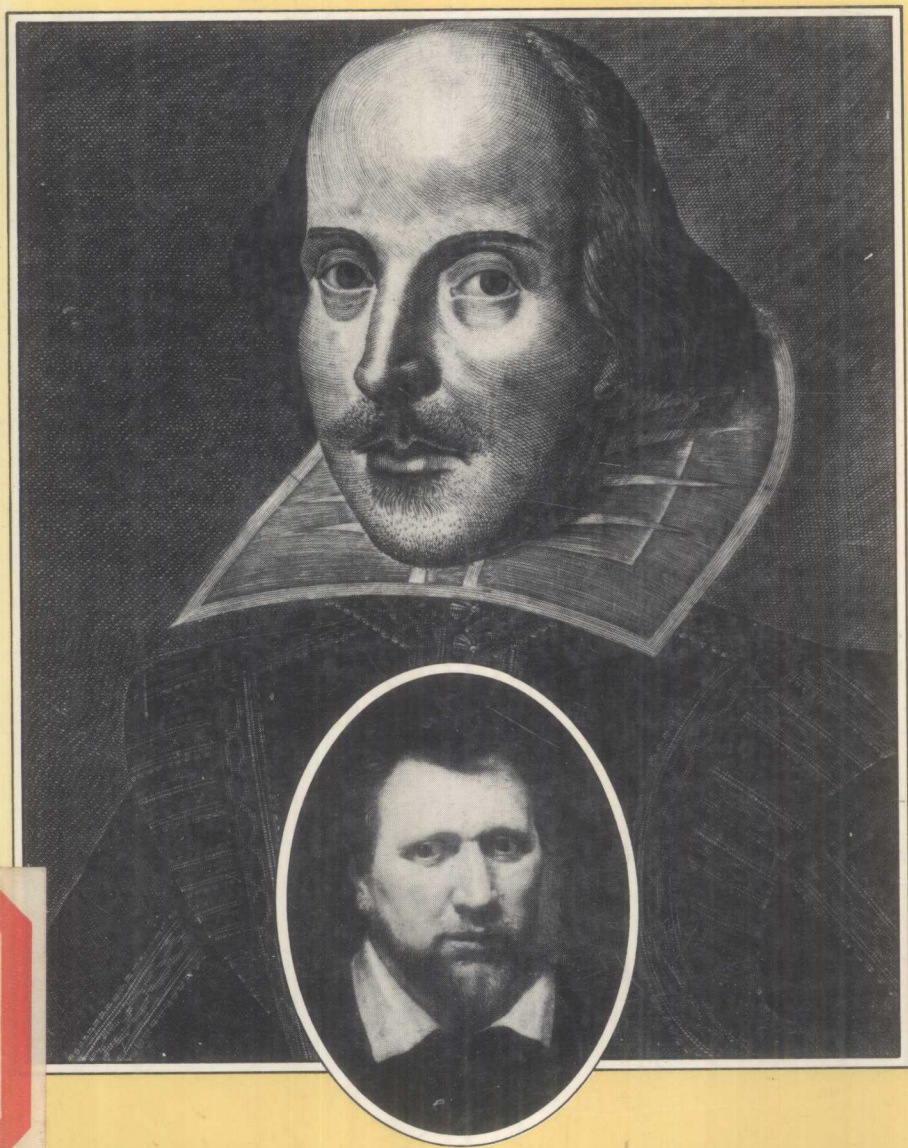


SHAKESPEARE'S IMPACT ON HIS CONTEMPORARIES

E.A.J. Honigmann



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Preface

'He was not of an age, but for all time.' Looking back across almost four centuries, we have to admit that Jonson judged correctly: Shakespeare's importance to posterity cannot be disputed. But what of Shakespeare's impact on his contemporaries? It has been said that he was 'rated at something like his true value by most persons of taste and judgement', and also that there is 'little or no direct evidence that the major dramatists thought of him as a master'. The facts, one might suppose, having been long available in allusion books and biographies, surely cannot support two such contradictory views. Pursue the 'facts', however, and you discover a strange story of misunderstanding or incompetence: crucial passages from the records have been misread, or have been ignored because they clashed with preconceived ideas. A careful re-examination of the records will compel us to revise current thinking about the dramatist's contemporary impact in many unexpected ways, throwing new light on his personality, his development as a writer, his influence on other writers, and his response to criticism. This book is a beginning. It cannot claim to be a rounded biography, since it proceeds selectively, but it offers a new 'Shakespeare', and a new understanding of his achievement.

