

## **UNIVERSITY WITS – Transitory Playwrights Who Set Preclude to Realistic Literature in Elizabethan Age**

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### **Abstract**

‘University Wits’ is a title given to a group of writers of the late 16<sup>th</sup> Century England by a 19<sup>th</sup> Century Scholar named George Saintsbury. These writers were educated either from Oxford or Cambridge Universities and wrote plays to earn their livelihood. In spite of the fact that these writers wrote without any patronage and had led short and stormy life, their importance in the history of English literature is due to their outstanding contribution towards the transformation of the theme of literature that was limited to puritanistic and moralistic writing to a more realistic yet didactic, heroic yet based on the real life problems of the everyday lives of individuals.

This essay tries to explore the works which not only enriched the English Literature through their plays with

varied themes such as revenge, passion, comedy, historical and tragedy, imaginative and romantic prose but also helped in raising the standards of literature by improving the coherence of language and structure of plot construction through their literary works, as well as setting a prelude for the writers of the later ages of the English Literature.

**Keywords:** University Wits, Elizabethan era, revenge and passion plays, transitory playwrights, heroic tragedies.

## **Introduction**

As Crompton Rickett States, “University Wits are transitory playwrights between 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> century .... They form a connecting link between the Morality and Miracle Plays which were written between the 12<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries and ‘Realistic plays’ later in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, which had ‘passion’ and ‘revenge’ as major themes’...”. (i) The term ‘University Wits’ , was a name given to a group of Elizabethan playwrights by George Saintsbury (ii) A 19th-century journalist, English writer, literary historian, scholar, critic and author. They were a bunch of writers associated with either Oxford or Cambridge University who came forward in the literary canvas with their handful of contribution in the field of drama during the Elizabethan age (1550 AD–1620 AD).

This group consisted of seven writers namely,

(1) Cristopher Marlowe (1564 AD–1593 AD) (2) John Lyly (1554 AD–1606 AD) (3) George Peele (1556 AD–1596 AD)

(4) Robert Greene (1558 AD–1592AD) (5) Thomas Nashe (1567 AD–1601 AD) (6) Thomas Lodge (1557–1625) (7) Thomas Kyd (1558–1594). These were succeeded by William Shakespeare, Fletcher, Ben Jonson in the Elizabethan Era.

University Wits were poets and Playwrights with a philosophical bent of mind; they wrote plays for earning their livelihood and were not patronized by anyone.

Renaissance Drama began with the decline of Protestantism and Morality plays. Moralities were overtaken by secular thoughts and reformers used morality to portray their own views. Secular morality took a long step to form rudimentary comedy called 'Interludes'. (iii) Interludes were sketches of a nonreligious nature, some plays were called interludes that are today classed as morality plays. John Heywood, one of the most famous interlude writers, brought the genre to perfection in his *The Play of the Wether* (1533) and *The Play Called the Four P.P.* (c. 1544). (iv) John Heywood (1497 AD–1575 AD) was a playwright whose short dramatic interludes helped put English drama on the road to the fully developed stage comedy of the Elizabethans. He replaced biblical allegory and the instruction of the morality play with a comedy of contemporary personal types that illustrate everyday life and manners. (v) The plays of the University Wits had several features in common: most of the writers that are clubbed under the title of 'University Wits' were more or less acquainted with each other, and most of

them have led irregular and stormy lives. Their plays have several common features: (vi) a) There was a fondness for heroic themes, such as the great figures of ‘Tamburlaine’ in the play, ‘Tamburlaine the Great’. It is a play written in two parts by Christopher Marlowe. It is loosely based on the life of the Central Asian emperor, Timur. (Tamerlane/Timur the Lame, d. 1405).

b) Heroic themes needed heroic treatment: great fullness and variety; splendid descriptions, long swelling speeches, and handling violent incidents and emotions. These qualities, excellent when held in restraint, only too often led to loudness and disorder.

c) Their style was also ‘heroic’. Their chief aim was to achieve strong and sounding lines, magnificent epithets and powerful declamation. This again led to abuse and mere bombast, mouthing, and in worst cases to nonsense. One of the best examples of such a case is in Marlowe’s work, the result of which is quite impressive.

d) The themes were usually tragic in nature, for the dramatists were as a rule too much in earnest to give heed to what was considered to be the lower species of comedy.

