

## The University Wits

Introduction:

The University Wits were a group of well-educated scholars-cum-men of letters who wrote in the closing years of the sixteenth century. All of them were actively associated with the theatre and the plays written by them mark a pronounced stage of development over the drama which existed before them. With their dramatic work they paved the way for the great Shakespeare who was indebted to them in numerous ways. Given below are the names of these University Wits:

- (1) John Lyly
- (2) Robert Greene
- (3) George Peele
- (4) Thomas Lodge
- (5) Thomas Nashe
- (6) Thomas Kyd
- (7) Christopher Marlowe

They were called University Wits because they had training at one or other of the two Universities-Oxford and Cambridge. The only exception, and that a doubtful one, was Thomas Kyd. Apart from academic training (in most cases, an M. A. degree) they had numerous characteristics in common. They were members of learned societies and rather liberal in their views concerning God and morality. They were all reckless Bohemians and had their lives cut short by excessive debauchery or a violent death. Marlowe was killed in a street brawl, perhaps over bought kisses, and Greene, after a career of unfettered self-dissipation, died friendless and penniless and in a very touchingly repentant frame of mind. Further, in their intellectualism they were true embodiments of the impact of the Renaissance on English culture and sensibility. Then, all of them had fairly good relations with one another and were wont freely to lend a hand to one another in the writing or completing of dramatic works.

Their Contribution to the Drama:

Whatever may be said against their reproachable careers as human beings, it will have to be admitted that, to quote Allardyce Nicoll, "they laid a sure basis for the English theatre." For understanding appropriately the contribution of the University Wits in this respect we should first acquaint ourselves with the state of the English drama before them. Now, when the University Wits started writing there were two fairly distinct traditions of the dramatic art before them. One was the native tradition (especially of comedy) which was vigorous, no doubt, but devoid of the artistic discipline of the classical Greek and Roman drama. The other was the tradition set by the imitators of ancient Roman drama. Such works as Sackville and Norton's *Gorboduc* (tragedy) and Ralph Roister Doister (comedy) are instances of this tradition. These plays, though they exhibit ample awareness of the classical form and control, are devoid of the vigour of the purely native plays. Differentiating between the popular and classical tradition, Allardyce Nicoll observes: "The classicists had form but no fire; the popular dramatists had interest, but little sense of form." The function of the University Wits was to combine the form with the fire. They had plenty of "fire" in them, all being reckless hedonists, but they had also the sense of form acquired by them from training in classical learning. While retaining in their dramatic works the vigour of the popular native tradition, they

gave them that literary grace and power which offered Shakespeare "a viable and fitting medium for the expression of his genius."

One thing which needs to be amply emphasised is that though the University Wits looked to the classical drama and incorporated its general respect of form in their own productions, they never imitated it slavishly. They retained for themselves sufficient freedom, sometimes even that of violating its well-recognised principles such as the strict separation of the species (comedy and tragedy, for instance), the observance of "the three unities" (those of time, place, and action), and the reporting of the major incidents to the audience through the dialogue of the dramatis personae or the agency of the messenger. What they established upon the English stage was not a pale copy of the ancient Greek or Roman drama, but a kind of romantic drama which was to be later adopted by Shakespeare himself. Lyly, Greene, and Peele contributed much towards the establishment of the romantic comedy, and Kyd and Marlowe, Elizabethan tragedy. Besides, Marlowe in his *Edward II* set an example of the historical play for Shakespeare and others.

Further, the University Wits set about the work of reforming the language of the drama. They made the medium of dramatic utterance extremely pliant and responsive to all the various moods endeavoured to be conveyed through it. Lyly lent the language of comedy, especially the prose, a wonderfully sophisticated touch, Peele gave it a rare sweetness, and Greene, considerable geniality and openness. As regards the language of tragedy, Kyd did not do much except introducing exaggerative bombast (which is not always without vigour), but Marlowe breathed into it that consuming intensity coupled with virtuosic brilliance which thrilled his contemporaries and thrills us even today. Blank verse became Marlowe's "mighty line."

Now let us consider the individual contribution of the various University Wits to the development of English drama.

(1) John Lyly (1554-1606):

Lyly is better known for his prose romance *Euphues* than his dramatic productions. It must be remembered that he himself was a courtier and wrote for the discerning courtiers. He had no intention to charm the eyes and ears of the masses or to win their acclamation. His plays are rather of the nature of masques which were very popular with the queen and the court. He gave comedy a touch of sophistication and an intellectual tone lacking in the native comedy which was predominantly of the nature of rough-and-tumble farce. Lyly wrote eight plays in all out of which *Compaspe*, *Endunion*, and *Gallathea* are the best and the best known. And though all the eight are, broadly speaking, comedies, yet they can be roughly divided, after Nicoll, into three groups as follows:

- (i) those which are allegorical and mythical in tone;
- (ii) those which display realistic features ; and
- (iii) those which mark the introduction of more or less historical features.

