



EDWARD DE VERE NEWSLETTER NO. 3

Published by De Vere Press
1340 Flemish Street
Kelowna, B.C. V1Y 3R7 Canada

Who was the "upstart crow" referred to in Robert Greene's *Groats-worth of Witte Bought With a Million of Repentance*?

Greene's *Groatsworth of Wit* is an allegorical tale of one Roberto. At page 39, Greene abruptly breaks off the story, saying of Roberto that his "life in most part agreeing with mine, found one selfe punishment as I have doone". He then promises that "Greene will send you now his groats-worth of wit, that never shewed a mites-worth in his life". Addressing himself in a general way to "Gentlemen", he sets out ten rules of conduct, asking his readers to "Learne wit by my repentance (Gentlemen) and let these rules following be regarded in your lives" (Harrison 41).

Having set out his ten rules of conduct for gentlemen, Greene next addresses himself to his fellow playwrights:

To those Gentlemen his Quondam acquaintance, that spend their wits in making plaies, saying that R.G. wisheth [them] a better exercise, and wisdom to prevent his extremeties (Harrison 43).

In this section of the text, Greene speaks directly, without naming them, to three playwrights, generally considered to be Marlowe, Nashe and Peele. He refers to the first as "thou famous gracer of Tragedians", to the second as "yong Juvenall, that biting satirist", and to the third as "no less deserving than the other two".

Having reproved each of the three playwrights individually, Greene then adjures all three to take heed against the opportunism and ingratitude of actors:

Base minded men all three of you, if by my miserie you be not warned: for unto none of you (like mee) sought those burres to cleave: 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 have beene beholding: is it not like that you, to whome they all have beene beholding, shall (were yee in that case as I am now) bee both at once of them forsaken? (Harrison 45)

Having warned his three fellow playwrights against actors in general, Greene next warns them specifically against one actor in particular, an actor who fancies himself a playwright, and who has a *Tygers hart* wrapped in his *Players hide*. Greene says:

Yes, trust them [the actors] not: for there is an upstart Crow, beautified with our feathers, that with his Tygers hart wrapt in a Players hide, supposes he is as well able to bombast out a blanke verse as the best of you: and beeing an absolute Johannes fac totum, is in his own conceit the onely Shake-scene in a cuntry (Harrison 45-6).

Greene then returns to inveighing against actors in general, counselling his three fellow playwrights to write nothing more for the actors:

O that I might intreat your rare wits to be imploied in more profitable courses: & let those Apes [the actors] imitate your past excellence, and never more acquaint them with your admired inventions... [W]hilst you may, seeke you better Maisters; for it is pittie men of such rare wits, should be subject to the pleasure of such rude grooms (Harrison 46).

Greene then refers to two others besides himself who have written against "these buckram Gentlemen and peasants" [the actors], and says that he is confident that the more intelligent among the newer play-

wrights will appreciate the actors for what they are; as for the rest of the playwrights, the actors can do with them as they like:

For other new-commers, I leave them to the mercie of these painted monsters [the actors] who (I doubt not) will drive the bestminded [playwrights] to despise them: for the rest, it skills not though they make a jeast of them (Harrison 46).

Greene then closes his text with a further warning to his fellow playwrights to learn from his unfortunate example:

But now return I again to you three, knowing my miserie is to you no newes: and let me hartily intreat you to be warned by my harms...Abhorre those Epicures [the actors], whose loose life hath made religion lothsome to your eares; and when they sooth you with tearms of Maistership, remember Robert Greene, whome they have often so flattered, perishes now for want of comfort....Trust not then (I beseech ye) to such weake staies: for they [the actors] are as changeable in minde, as in many attyres. Wel, my hand is tyrde, and I am forst to leave where I would begin: for a whole booke cannot containe their wrongs, which I am forst to knit up in some fewe lines of words (Harrison 46-7).

If these remarks can be taken at face value, there is no escaping the conclusion that in the last weeks of his life Robert Greene had conceived a bitter antipathy toward actors. With what are almost his dying words, he warns his fellow playwrights that actors will flatter and make use of them, just as they have of Greene himself. And among all the actors, Greene specifically singles out for special mention one who is not only a sycophant and opportunist like the others, but who also has the effrontery to consider himself a budding playwright.