Elizabethan age dramas are a series of improvements upon 14<sup>th</sup> century plays and Caucer’s literature and towards the end of the age, literature becomes realistic and puritan in theme. The most significant representatives of the writers of real comedies is Lyly, who in such plays as ‘Alexander and Campaspe’ (1584 AD), ‘Endymion’ (1592

AD), and 'The Woman in the moon', gives us the first examples of romantic comedy. (vii) Lets discuss these dramatists in detail.

### **(1) Cristopher Marlowe (1564-1595)**

A Cambridge graduate and the most important pre-Shakespearean dramatist, Cristopher Marlowe is famous for his quality of 'Didacticism' in his tragic plays. Marlowe's characteristic "mighty line" (as Ben Jonson called it) established blank verse as the staple medium for later Elizabethan and Jacobean dramatic writing. (viii) His tone and language might be compared with that of Thomas Grey, Collins, P. B. Shelley and Keats in terms of their moods which were of pensiveness, romantic sadness, or indolence, as well as ecstatic delight, which can be observed in their great odes and poems.

Marlowe was a real source of guidance for Shakespeare for writing great plays in blank verse. His works contained music that was in harmony with Milton's works. His blank verse was metrically precise, regular, and contained imagery not introduced in English poetry at that time. He also introduced genuine blank verse and tragedy in literature and paved the way for Shakespeare to follow. (ix)

F. S. Boas in his book, *Shakespeare and his predecessors* mentions on several occasions, which can be summed up as , 'As a precursor to William Shakespeare, all plays of Marlowe can be labelled as 'Revenge' and 'Passion' plays, according to their themes'.

Marlowe's major plays are *Tamburline*, *Edward II*, *Doctor Faustus* and *The Jew of Malta*.

John Webster, a 'Restoration age' playwright is believed to have revived Marlowe in his didactic tragic play titled, 'The White devil' and 'Dutches of Malfi'.

Shakespeare is believed to have used these qualities of Marlowe in his four famous tragic plays *Othello*, *Hamlet*, *Macbeth* and *King Lear*.

According to A. C. Bradley, Marlowe and Shakespeare's tragedy have one prime thing in common: "one hero of high social status....due to his flaw in personality....dies a tragic death at the end of the play".

## **Reflections of Marlowe's Plays in Shakespeare's Plays**

Just like 'Dr. Faustus', who listened to ghosts for follow up of action 'Hamlet' too met the same fate as Dr. Faustus and died a pitiable death. 'Macbeth' of Shakespeare dies due to his quality of 'overambition' like Marlowe's 'Tamburline' who dies at the end all to nothingness. 'The Jew of Malta' is a study of 'Lust of Wealth', and centres around money lender, a Jew, which is similar to the Character 'Shylock' in the Shakespeare's play, 'Merchant of Venice'.

### **(2) John Lyly (1554 AD–1606 AD)**

John Lyly is supposed to have been influenced by Nicholas Udhall's *Ralph Roister Doister* (1553 AD), a play that marks

the emergence of English comedy from the medieval morality plays and earliest “proper” English stage comedy, having been written somewhere in the early 1550’s. (ix-a) which is presumed to have influenced Lyly’s play ‘Euphues-The Anatomy of wit’ (1578 AD), a prose romance. Udhall’s technique is also presumed to have influenced dramatist William Shakespeare’s plays namely ‘Much Ado about Nothing’, ‘All’s well that ends well’. At the same time, Gorbuduc, the first tragedy play written by Sackville and Norton might have influenced playwright Cristopher Marlowe in his play Tamburline and Edward II, and Thomas Kyd in his play Senecan tragedy titled, *Spanish Tragedy*, a revenge play.

John Lyly is known for his peculiar style of ‘Euphimism’, due to his pioneering efforts to write English fictional prose romance titled, *Euphues: The Anatomy of Wit*.

The Cambridge graduate John Lyly, looked to the court for his favour rather than his spectators. In contrast to him, George Peele looked to his audience for appreciation for his style of writings and popularity.

