

## ERUDITE PLAYWRIGHTS: THE UNIVERSITY WITS

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### **ABSTRACT**

*The University Wits are young analytical writers from Oxford and Cambridge who sets off inventive terrain in secular drama, severing all its ties with the conventions of clerical/ecclesiastical narrative of medieval England. These creditable authors not merely strive for secularization of theatre by etching customary plays, courtly comic pieces, farces, historical works, and melodramas, but also inscribe literary bits vocationally and proficiently for the very first instance to accomplish fiscal security. The Wits are valued antecedents of Shakespeare who is indeed indebted to the scholars for his key plots.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Scholars, Drama, Conventional Plays, Chronicle Plays, Comedy, Tragedy, Farce*

### **INTRODUCTION**

The initial step is always the toughest. The novice forever and a day embarks on unearthing follies and foibles, however the intellectual universally perceives the optimistic connotation in every doable thing. Iron shapes iron; and consequently a scholar moulds and evolves a scholar. A paper, in specific a book is formed from a tree via a process of assortment of even, supple elements - the leaves - embossed with shady tinted doodles. These inert foliage bear tremendous authority to evoke the human race and solicit the languid populace to connect to the eternal voice, which has though left this mortal place for hundreds of years. The University Wits, a cluster of well-educated intellectuals have felt the pulse of the community and thereby started penning down their assorted experiences in the matrix of a tome to amuse as well as acquaint humans with the intricacies of the globe. The themes which these writers slot in lug a carton of diverse elements, be it allegory, realism, history, tragedy, comedy, farce or any added humanizing matter. These are men of letters - English playwrights and pamphleteers - who made their existence in the concluding years of 16<sup>th</sup> century.

### **Major Playwrights**

The University Wits include seven valued scholars, viz., John Lyly, Robert Greene, George Peele, Thomas Lodge, Thomas Nashe, Thomas Kyd and Christopher Marlowe in its constellation. As these intellectuals “were learned and classical in their tastes and interested in courtly literature” (Horne, *The Life and Minor Works of George Peele* 70), they dynamically allied themselves with the theatre and the works written by them score a prominent juncture of advancement over the preceding plays. The potential of their dramatic work is exceptionally superlative that it enthuse the great Shakespeare to borrow the plots of these spectacular architects for his artistic design. This faction is universally addressed and acclaimed as the “University Wits” – despite the fact that the expression was never

employed during their lifetime, but was devised afterwards by George Saintsbury, a 19<sup>th</sup> century columnist and playwright (Sager, “Review of Kirk Melnikoff, ed., Robert Greene” 12) - for the reason that they had their edification either at one or other of the two illustrious Universities – Oxford or Cambridge and are accordingly an assemblage of scholars as rendered by the expression ‘wit’ who are writing by means of vocational preference. Christopher Marlowe, Robert Greene, and Thomas Nashe, all are graduates of Cambridge, and Thomas Lodge and George Peele, both alumnae of the University of Oxford. Yet, there is one dubious exemplar of Thomas Kyd who is also included in the set, despite the fact that he is assumed to have by no means attended any university. Adolphus William Ward avers that the “pride in university training which amounted to arrogance” is pooled with “really valuable ideas and literary methods” (Ward, “The Plays of the University Wits” 9) which authorized this galaxy of University Wits to excel the Elizabethan drama and made it more customary with Renaissance humanism and delight of partisanship. It is during this phase only that the English drama apprehends its vigor and exuberance for the very first time ever since its inception. On personal grounds, these learned personalities were laissez-faire in their outlook pertaining to divinity and scruples and share an excellent rapport among them.

### Establishment

To figure out the literal chipping in of the University Wits one has to at the outset familiarize oneself with the previous state of the English drama, a phase before the emergence of the Wits on literary pedestal. Prior to the blooming of University Wits, two diverge mores of dramatic sculpture were tagged along; first in the portrayal was the native convention, the institution of comedy which though was indisputably spirited yet sans inventive authority of the conventional Greek and Roman drama. The second one in succession is the practice laid down by the adherents of Roman pieces, which incorporates tragedies like Sackville and Norton’s *Gorboduc* (1561), and comedies like Nicholas Udall’s *Ralph Roister Doister* (1566). These dramas nevertheless put on display abundant alertness of the established form and control; still they are deficit in verve of the indigenous art bits. In order to divulge the disparity amid the accepted and the conventional custom, British scholar Allardyce Nicoll asserts:

The classicists had form but no fire; the popular dramatist had interest, but little sense of form. (*The Theory of Drama*)