Lyly's plays are the production of scholarship united to an elegant fancy and a somewhat fantastic wit, but not of a writer capable of moving the passions or of depicting character by subtle and felicitous touches. Broadly speaking, Lyly's achievement is to have synthesised many mutually antagonistic elements which had till then lain unreconciled. His was a Renaissance mind working synthetically on the native material before him. For instance we have frequently in his plays a courtly main plot (in

which such characters as kings, queens, princes, princesses, knights, fairies, pagan and Greek and Roman deities figure) supported by a sub-plot setting forth the blunders of villagers. Lyly strangely amalgamates humour and romantic imagination and in this way paves the way for Shakespeare who does likewise in many of his comedies. In his plays Lyly used a mixture of verse and prose. This mixing of the two is suggestive of his mixing of the world of reality and the world of romance. "The same fusion", observes Nicoll, "is to be discovered in As You Like It". Lyly found a suitable blank verse for comedy as Marlowe did for tragedy. Whereas Marlowe's blank verse is characterized by consuming intensity and mouth-filling bombast, Lyly's is by its lightness of touch suitable for comedy. The prose that Lyly used in his comedies is sometimes mannered after the style of his Euphues; it is full of puns, far-fetched conceits, and verbal pyrotechnics which Shakespeare incorporated in his early comedies such as Love's Labour Lost and A Midsummer Night's Dream.

Robert Greene (1558-92):

Greene wrote some five plays in all. They are : (i) The Comical History of Alphonso King of Aragon

(ii) A Looking Glass for London and England (written jointly with Lodge)

(iii) The Honourable History of Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay

(iv) The History of Orlando Furioso

(v) The Scottish History of James, the Fourth.

Out of them the most important and interesting is Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay. With this play and James IV, Greene contributed substantially towards the establishment of the romantic comedy. He effects two kinds of fusion:

(a) The fusion of various plots and sub-plots; and

(b) the fusion of various moods and worlds in one and the same play.

In Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay, for instance, there are, in the words of Nicoll, "three distinct worlds mingled together-the world of magic, the world of aristocratic life, and the world of the country. These, by his art, Greene has woven together into a single harmony, showing the way to Shakespeare when the latter came to write A Midsummer Night's Dream." As regards characterisation, Nicoll gives Greene the credit of being "the first to draw the Rosalinds and Celias of Elizabethan times." Dorothea, the heroine of his comedy James IV which has romantic love for its theme, is the best known of all the female characters in Elizabethan drama excluding Shakespeare's works. Further, as regards Greene's handling of blank verse which he used as the medium of his comedies, it may be observed that he gave it more flexibility than the imitators of the classical models allowed it.

(3) George Peele (1558-97):

The five plays of Peele extant today are:

(i) The Arraignment of Paris (a pastoral play)

(ii) The Battle of Alcazar (a romantic tragedy)

(iii) The Famous Chronicle of King Edward, the First (a chronicle history)

(iv) The Love of King David and Fair Bathsheba (a kind of mystery play for it has a biblical theme)'

(v) The Old Wives' Tale (a romantic satire on the current dramatic taste)

The list shows Peele's versatility as a dramatist. However, his plays are not marked by any technical brilliance. What is of interest to us is his excellence as a poet. "Certainly",

observes Compton-Rickett, "he shares with Marlowe the honour of informing blank verse with musical ability that, in the later hand of Shakespeare, was to be one of its most important characteristics." But it is Peele's fault that "he allows poetry to enter into scenes from which it ought to be excluded" (Nicoll). For instance, when Absalom in David and Bathsheba finds his own hair about to hang him to death, he bursts into a poetic utterance:

What angry angel sitting in these shades,  
Hath laid his cruel hands upon my hair .  
And holds my body thus twixt heaven and earth?

(4) Thomas Lodge (1558-1625) and

(5) Thomas Nashe (1567-1601):

Their dramatic work is inconsiderable. Lodge who was, according to Gosson, "little better than a vagrant, looser than liberty, lighter than vanity itself," was, in Nicoll's words, "the least of the University Wits ", for he "gave practically nothing to the theatre." He has left only one play, The Wounds of Civil War. Both Nashe and he are much more important for their fiction than dramatic art.