### **Lyly’s Contributions**

His famous plays are *Euphues: The Anatomy of Wit* (1578), *Euphues and his England*, *Sapho and Phao*.

Wyatt and Collins state that “Lyly’s greatest contribution to drama form is his writings in prose”.

Shakespeare is presumed to have used Lyly’s style of dialogue in his comedy plays namely *Much Ado about*

*Nothing, All's Well That Ends Well, Cymbeline*. Similarities are noted between Lyly's observations and experiences at Court of London and Court scenes in Shakespeare's plays namely, *Merchant of Venice, Othello, King Lear*.

Lyly's comedies mark an enormous advance upon those of his predecessors in English drama. Their plots are drawn from classical mythology and legend, and their characters engage in euphuistic speeches redolent of Renaissance pedantry; but the charm and wit of the dialogues and the light and skillful construction of the plots set standards that younger and more gifted dramatists could not ignore. (x)

### **(3) George Peele (1559 AD–1596 AD)**

This Oxford graduate, one of the University Wits playwrights left a legacy of 'Pastoral Plays', in his comic play, 'The old Wives' Tale'. (xi)

Peele, an Elizabethan dramatist who experimented in many forms of theatrical art: pastoral, history, melodrama, tragedy, folk play, and pageant. (xii) His lyrical lines in Play 'An arraignment in Paris' is presumed to have been used by Ben Johnson in his play 'Volpone or the Fox'. According to E. Albert, "plot construction and use of blank verse lyrics are Peele's original contributions". 'The Troublesome Reign of John, King of England', is an Elizabethan history play, probably by George Peele, as the source and model that William Shakespeare employed for his own 'King John' (1591 AD) (xii-a)

His famous literary works include *The Battle of Alcazar* (1589 AD)— a chronicle history, *Edward I* (1593 AD)—a biblical tragedy, *The Love of King David and Fair Bethsabe* (1594 AD), and his most enduring achievement, the fantastical comic romance, *The Old Wives' Tale* (1591–94 AD), *The Troublesome Reign of John*, King of England.

One of his earliest works includes *The Arraignment of Paris* (1581–1584 AD), which is a mythological extravaganza written for the Children of the Chapel, a troupe of boy actors, and performed at court before Queen Elizabeth I. (xiii)

#### **(4) Robert Greene (1558 AD-1592AD)**

Robert Greene, highly educated playwright, poet, and pamphleteer, born in 1558 and had masters from Cambridge in 1583, and that another from Oxford in 1588. (xiv) A man of letters curiously mingling artistic and Bohemian sympathies and impulses with puritanic ideals and tendencies, who had been trained in the formal learning of an English university, he was greatly stimulated by the varied renaissance influences, and, by them, in many cases, was led, not to greater liberty, but to greater licence of expression. (xv)

Greene wrote prose pastorals in the manner of Sir Philip Sidney's *Arcadia*. The best of his pastorals is *Pandosto* (1588), the direct source of Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*. (xvi)

Robert Greene's play titled 'Henry VI is a satire on extravaganza of the then King Henry VI, hence this play is also called a realistic play. It is thought that Robert Greene, among others, may have helped Shakespeare to develop the plot as well as writing some of the dialogue in *Henry VI, Part 2*. (xvii)

As a dramatist, Greene's specialty is his sincerity and real insight into the characters.

His major works include *Pandosto* (1588 AD), *Menaphon* (1589), *The Comical History of Alphonsus, King of Aragon* (1590 AD), *Greene's Groats-worth of Wit* (1592 AD), *The Honorable History of Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay* (1594 AD), *The History of Orlando Furioso* (1594), *The Scottish History of James IV* (1598 AD) (xviii)

It has been suggested that the fairy characters in his work '*The Scottish History of James the Fourth, Slain at Flodden* (1590) inspired Shakespeare's use of fairies in '*A Midsummer Night's Dream*. An earlier play, '*Pandosto* (1588)' has a plot similar to Shakespeare's later work, '*The Winter's Tale*', suggesting the possibility of further influence on Shakespeare.

