LITERATURE

ROBERT GREENE AS AN ELIZABETHAN POET

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Robert Greene seems to have been active (1) as the playwright of *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay*; (2) as a prose writer or author of conny-catching pamphlets; (3) as a poet of such well-known poems as "Ah, what is love?" (*The shepherd's wife's song*), "Sweet are the thoughts that savour of content" (*Maesia's song*), "Sitting by a riverside" (*Philomela's ode*), and "Weep not, my wanton, smile upon my knee" (*Sephestia's song to her child*); and (4) as a popular writer of repentance pamphlets such as *Greene's groatsworth of wit*, *Farewell to folly*, and *Never too late*. Perhaps most students of English literature remember him as a University Wit who notoriously attacked Shakespeare out of jealousy, or who led a decadent and sinful life in London. Although such assessment does injustice to Greene, we can hardly attack such unfair generalizations on Greene, for the scarcity of authentic biographies, biographical data, and insufficient critical sources, and the lack of definitive and readable editions of his major works at least partially account for such an unfair estimate of Greene as an Elizabethan writer. I hope the modern edition which I published in the United States — *The poetry of Robert Greene* (1977) — will give the reader a more comprehensive view of the nature and extent of Greene's poetry and, subsequently, of Greene's intrinsic value as an Elizabethan poet in the school of John Lyly and Thomas Lodge, who prepared the way for Shakespeare.

The son of a Norwich saddler, Robert Greene matriculated as a sizar at St. John's College in the University of Cambridge, in the Michaelmas term on November 26, 1575, although Kenneth Mildenberger claims that the University of Cambridge Register records the matriculation of "a RG, sizar, at Corpus Christi College in Easter term, 1573" (Mildenberger 1951 : 546—49).

A member of Clare Hall, he received the Master of Arts degree in 1583. Always proud of being a Cambridge graduate, Greene very seldom failed to identify himself as Master of Arts or *Artibus Magister* on the title-pages of

most of his major works. In July 1588 he was incorporated M.A. at the University of Oxford and, after that, sometimes proudly identified himself as *Utriusque Academiae in Artibus Magister* (a Master of Arts from both Universities), as on the title-page of his *Mourning garment* (1590). As a University Wit, Greene was aware of Shakespeare's substantial success around 1592 when he made his controversial attack on Shakespeare in *Greene's groatsworth of wit*, which was published posthumously.

Despite the fact that Greene was always proud of having received Masters of Arts from two Universities, he became a popular writer of romances. As a "commercial" writer he wrote many books for profit by feeding the reading public with what they wanted to read: both "sweet" (*dulce*) and "didactic" (*utile*) materials that might have appealed to a Puritan reader aware of the following literary motto: *Omne tulit punctum qui miscuit utile dulci*[1] ("He who mixes the useful (didactic) with the sweet (entertaining) will receive everyone's vote"), a motto found on the title-page of such works as *Alcida*, *Arbasto*, *Ciceronis amor*, *Menaphon*, and *Never too late*. Interestingly enough, Greene remained a Bohemian with an overwhelming Puritan sense of guilt; at the very least, he seems to have enjoyed picturing himself as a notoriously sinful man, an image reinforced by the criticism he posthumously received at the hands of Gabriel Harvey, in his *Four letters* (1592). His own identity as a "super-sinner" indeed must have made the Puritan reader feel good, and his confession and his repentance could not but have pleased the Puritan reader. In spite of his confession of decadence, his literary productivity was indeed impressive. He authored thirty-six pamphlets and romances, most of which were published during his lifetime, some of them posthumously printed; still others were reprinted posthumously. He wrote *Pandosto* in 1588 (the source of Shakespeare's *The winter's tale*, 1611) and *Orlando furioso* in 1591 (the partial source of *As you like it*, 1599), along with *Alphonsus*, *James IV*, and *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay* among others. Such productivity amply attests to the fact that Greene must have been an indefatigable worker, determined to produce what he could sell and what would appeal to a large audience. Therefore, his identity as a repentant character should be understood against that of a disciplined and ambitious writer. It is perhaps safe to assume, therefore, that decadent as he was — or said he was in his literature — he lived an active life as an author, or turned his Bohemian experiences into profitable and productive literary subject matter. As he sank lower and lower socially and morally, he was yet able to observe human behavior so realistically, and particularly in his conny-catching series.

Although he received the nickname, a "Homer of women"[2], it may be too

[1] Other mottos are *Sero sed serio* and *Nascimus pro patria*.

