

The Batillus, the Player, and the Upstart Crow

Foreword

Following A. D. Wraight's lead¹, Daryl Pinksen has developed a fairly unassailable case² that the 'upstart Crow' referred to by Robert Greene in his *Greene's Groatsworth of Wit*³ was Edward Alleyn, rather than William Shakespeare as the Crow is almost universally taken to be by Shakespeare's biographers. In particular, he also gives very plausible reasons for Greene having deliberately chosen Marlowe, Nashe and Peele for the three 'Gentlemen his Quondam acquaintance' to whom he addressed his famous letter, for inferring that *Tambercam* was the play Greene was complaining the upstart Crow had written, for thinking that Marlowe had fallen out with Alleyn, and for understanding why both Nashe and Chettle were so quick to deny any personal part in this attack.

There is one aspect of this which Pinksen decided not to discuss, however, but which could add further support for the Edward Alleyn identification - the *Groatsworth* Player's claim that he was reputed able at his 'proper cost to build a Windmill'. What this most probably means, and how it connects with other words of Greene, is the subject of this essay.

The Batillus

As Daryl Pinksen reminds us, in 1590 Greene had attacked Alleyn in his *Francesco's Fortunes*: 'Why Roscius, art thou proud with Aesop's crow, being pranced with the glory of other's feathers?' In the dedication of his 1584 *The Mirror of Modesty*, although not referring to Alleyn, Greene also wrote of 'Ezops Crowe, which deckt hir selfe with others feathers, or like the proud poet Batyllus, which subscribed his name to Virgils verses, and yet presented them to Augustus.'

In the Preface to his *Farewell to Folly*, written the year before *Groatsworth*, Greene had this to say to the 'Gentlemen students of both Universities' about people who might criticize this work of his:

*...Others will flout and ouer read euerie line with
a frumpe and say tis scuruie when they themselves
are such scabd lades that they are like to dye of
the fazion [ulcerated throat]: but if they come
to write, or publish anie thing in print, it is
either distild out of ballets, or borrowed of*

¹ A.D. Wraight, *Christopher Marlowe and Edward Alleyn* (Adam Hart Ltd, London, 1993) - pp.144-238.

² See Daryl Pinksen's article *Was Robert Greene's "Upstart Crow" the Actor Edward Alleyn* in the online Marlowe Society Research Journal Vol. 6 at:
http://www.marlowe-society.org/pubs/journal/downloads/rj06articles/jl06_03_pinksen_upstartcrowalleyn.pdf

³ See <http://www2.prestel.co.uk/rey/groats.htm> for a transcript of *Greene's Groatsworth of Wit*

*Theological poets, which, for their calling and
grauitie being loth to haue anie prophane pamphlets
pass under their hand, get some other Batillus to
set his name to their verses.*

So a 'Batillus' was one who pretended to be the author of works actually written by someone else. He continues:

*Thus is the asse made proud by this vnder hande
brokerie. And he that can not write true Englishe
without the helpe of Clearkes of parish Churches,
will needes make him selfe the father of interludes.*

It is clear now that Greene has a specific 'Batillus' in mind - one who initially appeared as the author of others' works but who has now started writing his own plays despite his own inability to write 'true English' without help.

*O tis a iollie matter when a man hath a familiar
stile, and can endite a whole yeare, and neuer be
beholding to art? But to bring Scripture to proue
any thing he sayes, and kill it dead with the text
in a trifling subiect of loue. I tell you is no
small peece of cunning. As for example two louers
on the stage arguing one an other of vnkindnesse,
his Mistris runnes ouer to him with his canonicall
sentence, A mans conscience is a thousande witnesses,
and hir knight againe excuseth him selfe with that
saying of the Apostle, Loue couereth the multitude
of sinnes, I thinke this was but simple abusing of
the Scripture. In charitie be it spoken I am per-
swaded the sexton of Saint Giles without Creeple
gate, would haue beene ashamed of such blasphemous
Rhetoricke.*

Although the context is slightly different, there is no doubt that those two quotations at the end are from an anonymous play called *Faire Em*, the *Miller's Daughter of Manchester*. The first is said by Em to Manville, the lover who abandons her:

Thy conscience, Manville, is a hundred witnesses.

