

## THE UNIVERSITY WITS

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### **Abstract**

The University wits were the young scholars associated with Oxford and Cambridge Universities, in the Late 16th Century. The term was coined by Saintsbury. The University wits were the professional writers. They were fond of heroic themes, splendid descriptions, long speeches and emotional incidents. The medium for expression was 'blank verse'. The theme was tragic in nature. The University wits were John Lyly, George Peele, Thomas Kyd, Robert Greene, Thomas Lodge, Christopher Marlowe and Thomas Nash. They were associated with the theatre and with their contribution; the English drama reached the highest point of glory. John Lyly was a comic playwright. He used delicacy and charm in his plays. He selected classical theme in his writings. George Peele was a versatile dramatist. His plays had a poetic element. He wrote plays of dramatic criticism. Robert Greene was a novelist and a playwright. He developed romantic comedy. He was known for his best plots in the dramas. Thomas Kyd was known for tragedy. He influenced William Shakespeare and other writers. He was a writer and a translator. Thomas Lodge was a writer and an actor. He used lyrics in his play. He was known for his prose romances and creative works. Marlowe was the greatest of all the wits. He used blank verse in his writings. He was a writer, a poet and a translator. He was known for his unique characterization. Thomas Nash was pamphleteer and playwright. He used literary codes and gestures in his writing. He was a satirist, poet and a singer. He was the most elusive of all the university wits. 'University wits', the term was coined by George Saintsbury, 19th century journalist and an author. 'wit' refers to scholars. They were a group of young dramatists, who were the writers and the performers of late 16th century. They were known as the predecessors of William Shakespeare. They reformed the 16th century theatres.

**Keywords:** Wits, Blank verse, Mighty line, Pastoral, Myth

### **The University Wits Term:**

The University Wits, the term was coined by George Saintsbury, journalist and author of 19th century 'Wit' refers to scholars. 'University Wits' is a phrase used for English playwrights of 16th century, who were educated at the university i.e. Cambridge or Oxford and became popular writers.

### **Writers**

'The University wits' were the graduates from Cambridge University namely Christopher Marlowe, Robert Greene, Thomas Nash. Members from Oxford University were Thomas Lodge, George Peele, John Lyly (studied at both the universities). Another of the wits was Thomas Kyd, who was not from university.

### **Period**

The group of young dramatists belonged to the early Elizabethan period in 1590's, just before William Shakespeare. So, they were called Shakespeare's contemporaries.

### **Theme**

The members of the 'University Wits' were well educated dramatists, who wrote for the public stage by following the native traditions. They included poetic power in writing. They mainly wrote on heroic themes like lives of great figures and tragedies. They used splendid descriptions, magnificent epithets and coarse humour.

All the writers of the university wits were the actors and dramatists of theatre. They had a clear idea of the demand and interest of the audience for the plays. Thus, English drama received lot of glory and fame.

### **John Lyly (1553 – 1606)**

John Lyly was considered to be one of the earliest dramatist of the Elizabethan period. He was an important contributor to English plays and an inspiration to the young dramatists like Thomas Kyd and William Shakespeare. His popular literary works, "Euphues: The Anatomy of wit" (1578), "Euphues and His England" (1580). It deals with the topics of religion and love. He used similes to make an elegant prose. His plots contained myths and legends. He was appointed as 'Master of Revels', an officer to review and license the place in London. Lyly's plays were performed publically as well as privately for Queen Elizabeth. "Campaspe" (1584) was his funniest play which entertained the audience. Moreover, he dealt with classical myth. He used a powerful language in 'Endymion' (1588), 'Gallathea' (1588), which had a pastoral comedy. He wrote a mythological play 'Midas' (1589), 'Love's Metamorphosis' (1601). Thus, he was the first English prose stylist, who had left an enduring impression in the field of literature.

### **George Peele (1556 – 1596)**

George Peele was a writer and translator. He wrote tragedy, comedy, history, melodrama and the first, to provide pageants in London. He was known as a 'Song writer' which could be traced from his 'The Arraignment of Paris (1584). 'Bethosobe', written in (1588). He wrote 'The Battle of Alcazar' (1591) a chronicle history. He gained a lot of reputation from his chronicle play 'The Famous Chronicle of King Edward the First' (1593). He wrote an

interesting dramatic works, 'The old wives tale', published in 1595, brought him lot of fame. 'A farewell to Arms published in 1929 is one of his poetry collections. He was a member of the famous Lord Admiral's Company and the Queen's men. He wrote many plays of history, melodrama, pastoral, tragedy, pageant and folk play. George was a part of the university scholars. He was considered genius for adding songs to his plays. The poetical quality of his blank verse witnessed in 'David'. His blank verse had more ease and variety. His contemporaries praised him for his skilful blank verse.