[2] Cf. Dean, J. S. Jr. (1973).

loaded a term to describe his gift in portraying a gallery of remarkable women, such as Fawnia in *Pandosto*, Ida and Dorothea in *James IV*, Margaret in *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay*, Sephestia in *Menaphon*, and the Shepherd's Wife in the *Mourning garment*, all of whom symbolize such qualities as the innocence of country life, unselfish love, and motherhood (Lavin 1969:xxv). Compared with Shakespeare's women, particularly Portia in *The merchant of Venice*, Hermia and Helena in *A midsummer night's dream*, Rosalind in *As you like it*, Viola in *Twelfth night*, and Cleopatra and Lady Macbeth, Greene's heroines are not as unforgettable, as fully developed, or as complex. At least his serious interest in portraying women may reflect the Elizabethan preoccupation with the Petrarchan and anti-Petrarchan traditions that influenced Shakespeare, especially as in his *Sonnets* (published in 1609 but written earlier.) Thus Greene's women rightfully anticipate some of the remarkable heroines of Shakespeare's later works.

ROBERT GREENE'S POETRY

(I) *WHAT KINDS OF POETRY DID GREENE WRITE?*

It is difficult to assess the intrinsic value of Greene's poetry fully without surveying all of his literary work: prose romances, repentance pamphlets, and plays in which all his poems with the exception of *A maiden's dream* originally appeared. At the same time, many of his lyrical poems can still be understood independently of the plot or theme of the larger framework, especially when these poems are often incidentally inserted, to publish a poem which might otherwise not have been published, for the sake of entertainment or a change of pace or relaxation, or for sheer enjoyment. Unlike his plays, prose romances, a conny-catching series, and repentance pamphlets, his poetry has been much less widely distributed partly because a definitive and readable text have never been published in a single volume.[3]

What kinds of poetry did Greene write? For the sake of convenience, I wish to employ seven basic categories with the understanding that some poems could well be classified as more than one category: as John Clark Jordan suggests, (1) love poems including the anacreontics; (2) the description of people; (3) gnomic poems, (4) pastorals; (5) repentance poems; (6) satires on women; and (7) songs including ditties, jigs, madrigals, and sonnets.[4]

[3] Greene's songs, ditties, sonnettos, etc., were anthologized mostly from his plays.

[4] Cf. the categories used by J. C. Jordan (1915: 127—163).

(II) *BACKGROUNDS OF ELIZABETHAN POETRY*

Because the Elizabethan age (of which Greene's poetry is a welcome manifestation) was definitely an age of music, it produced such composers as William Byrd, Thomas Morley, Orlando Gibbons, Thomas Weelkes, John Dowland, and John Daniel, all of whom drew upon poetry, just as poetry was in turn enriched by music. Thus the English lyric was a mode of poetry which lived in intimate relationship with music. Thomas Dekker's *The shoemaker's holiday*, for example, exemplifies this exuberant musically-oriented tradition.

The play also reveals, as Hallett D. Smith (1952) contends, that music unified both the aristocratic class and the peasant working class, partly because the social conditions were often more favorable to oral rather than printed communication. Further, as Castiglione stresses in *The courtier*, published in 1528 but translated by Sir Thomas Hoby in 1561, music was a serious and compulsory part of Renaissance education. Richard Mulcaster, the master of the Merchant Taylors School, and Spenser's teacher, insisted that his pupils know how to sing and read music and even to perform upon instruments. In the science of the day, the organizing principle of the universe was harmony; the spheres produced an exquisite music as they revolved in perfect play, and the order and relation of one celestial body to another was governed by fundamental harmonic principle, as in Shakespeare's *The tempest*.[5] The Elizabethan believed, perhaps in a literal sense, that the man who had no music in him was fit for treason, as in Shakespeare's *Othello*, *Richard III*, and *Julius Caesar*. As Smith (1952) notes, between 1588 and 1620 scores of collections of madrigals and airs were published, some of them going into several editions. The lutanist songs are excellent lyrics; and their poets, most of whom are anonymous, showed considerable skill in arranging the corresponding lines of each stanza, and even specific words so that they would fit the accompaniment. Greene echoes this rich tradition in his songs, ditties, jigs, madrigals, and sonnets (Smith 1952:37, Pattison 1950:18—19).

