' - a metrical version of the classical tale of love. On the 18th April, 1593, this poem was entered for publication in the Stationer's Register immediately after Shakespeare had secured patronage of Henry of Wriothesly, third Earl of Southampton. To this nobleman the poem was dedicated both respectfully and formally. 'Venus and Adonis' was at once popular and received much praise. That denoted the growing maturity of Shakespeare's poetic style. In the spring of 1594, May 9, another poem - 'The Rape of Lucrece' - was entered in the Stationer's Register. This also was dedicated to the Earl of Southampton, but in warm and friendly terms.

'In these poems,' as remarked by Lee, 'Shakespeare made his earliest appeal to the world of readers. The London playgoer already knew his name as that of a promising actor and a successful playwright.' Yet the perfect sweetness of the verse, and the

poetical imagery in 'Venus and Adonis' and 'Lucrece' and their affluence in the beautiful and the imaginative, practically paved the way for an enthusiastic reception of the new-born poet. 'Critics,' Lee remarked again, 'vied with each other in the exuberance of the eulogies in which they proclaimed that the fortunate author had gained a place in permanence on the summit of Parnassus.' 18

It was two months after the appearance of 'Venus and Adonis' that the first reference to this poem was made. It came as a note recorded anonymously in 'An Ancient MS Diary'. This note read: '12 th of June, 1593. For the Survay of Fraunce, with the Venus and Anthonay pr Shakespere, xii.d.' Another reference to the same poem was made in 1594 by a contemporary, Robert Southwell:

This makes my mourning muse resolve in teares,
 This Theames my heavy penne to plaine in prose.
 Christes Thorne is Shoupe, no head his Garland weares
 Stil Finest wits are 'stilling, Venus' Rose.
 In paynim toyes the sweetest vaines are spent:
 To Christian workes, few have their talents lent.¹⁹

These two sample allusions may suggest the speed and extent of the popularity which Shakespeare's first narrative poem received. His second poem, 'Lucrece,' was alluded to also by contemporary men of letters, all in the same year of publication, 1594. The references are surer and more frequent than in the case of 'Venus.'

The earliest of these was probably made by W. Har in his 'Epicedium: A Funeral Song':

You that haue writ Chaste Lucretia
 Whose death was witsnesse of her spotlesse life:
 Or pen'd the praise of sad Cornelia,
 Whose blamelesse name hath made her fame so rife,
 As noble Pompey's most renowned life:
 Hither vnto your home direct your eies,
 Whereas, vnthought on, much more matter lies.²⁰

'Lucrece,' Michael Drayton wrote in his 'Legend of Mathilda,'

of whom proude Rome hath boasted long
Lately reviv'd to live another age,
And here ariv'd to tell of Tarquins wrong
Her Chast deniall, and the Tyrants rage
Acting her passion on our stately Stage.

She 's remembered, all forgetting me,
Yet I, as fayre and Chast as ere was She. 21

Even as early as 1594, the greatest of Shakespeare's contemporaries, Edmund Spenser, was drawn by the sweetness manifested in these two poems. He described Shakespeare in 'Colin Clouts Come Home Againe' (completed 1594), under the name of 'Aetion' - a familiar Greek name -

And there, though last not least, is Aetion,
A gentler shepheard may no where be found,
Whose Muse, full of high thought's invention,
Doth like himselfe heroically sound. 22

Chettle, who a year before offered the actor-playwright an apology, alluded to 'Lucrece' in his 'Englandes Mourning Garment' :

Nor doth the siluer tonged Melicert,
Drop from his honied muse one sable teare
To mourne her death that graced his desert,
And to his laies opened her Royall eare.

Shepheard, remember our Elizabeth,
And sing her Rape, done by that Tarquin Death. 23

These allusions and many others which occur in the following few years emphasise once again the reputation of the young Shakespeare as a poet. He was widely read and enjoyed, and he gained a great deal of esteem. That was not only inside the circles of actors and scholars, but also outside them in the grand houses of noble patrons of literature and the drama. One of those was Southampton, whose notice was arrested by Shakespeare's 'pleasant style'

and 'civil demeanour' of which Chettle wrote. Shakespeare was able to achieve literary distinction for his works as well as for himself.

'Venus and Adonis' and 'The Rape of Lucrece' were made distinctive works of art through their 'artifice'. I mean the wit, the conceits, the rhetorical bravery and the heavy conventional style, which are all utilised with a large measure of artificiality and sophistication. Shakespeare was highly praised for his refined, elegant and witty style. The praise, though extended to the end of the century, still went back in its content to the early years of the 1590s. In 1595, William Covell described 'Lucrece' as 'All praise-worthy Lucrecia' and its author as 'Sweet Shakespeare.'²⁴ In a letter on the 'Excellencie of the English tongue' of about 1596, Richard Carew praised 'Venus' and credited Shakespeare with the literary merit of Catullus.²⁵ In 1598, Francis Meres produced the Palladis Tamia in which he praised Shakespeare, among other things, as one of five poets who excelled in lyric poetry: 'As the soule of Euphorbus was thought to liue in Pythagoras: so the sweete witty soule of Quid liues in mellifluous & hony-tongued Shakespeare, witnes his Venus and Adonis, his Lucrece, his sugred Sonnets among his priuate friends, & c.'²⁶

