

After 1585 William and Anne produced no more children (unusual in those days: William's parents had eight children over a period of twenty-two years). It may have been shortly thereafter that he left home for a career in the theatre. We first hear of him as an actor and dramatist in 1592, from a rival dramatist who believed that he suffered neglect because of Shakespeare's great popularity. In his *Groat's Worth of Wit* Robert Greene addressed three 'gentlemen, his quondam acquaintance, that spend their wits in making plays' (Marlowe, Peele, Nashe) and denounced 'an upstart crow, beautified with our feathers, that with his "Tiger's heart wrapped in a player's hide" supposes he is as well able to bombast out [i.e. write] a blank verse as the best of you: and, being an absolute Johannes fac totum, is in his own conceit the only Shake-scene in a country'. The pun in Shake-scene and ridicule of a line from *3 Henry VI* ('O tiger's heart wrapped in a woman's hide') leave us in no doubt as to Greene's target. He sneered at an upstart actor who dared to compete with his betters, gentlemen dramatists who had been to university (Shakespeare had not), one who thought his bombastic blank verse superior to theirs, and who threatened to put them all out of business.

Greene, I think, continued his attack in *Groat's Worth of Wit* with an allusion to the fable of the ant and the grasshopper. The grasshopper enjoyed himself in the summer, the ant toiled to prepare for winter. When winter arrived, the grasshopper 'went for succour to the ant his old acquaintance, to whom he had scarce discovered his estate but the waspish little worm made this reply, "Pack hence," quoth he, "thou idle lazy worm . . ." The grasshopper died, and, concluded Greene, 'like him, myself: like me, shall all that trust to friends or time's inconstancy'. Can we doubt that the busy ant, pursuing two separate careers as actor and writer, drove himself hard? 'Weary with toil I haste me to my bed' (Sonnet 27).

Greene picked on the line from *3 Henry VI* to accuse gentle Shakespeare of having a 'tiger's heart', a charge apparently repeated in 'the waspish little worm'. If we accept that Greene had Shake-scene in mind as the relentless ant, the circumstances become clearer, from Greene's point of view. Shakespeare, we may hope, would have told a different tale. Henry Chettle, who had prepared Greene's pamphlet for the press, apologized: various gentlemen vouched for Shakespeare's 'uprightness of dealing, which argues his honesty, and his facetious [polished; witty] grace in writing, that approves [confirms] his art'. Greene's public attack must have pained Shakespeare, and it is not impossible that he reflected on it in Sonnet 112:

Your love and pity doth th'impression fill
Which vulgar scandal stamped upon my brow;
For what care I who calls me well or ill,
So you o'ergreen my bad, my good allow? (1-4)

At least one other contemporary, it seems, thought like Greene about Shakespeare. In the anonymous pamphlet *Ratsey's Ghost* (1605) a player is advised to go to London and 'play Hamlet' for a wager. 'There thou shalt learn to be frugal . . . and to feed upon all men, to let none feed upon thee; to make thy hand a stranger to thy pocket . . . and when thou feelest thy purse well lined, buy thee some place or lordship in the country . . .' The player answers that he will do so, 'for I have heard indeed of some that have gone to London very meanly, and have come in time to be exceeding wealthy'. The allusions (Hamlet, New Place and going to London) point to Shakespeare rather than Edward Alleyn, the only other player rich enough to buy a 'place' in the country, for Alleyn was a Londoner born and could not 'go to London' at the start of his career.

Greene's fable may help us with another unsolved problem. When did Shakespeare begin his theatrical career? The grasshopper calls the ant 'old acquaintance', which supports the view that he had been around in the theatrical world for some years, i.e. had made an 'early start' (1586 or 1587), not a 'late start' (1590). The late start is still widely supported, yet there are good reasons for the early start which, if correct, could mean that Marlowe (also born in 1564) was not Shakespeare's predecessor as a playwright, as stated in older textbooks, but his exact contemporary.

We next hear of Shakespeare in 1593 and 1594. He dedicated his *Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece* to the young Earl of Southampton (born 1572), the 1593 dedication being couched in formal language ('I know not how I shall offend in dedicating my unpolished lines to your lordship . . .'). The later one indicates that Southampton responded positively.

The love I dedicate to your Lordship is without end, whereof this pamphlet without beginning is but a superfluous moiety. The warrant I have of your honourable disposition, not the worth of my untutored lines, makes it assured of acceptance. What I have done is yours, what I have to do is yours being part in all I have, devoted yours.

We assume that Shakespeare wrote these poems because plague caused the closing of London's theatres, from the summer of 1592 to the spring of 1594, and he was cut off from his normal income. He and his colleagues, now the Lord Chamberlain's Men, resumed acting in 1594, and performed twice at court in the Christmas season. Three of their leaders signed a receipt for £20 — Richard Burbage, William Kempe, and Shakespeare. Burbage was a gifted tragic actor, Kempe an outstanding clown, and Shakespeare—? The receipt proves that by 1594 he had won a prominent place in his company. Indeed, Greene—identifying no other actor—implied that Shakespeare helped to lead his fellows as early as 1592, perhaps as their business manager.

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