The occupation of the University Wits is consequently to coalesce the form with the conflagration, and being feral sybarites they seize ample fire within them at one end and simultaneously on the other end the worthy dramatists being tutored in conventional erudition carry the sagacity of form too. G. K. Hunter maintains that the new-fangled “Humanistic education” of the era authorizes these laudable rationals to erect a “complex commercial drama, drawing on the nationalisation of religious sentiment” that will converse to the spectators “caught in the contradictions and liberations history had imposed” (Hunter, *English Drama 1586-1642: The Age of Shakespeare* 24). These esteemed scholars never look upon slavish simulation as a mode to acquire a thriving legendary section; instead they impart literary poise to their works by merely appreciating and integrating universal outline/form of traditional drama in their personal creations. They evolve as one of the most supple mortals who hold the autonomy of infringing its acknowledged and venerated doctrines, such as, the stern severance of the genus - comic and tragic to be precise, austere adherence to the three unities, viz. unity of time, place and action, and last but not least the coverage and communication of chief events to the spectators all the way through the discourse of the dramatis

personae or via an envoy. Their dramatic pieces were not merely replica of the primordial Greek or Roman plays, but a new genre of Romantic drama which was later espoused by the most distinguished dramatist Shakespeare himself. Lyly, Greene, Peele make their mark in widening the sphere of romantic comedy, conversely, Kyd and Marlowe are intensely acknowledged for their Elizabethan tragedies. The exceptionally illustrious poetic playwright among the artistic University Wits is Christopher Marlowe who writes historical plays which were admired by Shakespeare and his contemporaries. Blank verse turns out to be Marlowe's 'Mighty Line.', a potent tool which imparts the theatre its distinctive tone and sway for subsequent 50 years. The credit of restoring the lingo of the drama too goes to these intellectuals who conscientiously made the medium of dramatic expression exceedingly supple and reactive to every particular transmitted disposition. Lyly bestows the language of comedy, particularly the prose, an astonishingly debonair pat; Peele confers an exceptional charm; and Greene substantial conviviality and candidness. As per the language of tragedy is concerned, Kyd launches inflated bravado only; but Marlowe permeates the overwhelming ardor amalgamated with the cogent luminosity that bequeath ecstasy to his contemporaries and even delights the existing populace till date.

### John Lyly

John Lyly is the foremost English prose designer who embedded a resilient notion upon the lingo. As an author he contributed towards the augmentation of prose discourse in English comical piece. A graduate from Magdalen College, Oxford, Lyly pulls off eminence with the emergence of two prose romances - *Euphues: The Anatomy of Wit* (1578) and *Euphues and His England* (1580). One should bear in mind that Lyly himself was a courtier and he penned down to cater the taste of astute courtiers only, instead of fascinating gazes and ears of the populace or to prevail their approbation. His dramas are basically masques, a genre time-honored and venerated by the regal gentry of the times. Past 1580 Lyly unswervingly committed himself towards writing comedies. The dramatist writes eight plays- *Campaspe* (1583), *Sapho and Phao* (1583), *Gallathea* (1585), *Endimion* (1588), *Midas*, (1589), *Love's Metamorphosis* (1590), *Mother Bombie* (1590), and *The Woman in the Moon* (1595) - out of which *Compaspe*, *Endimion*, and *Gallathea* are his unsurpassed creations. His comedies embrace thump of affability and cogent tenor, a component absolutely missing in the indigenous comedy, which was chiefly boorish and plummet charade.

John Lyly's literary bits echo the Elizabethan ethnicity, a noble civilization which sustains dramatic flair. He employs the academic verve of London as locale for his plots. The cited theme is superlatively portrayed in *Euphues*, a romantic stratagem sprinkled with the tinge of religious conviction, adoration, and epistolary technique. Lyly's fixation with precise array and assortment of vocabulary, recurrent exercise of similes hauled out from the conventional folklore, and synthetic and markedly graceful prose stirred an ephemeral Elizabethan dramatic mode acknowledged as 'euphuism', a novel facet of English prose. An incredibly admired adage - 'All is fair in love and war' has been accredited to Lyly's *Euphues*. Indeed, the playwright turns out to be a key spring of stimulation for Shakespeare's magnificent play - *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1595-96). However, Lyly's fame diminishes with the ascend of writers like Thomas Kyd, Christopher Marlowe, and William Shakespeare, and his plea to Queen Elizabeth for fiscal respite sets off unnoted. He anticipates deposing Edmund Tilney in the court position of Master of the Revels, but Tilney outlast him, and the inopportune author breathes last as a deprived and an inconsiderate fellow.