The other is said earlier in the same scene by the King of Denmark to his daughter Blanche:

*Yet love, that covers multitude of sins,
Makes love in parents wink at childrens faults.*

Greene seems therefore to be saying that it is the author of *Faire Em* who was the 'Batillus'. He can hardly write true English without help, but had fooled himself into thinking that he could write plays in verse - thus sounding rather

like the Ass in Aesop's fable of *The Ass in the Lion's Skin*. 'Fine clothes may disguise, but silly words will disclose a fool.'

The reference to St. Giles without Cripplegate is noteworthy since it was the parish with which, other than Dulwich, Edward Alleyn was most closely associated as a benefactor for several years, and in which he and Philip Henslowe would later build their Fortune Theatre. Indeed, it was this association which was an important factor in the Fortune project being accepted. Was it Alleyn that Greene had in mind as the 'Batillus' who wrote *Faire Em*?

The Player

In his semi-autobiographical *Francesco's Fortunes* (1590) Robert Greene had written that 'he fell in amongst a companie of Players, who perswaded him to trie his wit in writing of Comedies, Tragedies, or Pastorals, and if he could performe anything worth the stage, then they would largelie reward him for his paines'. In his *Groatsworth of Wit* (1592), however, this story has changed slightly, and it is now a solitary player, about whom we learn quite a lot, who starts him (i.e. *Roberto*) off as a playwright.

This change was probably made because in the *Groatsworth* story it was important for the Player to be identifiable, whereas in the other it was not. The reason for this is not hard to find, either, since a clear parallel is shown between the story of Roberto and that of the *Ant and the Grasshopper* - also included in the book - in which a single Ant who is a former friend eventually forsakes the Grasshopper. Just as this story would not work so well if the 'waspish little worme' had not been an 'olde acquaintance', so Greene's tale would not work so well if an earlier relationship had not been similarly evident.

We learn more about the Player who, overhearing Roberto complaining of his problems, offered help:

Roberto wondring to heare such good wordes, for that this iron age affoordes few that esteeme of vertue; returnd him thankfull gratulations, and (urgde by necessitie) uttered his present griefe, beseeching his advise how he might be employed. Why, easily, quoth hee, and greatly to your benefite: for men of my profession gette by schollers their whole living. What is your profession, said Roberto? Truly sir, saide hee, I am a player. A player, quoth Roberto, I tooke you rather for a Gentleman of great living, for if by outward habit men should be censured, I tell you, you would bee taken for a substantiall man. So am I where I dwell (quoth the player) reputed able at my proper cost to build a Windmill.

Richard Simpson was the first to point out the link with *Faire Em* that this mention of a windmill seems to suggest⁴, and few have disagreed with this idea as it stands. In fact, given Greene's clear reference to the play the year before, it would seem inescapable. This is a pleasant enough play, written in blank verse, the main plot of which does in fact take place in a windmill. It was 'sundrie times publicly acted in the honourable citie of London, by the right honourable the Lord Strange his seruants', most probably in the period 1589-90 when Alleyn was their leader. It may also have had its premiere at a Lancashire stately home belonging to the Earl of Derby, in January 1589. The Player cannot be made to say that he wrote it, because in 1587 (about the time when such a meeting would have occurred) it had not yet been written, but this is as good a way as any to indicate that he will do so.

As we have seen, however, Greene had earlier complained that the author of this play is an uneducated person who wrongly thinks that he is able to write blank verse plays as well as true poets. He then, in the *Groatsworth* letter, says almost exactly the same things about someone he calls a 'Shake-scene', and who is therefore almost universally accepted as Shakespeare. It all makes perfect sense except for one thing - *Faire Em* just isn't good enough to have been written by the author we know of as Shakespeare.