One reason for the misreading of early records must be mentioned immediately. It is that they have been studied in allusion books or biographies, torn from their context. '*Sweet Swan of Avon*' and '*gentle Shakespeare*' are examples: Jonson's epithets conjure up a mild-mannered, sweet-tempered poet – a 'soft' Shakespeare who is all too familiar. Here the context includes Jonson's long-standing relationship with Shakespeare, the occasion of his commemorative poem of 1623, the conventions of elegy, the rhetoric of praise; and to disregard the context is to run the risk of sentimentalising. The 'Elizabethan' context of the early records is a theme to which I return repeatedly, since I believe that imperfect knowledge of the by-ways of Elizabethan life and letters has too often caused confusion. Wherever possible I have consulted the original documents, and often I quote extracts that will not be recognised in their present form. (The authors of standard works tend to copy the same 'allusions' verbatim from one another, forgetting that the force of an

allusion may be affected by the sentences that precede or follow it, or by the tone or argument of the text as a whole.) For the reader's convenience – and my own – I do, however, cite some of these contemporary witnesses from standard works, such as E. K. Chambers's *William Shakespeare* (2 vols, 1930), in cases where 'contextual' difficulties do not arise.

Although Anthony Burgess, Edward Bond and others have tried to present Shakespeare the Man in new ways, the more 'official' commentators cling to an established formula, and usually paint the same pleasant picture. I do not recollect any survey of the less flattering evidence, which survives in some quantity (though not in modern biographies, where crucial witnesses sometimes disappear silently, or are not given their full say). In starting with this, the less familiar view of Shakespeare the Man, I hope to show that the traditional picture is incomplete. As will be seen, while we may be suspicious of some of the witnesses against Shakespeare, once we place them in their context the cumulative weight of their evidence is considerable. We may not like the new Shakespeare as much as the old sentimental model, but at least it can be said that he becomes a more credible human being.

Three of the remaining chapters (2, 5 and 6) deal, one way or another, with Shakespeare's impact on his contemporaries as a writer. What did they like in the plays? And dislike? Why did the demand for printed plays begin so late? We read often enough that without an understanding audience Shakespeare would never have written the plays – but is it really so? My story stops in 1623, with the publication of the first Folio, even though informed contemporaries lived on for years and we cannot wholly ignore their later statements. In these three chapters, I now find to my surprise, Ben Jonson plays almost as large a part as Shakespeare. To my surprise – for I did not plan it that way, nor did I realise that some of Jonson's most fretful criticisms of his great rival had not yet been identified. Students of Jonson the Man who are not greatly interested in Shakespeare, if such there be, may also think these chapters revealing.

Two central chapters of this book are concerned with the dating of Shakespeare's first plays. I have ignored the chronology of the later plays, having little to add to the textbooks; but the textbooks are wrong, I believe, in their dates for the early plays, and in what they tell us about Shakespeare's first impact on the London literary scene, and must be challenged. My argument turns on the relationship of the two King John plays, one by Shakespeare and the other anonymous, a tale of a tub that fascinated me from 1948 to 1954, and that I then abandoned (as Swift might have said) to divert the whales. The whales sported happily and

spouted mightily, but solved no problems, Returning now to *King John* after a quarter of a century I am particularly conscious of my debt to three brilliant teachers, Peter Alexander, J. C. Maxwell and F. P. Wilson, who advised me long ago: I can only hope that, had they lived, they would have given their approval not only to a thesis presented in 1950 but also to its belated afterbirth.

It is also a pleasure to acknowledge more recent debts. I am grateful to the University of Newcastle upon Tyne for a term's study-leave, which gave me the leisure to write this book; to Kathleen O'Rawe, Kay Moore and Barbara Kugler, who helped to type it; to Mr A. D. Robinson, who suggested several corrections and improvements; and particularly to my wife, who checked the typescript and once again helped me with proof-reading. Dr R. L. Smallwood, the editor of one of the most careful editions of *King John*, generously found time to read through my manuscript and made many suggestions: he has his own views about some of the issues that I discuss, but I have benefited greatly from his perceptive criticism.