Barnfield in the same year praised - as aforementioned - Shakespeare's 'hony-flowing Vaine.' And in the following year, 1599, John Weaver addressed a sonnet to Shakespeare in 'Epigramms,' eulogising the poet and his poetry:

Honie-tong'd Shakespeare when I saw thine issue
 I swore Apollo got them and none other,
 Their rosie-tainted features cloth'd in tissue,
 Some heaven born goddesse said to be their mother:
 Rose-cheekt Adonis with his amber tresses,
 Faire fire-hot Venus charming him to love her,

Chaste Lucretia virgine-like her dresses,
prowd lust-stung Tarquine seeking still to prove her. 27

Shakespeare's earliest reputation was not a reputation of an actor. His work as a dramatist as clear from 1 Henry VI, which drew ten thousand spectators or more at several performances, soon eclipsed his histrionic fame. Nor was this reputation even a reputation as a dramatist. His poetic achievements overshadowed (though temporarily) his fame as a promising professional playwright. And yet the period in which Shakespeare's poetic genius was 'in action,' happened to co-incide with the theatrical inactivity in London. This was from the summer of 1592 until the spring of 1594, the period of the catastrophic plague outbreak. All the theatres were shut and the playing companies went on tour.

This gave rise to the belief that 'Venus' and 'Lucrece' were merely products of an idleness enforced on Shakespeare. This belief was even vindicated by the peculiar expansiveness and unhurried pace inapparent in the tense bustle of the plays which were to emerge later. I wish, however, to argue that the closure of the theatres allowed Shakespeare enough time to concentrate solely on his poetic potentials. Retiring, for a time, from the business of an 'antic' or a 'Johannes factotum,' he chose to realise his poetic ambitions. Those had been to produce classical verse, as plainly avowed in the Latin motto of 'Venus': 'Vilia miretur vulgus, mihi flavus Apollo / Pocula Castalia plena ministret aqua,' or 'Let the vulgar admire vile things; to me may golden Apollo offer full draughts from the Castalian spring.' 28

The poetic obsessions pre-existed, then, the dramatic, though the young Shakespeare was preoccupied from the beginning with the playing and the writing of plays. And once carried out, these obsessions revealed the secret of the early Shakespeare, the pleasant, sweet and honey-tongued Shakespeare.

Notes

1. This is presumably the date of Shakespeare's arrival to London, according to the corpus of scholarly opinion. See p. 3, supra, and n. 8, infra.
2. G.D. Willcock, Shakespeare as Critic of Language (London: Oxford University Press, 1934), p. 128.
3. Notes and Queries, 9th Series. Vol. 8 (1901), 277-79.
4. Quoted in Sidney Lee, A Life of William Shakespeare (London: John Murray, 1931), 14th edn., p. 149.
5. See John Addington Symonds, Shakespeare's Predecessors in the English Drama (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1900), p. 439.
6. Works of Thomas Nash, ed. by R.B. MacKerrow (London: A.H. Bullen, 1904), Vol. III, pp. 311, 315.
7. Ibid., pp. 323-24.
8. Shakespeare's Story of his Life (London: Grant Richards, 1904), p. 126.
9. See Lee, pp. 45-6; and Schoenbaum, William Shakespeare: A Documentary Life (Oxford: Clarendon, 1975), p. 90.
10. P. 439.
11. Op.cit., p. 212.
12. The Life and Complete Works in Prose and Verse of Robert Greene, ed. by Alexander B. Crossart (Lancashire: St. George's Blackburn, 1881-83), Vol. XII, pp. 343-44.
13. A New Companion to Shakespeare Studies, ed. by Kenneth Muir and Schoenbaum (Cambridge: University Press, 1971), p. 5.

14. See A Shakespeare Glossary, ed. by C.T. Onions (Oxford: Clarendon, 1949), 2nd edn., p. 19.
15. P. 154.
16. Ed. by Peter Davison (New York & London, 1977).
17. "'With that Facility:" False Starts and Revisions in Love's Labour's Lost,' Essays on Shakespeare, ed. by W. Gerald Chapman (Princeton, N.J.: University Press, 1965), p. 93. I am deeply indebted to this article.
18. Pp. 148-49.
19. See Edmund Malone, Inquiry into the Authenticity of Certain Miscellaneous Papers and Legal Instruments, Attributed to Shakespeare, Queen Elizabeth and Henry, Earl of Southampton (London: Printed for T. Cadell, Jun. and Davies: E. Baldwin, 1796), p. 67; and Poems of Robert Southwell, ed. by James H. Mc Donald and Nancy Pollard Brown (Oxford: Clarendon, 1967), p. 75.
20. Quoted in E.K. Chambers, William Shakespeare (Oxford: Clarendon, 1930), Vol. II, pp. 190-91.
21. Works of Drayton, ed. by J. William Hebel (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1932), Vol. II, p. 257.
22. The Works of Spenser, ed. by R. Morris (London & New York: Macmillan, 1899), p. 553.
23. Quoted in Chambers, p. 189.
24. Ibid., p. 193.
25. Lee, p. 142, n. 1.

26. Quoted in Chambers, p. 194.
27. See A.C. Hamilton, The Early Shakespeare (San Marino, California: Huntington Library, 1967), p. 126.
28. Creighton, p. 126.