The Upstart Crow

This is what Greene writes to his three playwriting acquaintances, generally accepted as being Christopher Marlowe, Thomas Nashe and George Peele:

*Base minded men all three
of you, if by my miserie you be not warnd: for unto none
of you (like mee) sought those burre to cleave: those
Puppets (I meane) that spake from our mouths, those
Anticks garnisht in our colours. Is it not strange, that
I, to whom they all have beene beholding: is it not like
that you, to whome they all have beene beholding, shall
(were yee in that case as I am now) bee both at once of
them forsaken? Yes trust them not: for there is an up-
start 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 beeing an absolute Johannes fac totum, is in
his owne conceit the onely Shake-scene in a countrey.*

In the context of this letter, he is inveighing against the actors in general and this one in particular who, having made good money through the efforts of writers like him, refuse now he is dying to help him obtain the sustenance, medicines and 'comfort' he so desperately needs. The orthodox approach is to conclude that the man referred to is William Shake-speare, given the pun 'Shake-scene' and the words based upon a quotation from *3 Henry VI* which will appear as a play by Shakespeare in the 1623 First Folio. As we have

⁴ Richard Simpson, *The School of Shakespeare - Vol 2* (1878).

seen, however, Wraight and Pinksen claim quite rightly that this is by no means as certain as scholars would have us believe, and that Edward Alleyn is far more likely to have been the object of Greene's animosity.

It has been argued that there is no need for the Player and the Crow to be the same person, since the three main parts of *Groatsworth* - Roberto's story, the letter, and the *Ant and the Grasshopper* fable - are quite independent, and that one need have no bearing upon the others, but the evidence is that the three of them do constitute a single work.

Firstly, this is how the printer, William Wright, introduces *Groatsworth*:

*I have published here Gentle
men for your mirth and be-
nefite Greenes groates worth
of wit. With sundry of his
pleasant discourses, ye have
beene before delighted: But
nowe hath death given a period to his pen,
onely this happened into my handes which I
have published for your pleasures: Accept it
favourably because it was his last birth
and not least worth. In my poore opinion. But I
will cease to praise that which is above my
concept, and leave it selfe to speak for it selfe:
and so abide your learned censuring.*

Notice how Wright refers to 'it' in the singular, which does of course beg the question of where the 'it' to which he is referring actually finishes. Fortunately he answers this for us immediately after the fable of the *Ant and the Grasshopper*:

*A letter written to his wife, founde with
this booke after his death.*

'This book' therefore consists of the Roberto story, the actual '*Groatsworth*' (with his ten precepts for a good life), the letter to his fellow writers, and the *Ant and the Grasshopper* fable. Because the letter from Greene to his wife is not included, the 'book' does not mean everything between the covers.

Second, Henry Chettle tells us:

*About three moneths since died M. Robert Greene,
leauing many papers in sundry Booke sellers hands,
among other his Groatsworth of wit, in which a
letter written to diuers play-makers, is offensiully
by one or two of them taken.*

The letter is 'in' the *Groatsworth of Wit*.

Third, writing of his own role in the publication, Chettle said:

*To be breife I writ it ouer, and as neare as I
could, followed the copy, onely in that letter
I put something out, but in the whole booke not
a word in, for I protest it was all Greenes,
not mine nor Master Nashes, as some uniustly
have affirmed.*

This means that all of the (quite detailed) passages linking the various parts of 'the book' were written by Greene himself, and that it must therefore have been his intention for them to be read together, and in the order in which they are presented. Some may doubt it, but this is what the direct concrete evidence tells us.

Support for the Crow and the Player being one and the same person is also evident if we compare the two extracts concerning them. Let us look in turn at each of the things we are told about the Crow and see how it relates to the Player.

...Yes trust them not: for there is an upstart...