Greene is most familiar to Shakespeare scholars for his pamphlet *Greene's Groats-Worth of Wit*, which alludes to a line, "O tiger's heart wrapped in a woman's hide", found in Shakespeare's *Henry VI, Part 3* (c. 1591–92) (xviii)

Like Peele, Greene is also appreciated for his style of 'wit', 'plot construction' and 'depiction of aristocratic life with a

romantic setting’. Shakespeare is presumed to have used his style in his plays, ‘Comedy of Errors’ and ‘The Winters’ Tale’.

Arthur Crompton Rickett in his book titled, *History of English Literature* states that, “Where Lyly excels in ‘literary polish’, Peele in ‘Melodic charm’ Greene achieves distinction in ‘humanization of his characterization’”.

### **(5) Thomas Nashe (1567 AD–1601 AD)**

A graduate of Cambridge, this writer used a free and extemporaneous prose style, full of colloquialisms, newly coined words, and fantastic idiosyncrasies, Nashe buttonholes the reader with a story in which a need for immediate entertainment seems to predominate over any narrative structure or controlling objective. (xix) Author Steve Sohmer in his book *Reading Shakespeare’s Mind* (xx) suggests that in the play titled, ‘As You Like It’, Shakespeare etched into Touchstone an effigy of Thomas Nashe. Further Sohmer states that, in Play titled, ‘Twelfth Night’, Shakespeare produced another, more highly developed portrait of Nashe as Feste – and thrust him back into conflict with his real-life nemesis Gabriel Harvey, whom Shakespeare cast as Malvolio – ‘He who wishes evil’ – the pretentious, over-ambitious steward.

His major works include *The Unfortunate Traveller; or, The Life of Jacke Wilton* (1594), the first ‘picaresque’ novel in English. *Pierce Penniless his supplication to the devil, Christ’s Tears over Jerusalem, The Choice of Valentines*.

His first publication, a preface to Robert Greene's *Menaphon*, was an attack on the writings of his contemporaries. He probably wrote one or more of the anti-Puritan attacks on the Marprelate tracts. He became involved in prolonged literary battles, the best product of which is *Pierce Penniless his Supplication to the Devil*. His prose ranges from the pious *Christ's Tears over Jerusalem* to his violent picaresque masterpiece, *The Unfortunate Traveller*; his Ovidian romance, *The Choice of Valentines*, is a witty and obscene poem. (xxi) Nashe was drawn into a prolonged and bitter literary quarrel with Gabriel Harvey. (xxii)

Nashe was strongly anti-Puritan and this together with his natural combativeness drew him into the Marprelate controversy: *An Almond for a Parrot* (1590) is now widely accepted as his along with a number of pseudonymous pamphlets. (xxii) His vivid social satire, *Pierce Penniless* was the most successful of Nashe's pamphlets and went through three editions in 1592. *The Unfortunate Traveller* (1594 AD) relating the knavish adventures of Jack Wilton is an important example of picaresque fiction and had a considerable influence on the development of the English novel. Nashe was also part-author (along with Ben Jonson among others) of *The Isle of Dogs*, which was judged by the authorities to be seditious and thus Nashe was forced to flee from London. (xxiii). In his writings, he reveals the conflict in cultural standards which arose between the humanist values of civility and eloquence and the racy vigor of popular folk-tradition. (xxiv)

## **(6) Thomas Lodge (1557 AD-1625 AD)**

Thomas Lodge, son of Lord mayor of London in 1562, was an English dramatist, prose writer and physician (xxv), who is best remembered for the prose romance *Rosalynde*, the source of William Shakespeare's play *As You Like It*. (xxvi)

His major literary works include *An Alarm Against Usurers* (1584), *Scillaes Metamorphosis* (1589), *Scillaes Metamorphosis* (1589), *Euphues Shadow* (1592), *Wounds of Civil War* (1594), *A Margaraite of America* (1596), *A Treastise of the Plague* (1603) (xxvii)

Thomas Lodge is known for his romantic treatment of classical subject in his play titled *Rosalynde*, which might have influenced Shakespeare in making of his play titled *As You Like It*. His *Rosalynde* is accessible in Hazlitt's Shakespeare's Library (vol. ii.) and elsewhere. Its relation to Shakespeare's comedy is exhaustively discussed in an essay by Delius in the Jahrbuch of the German Shakespeare Society (1871). (xxviii)

His *Scillaes Metamorphosis* (1589), an Ovidian verse fable, is one of the earliest English poems to retell a classical story with imaginative embellishments, and it strongly influenced Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis*. (xxix)

Lodge took degrees of B.A and M.A from Oxford. His literary work *An Alarum Against Usurers* (1584), exposed the ways in which money lenders used to lure young heirs into extravagance and debt. This literary piece is known to

have inspired another University Wits writer named Thomas Nashe.