### Robert Greene

Amongst the volume of Robert Greene's plays, explicitly - *The Comical History of Alphonsus King of Aragon* (1587-88), *A Looking Glasse for London and England* (1594), *The Honourable History of Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay* (1594), *The History of Orlando Furioso* (1592), *The Scottish History of King James IV* (1598) - a great measure is comical pieces. His attempt at the genus of comedy formulates *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay* as a magnum opus. The dramatist labeled as the "first notorious professional writer" (Gieskes, *Writing Robert Greene*) blends three divergent arenas of enchantment, nobility, and pastoral set-up in his masterwork and consequently paves way to Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Interludes and folklores turn out to be Green's preferred devices for portraying the historic floor as witnessed in *The Scottish History of King James IV*. The author while painting his plot profoundly probes the historical milieu, wizardry, fallacies and portentous trepidation - the Elizabethan spectators' prime fundamentals of curiosity. With *Friar Bacon* and *James IV*, an innovative turf of Romantic comedy emerges out on the literary plinth. Greene is credited to launch Rosalyndes and Celias of Elizabethan epoch through Dorothea, the heroine of his *James IV* much before the emergence of Shakespearean heroines. In *A Looking Glasse for London and England*, the esteemed writer with his comrade Thomas Lodge paints the realistic minutiae of England of that era.

### George Peele

Of all the precursors of Shakespeare, George Peele is conceivably the lone spectacular playwright who along with Marlowe is a recognized 'genius'. Being from a poor family, Peele spends his burgeoning years in dismal dearth and subsists and witnesses the nastiness and filth of contemporary London. Peele's technical luminosity and suppleness can be appraised all the way through the speckled subject matters he employs in his works. His gleaming carnival includes *The Arraignment of Paris* (*The Judgement of Paris* - 1584), a pastoral play with Trojan War as its locale, a work of genius. The text holds a burly mythological footing of pre-Homeric Greece with Prime Paris being asked over by the three deities - Aphrodite, Venus, and Hera to adjudge the fairest among them. He proclaims Venus to be the brightest and consequently incurs the rage of Hera and Diana. The drama re-establishes the platform of miraculous revelation and conjecture that inculcates incredible appeal among the viewers. Other noteworthy plays are - *The Love of King David and Fair Bethsabe* (1599), a mystery play encompassing biblical theme. It takes us into an absolutely bizarre space, the oriental globe of King David - a place of sumptuousness, felony and atonement. Next in the series are - *The Famous Chronicle of King Edward, the First* (1593), a chronicle history; *The Battle of Alcazar* (1594), a romantic tragic tale; and *The Old Wives' Tale* (1595), a romantic spoof on the contemporary theatrical savor as it lands the booklovers into a kindergarten.

### Thomas Lodge

Thomas Lodge, the English versifier, dramatist, and prose author unites with this assemblage via three imperative aspects - time, setting, and legendary pieces. He receives his education from the Merchant Taylor's School, and Trinity College, Oxford and turns to be an affiliate of Lincoln's Inn. Lodge displays his literary worth through a 1579 anonymous pamphlet drafted as a rejoinder to the Church-endorsed assault of Stephen Gosson hurled against the University Wits. The writer's pioneering liteness epitomize the Elizabethan epoch which is evidently perceived by means of his romances, mainly the prose romance *Rosalynde: Euphues Golden Legacie* (1590), a foundation sustained by William Shakespeare in *As You Like It* (1599). However, the most significant romance of Lodge is *A Margarite of America* (1596), which merges Senecan drives and Arcadian romance in an implausible love chronicle.

Other vital texts in the string include, *An Alarum Against Usurers* (1584), *Scillaes Metamorphosis* (1589), *Phyllis* (1593), and *A Fig for Momus* (1595). *Scillaes Metamorphosis*, an Ovidian verse fable has stalwartly influenced Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis*. Lodge unremittingly inscribes didactic pamphlets like *Wits Miserie, and the Worlds Madnesse* (1596), and in addition drafted two plays, explicitly *The Wounds of Civil War* and *A Looking Glasse for London and England* along with Robert Greene in 1594. Conversely, Lodge being a benefactor of the literary heritage of University Wits turns fainter subsequent to the publication of his final idyllic saga in 1596, and espouses the erudition and practice of medicine for rest of his life. His later endeavors incorporate *A Treatise of the Plague* (1603) and two key translations — *The Famous and Memorable Works of Josephus* (1602) and *The Works of Lucius Annaeus Seneca* (1614).