September 1980

E. A. J. H.

List of Abbreviations

The customary abbreviations are employed for Shakespeare's plays, and for periodicals. Works frequently referred to are quoted by short titles only: their full titles will be found in the list below.

- Allusion-Book.* *The Shakspeare Allusion-Book: A Collection of Allusions to Shakspeare from 1591 to 1700*, edited by John Munro (1909), re-issued with a Preface by Sir Edmund Chambers (2 vols, 1932).
- Apocrypha.* *The Shakespeare Apocrypha*, edited by C. F. Tucker Brooke (Oxford, 1918).
- Arber.* *Transcript of the Registers of the Company of Stationers, 1554-1640*, edited by E. Arber (5 vols, 1875-94).
- Bentley, Profession of Dramatist.* *The Profession of Dramatist in Shakespeare's Time 1590-1642*, by G. E. Bentley (Princeton, 1971).
- Bentley, Shakespeare & Jonson.* *Shakespeare & Jonson Their Reputations in the Seventeenth Century Compared*, by G. E. Bentley (2 vols, Chicago, 1945).
- Dryden, Essays.* *Essays of John Dryden*, edited by W. P. Ker (2 vols, Oxford, 1900).
- EKC.* *William Shakespeare A Study of Facts and Problems*, by E. K. Chambers (2 vols, Oxford, 1930).
- EKC, ES.* *The Elizabethan Stage*, by E. K. Chambers (4 vols, Oxford, 1923).
- GWW.* Robert Greene, *Groats-Worth of Witte* (1592) (quoted from *Elizabethan and Jacobean Quartos*, edited by G. B. Harrison Edinburgh, 1966).
- Harvey, Works.* *The Works of Gabriel Harvey*, edited by A. B. Grosart (3 vols, privately printed, 1884).
- Jonson.* *Ben Jonson*, edited by C. H. Herford and Percy and Evelyn Simpson (11 vols, Oxford, 1925-52).
- Muir, Sources.* *The Sources of Shakespeare's Plays*, by Kenneth Muir (1977).
- Nashe, Works.* *The Works of Thomas Nashe*, edited by R. B. McKerrow (5 vols, Oxford, 1958 (reprinted by F. P. Wilson)).

- OED. *The Oxford English Dictionary*, edited by James A. H. Murray *et al* (13 vols, Oxford, 1933).
- Schoenbaum, *Life. William Shakespeare A Documentary Life*, by S. Schoenbaum (Oxford, 1975).
- SR. See Arber.
- TR. Anon., *The Troublesome Raigne of Iohn King of England* (2 vols 1591: quoted from G. Bullough, *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare* (8 vols, 1957 etc.), vol. IV (1962)).

Modernised quotations from Shakespeare, and line-references, are taken from Peter Alexander's *William Shakespeare, The Complete Works* (Collins, 1951).

Old-spelling quotations from Elizabethan texts are from the first editions. In a few cases (usually indicated by footnotes) they are taken from EKC, or from modern editions. Black-letter texts are printed as roman; and some texts in italics have also been converted to roman. I have expanded contractions, and have lowered letters printed superior. Square brackets in quotations indicate my insertions in the text.

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1

The Man

(I) A 'WASPISH LITTLE WORME'

Every biography of Shakespeare quotes Greene's¹ death-bed attack upon 'an absolute *Iohannes fac totum*' who 'is in his owne conceit the onely Shake-scene in a countrey', the earliest surviving indication that the young man from Stratford had now (September 1592) won a place for himself in the literary world of London: yet no biographer appears to have noticed that Greene had more to say about his rival in the same pamphlet. This is because, writing his autobiography in a curiously oblique way, Greene teases the reader by sliding from romance to private reminiscence to fable, from third to first person and back to third. Once his circling technique is understood, however, it becomes difficult to resist the conclusion that he proceeded from the only Shake-scene in a country to the fable of the grasshopper and the ant in order to pillory Shakespeare as the ant – a 'waspish little worme'.