Upstart (*adj*): Lately or suddenly risen to prominence or dignity (OED).

One might quibble about the 'suddenly', but it is only one of two alternatives, and from the point of view of the much older Robert Greene, the word would still apply to a relatively ill-educated person who 'was faine to carry my playing Fardle a footebacke...but...its otherwise now; for my very share in playing apparell will not be sold for two hundred pounds.'

...Crow...

This was the metaphor for an actor, based on Aesop's fable, and used (coined?) by both Greene and Nashe. Certainly Greene's word for someone calling himself a 'player'.

...beautified with our feathers...

Again Aesop's crow, as already referred to in Greene's *The Mirror of Modesty*, who decked himself with peacock's feathers. Made to look good by the plays that Greene and his fellow University Wits have provided. As the Player put it: 'men of my profession gette by schollers their whole living.'

...that with his Tygers hart wrapt in a Players hyde...

Being as cruel as he is. This is the situation now, in stark contrast to how generous he was when he wanted something from Roberto. Interestingly, few critics other than John Dover Wilson have observed that the image of a tiger's 'heart' being concealed in this way comes from a line originally by Greene

himself. In his 1583 *Mamillia*, he had written of 'Covering...the heart of the Tigre with the fleece of a Lambe'.

...supposes he is as well able to bombast out a blanke verse as the best of you...

As we have seen, the only reasonable interpretation of 'reputed able at my proper cost to build a Windmill' in this context is that Greene is referring to the blank verse play *Faire Em* and saying that it is this man who will write it. However, Greene complains elsewhere that its author is not even able to write true English. Pinksen's suggestion that 'the best of you' is Marlowe, and the blank verse in question Alleyn's rip-off *Tambercam* is also very convincing.

...and beeing an absolute Johannes fac totum...

"Jack of all trades, a would-be universal genius" (OED). As well as a Player, we also hear of Roberto's saviour having been a porter, wardrobe master, actor, speech maker, country author, rhymester, puppet interpreter, play commissioner, employer (and impresario?).

...is in his owne conceit the onely Shake-scene in a countrey.

As the Player says:

*...I am as famous for Delphrigus, & the King of Fairies,
as ever was any of my time. The twelve labors of Hercules
have I terribly thundred on the Stage...*

In passing, we should note that the reference to Delphrigus and the King of Fairies had been used earlier by Thomas Nashe in his introduction to Greene's *Menaphon*, and in a passage clearly referring to Edward Alleyn. Speaking of actors, he said:

*they might haue antickt it vntill this
time vp and downe the countrey with the King of the Fairies, and
dinde euery daie at the pease porredge ordinarie with Delphrigus.
But Tolossa (Toulouse) hath forgot that it was sometime sackt, and
beggars that euer they caried their fardles on footback: and in truth
no meruaile, when as the deserued reputation of one Roscius, is of
force to inrich a rabble of counterfets.'*

The description of the Crow could hardly fit the Player any better if it had been written for him, and therefore almost certainly was. Furthermore, as mentioned above, the *Ant and the Grasshopper* fable clearly supports the idea that the person who was his particular friend originally (the Player) was the same one (the Crow) he sees as having been the most cruel for having deserted him later. That Greene's 'Batillus', his 'Player' and his 'upstart Crow' were all the same person is inescapable.

The Puppet-Interpreter

There is something else the Player tells us about himself that is really interesting. It is his claim that he 'for seven yeers space was absolute Interpreter to the puppets'. Here is what the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* has to say about 'interpreters' in this context:

In many forms of puppet theatre...the dialogue is not conducted as if through the mouths of the puppets, but instead the story is recited or explained by a person who stands outside the puppet stage to serve as a link with the audience. This technique was certainly in use in England in Elizabethan times, when the 'interpreter' of the puppets is frequently referred to.

