



“Upstart Crow”

The Murky Origins of *Love’s Labor’s Lost*

By Jerry James

There comes a time that a piano realizes that it has not written a concerto!
— Playwright Lloyd Richards to Actor Margo Channing, *All About Eve* (1950)



William Shakespeare (David Mitchell) and Robert Greene (Mark Heap)
“Upstart Crow” — BBC Comedy Series (2016-2020)

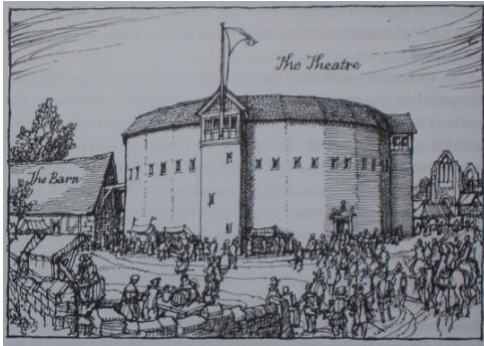
In the BBC series, *Upstart Crow*, William Shakespeare is beset in every episode by his nemesis, Robert Greene. Like much else in the series, this is an in-joke, dependent on how much one knows about Shakespeare. But truth to tell, we *don’t* know a lot about Shakespeare, especially in the ten years following his 1582 marriage to Anne Hathaway.

During these years, Shakespeare’s name appears exactly four times: twice for the baptisms of his children; once (with his parents) in a court document—and once when the playwright Robert Greene, in his 1592 posthumous pamphlet, *A Groatsworth of Wit*, beats Shakespeare like a rented mule. We here reproduce Greene’s spleen in its full Elizabethan spelling:

...for there is an upstart Crow, beautified with our feathers, that with his Tygers hart wrapt in a Players hyde, supposes he is as well able to bombast 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 country.

Elizabethan spleen is common. But at this point in his career, Shakespeare was a complete unknown. What in the world did he do to the dying Robert Greene to merit this excoriation? And what does it have to do with *Love’s Labor’s Lost*? Let’s begin with the Elizabethan theatre.

The Elizabethan Theatre



The Theatre (1576)

Actors have always been considered little better than “gypsies, tramps and thieves,” as Cher sang. In Elizabethan times, when players trouped around England, playing innyards and bear-baiting venues, a nobleman’s protection was necessary to avoid being arrested for vagrancy.

In 1576, James Burbage, who’d been trained as a carpenter, built the first theatre in London since Roman times. With typical British bluntness, he called it the Theatre. Burbage took its raised stage from innyards and its seating from bear baiting. It would prove the very model of a modern major London theatre (outdoors) for 66 years.

By 1592, Philip Henslowe was running a new theatre, the Rose, with his group of shareholders, about a dozen actors with enough money to buy into the enterprise. Supplemented with jobbing actors when needed, the Rose’s season that year ran 6 days a week for 4 months, with 23 plays performed, about half of them new. They never did the same play twice in a row and rarely twice in the same week. We know this because Henslowe kept a diary.

Aspiring playwrights would gather in a tavern with Henslowe and his sharers and read the play. If they liked it, they would buy the script for £6 (about \$1,660). The playwright never got another groat.

It was Hollywood on the Thames, in that the producer owned the play, not the playwright. This meant the actors might alter the script in any way that pleased them. So, inevitably, playwrights hated actors.

Robert Greene

Norwich gentry may have sent Robert Greene (1558-1592) to Cambridge (BA, 1580; MA, 1583). But he settled in London, where he became one of the first professional writers in the English language.

The red-haired Greene cut quite a figure with his pointed beard, green cloak and silk stockings. He was a drunken, whoring hellion, who spent every penny he ever made—the first English Bohemian.

Wikipedia says, “Gabriel Harvey claimed that Greene kept a mistress, Em, the sister of a criminal known as ‘Cutting Ball’ hanged at Tyburn. Harvey described her as ‘a sorry ragged quean of whom [Greene] had his base son Infortunatus Greene.’”

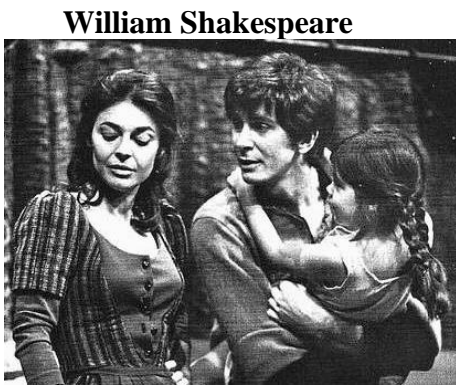


*Seen here, writing in his death shroud,
Greene resembles an onion*

Greene wrote romances and exposés of the London underworld. He also wrote 15-20 plays, either in whole or in part. He was one of the University Wits, those graduates of Oxford or Cambridge who, having dealt exclusively in Latin at college, were now forced to make a living in English. Foremost among them was Christopher Marlowe.

