

A Study on University Wits and William Shakespeare

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Abstract

According to Ben Johnson "William Shakespeare, was not of an age, but for all time", The greatness of Shakespeare, is always in the history of literary world. His writings not for a particular period but to the future and forever. Today, we see a lot of debate on English Literature and popularity of the writers of the Renaissance of Elizabethan period. The University Wits were a group of late 16th century English playwrights who were educated at the universities of (Oxford or Cambridge) and who became playwrights and popular writers. Prominent members of this group were Christopher Marlowe, Robert Greene, and Thomas Nashe from Cambridge, and John Lyly, Thomas Lodge, George Peele from Oxford. The diverse and talented loose association of London writers and dramatists set the stage for the theatrical Renaissance of Elizabethan England. They were looked upon as the literary elite of the day and often ridiculed other playwright such as Shakespeare who did not have a university education or a degree either from Oxford or Cambridge Universities. Greene calls Shakespeare an "upstart crow" in his pamphlet, *Groats Worth of wit*.

The Chief University Wits include:

- Christopher Marlowe, Robert Greene, Thomas Kyad, Thomas Nashe, Thomas Lodge, George Peele, John Lyly: Christopher Marlowe: **Plays**
 - *Dido, Queen of Carthage* (c.1586) (possibly co-written with Thomas Nashe)
 - *Tamburlaine, part 1* (c.1587)
 - *Tamburlaine, part 2* (c.1587-1588)
 - *The Jew of Malta* (c.1589)
 - *Doctor Faustus* (c.1589, or, c.1593)
 - *Edward II* (c.1592)
 - *The Massacre at Paris* (c.1593)
- Marlowe was born in Canterbury to John Marlowe and his wife Catherine. His date of birth is not known, but he was baptised on 26 February 1564, and is likely to have been born a few days before. Thus he was just two months older than his contemporary Shakespeare, who was baptised on 26 April 1564 in Stratford-upon-Avon.
- Marlowe attended The King's School in Canterbury (where a house is now named after him) and Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, where he studied on a scholarship and received his Bachelor of Arts degree in 1584. In 1587 the university hesitated to award him his master's degree because of a rumour that he had converted to Roman Catholicism and intended to go to the English college at Rheims to prepare for the priesthood. However, his degree was awarded on schedule when the Privy Council intervened on his behalf, commending him for his "faithful dealing" and "good service" to the Queen. A warrant was issued for Marlowe's arrest on 18 May 1593. No reason for it was given, though it was thought to be connected to allegations of blasphemy—a manuscript believed to have been written by Marlowe was said to contain "vile heretical conceits". On 20 May he was brought to the court to attend upon the Privy Council for questioning. There is no record of their having met that day, however, and he was commanded to attend upon them each day thereafter until "licensed to the contrary." Ten days later, he was stabbed to death by Ingram Frizer. Whether the stabbing was connected to his arrest has never been resolved yet.

Robert Greene was born in Norwich in 1558; however, biographers disagree whether Greene was the son of a humble saddler or of a more prosperous innkeeper with landowning relatives. He took his B.A. in 1580 and his M.A. in 1583 at St John's College, Cambridge, and became an M.A. of Oxford in 1588. Greene claimed to have married a well-off woman named Doll, and to have later abandoned her, after spending a considerable sum of her money.

In London, Greene managed to support himself through his own writing. He lived as a notorious intellectual and rascal, cultivating this reputation himself in pamphlets describing his adventures amid the seamier characters of Elizabethan England, and through a memorable appearance, with fashionable clothing and his pointy red beard.

Thomas Nashe: A little is known with certainty of Nashe's life. He was baptized in Lowestoft, Suffolk, where his father was curate. The family moved to West Harling, near Thetford in 1573 after Nashe's father was awarded the living there at the church of All Saints. Around 1581 Thomas went up to St John's College, Cambridge as a sizar, gaining his bachelor's degree in 1586. From references in his own polemics and those of others, he does not seem to have proceeded Master of Arts there. Most of his biographers agree that he left his college about summer 1588, as his name appears on a list of students due to attend philosophy lectures in that year. His reasons for leaving are unclear; his father may have died the previous year, but Richard Lichfield maliciously reported that Nashe had fled possible expulsion for his role in *Terminus et non terminus*, one of the raucous student theatricals popular at the time.

Thomas Lodge was one of the member of UNIVERSITY WITS. He contributed a lot in English drama before Shakespeare. In 1578 he entered Lincoln's Inn, where, as in the other Inns of Court, a love of letters and a crop of debts were common. Lodge, disregarding the wishes of his family, took up literature. When the penitent Stephen Gosson had (in 1579) published his *Schoole of Abuse*, Lodge responded with *Defence of Poetry, Music and Stage Plays* (1579 or 1580), which shows a certain restraint, though both forceful and learned. The pamphlet was banned, but appears to have been circulated privately.