Greene is deliberately vague and allusive about the identity of this actor-cum-playwright. However Greene's text offers three clues to this individual's identity: he is known to Greene's fellow playwrights primarily as an actor, he is characterized as having a "Tygers hart" wrapped in his "Players hide" via an allusion to a line from *Henry VI, Pt.3*, and he can be considered a "Johannes fac totum".

1. An individual known primarily as an actor.

That the individual about whom Greene complains is known to Greene himself, and to Greene's three fellow playwrights, primarily as an actor requires little comment. It is evident from the words of the text. Greene warns his three fellow playwrights that there is an upstart actor in their midst who has developed playwriting aspirations, and who thinks he is as good as any of the current playwrights. Greene says that this actor "supposes", i.e. imagines and/or pretends, that he is:

as well able to bombast out a blanke verse as the best playwright, and that in his owne conceit he is the onely Shake-scene in a countrey.

These words imply that this upstart's abilities as a playwright are as yet untried and unrecognized. In fact, strangely enough, it appears that no-one but Greene himself is even aware that this actor sees himself as a playwright. Judging from the text of *Groatsworth*, Greene's fellow playwrights are completely oblivious to the danger which this upstart actor's playwriting aspirations represents to their livelihood, which is why Greene, at the point of death, summons his failing energies to warn them.

2. An individual characterized as having a "Tygers hart".

Greene's allusion to the exclamation "O tiger's heart wrapp'd in a woman's hide!" from one of York's speeches in *Henry VI, Pt.3* demonstrates that the play *Henry VI, Pt.3* (although perhaps not its author's identity) was well known by 1592. Had the play not been well known in 1592, the allusion to York's exclamation against Queen Margaret would have been pointless. By definition, a literary allusion relies for its effect on the reader's familiarity with a work which is already well known.

Having paid the author of *Henry VI, Pt.3* the compliment of alluding to a line from his deservedly popular play, would Greene have intended thereby to denigrate the author of *Henry VI, Pt.3* as an "upstart Crow" with a "Tygers hart"? Surely not. It is evident from the text of *Groatsworth* that the allusion to York's exclamation against Queen Margaret from *Henry VI, Pt.3* is not intended in any way to

identify the author of *Henry VI, Pt.3* as an "upstart Crow" with a "Tygers hart". The allusion is merely intended to convey a forceful impression of the personality of the upstart actor whom Greene has singled out as a would-be playwright. It serves as a compendious character sketch of this actor: like Queen Margaret, the "she-wolf of France", who concealed a tigerish cruelty beneath her deceptive femininity, the upstart actor is one who conceals his ambition to threaten the playwrights' livelihood (his "Tygers hart") beneath the deceptive exterior of an actor ("a Players hyde").

That Greene must have considered the author of *Henry VI, Pt.3* to be someone other than this actor is further borne out by an examination of the speech from which the line in question is taken. Even the most cursory examination of York's speech to Queen Margaret reveals it to be the work of a highly accomplished poet and dramatist. It is impossible to think of this speech as an early attempt by an "upstart" who "supposes", i.e., imagines or pretends, he can "bombast out a blanke verse". One has only to read the speech in its entirety to appreciate its power and beauty, its dramatic quality, and its command of language and imagery:

York. She-wolf of France, but worse than wolves of France,
Whose tongue more poisons than the adder's tooth!
How ill-beseeming is it in thy sex
To triumph like an Amazonian trull,
Upon their woes whom fortune captivates!
But that thy face is, visor-like, unchanging,
Made impudent with use of evil deeds,
I would assay, proud queen, to make thee blush:
To tell thee whence thou cam'st, of whom deriv'd,
Were shame enough to shame thee, were thou not shameless.
Thy father bears the type of King of Naples,
Of both the Sicils and Jerusalem;
Yet not so wealthy as an English yeoman.
Hath that poor monarch taught thee to insult?
It needs not, nor it boots thee not, proud queen,
Unless the adage must be verified,
That beggars mounted run their horse to death.
'Tis beauty that doth oft make women proud;
But, God he knows, thy share thereof is small:
'Tis virtue that doth make them most admir'd;
The contrary doth make thee wonder'd at:
'Tis government that makes them seem divine;
The want thereof makes thee abominable.
Thou art as opposite to every good
As the Antipodes are unto us,
Or as the south to the septentrion.