By 1592, Greene was terminally ill, possibly suffering from a combination of cirrhosis of the liver and syphilis. But he saw Henslowe open the Rose season that year with his *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay*, featuring "... two magic friars who can discover things by using something close enough to CCTV for the play to be called science fiction." (alfa-16 @oxfraud.com)

From this, we know Greene and Henslowe had done business before. Now, with money to be made, perhaps they did again.



Anne Bancroft (Anne), Frank Langella (Will) in "A Cry of Players" (1968)

John Shakespeare, William's father, was born the son of a tenant farmer. Yet he became successful enough to be elected High Bailiff (Mayor) of Stratford. What must he have thought, as he watched the sons of similar men go off to Oxford, while his Will was notable only for impregnating a spinster 8 years his senior?

And yet, by 1594, this unknown loser, smacked around in print by Robert Greene only two years earlier, held a full share in a major theatre company. How did this happen? Or rather, because this is Shakespeare—and so little is known of him that many claim he never existed—how *might* this have happened?

A Groat for Your Thoughts



The Original Title Page

Like many reprobates, Greene fell to moralizing in his final days. In *Groatsworth*, he urges 3 of his fellow University Wits to mend their ways, especially the atheist Marlowe. But he also takes special pains to indict actors—conceited, covetous, insolent apes who supplied “a kind of mechanical labor.” For which they got paid a lot more than the playwright did, dammit!

No, Robert Greene did not like actors. Perhaps Sophocles, Euripides and Plautus felt the same way. They just didn't have the chance to write about it.

But in *Groatsworth*, Greene singles out one particular actor, “an upstart crow, beautified with our feathers.” An actor, who, like the bird in Aesop's fable, is nothing without what he takes from others. An actor who dares to think he can write blank verse as well as a university man. An actor who imagines himself a jack-of-all-trades, who believes he can do everything in the theatre, “the only Shake-scene in a country!”

But wait. We've left out the “tiger's heart wrapped in a player's hide.” The line is from *Henry VI, Pt. III*. We know the Rose had mounted a play called *Henry VI* on March 3, 1592. But *Part III*?

Let's search for a possible explanation.

Henry VI



In 1588, the English defeated the Spanish Armada, preventing an invasion. With patriotism running high, plays about English history were suddenly as popular as *Star Wars* in the late 1970s. Henslowe needed plays to feed that demand, and Greene knew it. But Greene was sick—he'd be dead in 6 or 7 months—and Henslowe had to be sure the plays would be delivered.

There was a jobbing actor in Henslowe's company, Will. A few years Greene's junior and handy around the theatre, this Will had also written a couple of things. Might not he be just the one who could work with the ailing Greene and make sure the plays got written, despite Greene's hatred of actors?

Did Greene and Will write the 2 plays that would be published after Greene's death as *The First Part of the Contention between the Houses of Lancaster and York* and *The True Tragedy of Richard, Duke of York*? The 2 plays that were *Star Wars*-level smash hits? The 2 plays later to be known as Parts II & III of *Henry VI*?

Recall, Part III is where York, about to be killed, addresses Queen Margaret as "tiger's heart wrapped in a woman's hide," the line Greene parodies in his attack. The line

Greene (maybe) *wrote*. But where is Part I?

With the 2 plays such a hit, did Henslowe demand a prequel? A prequel on which Greene did some work but couldn't continue? It's generally conceded that, except for a few scenes, Part I isn't nearly as good as the other two. Indeed, it may be the worst prequel ever written, until, well, until the ones written for *Star Wars*. No matter. Who got the credit for the *Henry VI* trilogy? Not the dying Greene! Who by then, we can be sure, *really* hated actors. Especially Will.

Love's Labors Lost & Won



The Earl of Southampton

Shakespeare, meanwhile, would soon dedicate two poems to the Earl of Southampton, thereby, perhaps, gaining the patron whose money would permit him to become a theatre-company sharer. That position would eventually allow him to write *Love's Labor's Lost*, a play that viciously parodied the University Wits while also demonstrating his ability to outdo them all in the use of flowery verse.

And so, Will, the actor, became William Shakespeare, the playwright. While Robert Greene is remembered—if he's remembered at all—only as the man who called him "an upstart crow." *Sic transit gloria theatra...*

Jerry James has been working in the theatre for nearly sixty years. For forty of those years, he lived in New York City, where he was an award-winning writer and director.