Greene's *Groats-Worth of Witte* (hereafter *GWW*) begins as the story of Roberto, 'a Scholler, and married to a proper Gentlewoman', whose father, a usurer, bequeathes to him a groat, 'to buy a groats-worth of wit', leaving his fortune to another son, Lucanio. To revenge himself, Roberto conspires with the courtesan Lamilia to cheat Lucanio of his money. She reveals the plot and Roberto, cast adrift, is befriended by a rich actor, who persuades him to write plays. He is soon 'famozed for an Arch-plaimaking-poet', earns much and spends much, and finally lies on his death-bed 'in extreame pouerty . . . hauing but one groat left'. At this point Greene interrupts what had appeared to be a typical moralising romance of the 1580s –

Heere (Gentlemen) breake I off *Robertoes* speach; whose life in most parts agreeing with mine, found one selfe punishment as I haue doone. Heereafter suppose me the saide *Roberto* . . .

After exhorting the gentlemen who read *GW* to learn from this example, Greene adds a letter – ‘To those Gentlemen his Quondam acquaintance, that spend their wits in making plaies, R. G. wisheth a better exercise, and wisdom to preuent his extremities.’ He addresses three dramatists, usually thought to be Marlowe, Nashe and Peele, then launches into the famous sentences about Shakespeare.

Base minded men all three of you, if by my miserie you be not warnd: for vnto none of you (like mee) sought those burre to cleaue: 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 haue beene beholding: is it not like that you, to whome they all haue 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 vpstart 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 *Iohannes fac totum*, is in his owne conceit the onely Shake-scene in a countrey. O that I might intreat your rare wits to be imployed in more profitable courses: & let those Apes imitate your past excellence, and neuer more acquaint them with your admired inuentions. I knowe the best husband of you all will neuer proue an Vsurer, and the kindest of them all will neuer proue a kind nurse . . .

The letter concludes with advice given before – ‘Trust not then (I beseech ye) to such weake staies: for they are as changeable in minde, as in many attyres’. Thereupon Greene switches abruptly to the ant and the grasshopper, a passage that must be quoted in full.

Now to all men I bid farewell in like sort, with this conceited Fable of that olde Comedian *Aesope*.

An Ant and a Grashopper walking together on a Greene, the one carelessly skipping, the other carefully prying what winters prouision was scattered in the way: the Grashopper scorning (as wantons will) this needlesse thrift (as hee tearmed it) reprooued him thus:

*The greedy miser thirsteth still for gaine,
His thrift is theft, his weale works others woe:
That foole is fond which will in caues remaine,
VVhen mongst faire sweets he may at pleasure goe.*

To this the Ant perceiuing the Grashoppers meaning, quickly replyde:

*The thriftie husband spares what vnthrift spends,
His thrift no theft, for dangers to provide:
Trust to thy selfe, small hope in want yeeld friends,
A caue is better than the deserts wide.*

In short time these two parted, the one to his pleasure, the other to his labour. Anon Haruest grew on, and reft from the Grashopper his woonted moysture. Then weakly skipt hee to the medowes brinks: where till fell winter he abode. But storms continually powring, hee went for succour to the Ant his olde acquaintance, to whom hee had scarce discouered his estate, but the waspish little worme made this reply,

*Packe hence (quoth he) thou idle lazie worme,
My house doth harbor no vnthriftie mates:
Thou scorndst to toile, & now thou feelst the storme,
And starust for food while I am fed with cates.
Vse no intreats, I will relentlesse rest,
For toying labour hates an idle guest.*

The Grashopper foodlesse, helplesse and strengthles, got into the next brooke, and in the yeelding sand digde for himselfe a pit: by which hee likewise ingrau'de this Epitaph,

*When Springs greene prime arrayd me with delight,
And euery power with youthfull vigor fild,
Gaue strength to worke what euer fancie wild:
I neuer feard the force of winters spight.*

*When first I saw the sunne the day begin,
And dry the Mornings tears from hearbs and grasse;
I little thought his chearefull light would passe,
Till vgly night with darknes enterd in.
And then day lost I mournd, spring past I wayld,
But neither teares for this or that auailde.*

*Then too too late I praisd the Emmets paine,
That sought in spring a harbor gainst the heate:
And in the haruest gathered winters meat,
Preuenting famine, frosts, and stormy raine.*

*My wretched end may warn Greene springing youth
To vse delights, as toyes that will deceiue,
And scorne the world before the world them leaue:*

*For all worlds trust, is ruine without ruth.
 Then blest are they that like the toyling Ant,
 Provide in time gainst winters wofull want.*

With this the Grasshopper yeelding to the wethers extremit, died comfortles without remedy. Like him my selfe: like me, shall all that trust to friends or times inconstancie. Now faint I of my last infirmity, beseeching them that shall burie my bodie, to publish this last farewell written with my wretched hand.