### Thomas Nashe

Nashe, a renowned pamphleteer, bard, dramatist, and creator of *The Unfortunate Traveller; or, The Life of Jacke Wilton* (1594), the first picaresque novel in English gains edification at the University of Cambridge. He has a close coalition with Robert Greene and other proficient writers of his time. Nashe is acclaimed for writing works like *The Anatomie of Absurditie* and a preamble to Greene's *Menaphon* in 1589. Both texts display intrepid, dogmatic appraisal of the existing status of inscription; sporadically ambiguous, their style is euphuistic, slotting in an array of premises. In 1591, the author drafts a prelude to Thomas Newman's unauthorized version of Sir Philip Sidney's *Astrophel and Stella* as well. His notable texts include, *Pierce Penilesse His Supplication to the Divell* (1592) - a satire tossed in opposition to the Seven Deadly Sins, *Pierce, Strange Newes* (1592), *Have with You to Saffron-Walden* (1596), *Strange Newes, Christs Teares over Jerusalem* (1593), *The Terrors of the Night* (1594), and *Summers Last Will and Testament* (1592). The literary bits of Nashe decree him to be one of the finest and exceedingly learned erudite playwrights of his era.

### Thomas Kyd

The genus of tragic narrative is dexterously and creatively utilized by Thomas Kyd in the Elizabethan epoch as avowed by Allardyce Nicoll.

It was left to the ... University Wits to make ... classical tragedy popular and ... popular tragedy unified in construction and conscious of its aim. (*The Theory of Drama* 165)

A Londoner like Peele, and an apprentice of the Merchant Taylor's School, Kyd authored a pioneering play *The Spanish Tragedie* (1587) to denote an indispensable notion of tragedy in the Elizabethan period. The work has been applauded as an 'exceptional theatre' for encapsulating requisite elements of Elizabethan tragedy. *The Spanish Tragedie* is sculpted on Seneca's reprisal tragedy and lay down the tenor and track of the Elizabethan vengeance convention, a practice reverberated by consecutive playwrights. Via his work, Kyd yearns to symbolize revenge as an ethical obligation, a vindicated action that necessitates a grave resolution as portrayed through the character sketch of Hieronimo, the protagonist. Soliloquies and the technique of play-within-play have been employed by the writer to accentuate the operation of retribution and eventually the nativity of a novel tragic hero who is neither a regal dignitary nor a champ but an average human being goes to Kyd's credit. This new-fangled male lead has dug up a facet of self-introspection which makes him altogether different from every accessible male protagonist. Other chief plays of Kyd are *Ur-Hamlet* (1587), a resource for Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (1601), *Soliman and Perseda* (1599), *King Leir* (1605), *Arden of Faversham* (1592), and *Edward III*

(1592). He is believed to be an alleged writer of a prose pamphlet labeled *The Murder of John Brewen* (1592), a repugnant testimony of assassination of a goldsmith by his spouse.

### **Christopher Marlowe**

Christopher Marlowe, the ‘Father of the English Drama’ is the most gifted dramatist amongst all the pre-Shakespeareans. The writer’s input in the turf of English tragedy is exceptionally splendid and diverse, turning him into an outstandingly admired University Wit of his period. Marlowe himself is acquainted methodically with his ascend over the preceding theater pertaining to the perspective of its lingo and the subject matter. He gains fame and esteem with the publication of *Tamburlaine, the Great* (1587-88), tale of a young shepherd who attains authority to grow up into a distinguished global vanquisher, suggestive of the lad’s aspiration for power. Other prominent plays in the succession are *Doctor Faustus* (1592), *The Jew of Malta* (1589-90), *Dido: Queen of Carthage* (1593), and a striking historical piece *Edward, the Second* (1594). *Doctor Faustus* depicts the struggle and bewilderment of a bright medical professional who is wedged in the mire of acquiring inestimable knowledge, though prohibited to comprehend as well as to sustain the quintessence of his subsistence - a factual facsimile of the commendable morality plays. *The Jew of Malta* is a saga which puts on show the dramatis personae’s unrestrained ambition for gold as its central theme. *Dido: Queen of Carthage* is yet another remarkable work of art assumed to have taken 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, and the 4<sup>th</sup> tome of Virgil’s Aeneid as its source of narration. Last in the row is *Edward II*, a historical play that bestows Marlowe with a pedestal to probe the hectic and anxious life of a monarch and accordingly portrays a new Machiavellian figure. Consequently, it is fittingly acknowledged by the literary historian George Saintsbury that the University Wits “dismissed ... the cultivation of classical models ... and gave English [drama]... its Magna Charta of freedom and submission to the restrictions of actual life only” (Saintsbury, *History of Elizabethan Literature* 60-64).

### **CONCLUSIONS**

The University Wits are therefore, a faction of diverse and proficient London playwrights and pamphleteers who lay down an arena for the theatrical/melodramatic resurgence of Elizabethan England. Sound edification facilitates the laudable writers to pull off as the most well-liked secular authors fond of valiant themes. Furthermore, the incomparable flair and professionalism earn them a pivotal pedestal of being outstandingly capable primitive proficient writers in English who pave the way for the plots of William Shakespeare and his contemporaries.

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