O tiger's heart wrapp'd in a woman's hide!
How couldst thou drain the life-blood of the child,
To bid the father wipe his eyes withal,
And yet be seen to bear a woman's face?
Women are soft, mild, pitiful, and flexible;
Thou stern, obdurate, flinty, rough, remorseless.
Bidd'st thou me rage? why, now thou hast thy wish:
Wouldst have me weep? why, now thou has thy will;
For raging wind blows up incessant showers,
And when the rage allays, the rain begins.
These tears are my sweet Rutland's obsequies,
And every drop cries vengeance for his death,
Gainst thee, fell Clifford, and thee, false Frenchwoman.

That this speech is the work of a polished craftsman Greene himself, with his own manifest abilities as a poet and dramatist, could not have failed to recognize. There is thus only one reasonable inference which can be drawn from Greene's allusion to the line from *Henry VI, Pt.3*: Greene alluded to the line solely for the purpose of characterizing the upstart actor's ambition and duplicity. It could never have been his intention to identify the upstart actor as the author of *Henry VI, Pt.3*, and Greene would no doubt be amazed at the way in which later generations of commentators have conflated the play's author, whose talents Greene obviously respected, with the upstart actor on whom Greene was heaping opprobrium.

If, then, the author of *Henry VI Pt.3* was an experienced and respected playwright and was not the upstart actor, what did Greene mean when he referred to the upstart actor as a "Shake-scene", an epithet which has caused many commentators to conclude that the upstart actor must have been William Shakespeare, the author of *Henry VI, Pt.3*?

There are a number of possible explanations. By using the word "Shake-scene", Greene may have intended to denigrate him as "a poor player/That struts and frets his hour upon the stage", while thinking himself an important Shake-scene. There may have been a pun on the name of the villain Shake-bag in *Arden of Feversham*, an anonymous play entered on the Stationers' Register on April 3, 1592, just a few months before Greene wrote his *Groatsworth of Wit* (Tucker Brooke xiii). Greene may also have intended an allusion to plagiarism: in Aesop's fable, the jackdaw decks himself in the pea-

cock's plumes. But whatever Greene meant by the reference, he clearly did not intend his readers to conflate an actor and amateur playwright, an "upstart Crow", with the author of the powerful lines of York's speech to Queen Margaret in *Henry VI, Pt.3*.

3. An individual known as a *Johannes fac totum*.

The final reference which affords a clue to the identity of the "upstart Crow" is the reference to him as a *Johannes fac totum*.

The Oxford English Dictionary describes the origin of the use of *factotum* in English as follows:

From medieval Latin *factotum* in phrases *Johannes Factotum*, *Dominus Factotum*, *Magister factotum*, which appear to be renderings in etymological equivalents of Romanic expressions = 'John Do-Everything', 'Mr. Do-Everything'; cf. Italian *fa il tutto*, *fattuto* of similar formation. These phrases are found in 16th century in English, and *Frere Jean Factotum* (Pare 1590), *Dominus Factotum* also in French; their source has not yet been discovered. The word *factotum* without the prefixed words is used in German from the 16th century.

The OED entry continues with three definitions which are followed by the first three historical examples of English phrases which make use of *factotum*:

1.a. In Latin phrases: *Dominus factotum*, used for 'one who controls everything', a ruler with uncontrolled power; *Johannes factotum*, a Jack of all trades, a would-be universal genius.

1.b. One who meddles with everything, a busybody.

1.c. In modern sense: A man of all-work; also, a servant who has the entire management of his master's affairs.

1566 Gascoigne. *Supposes* iii. iv. (1572) 31. He had the disbursing . . . of al my masters affaires . . . he was *Magister fac totum*. [Ariosto 1525: *era fa il tutto*.]

1584 *Leicester's Commonwealth* 65. Throughout all England my L. of Leycester is taken for *Dominus fac totum*.

1592 Greene. *Groatsworth* E iv. Being an absolute *Johannes fac totum* [he] is in his owne conceit the onely Shake-scene in a Countrey.