### **Lodge's *Wounds of Civil War***

Lodge's *Wounds of Civil War* is an Elizabethan era's stage play which is a dramatization of ancient Rome's conflict between Roman General and Statesman named 'Gaius Marius' (157 BC – 86 BC) who is known for bringing certain reforms in the Roman army (xxx) and an another Roman general and Statesman named 'Lucius Cornelius Sulla Felix (138 BC – 78 BC), who rose to prominence during the war against 'Numidian King named Jugurtha', where he fought under the command of Gaius Marius. His relationship with Marius soured during the conflicts that would follow and lead to a rivalry which would only end with Marius' death. (xxxi)

Lodge had adapted the story from Appian's Roman History, translated in 1578 as 'An Auncient Historie and Exquisite Chronicle of the Romanes Warres', a translation that was probably also consulted by Shakespeare when he wrote Julius Caesar and Antony and Cleopatra. (xxxii)

The beginning of rivalry is seen in the play when the senators line up one after another to cast their vote for Marius, who accepts the office on their authority. When the senate does exercise its authority and appoints Marius as general, Sulla stages an armed insurrection and seizes power. In refusing to accept Marius's election, Sulla asserts that his own worth and honour counts far more than those of his rivals.

While Marius derives his authority from the republican senate, Sulla asserts that they should all be loyal to him. His 'honour', in the form of conquest and loot, should gain him military and political authority. Marius looks back to the most famous and successful republican general, who protected Rome from her most terrifying enemy in a dangerous and protracted war that led to the unchecked rise of Rome as the key power in the Mediterranean. Sulla, in contrast, places the military first as the mainspring of imperial Rome, the first step towards tyranny. (xxxiii)

Thomas Lodge's prominent long poems and Fictions include *A Margarite of America* (1586) and *The Famous, True, and Historicall Life of Robert, Second Duke of Normandy* (1591) amongst many.

*A Margarite of America* (1596) was Thomas Lodge's last work of imaginative writing, which he composed while he was on a voyage to South America with Sir Thomas Cavendish (1522 AD–1592 AD). In this prose romance, Lodge describes the tragic love of Margarite, the daughter of King of Muscovy, for the treacherous and violent Arsadachus, the son of emperor Cusco, who eventually kills her, together with his wife Diana and their child. This piece of work is notable for its variety of visual spectacle and pageantry, its highly patterned poems, songs, and the unsparing savagery of many incidents. (xxxiv)

In his later life, he became a Roman catholic and graduated in Medicine from the University of Avignon in the year 1598 AD and further received another M.D.

Degree from Oxford in the year 1602 AD. Thereafter he practiced medicine in London and Brussels.(xxxv)

Even while practicing medicine, he did not loose his love for creating literary pieces and wrote 'A Treastise to Plague in year 1603 AD. He is known to have devoted to medicine and work for people affected with disease of Plague thereafter till his death in year 1625.

### **(7) Thomas Kyd (1558 AD-1594 AD)**

Thomas Kyd, the son of a scrivener, Kyd was educated at the Merchant Taylors School in London. (xxxvi)

Thomas Kyd's place in the history of English Renaissance drama is secured by one surviving play, *The Spanish Tragedy*, although there is evidence that Kyd wrote a play known simply as the *Ur-Hamlet*, which was the immediate source for William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. (xxxvii)

Kyd's major works are *Ur-Hamlet* (c. 1589), *The Spanish Tragedy* (1592), *Cornelia* (1594), *The Truth of the Most Wicked and Secret Murdering of John Brewen* (1592).