George Peele was christened on 25 July 1556. His father, who appears to have belonged to a Devonshire family, was clerk of Christ's Hospital, and wrote two treatises on bookkeeping. Peele was educated at Christ's Hospital, and entered Broadgates Hall (Pembroke College), Oxford, in 1571. In 1574 he removed to Christ Church, taking his B.A. degree in 1577, and proceeding M.A. in 1579. In that year, the governors of Christ's Hospital requested their clerk to "discharge his house of his son, George Peele." He went up to London about 1580, but in 1583 when Albertus Alasco (Albert Laski), a Polish nobleman, was entertained at Christ Church, Peele was entrusted with the arrangement of two Latin plays by William Gager (fl.1580-1619) presented on the occasion.

John Lyly was born in Kent, England, in 1553 or 1554. According to Anthony Wood, at the age of sixteen Lyly became a student at Magdalen College, Oxford, where he proceeded to earn bachelor's and master's degrees (1573 and 1575), and in 1574 applied to Lord Burghley "for the queen's letters to Magdalen College to admit him fellow." The fellowship, however, was not granted, and Lyly subsequently left the university. He complains about a sentence of rustication apparently passed on him at some time, in his address to the gentlemen scholars of Oxford affixed to the second edition of the first part of *Euphues*,

Thomas Kyd was the son of Francis and Anna Kyd and was baptized in the church of St Mary Woolnoth in the Ward of Langborn, Lombard Street, London on 6 November 1558. The baptismal register at St. Mary Woolnoth carries this entry: "Thomas, son of Francis Kyd, Citizen and Writer of the Courte Letter of London". Francis Kyd was a scrivener and in 1580 was warden of the Scriveners' Company. In October 1565 the young Kyd was enrolled in the newly founded Merchant Taylors' School, whose headmaster was Richard Mulcaster. Fellow students included Edmund Spenser and Thomas Lodge. Here, Kyd received a well-rounded education, thanks to Mulcaster's progressive ideas. Apart from Latin and Greek, the curriculum included music, drama, physical education, and "good manners". *The Spanish Tragedie* was probably written in the mid to late 1580s. The earliest surviving edition was printed in 1592; the full title being, *The Spanish Tragedie, Containing the lamentable end of Don Horatio, and Bel-imperia: with the pittifull death of olde Hieronimo*. However, the play was usually known

simply as "Hieronimo", after the protagonist. It was arguably the most popular play of the "Age of Shakespeare" and set new standards in effective plot construction and character development.

A non-university Wit: William Shakespeare (baptised 26 April 1564; died 23 April 1616), was an English poet and playwright, widely regarded as the greatest writer in the English language and the world's pre-eminent dramatist. He is often called England's national poet and the "Bard of Avon". His surviving works, including some collaborations, consist of about 38 plays, 154 sonnets, two long narrative poems, and several other poems. His plays have been translated into every major living language and are performed more often than those of any other playwright. Shakespeare was born and raised in Stratford-upon-Avon. Between 1585 and 1592, he began a successful career in London as an actor, writer, and part owner of a playing company called the Lord Chamberlain's Men, later known as the King's Men. He appears to have retired to Stratford around 1613-16.

According to Shakespeare, "All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players: they have their exits and their entrances; and one man in his time plays many parts..

As You Like It, Act II, Scene 7.

Works of William Shakespeare

Comedies

Main article: Shakespearean comedy

- *All's Well That Ends Well*
- *As You Like It*
- *The Comedy of Errors*
- *Love's Labour's Lost*
- *Measure for Measure*
- *The Merchant of Venice*
- *The Merry Wives of Windsor*
- *A Midsummer Night's Dream*
- *Much Ado About Nothing*
- *Pericles, Prince of Tyre*
- *The Taming of the Shrew*
- *The Tempest* *
- *Twelfth Night*
- *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*
- *The Two Noble Kinsmen*
- *The Winter's Tale*

Histories

Main article: Shakespearean history

- *King John*
- *Richard II*
- *Henry IV, Part 1*
- *Henry IV, Part 2*
- *Henry V*
- *Henry VI, Part 1*
- *Henry VI, Part 2*
- *Henry VI, Part 3*
- *Richard III*
- *Henry VIII*

Tragedies

Main article: Shakespearean tragedy

- *Romeo and Juliet*
- *Coriolanus*
- *Titus Andronicus*
- *Timon of Athens*
- *Julius Caesar*
- *Macbeth*
- *Hamlet*
- *Troilus and Cressida*
- *King Lear*
- *Othello*
- *Antony and Cleopatra*
- *Cymbeline*

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