

## READING THE 1592 GROATSWORTH ATTACK ON SHAKESPEARE

D. ALLEN CARROLL\*

*The professional biography of Shakespeare, for those who believe an actor from Stratford by that name wrote the plays, begins with an astonishing attack on an “upstart Crow” who imagines himself to be “the onely Shake-scene in a countrey.” The attack appears in a pamphlet called Greene’s Groatsworth of Wit (or, as we would say, “Greene’s Pennyworth of Wisdom”) in September 1592, where it is attributed to a disgruntled and dying playwright named Robert Greene, though the pamphlet may well have been written by its editor, Henry Chettle, himself a hack writer. Anti-Stratfordians read the passage otherwise; but there can be no doubt that it shows Shakespeare to be in London, an actor, and one that has achieved some success as a playwright, enough to provoke the outburst, purportedly by Greene, warning other university-educated playwrights (Christopher Marlowe, Thomas Nashe, and George Peele) against writing any more plays for the actors. The passage charges Shakespeare and the other actors with pride and cruelty in forsaking those, like Greene, who have served them well. Some have thought it also charges Shakespeare with plagiarism, with passing off the work of these playwrights as his own. In his very next publication, Chettle, without naming him, appears to apologize to Shakespeare—though anti-Stratfordians, and some Shakespeareans, think otherwise—as one “whome at that time I did not so much spare, as since I wish I had.” The “Shake” in the original attack (“Shake-scene”) is to be joined with the “spare” in the apology to identify the man, the same kind of play on his name that occurs in Shakespeare’s epitaph.*

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\* D. Allen Carroll, a specialist in the English Literary Renaissance, has taught at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, for thirty-five years, where he holds the J. Douglas Bruce Chair in Literature. In 1989 he won an Alumni Distinguished Teaching Award, given campus wide, and in 2003 the Cunningham Teaching Award, given by the College of Arts and Sciences. In 2002 he stepped down as head of the Department of English after over ten years in that position. For many summers he directed his department’s Drama in England course.