Just as Roberto had turned into Robert Greene, the grasshopper is also later identified as the author ('Like him my selfe'), a point that was gleefully seized upon by Gabriel Harvey ('the Grasshopper enraged, would bee no lesse then a greene Dragon'²). And the fable reverts to Greene's earlier complaints in obsessively echoing his earlier warning – 'trust them not': (1) 'Yes, trust them not: for there is an vpstart Crow'; (2) 'Trust not then . . . to such weake staies'; (3) 'Trust to thy selfe, small hope in want yeeld friends'; (4) 'Like me, shall all that trust to friends . . .'. The fable, therefore, though apparently quite casually tagged on after the letter, develops the charges contained in the letter. But the target is not only the foolishness of grasshopper lives, as in Aesop's fable: Greene also manages to present the sensible ant in a new light. Compare John Prime, in a sermon of 1588: 'And this is true wisdomde indeede . . . with the wise Emite in sommer to lay vp for the winter following'.³ Or Caxton's version of Aesop:

*It is good to purueye hym self in the somer season of suche thynges /
 wherof he shalle myster [need] and haue nede in wynter season / As
 thow mayst see by this present fable / Of the sygalle / whiche in the
 wynter tyme went and demaunded of the ant somme of her Corne for
 to ete / And thenne the Ant sayd to the sygall / what hast thow done
 al the somer last passed / And the sygalle ansuerd / I haue songe / And
 after sayd the ante to her / Of my corne shalt not thou none haue /
 And yf thow hast songe alle the somer / daunse now in wynter / And
 therfore there is one tyme for to doo some labour and werk / And one
 tyme for to haue rest / For he that werketh not ne doth no good / shal
 haue ofte at his teeth grete cold and lacke at his nede / ⁴*

The originality of Greene's fable lies in its portrait of the ant. Aesop's exemplar of prudence and foresight is introduced with a blackened character.

The greedy miser thirsteth still for gaine,
His thrift is theft, his weale works others woe . . .

Is Aesop's ant a greedy miser, whose thrift is *theft*? Is it said to *work others woe*? These surprising charges pick up the very accusations levelled against 'Shake-scene'. *Theft* reverts to 'an vpstart Crow, beautified with our feathers', and the idea that the ant injures others by its industry resembles 'an absolute *Iohannes fac totum*', the 'onely Shake-scene in a countrey' (i.e. one who puts other playwrights out of business). Again, the ant's nature is powerfully suggested in the phrase 'waspish little worme', and in its own words, 'Vse no intreats, I will relentlesse rest': like Shake-scene, it has a tiger's heart.

Elsewhere in *GW* Greene also preferred not to accuse others too directly. He did not name the three dramatists or Shakespeare in his letter to his 'Quondam acquaintance', but left it to the reader to guess them. Since the fable of the ant and the grasshopper continues his previous complaints it places them in a new context that is more insidiously damaging. Whereas the overstatement in the Shake-scene passage is almost hysterical, and consequently self-defeating, the case against the ant seems more plausible, presented as it is from three points of view: the narrator first repudiates the grasshopper as a 'wanton', a speaker not to be trusted; the ant then partly accepts the grasshopper's view of itself, as thrifty and proud of it; the narrator endorses the more prejudicial view ('waspish little worme'); the ant endorses it too ('I will relentlesse rest'). Yet, as the grasshopper finally agrees that ants know best, the reader is prompted to feel that justice has been done, whereas the prudent ant, of course, has been painted in most unpleasant colours.