The Elizabethan lyric was partly a development of the medieval lyric; as Kenneth Muir (1952) states, some of the stanza-forms employed can be traced back to the time of Chaucer. This is both a native influence and a foreign one, Italian, French, Latin, and Spanish poetry contributing to its development. The Italian influence, for example, culminated in the Petrarchan and anti-Petrarchan traditions in England. Greene reflects these rich backgrounds in his preoccupation with the theme of love, satire on women, the transitoriness of beauty, the pains of absence, the cruelty and chastity of woman, and the theme of unrequited love (Muir 1952 : 8—9). He also follows the French tradition of Pierre de Ronsard and Joachim du Bellay, for instance, by adding French refrains in his poems (Muir 1952:9). The Italian influence also accounts for Greene's partial mixing of verse with prose, as he added a number of lyrical poems incidentally or integrally to his prose works, although Sidney's *Arcadia* (in manuscript) might be another potential influence on other poets, including Thomas Lodge and Robert Greene (Muir 1952:28—29). As for the Latin influence, Ovid's, like Virgil's, was considerable on narrative poetry and perceptible in lyrical poems; Horace and Catullus were also imitated by Thomas Campion, Ben Jonson, and other poets. Elizabethan pastorals too were derived partly from a mixture of Latin and native influences.

[5] See Smith, H. D. (1952: 28—29; 257—258).

During the Elizabethan age, the Renaissance spirit and Platonism together with Humanism became the obsessions of the poets. The age stressed man's fulfillment, his choice and freedom, his sensuous delight in beauty and adoration, his wit and humor, his love and his conscience. At the same time it was the age of incipient Puritanism, and the preoccupation with sin and repentance dominated the scene. Robert Greene inherited the rich backgrounds that embraced some conflicting elements and qualities such as Hellenistic and Hebraic values, the Renaissance spirit and Puritan obsessions, and modern and medieval literary traditions. No wonder he is musically oriented as a poet; he reveals his preoccupation with sin and repentance as a moralist. He mixes English with French and Latin poems, prose with poetry, the adoration of women with their satire, and Petrarchan with anti-Petrarchan poems. No wonder he loves pastorals and translations of foreign materials into English. His poetry stands for variety, flexibility, mixture, richness, and at the same time, haste and carelessness of a popular, mass-producing author. It also stands for delicate beauty, pleasant melody, and rhythm, yet not profound themes, serious times, or a soul-shaking philosophy.

(III) *NATURE OF GREENE'S POETRY*

a. Love poems including anacreontics

As John Clark Jordan (1915) points out in his *Robert Greene*, the poet is a fairly accurate mirror of the literary activity of the Elizabethan age. With love as his predominant theme, Greene attempts various definitions of love like his contemporaries, Lodge and Marlowe, and like his successors, Shakespeare, Donne and Dryden. Many of his love poems in *Menaphon*, *Never too late*, *Philomela*, and other romances endeavor to answer the traditional question: "What is love?" In answering the question in *Menaphon*, he notes that: (1) love is a "sweet" but painful experience; (2) a bitter sweet, that is also "inconstant" and "transient"; (3) it is a "power divine/That reigns in us"; (4) it is a discord, a desire, and a peace. These qualities are far more seriously and

exquisitely treated by Shakespeare later in his *Romeo and Juliet*, *A midsummer night's dream*, *As you like it*, and *The sonnets*, but Greene's poems reveal that he has offered enough substance for Shakespeare to enrich and develop later.

Greene also reveals his Petrarchan interest, as he treats the pangs of the lover, although he employs classical names such as Venus, Adonis, and others in "Infida's song" in *Never too late*, for instance. Simultaneously, Greene attempts a poem in the anti-Petrarchan tradition in "Discourteous women" in *Orlando furioso*. He apparently experiments with pleasure with everything in contemporary fashion. His ideal women are pictured as "golden-haired, blue-eyed, fair-skinned with cheeks of lilies and roses", a similar image developed more vividly by Shakespeare in his *Sonnets*.

b. Description of people

As a literary camera man, Greene takes special delight in describing the Shepherd and His Wife in *Mourning garment*; he continues his favorite camera-like technique in describing a beautiful shepherd's wife: "A neck as white as whale's bone,/Compass'd with a lace of stone,/Fine she was, and fair she was,/Brighter than the brightest glass". He further experiments in describing even "historical" personages such as Chaucer, Gower, and Solomon in *Greene's vision*. Yet, in those poems Greene still remains a camera man rather than a psychologist, as he reveals his interest in physical appearances and garments. In *Orlando furioso* Greene describes Angelica as the paragon of beauty, possessing all the external qualities he admires.

