

Question 9

When did Shakespeare first appear on the literary scene?

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The earliest surviving reference to Shakespeare as a writer comes from one of his rivals, playwright Robert Greene. In a pamphlet from 1592 called Greene's *Groatsworth of Wit*, Greene sneers at a rival author who is "in his own conceit the only Shakes-scene in a country". Although Greene doesn't deign to name Shakespeare directly, "Shake-scene" is quite obviously a pun on his name.

The interesting thing, I think, is Greene's *Groatsworth of Wit* appears to be the remnant of some long-lost literary feud – Greene goes on, without, it has to be said, much evidence, to accuse Shakespeare of plagiarism.

Did Shakespeare borrow from Greene's work? Well, perhaps – but, more likely, Greene was simply annoyed that a young "upstart" from the sticks was writing plays every bit as good as his.

In any case, it's because of Greene that we can be confident that Shakespeare was on the scene from the early 1590s – and he was doing well enough to have acquired some bitter literary enemies.