The rise of British sea superiority, demonstrated by both the British defeat of the Spanish Armada in 1588 and the extensive oceanic explorations of Francis Drake and Sir Walter Raleigh; and the advancement of English theater to a popular and enduring art form, demonstrated by the works of William Shakespeare and Christopher Marlowe. (xxxviii)

In book *Critical History of English Poetry* by Grieson Smith, *Spanish Tragedy* is labelled as 'Romantic Melodrama'.

During the early months of 1593, he became involved in legal difficulties in connection with certain "lewd and malicious libels" directed against foreigners living in London. In the course of an investigation into these charges, incriminating papers of an "atheist" nature were discovered in Kyd's lodgings. (xxxix) In around 1591 AD while Kyd was sharing lodgings with Christopher Marlowe, on May 13, 1593, he was arrested and then tortured in Bridgewell, being suspected of treasonable activity. His room had been searched and certain "atheistical" disputations denying the deity of Jesus Christ found there. He probably averred then and certainly confirmed later, in a letter, that these papers had belonged to Marlowe. He asserted that he knew nothing of this document and tried to shift the responsibility of it upon Marlowe, but he was kept in prison until after the death of that poet. He was dead by Dec. 30, 1594, when his mother made a formal repudiation of her son's debt-ridden estate. (xl)

What German criticism calls the Ur-Hamlet, the original draft of the tragedy of the prince of Denmark, was a lost work by Kyd, probably composed by him in 1587. This theory has been very elaborately worked out by Professor Sarrazin, and confirmed by Professor Boas; these scholars are doubtless right in holding that traces of Kyd's play survive in the first two acts of the 1603 first quarto of Hamlet, but they probably go too far in attributing much of the actual language of the last three acts to Kyd. Kyd's next work was in all probability the tragedy of Soliman and Perseda, written perhaps in 1588 and licensed for the

press in 1592, which, although anonymous, is assigned to him on strong internal evidence by Mr. Boas. His work was reprinted after Kyd's death, in 1599. (xli)

The Spanish Tragedy was long the best known of all Elizabethan plays abroad. It was acted at Frankfurt in 1601, and published soon afterwards at Nuremberg..... The importance of Kyd, as the pioneer in the wonderful movement of secular drama in England, gives great interest to his works, and we are now able at last to assert what many critics have long conjectured, that he takes in that movement the position of a leader and almost of an inventor. Regarded from this point of view, The Spanish Tragedy is a work of extraordinary value, since it is the earliest specimen of effective stage poetry existing in English literature. It had been preceded only by the pageant-poems of Peele and Lyly, in which all that constitutes in the modern sense theatrical technique and effective construction was entirely absent. These gifts, in which the whole power of the theatre as a place of general entertainment was to consist, were supplied earliest among English playwrights to Kyd, and were first exercised by him, in 1586. (xlii)

## **Conclusion**

Thus we can agree that, University wits, the notable group of pioneer English dramatists who wrote during the later years 16<sup>th</sup> century and who transformed the native interlude and chronicle play with their plays of quality and diversity. (xlili)

University Wits, thus, can be called as a group of university-educated playwrights who are often credited with transforming English drama in the 1500s in terms of especially in being an essential link to the development of plot construction, characterization, development of tragic form and representation of their times through their literary works.

Further, it can be said that, this group of writers can be considered a prelude, paving way for dramatist William Shakespeare to emerge, towering over all of them as he is presumed to have borrowed from the foundations that these authors set. They set the course for later Elizabethan and Jacobean drama, and they paved the way for Shakespeare.

They absorbed the new renaissance spirit and synthesized the vigour of the native tradition with more refined classicism. The constellation of University wits made the Elizabethan drama more popular with Renaissance humanism and pride of patriotism. English drama for the first time in their hands recognized its potentialities and exuberance. They wrote classical plays, courtly comedies, farces, chronicle plays, melodramas etc. They gave thrill, action, sensation, humour and music.

It can thus be said that the education of these group of men at Oxford and Cambridge did impact and transform popular drama in the late 16th century especially in terms of improvement in the language and structure of drama,

and plays became more complex, coherent, poetic, witty, and overall well-written.

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