These examples indicate that the first use of a phrase with *factotum* is found in George Gascoigne's 1566 translation of an Italian play by Ariosto in which Gascoigne Englishes the Italian "era fa il tutto" as "Magister fac totum".

The next usage is found in the anonymous *Leicester's Commonwealth* published in 1584, eight years before Greene's *Groatsworth of Wit*. The author of *Leicester's Commonwealth* uses the term to describe Queen Elizabeth's favourite, the ambitious and powerful Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester:

Only this I knew before, that throughout all England my Lord of Leicester is taken for *Dominus factotum*, whose excellency above others is infinite, whose authority is absolute, whose commandment is dreadful, whose dislike is dangerous, and whose favour is omnipotent (Peck 107).

The use of the term "Dominus factotum" in reference to the Earl of Leicester remained current for at least a further two decades. For example, Sir John Harington, Queen Elizabeth's godson, used it in his *Brief View*, written 1605-1612, but not published until 1653. According to Harington, Bishop John Scory gave a bribe of some:

legions, or rather chiliads, of Angells to a Lady that was potent with him that was Dominus fac totum (Pierce 103).

Leicester's Commonwealth has another version of the same story which identifies the lady in question as Leicester's wife, Lettice Knollys (Peck 233-4).

These usages of "Magister factotum" and "Dominus factotum" in 1566 and 1584 were followed by the use of "Johannes fac totum" in *Groatsworth* in 1592, and of "mistress factotum" by Thomas Nashe in 1594 in *The Unfortunate Traveller*, a usage unnoticed by the OED. In *The Unfortunate Traveller*, Nashe says of the courtesan Diamante:

My courtesan is left my keeper, the keys are committed unto her, she is *mistress fac totum* (Steane 361).

What seems evident from the foregoing examples is that, from 1566 onwards, phrases with "factotum" were used to denote someone who either controlled

everything through his own power or, if a servant, controlled all his/her master's affairs. Greene must therefore have intended that the upstart actor in *Groatsworth* be seen as such a person, that is, as someone who sought to control everything, to have a hand in everything.

But did Greene further identify this individual by using the name "Johannes" (i.e., "John")? If he did, the most plausible candidate for the upstart actor in the London theatre world of 1592 would have been Ben Jonson.

In 1592, Jonson, at twenty years of age, may have had burgeoning aspirations as an actor and playwright. Moreover, his personality was such that he might well have been characterized as an "upstart" and a "Shake-scene". His arrogance, his own considerable opinion of his talents, and his lack of charity toward other writers are amply attested to in his own words as recorded for posterity by William Drummond of Hawthornden (Donaldson 610-11). Drummond also commented on the excessive fondness for drink which could well have made Jonson one of the fair-weather tavern companions of whom Greene complains. Finally, and most importantly, the first syllable of Jonson's surname corresponds to the Latin form "Johannes".

The difficulty is that 1592 is too early in Jonson's career for the hypothesis to be plausible. There is no evidence that Jonson was connected in any way with the world of the theater until about five years after the publication of *Groatsworth*.

It therefore seems necessary to discard the possibility that "Johannes" is an allusion to the name Jonson, and to look elsewhere for a candidate who meets the three criteria, i.e., someone who was known in 1592 primarily an actor, who could be characterized as having a "Tygers hart", and who might have been referred to as a "Johannes fac totum", someone who sought to have a hand in everything.

The most likely individual is William Shaksper of Stratford. There is documentary evidence that Shaksper was an actor with a prominent company,

the Lord Chamberlain's Men, two years later, in 1594, and it seems likely that he had been an actor for at least a few years prior to that. There is also considerable documentary evidence of Shaksper's money-lending activities and litigiousness. In particular, the Clayton loan document indicates that Shaksper was involved in a money-lending transaction in Cheapside in London on May 22, 1592 (Chambers 52; *Shakespeare*, 37-8), just a few months prior to the publication of *Groatsworth*. This usurious and litigious aspect of Shaksper's character might have caused some to think of him as having a "Tygers hart" wrapped in a "Players hide". Finally, the very fact that Shaksper was involved in activities as diverse as money-lending and acting might have encouraged some to think of him as a "Johannes fac totum". And, of course, Shaksper's surname fits Greene's epithet of "Shake-scene".