c. Gnomic verse

Greene also issues a serious warning, against sin perhaps even a didactic sermon on morality. In "Roundelay: love scolded" in *Ciceronis amor* the poet warns that love is "a foolish toy". In "Wanton youth reproved" in *Perimedes* the poet condemns lawless lust: "A lecher's fault was not excus'd by youth". In "Philomela's ode" he ends with a warning that, "Though love be sweet, learn this of me:/No sweet love but honesty". Thus Greene reveals his function as a popular philosopher or moralist.

d. Pastorals

Greene is at his best in writing pastorals, partly because he has a camera man's eyes, partly because he is at ease with nature, but also because he created a congenial melody that enforces the desirable atmosphere of pastoral settings. In "Philomela's ode" in *Philomela* he begins: "Sitting by a riverside/ Where a silent stream did glide/ Muse I did of many things/ That the mind in quiet brings, ..." In "Barmenissa's song" in *Penelope's web* Greene glorifies contentment in the shepherd's life as he contrasts the king's stormy life of

"scepter and the glittering pomp of mace" with the shepherd's happier life of contentment, peace, and tranquility. Greene is more dramatic as he combines the theme of love with the pastoral theme as in "Thine, who can be thine, the shepherd Eurymachus" in *Never too late*.

e. Repentance poems

Greene is unique in his repentance poems. In fact, Greene the poet is nearly identical with Greene the repentant. Lacking the repentance poems, the poet is diminished immeasurably. In "Miserimus" in *The groatsworth of wit* he dramatizes the situation that calls for a soul-shaking repentance. The poet also employs an Aesop-like story to magnify the need of repentance in his "A conceited fable of the old comedian Aesop" and he further employs Biblical themes in "Iniquity" in *A looking glass for London and England* which was written in collaboration with Thomas Lodge, in which he threatens one with the fear of God's wrath. In "The Lord is just" from the same play Greene calls for God's grace in his treatment of the theme of Jonas. To the Puritan reader this must have been the sweet sound of music.

f. Satire of women

Here Greene openly reveals his anti-Petrarchan interest and issues a series of warnings about those women who are men's traps and temptations, and even the allegorical symbol of death. In "Miserimus" and "Verses against the gentlewomen of Sicilia" in *Mamillia* Greene shares his rich experience as a decadent Bohemian with the reader of his poems by satirizing women, and by exposing their supposed hypocrisy, loquaciousness, luxurious taste, and treachery.

g. Songs

Greene loves to include songs, jigs, madrigals, roundelays, and sonnettos in his prose works and plays, thus vividly reflecting the musically-oriented Elizabethan age. "Doralicia's song" and "Arbasto's song" in *Arbasto*, "Maesia's song" in *Farewell to folly*, and "Canzone" in *Never too late* create a delightful atmosphere in each work in which the poems are found. The songs of Greene entertain the reader or the audience both independently as musical pieces, and insofar as they are integral to the major themes of each work. Occasionally, they enforce the theme, but many of these songs do not, for they are to be enjoyed by the reader or the audience for their music, their melody, and their rhythm; they provide the literary work with variety, with a change of pace, and also with a sensual pleasure. His songs echo the age of music that is typified in Thomas Dekker's *The shoemaker's holiday* (1599).

CONCLUSION

When Shakespeare began to write, Marlowe and Greene were the most firmly established playwrights of the age; both Greene and his friends testify to the eagerness of rival managers to obtain the hasty products of Greene's performances. Yet Greene's plays with the exception of *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay* are by no means the best product of his pen. He started his literary career as an author of love-tales or "novels" in prose, interspersed with songs and lyrics. As Greene had an extraordinary ear for the music of verse, these occasional pieces are his best productions. In fairness he should be evaluated as the author of love poems rather than merely or even chiefly as the playwright of *Orlando furioso* and *Alphonsus*. As a dramatist he was a follower of John Lyly and Christopher Marlowe, but as a writer of pastoral lyrics he was Marlowe's predecessor. For instance, in *Mamillia* (I) (1583) he proves to be an imitator of Lyly's *Euphues* to some extent, but very soon he outgrows it as he embraces other influences and experiments on his own (Minto 1885:240).

In spite of his comparative "anonymity" today, Greene was immensely popular and perhaps even "sensational" as a writer in his time, because of his misery and repentance, his stormy life, and his premature death at the age of thirty-four. All of these factors made him a controversial and popular writer, whose writings appealed to a broader reading public consisting of the upper class and the rising middle-class, the Puritans. As a poet he has what we might call "permanent claims" to fame, although his intrinsic literary value remains controversial even today. As a "novelist" he has "historical importance", although as a pamphleteer he is not at his best except for two translations: *The debate between Folly and Love* from French and *The royal exchange* from Italian (Lewis 1954:484).

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