

# The University Wits

A group of six feisty, well- educated men chose to write for the public stage, taking over native traditions. They brought new coherence in structure, and real wit and poetic power to the language. The decade of the 1590s, just before Shakespeare started his career, saw a radical transformation in popular drama. They transformed the native interlude (a short, simple dramatic entertainment) and chronicle play into a potentially great drama by writing plays of quality and diversity

- John Lyly (1554-1606)\*
- Thomas Lodge (c.1558-1625)\*
- Christopher Marlowe (1564-1593)\*
- Robert Greene (1560-1592)\*
- Thomas Nashe (1567-1601)\*
- George Peele

## (1) John Lyly (1554-1606)

Always on the fringe of the Court, Lyly never achieved the fame he sought. He is best known for his elaborate prose style, named after his moral prose romance, *Euphues, the Anatomy of Wit*, but he wrote several original comedies for the Court. His plays were performed by the child actors, the Children of the Chapel Royal, and the Paul's Boys.

## (2) Thomas Lodge (c.1558-1625)

Lodge's activities as dramatist were limited, but he collaborated with other writers of the period. The most popular of his joint efforts was a play he wrote with Robert Greene, *A Looking Glass for London and England*.

His prose romance *Rosalynde*--still eminently readable--was the source for Shakespeare's *As You Like It*.

## (3) Christopher Marlowe (1564-1593)

Born the same year as Shakespeare, Marlowe rose to deserved fame as a playwright well before Shakespeare had produced plays of real substance. Marlowe was rightly characterised by Ben Jonson as the creator of the "mighty line"--blank verse of great rhetorical power.

He was killed in a tavern brawl at the young age of 29.

#### **(4) Robert Greene (1560-1592)**

Robert Greene, six years older than Shakespeare, has the melancholy distinction of being best remembered as the first negative critic of Shakespeare.

He was a perfectly competent, even original dramatist in his own right, wrote prose romances in the style of Lyly, and wrote a number of pamphlets on the subject of the London underworld of his time.

After a life of some dissolution, he died in 1592, just after writing *A Groats-worth of Witte, Bought with a Million of Repentance*, the pamphlet in which he attacked Shakespeare. Ironically, one of his romances, *Pandosto*, was the source of Shakespeare's play *The Winter's Tale*.

His best, and best-known, play is *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay*, written at about the same time as Marlowe's more famous *Doctor Faustus*, and dealing with the same subject of magic and the occult.

#### **(5) Thomas Nashe (1567-1601)**

As a dramatist, Nashe is remembered for one odd satirical pastoral-cum-masque, *Summer's Last Will and Testament*, written for performance by child actors and designed to be acted in the Great Hall of a nobleman's house.

Nashe also wrote one scandalous play that has disappeared: *The Isle of Dogs*, written in collaboration with the young Ben Jonson, ended up with Jonson in jail for "seditious and slanderous" language. Nashe's love of political satire, very much in evidence in his pamphlets, seems to have gone too far in this case.

Nashe's best work is his prose narrative, *The Unfortunate Traveller*, a tale of the adventures of a young page in the time of Henry VIII.

#### **(6) George Peele**

An unlikely product of the streets of London and the University of Oxford, Peele lived a short and rather scandalous life as a writer--of commemorative verses, lyrics (some of great beauty), and plays.

One play, *The Arraignment of Paris*, is a particularly good example of the Court drama of flattery, in praise of the Virgin Queen (click for more).

Of particular interest to readers of Shakespeare is his *Old Wives' Tale*, a play which explores the tradition of romantic comedy (like *Clyomon and Clamydes*, though more sophisticated) within the framework of a play-within-a-play, rather like the (incomplete) frame of *The Taming of the Shrew*.

Peele also took advantage of the growing convention of mingling several plots in the one play, so that often the action of the main plot was parodied in the sub-plot.

## **Conclusion :**

As a group, then, these contemporaries illustrate well the possible attitudes of an educated man of their time toward the drama. Midway between Lyly and his successful practice of the drama, which for the most cultivated men and women of his day, maintained and developed standards supplied to him, at least in part, by his university, and Thomas Lodge, who put the drama aside as beneath a cultivated man of manifold activities, stand Nashe, Peele and Greene. Nashe, feeling the attraction of a popular and financially alluring form, shows no special fitness for it, is never really at home in it and gives it relatively little attention. Peele, properly endowed for his best expression in another field, spends his strength in the drama because, at the time, it is the easiest source of revenue, and turns from the drama of the cultivated to the drama of the less cultivated or the uncultivated. Greene, from the first, is the facile, adaptive purveyor of wares to which he is helped by his university experience, but to which he gives a highly popular presentation. Through Nashe and Lodge, the drama gains nothing. Passing through the hands of Lyly, Greene and even Peele, it comes to Shakespeare something quite different from what it was before they wrote.

University-bred one and all, these five men were proud of their breeding. However severe from time to time might be their censures of their intellectual mother, they were always ready to take arms against the unwarranted assumption, as it seemed to them, of certain dramatists who lacked this university training, and to confuse them by the sallies of their wit. One and all, they demonstrated their right to the title bestowed upon them—"university wits."