However, there is an important distinction to be made. For the reasons mentioned earlier in this article, Shaksper, the "upstart Crow" with his "Tygers hart" who thinks himself a "Shake-scene", is not to be confused with the playwright who wrote *Henry VI, Pt.3*. The former is a young, arrogant, ambitious amateur who has not yet proven his ability, as Greene's comments clearly indicate; the latter is an accomplished and brilliant playwright whose work is already so well known that a line quoted from one of his plays is instantly recognizable to Greene's readership.

Why, then, does Greene warn his fellow playwrights against Shaksper? The following scenario suggests a possible answer.

From 1580-1592, Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford, wrote under the pen-name "Robert Greene". Although there were a number of Robert Greenes in England at the time, several of them graduates of Cambridge and Oxford, there is no evidence that any of these Robert Greenes was in any way connected with the works published under that name. At the same time, considerable stylistic and other evidence in Robert Greene's works strongly suggests that Greene was, in fact, one of Oxford's pen-names.

If Oxford had used the pen-name Robert Greene successfully for twelve years, why did he dispose of it in *Groatsworth*? The immediate reason seems to have been that in late August of 1592 the scholar Gabriel Harvey arrived in London determined to sue Robert Greene for what he considered a libellous passage in Greene's recently published *Quip for an Upstart Courtier*. Under these circumstances, Oxford's pen-name "Robert Greene" abruptly became a liability, and in fact Greene's recent forays into the field of social satire had probably made the pen-name something of a liability for other reasons as well. The result was that, within a few days of Gabriel Harvey's arrival in London, Greene was conveniently dead, which put an end to Harvey's prospective lawsuit. His death was announced in *Groatsworth*, alleged to have been written by him on his death-bed. At the time, doubts were expressed about Greene's authorship of *Groatsworth*, and similar doubts are still being expressed by scholars today. The idea that *Groatsworth* was written by the dying Robert Greene simply does not sustain close scrutiny.

The reality underlying the "cover" story of Robert Greene's deathbed publication seems to be that Oxford used *Groatsworth* as a vehicle for putting to rest the pen-name "Robert Greene", which had become a liability, and as a means of laying the groundwork for the introduction of his new pen-name, "William Shakespeare".

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Appendix A: Letter to the three playwrights from Greene's *Groatsworth of Witte*:

To those Gentlemen his Quondam acquaintance, that spend their wits in making plaies, R.G. wisheth a better exercise, and wisdome to prevent his extremeties.

If woefull experience may move you (Gentlemen) to beware, or unheard of wretchednes intreate you to take heed: I doubt not but you wil looke backe with sorrow on your time past, and indeavour with repentance to spend that which is to come. "Wonder not, (for with thee wil I first begin) thou famous gracer of Tragedians, that *Greene*, who hath said with thee (like the foole in his heart) There is no God, shoulde now give glorie unto his greatnes: for penetrating is his power, his hand lyes heavie upon me, hee hath spoken unto mee with a voice of thunder, and I have felt he is a God that can punish enemies. Why should thy excellent wit, his gift, bee so blinded, that thou shouldst give no glorie to the giver? Is it pestilient Machivilian pollicy that thou has studied? O peevish follie! What are his rules but meere confused mockeries, able to extirpate in small time the generation of mankind. For if *Sic volo, sic iubeo*, hold in those that are able to commaund: and if it be lawfull *Fas & nefas* to do any thing that is beneficiall; onely Tyrants should possesse the earth, and they striving to exceed in tyrannie, should each to other be a slaughter man; till the mightiest outliving all, one stroke were lefte for Death, that in one age mans life should end. The brocher of this Diabolicall Atheisme is dead, and in his life had never the felicitie hee aymed at: but as he began in craft; lived in feare, and ended in despaire. *Quam inscrutabilia sunt Dei iudicia?* This murderer of many brethren, had his conscience seared like *Caine*: this betrayer of him that gave his life for him, inherited the portion of *Judas*: this Apostata perished as ill as *Julian*: and wilt thou my friend be his disciple? Looke but to me, by him perswaded to that libertie, and thou shalt find it an infernall bondage." I know the least of my demerits merit this miserable death, but wilfull striving against knowne truth, exceedeth all the terrors of my soule. Defer not (with me) till this last point of extremetie; for little knowst thou how in the end thou shalt be visited.