If we accept that Greene's ant glances back at Shakespeare, because the fable repeats three earlier charges against 'Shake-scene' (theft, injury to others, a tiger's heart), what else do we learn from Greene's thinly disguised invective? First, that he thought of Shakespeare as an 'olde acquaintance', and, fallen on evil days, had appealed to him for help. Second, the implications of 'the onely Shake-scene in a countrey' are clarified. Greene appears to have meant not merely 'the only supplier of plays' but one who 'in his owne conceit' was the central figure in the theatrical world. The ant is probably spokesman for 'those Puppets', those 'Anticks' who had rejected Greene (and this may explain why Greene's mind jumped from being 'forsaken' to the 'Tygers hart'). Third, the fable's insistence on the ant's thrift is revealing. In Caxton and other versions of Aesop the ant's thrift was implied; Greene repeats the

word so often, as also others that develop the same thought (carefully prying, greedy miser, thriftie husband, labour, toile, toylng labour) that he manages to make thrift seem thoroughly inhuman – indeed, repulsive. The intended suggestion, I take it, is the same as that found in the second sentence after ‘the onely Shake-scene in a countrey’. (‘I knowe the best husband of you all will neuer proue an Vsurer, and the kindest of them all will neuer proue a kind nurse’, meaning ‘I know the best of *them* will prove an usurer’).

* * *

At this point I must interrupt briefly in order to glance at Shakespeare's sonnets. At least three of the sonnets (110–12) are concerned with a ‘vulgar scandal’ that was deeply wounding. It arose from Shakespeare's professional activities, and he justified himself by saying that in a public situation one must adopt ‘public manners’.

O, for my sake do you with Fortune chide,
The guilty goddess of my harmful deeds,
That did not better for my life provide
Than public means which public manners breeds.
Thence comes it that my name receives a brand . . .

Some think that this refers to the disgrace of being an actor⁵. While actors were legally ‘rogues and vagabonds’, we have no reason to believe that Shakespeare's name was branded in the ordinary way of business. But we do know of one – and only one – public branding of his *name*, and I have argued that Greene's was a more wide-ranging and a more venomously personal attack than has been recognised. Could the sonnets refer to Greene? This is not an entirely new suggestion, for Shakespeare appears to go out of his way to drag in the name⁶:

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

This is the first recorded use of *o'ergreen*. Why did Shakespeare coin the word?⁷ It has been paraphrased as ‘to cover with green . . . hence *fig.*, to

cover so as to conceal a defect, embellish' (*OED*) – a curious word, most easily explained as a punning allusion to *GWW* and its repercussions. (Apologising for not moderating the heat of Greene's anger in *GWW*, Henry Chettle acknowledged later in 1592 that 'diuers of worship' had reported Shakespeare's 'vpwrightnes of dealing', that is, had defended his good name – which is what 'o'ergreen my bad [name]' also suggests. Was the young man addressed in the sonnets one of the 'diuers of worship'?)

The dating of the sonnets remains disputed. Some place them at the turn of the century, or later. I am not convinced that all the sonnets were written at the same time, over a period of only three years or so; and if the early plays have been postdated, as I suggest below (pp. 54, 77), the sonnets could be moved back as well. Leaving these larger questions aside, however, it is surely quixotic *not* to connect sonnets 110–12 and the one vulgar scandal that so neatly elucidates what they say.

* * *

Greene's 'Tygers hart', together with 'greedy miser' and 'Vsurer', conjures up a picture that is already familiar to students of Elizabethan drama – that of Philip Henslowe, the theatrical entrepreneur who helped out as banker for various groups of actors from 1592 and also carried on a lucrative business as pawn-broker or, as contemporaries will have said, as usurer. Whether or not theatre historians have been unfair to Henslowe, who could be generous to actors, pathetic appeals to him for financial assistance let us glimpse the humiliating poverty experienced by many a writer at this time.

Mr Hinchlow I acquaynted you wth my necessity which I know you did in part supply but if you doe not help me to tenn shillings by this bearer by the living god I am vtterly disgract one ffryday night I will bring you papers to the valew of three acts Sr my occation is not ordinary that thus sodeynly I write ...⁸

Greene's appeal to 'those Puppets' was also for money, for he was 'lying in extreame pouerty ... comfortlesly languishing, hauing but one groat left'; and the 'waspysh little worme' turned him away⁹. What I would tentatively suggest, therefore, is that in the period 1590–94, when the London acting companies were re-grouping and a new financial strategy