### **Thomas Kyd (1558 – 1594)**

Thomas Kyd, best known for tragedy. He was an important English playwright to develop the Elizabethan drama. He became famous for his revenge play, 'The Spanish Tragedy', written between 1582 – 1592. His translation, 'Householder's Philosophy' (1588). He had long been associated with 'Hamlet' play, referred as 'Ur – Hamlet'. It was also believed that Shakespeare might have used it for his writings. Shakespeare was influenced with the writings of Kyd.

Kyd's verse proved to be powerful and emotional. His work 'The Truth of the Most Wicked and Secret Murdering of John Brewen' (1592) was one of his major writings. 'Cornelia' (1594), a translation of a play by Robert Garnier. He made important contribution to an Elizabethan era. He was known for his originality and invention. His formulae of introducing bloody tragedies, gave him lot of popularity. The Puritans objected immortality but audience demanded for the tragedies. He stressed on 'heroic' aspect where the heroes had to choose between the two i.e. women or responsibility. The context was sentimental and the theme was 'Revenge'. He had a talent as a great dramatist. His works were the masterpieces and great accomplishments.

### **Robert Greene (1558 – 1592)**

Robert Greene, known to the world as a lyric poet, incorporated poems and songs in his romances. He was an Elizabethan dramatist known for his critics. He wrote Pamphlets, plays and autobiography. With the publication of 'Mamillia' (1580) , he received a lot of appreciation and recognition. Nearly twenty five of his prose works were written in a variety of genres. He became 'England's celebrity author'.

Greene wrote his romances in a wrought style, 'Pandosto' (1588) and 'Menaphon' (1589). He became famous for his plays, 'The Troublesome Reign of King John' (1591), 'The Black Book's Messenger' (1592), 'Selimus' (1594), 'Lochrine' (1595), 'The Scottish History of James IV' (1598), 'John of Borbeaux' (1936).

Greene worked as a construction worker, editor, translator, movie writer and a successful predecessor of Shakespeare. He was the professional writer and well known autobiographer. He used comic elements in his drama's. Shakespeare got inspired with his plays and the people of London liked his poetry and artistic vision. His plays had malicious wit and a powerful imagination.

### **Thomas Lodge (1558 – 1625)**

Thomas Lodge known as a great dramatist and poet of Elizabethan age. He wrote Pamphlets and innovative prose writings. He became famous for his prose romance 'Rosalynde' (1590) Thomas Lodge was an actor and he wrote many lyrical poems. He collaborated with Shakespeare in Henry VI and with other dramatists like Robert Greene. He became famous for his romantic work 'A Margarite of America' (1596). He used fine lyrics in his works. His well known Pamphlets 'Wits Miserie, and the world's Madnesse' (1596) brought him reputation. He was a translator and he translated 'The Famous and Memorable Works of Josephus' (1602). His later works include 'A Treatise of the Plague' (1603), 'The Works of Lucius Annaeus Seneca' (1614). He used classical, French and Italian sources for his creativity.

### **Christopher Marlowe (1564 – 1593)**

Christopher Marlowe was one among the most famous writers of the Elizabethan period. He was a writer, Poet and a Translator. He had influenced Shakespeare, for his writings. He was well known for his blank verse and a realistic approach.

Marlowe's greatest success was visible with his plays, 'Translation of Ovid's Elegies' (1582), 'Translation of Lucan's Pharsalia' (1582), 'Tamburlaine' (1590), 'The Jew of Malta' (1592), 'Doctor Faustus' (1604). He was an admired writer of his age.

Marlowe was proved to be a social writer with his work 'The Massacre at Paris' (1593). He wrote Morality plays, a good angel and a bad angel. He used historical themes for his writing, the central character with lust of power. He used 'Mighty Line' as an instrument for his expressions. He wrote the poem 'Hero and Leander' (1598), which brought instant recognition. He had splendid imagination, poetic beauty, wide knowledge of human life and good characterization.

### **Thomas Nash (1567 – 1601)**

Thomas Nash, the youngest of the University of Wit, a singer of Saints John College, Cambridge. He is famous Pamphleteer a playwright.

Nash constructed a corporate a social identity through literary codes and gestures. 'Pierce Penniless' (1592) was one among the famous Pamphlets. He finished Marlowe's 'The Tragedy of Dido' (1594). He wrote a satirical Masque, 'summers Last Will and Testament' (1600). He was described as the most elusive of all the university wits. Nash is known today as a playwright, satirist, poet and Pamphleteer.

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