A moral Compromise or moral Calling? Elizabethan Pamphleteers on the Theater

Tudor London was an arena upon which two significant literary mediums made a staggering rise: the printed pamphlet and the modern play. The introduction of print, accompanied by a rise in literacy during the 16th century, had brought with it a significant increase in the number of publications circulating in the London market. The influx of printed publications not only brought literature to the hands of hitherto unreachable audiences, but also turned the book into a commercial product, being sold for profit. These changes in the consumption and production of literature are known to have had significant implications upon style, the perception of authorship and views regarding the role of literature (Burrow, 2000, pp. 11-29).

Simultaneously, the public theaters of the Elizabethan era had an influence similar in magnitude upon performance art. The enormous popularity of London's theaters had obliterated, to a certain degree, the relevance of medieval forms of performance, such as the fair and the carnival shows, and even casted a shadow on the royal masque. In this process, the very function of theater took on new meaning (Howard, 2007, pp. 14-19).

But by no means were these two processes parallel. Rather, they were intertwined. The great pamphleteers of Elizabethan London were also play-writers, and as such were immersed in the world of theater, consorted with its key figures and had scores to settle with them (Clark, 1983, pp. 17-23). Plays were also being printed, for the purposes of rehearsal and promotion of play-houses (Peters, 2003, pp. 27-31). Ultimately, print would also play a significant role in the canonization of certain plays and the rise of the Author as the sole owner of the theatrical work (Brooks, 2000, pp. 9-12).

The inter-relations between theater and print raise some interesting questions, which I wish to answer in this paper: What did pamphleteers think about the theater and about play-writers? Did they see the play as an art-form equal to, inferior to or superior to literature? And what can the views which pamphleteers had on the theater tell us about the social processes, which were behind the emergence of the book market and the modern theater in 16th century London?

In order to answer these questions I will analyze two printed works which have been written by authors who were also active as play-writers: *A Groat's-worth of Wit, bought with a million of Repentance,* written by Robert Greene and published in 1592; and *Pierce Penniless, his supplication to the Devil,* written by Thomas Nashe and published later that same year. Both are printed works which include lengthy comments about the world of theater, its moral value and its stylistic qualities. I will first analyze the attitude towards the theater presented in each work and then compare the two works on this basis. This, to me, is a particularly interesting comparison since there has been a substantial claim that Thomas Nashe, the Author of *Pierece Penniless,* was also the author of *Groats-worth of Wit.* This claim seems rather impossible given the contrasting judgment that each work casts upon theater.

Groat's-worth of Wit tells the story of a usurer named Gorinius, who on his death bed calls his two sons, Roberto and Lucanio, to tell them how his vast fortune will be distributed between them. To Lucanio, who resembled him in his lust for money, he left all his possessions. To Roberto, who was a scholar and critical of his father's profession, he left one Groat (a coin).

Gorinius' decision, which echoes the biblical story of the struggle between Esau and Jacob over Isaac's inheritance, was not only induced by his anger at Roberto's ungratefulness, having used his father's fortune to acquire an education and then criticized the manner by which that fortune was accumulated. It was also a manifestation of his world-view, which may be best summarized by his saying that "without wealth, life is death" (Greene, 1592, p. 6).

As someone who arrived in the big city (the author is clearly referring to London, although the city is not directly named) as a poor young man and reached the greatest heights of fortune and power with only his wits to aid him, Gorinius was a man who despised the notion that there was anything more important than money. "…what is gentry if wealth be wanting, but base servile beggary?" he says, and relishes at the memory of scholars who for a meager pay wrote verses in his praise (Ibid, ibid).

It is this sinister position which puts him at odds with his educated son, who argues for the supremacy of education over wealth accumulated by questionable means. To illustrate this, Gorinius leaves his son the same amount of money which he himself had upon first arriving in the big city – one Groat.