(6) Thomas Kyd (1557-97):

His only play The Spanish Tragedy is modelled on Seneca's revenge tragedies which before Kyd had been imitated by some scholars like Sackville and Norton, the writers of Gorboduc. But whereas Gorboduc was rather slavishly and strictly based on Seneca, Kyd is much more flexible in his attempt. Of course there are murders and bloodshed, suicides and horrifying incidents (like the biting off of a man's tongue by himself and the running amuck of a respectable lady), the ghost and many other Senecan features, yet The Spanish Tragedy breaks away from the Senecan tradition on various points. For example, there is much of action on the stage itself (and not reported, as in Seneca). Moreover, though, after Seneca, it has for its leitmotif revenge (Heironimo's revenge for the murder of his son) yet there is strong external action. The Elizabethan audiences had a craving for watching sensational, even horrifying action. Kyd was obliging enough. Nicoll aptly describes The Spanish Tragedy as "a Senecan play adapted to popular requirements."

Kyd's contribution to English tragedy is twofold. First, he gave a new kind of tragic hero who was neither a royal personage nor a superman but an ordinary person. Secondly, he introduced the element of introspection in the hero. Along with the external conflict in the play, we are conscious of a kind of introspective self-analysis within Heironimo himself. In this; respect Kyd was paving the way for Shakespeare's Hamlet.

Kyd's blank verse was ridiculed for its pomposity and exaggeration even by his contemporaries-who had an ear for high-sounding words. Like Seneca's tragic style, Kyd's also has the element of rhetoric in it. Kyd's extravagance is sometimes annoying but we must remember Compton-Rickett's words that "even extravagance is better than lifelessness."

(7) Christopher Marlowe (1564-93):

He is, in Nicoll's words, "the most talented of pre-Shakespeareans." His plays are:

- (i) Tamburlaine, the Great;
- (ii) Doctor Faustus;
- (iii) the Jew of Malta;
- (iv) Edward, the Second; and

(v) Parts of The Massacre at Paris and Dido Queen of Carthage.

Marlowe's contribution to English tragedy is very vital and manifold. He himself seems to be aware of having scored an advance over the previous drama. In the prologue to his first play he sets his manifesto in these lines :

From jiggling veins of rhyming mother wits,  
And such conceits as clownage keeps in pay,  
We will lead you to the stately tent of war.

Marlowe promises that his play is going to be different from the conventional plays in both its language and subject. And he, indeed, keeps his promise.

First of all, Marlowe exalted and varied the subject-matter of tragedy. For the Senecan motive of revenge he substituted the more interesting theme of ambition—ambition for power as in Tamburlaine, ambition for infinite knowledge as in Doctor Faustus, and ambition for gold as in The Jew of Malta.

Secondly, he put forward a new kind of the tragic hero. The medieval concept of tragedy was the fall of a great man. See, for instance, the words of the Monk in Chaucer's Canterbury Tales.

Tragedie is to seyn a certyne storie,  
As old bokes maken us memorie,  
Of hym who stood in great prosperitie  
And is y-fallen out of high degree  
Into miserie and endeth wretchedly.

Marlowe revived the Aristotelean conception of the tragic hero in so far as he introduced a certain flaw or flaws in his character. His heroes are air supermen whose major flaw is always an over-weening ambition. Their love is the love of the impossible; but with a singular intensity and concentration of purpose, they make headway towards their destination though they perish by forces beyond their control. Thus, there is a dramatic conflict between their ambition and the antagonistic forces of life which stand in its way. But along with this outer conflict, there is, at least in Doctor Faustus, a struggle in the mind of the chief character also. This was something new for English tragedy.

Next, he gave a greater unity to the drama. This he did in Edward II. The rest of his plays are weak in structure, being loose strings of scenes and episodes. But as he matured he acquired a greater technical and constructive skill.

One of Marlowe's chief merits is his reformation of the chronicle plays of his time. They were formless and poor in characterisation. Marlowe humanised the puppets of these plays and introduced motives in them. Also he gave shape and internal development to his plots. He handled the crude historical material judiciously and artistically, selecting some, rejecting some, and modifying some, so as to suit his dramatic purpose. Out of the formlessness of old chronicle Marlowe produced a play which is a genuine tragedy and the model for Shakespeare's Richard II.

Last but not the least is Marlowe's establishment of blank verse as an effective and pliant medium of tragic utterance. His blank verse is immensely superior to the blank verse of Gorboduc, the first tragedy which employed this measure. He found it wooden, mechanical, and lifeless and breathed into it a scarifying intensity 'of passion which electrified it into something living^and throbbing with energy. He substituted the end-stopped lines of Gorboduc with run-on lines forming verse paragraphs. True, some element of bombast is perceptible in Marlowe's earlier works, but in Edward II his style

becomes quite subdued and answers more readily to the whole gamut of varying moods sought to be conveyed through it. He made blank verse a great dramatic medium acknowledged by all his successors as the metre indispensable for any serious drama. With Marlowe, indeed, begins a new era in the history of-English drama.