If it was Edward Alleyn, as now seems to be very likely, is this a clue as to how an inn-keeper's son with little known education could have found himself a member of the Earl of Worcester's company of players by the age of seventeen? Did he start off 'interpreting' for a puppeteer (perhaps his older brother John, who also became an actor?) in their step-father's pub, taking this show on the road after their mother's third marriage when he was thirteen?

An intriguing illustration of an interpreter in action is given by Ben Jonson in *Bartholomew Fair* (Act 5, scenes 3-5). In this extract (using Michael Jamieson's Penguin edition), Lantern Leatherhead, the 'interpreter', is presenting his version of Marlowe's *Hero and Leander*. One of the audience, Cokes, asks:

COKES: *But do you play it according to the printed book? I have read that.*

LEATHERHEAD: *By no means, sir.*

COKES: *No? How then?*

LEATHERHEAD: *A better way, sir; that is too learned and poetical for our audience. What do they know what Hellespont is? 'Guilty of true loves blood'? Or what Abydos is? Or 'the other Sestos height'?*

COKES: *Th' art i' the right, I do not know myself.*

LEATHERHEAD: *No, I have entreated Master Littlewit to take a little pains to reduce it to a more familiar strain for our people.*

COKES: *How, I pray thee, good Master Littlewit?*

LITTLEWIT: *It pleases him to make a matter of it, sir. But there is no such matter, I assure you. I have only made it a little easy and modern for the times, sir, that's all: as for the Hellespont, I imagine our Thames here; and then Leander I make a dyer's son, about Puddle Wharf; and Hero a wench*

*o' the Bankside, who going over one Morning to Old
Fish Street, Leander spies her land at Trig Stairs,
and falls in love with her. Now do I introduce
Cupid, having metamorphos'd himself into a Drawer,
and he strikes Hero in love with a pint of sherry.*

So according to Jonson we have the Puppets' interpreter (Alleyn?) having taken a work by Marlowe (like *Tamburlaine?*), and (as with his *Tambercam?*) dumbing it down enough for the audience to be able to understand it. *Bartholomew Fair* was put on as one of the first shows in Henslowe's (and Alleyn's) new Hope Theatre, however, so we may perhaps assume that Alleyn was by then (1614) able to take a joke about one of his very early follies!

It is particularly interesting that Littlewit makes Leander "a dyer's son". Philip Henslowe, who had no children of his own and always referred to his son-in-law Edward Alleyn as his "sonne", had early on in his life gained his freedom in the Dyers' Company under the supervision of someone whose widow he married after their death in 1579, and to whom he was still married in 1614⁵.

The puppet-play is in fact based on two stories, the second of which is an equally wildly changed version of *Damon and Pythias*. These were two great friends, one of whom is condemned to death by the monarch (Dionysius) but who is allowed to leave the country if his place is taken by his friend. Given the centrality of Marlowe to the first puppet-show we may recall there is evidence that John Penry (whose body many of those who believe Marlowe's death was faked believe to have been the actual corpse at the inquest) had been at Peterhouse College, only a couple of hundred yards down the road, while Marlowe was at Corpus Christi. In this version of the story, however, Dionysius is portrayed - unlike so in the original - as having died already, just as Queen Elizabeth (possibly responsible for Marlowe's exile in similar circumstances?) had just died. It is of course a central tenet of the 'Marlovian' case that Ben Jonson was very much involved in the deception.

We have seen it is very likely that the people Greene was actually referring to as the Batillus, the Player and the Upstart Crow were in fact the same person. This all leaves those who nevertheless insist that Greene was referring to Shakespeare as the 'upstart Crow' with an interesting dilemma. If it really was Shakespeare, then why was Greene so clearly indicating that he wrote the very second-rate *Faire Em* and, even worse, that he was also a *Batillus* who put his name to the works of others? But if it was Alleyn after all, then the first sighting of Shakespeare in London moves two years on, from September 1592 to December 1594.

© Peter Farey 2009

⁵ I am grateful to Daryl Pinksen for drawing this possible connection to my attention.