With thee I joyne yong *Juvenall*, that byting Satyryst, that lastly with mee together writ a Comedie. Sweet boy, might I advise thee, be advise, and get not many enemies by bitter wordes: inveigh against vaine men, for thou canst do it, no man better, no man so well: thou hast a libertie to reprove all, and name none; for one being spoken to, all are offended; none being blamed no man is injured. Stop shallow water still running, it will rage, or tread on a worme and it will turne: then blame not Schollers vexed with sharpe lines, if they reprove thy too much liberty of reproofe.

And thou no lesse deserving than the other two, in some things rarer, in nothing inferiour; driven (as my selfe) to extreme shifts, a litle have I to say to thee: and were it not an idolatrous oth, I would swear by sweet S. George, thou art unworthy better

hap, sith thou dependest on so meane a stay. Base minded men all three of you, if by my miserie you be not warnd: for unto none of you (like mee) sought those burre to cleave: 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 have beene beholding: is it not like that you, to whom they all have 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 upstart 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 *Johannes fac totum*, is in his owne conceit the onely Shake-scene in a countrey. O that I might intreat your rare wits to be imploied in more profitable courses: & let those Apes imitate your past excellence, and never more acquaint them with your admired inventions. I knowe the best husband of you all will never prove an Userer, and the kindest of them all will never prove a kind nurse: yet whilest you may, seeke you better Maisters; for it is pittie men of such rare wits, should be subject to the pleasure of such rude groomes.

In this I might insert two more, that both have writ against these buckram Gentlemen: but lette their owne workes serve to witness against their owne wickednesse, if they persevere to maintaine any more such peasants. For other new-commers, I leave them to the mercie of these painted monsters, who (I doubt not) will drive the best minded to despise them: for the rest, it skills not though they make a jeast at them.

But now returne I againe to you three, knowing my miserie is to you no newes: and let mee hartily intreat you to be warned by my harms. Delight not (as I have done) in irreligious oathes; for from the blasphemers house, a curse shall not depart. Despise drunkennes, which wasteth the wit, and maketh men all equall unto beasts. Flie lust, as the deathsman of the soule, and defile not the Temple of the holy Ghost. Abhorre those Epicures, whose loose life hath made religion lothsome to your eares: and when they sooth you with tearms of Maistership, remember *Robert Greene*, whome they have so often flattered, perishes now for want of comfort. Remember Gentlemen, your lives are like so many lighted Tapers, that are with care delivered to all of you to maintaine: these with wind-puft wrath may be extinguisht, which drunkennes put out, which negligence let fall: for mans time is not of it selfe so short, but it is more shortned by sinne. The fire of my light is now at the last snuffe, and for want of wherewith to sustaine it, there is no substance left for life to feede on. Trust not then (I beseech ye) to such weake staies: for they are as changeable in minde, as in many attyres. Wel, my hand is tyrde, and I am forst to leave where I would begin: for a whole booke cannot containe their wrongs, which I am forst to knit up in some fewe lines of words.

*Desirous that you should live,
though himselfe be dying:*

Robert Greene.

Appendix B: William Drummond of Hawthornden's comments on Ben Jonson, 1619.

He is a great lover and praiser of himself, a contemner and scorner of others, given rather to lose a friend than a jest, jealous of every word and action of those about him (especially after drink, which is one of the elements in which he liveth), a dissembler of ill parts which reign in him, a bragger of some good that he wanteth, thinketh nothing well but what either he himself or some of his friends and countrymen hath said or done. He is passionately kind and angry, careless either to gain or keep, vindicative, but, if he be well answered, at himself.

For any religion, as being versed in both. Interpreteth best sayings and deeds often to the worst. Oppressed with fantasy, which hath ever mastered his reason, a general disease in many poets. His inventions are smooth and easy; but above all he excelleth in a translation.

When his play of *A Silent Woman* was first acted, there was found verses after on the stage against him, concluding that that play was well named *The Silent Woman*: there was never one man to say *plaudite* to it.