THE UNIVERSITY WITS

PREPARED FOR B. A. (H) - I

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THE UNIVERSITY WITS is a phrase used to name a group of late 16th-century English playwrights and pamphleteers who were educated at the universities of Oxford and Cambridge and who became popular secular writers. Prominent members of this group were Christopher Marlowe, Robert Greene, and Thomas Nashe from Cambridge, and John Lyly, Thomas Lodge, and George Peele from Oxford. Thomas Kyd is also sometimes included in the group, though he is not believed to have studied at university.

This diverse and talented loose association of London writers and dramatists set the stage for the theatrical renaissance of Elizabethan England. They are identified as among the earliest professional writers in English, and prepared the way for the writings of William Shakespeare, who was born just two months after Christopher Marlowe.

In the history of the growth of English drama, particularly English tragedy, Seneca, the Latin dramatist who wrote in the first century AD, exercised enormous influence. His influence was felt in Cambridge between 1550 and 1560, and his appeal was so great that his ten tragedies were translated into English by 1581. When the universities were raging with Senecan blaze, Marlowe, Peele and Greene studied at the universities. These young men, and some of their followers, who knew each other were responsible for the emergence of the Elizabethan school of drama.
CHARACTERISTIC FEATURES: EDWARD ALBERT IN HIS HISTORY OF ENGLISH LITERATURE (1979) ARGUES THAT THE PLAYS OF THE UNIVERSITY WITS HAD SEVERAL FEATURES IN COMMON:

(A) THERE WAS A FONDNESS FOR HEROIC THEMES, SUCH AS THE LIVES OF GREAT FIGURES LIKE MOHAMMED AND TAMBURLAINE.

(B) HEROIC THEMES NEEDED HEROIC TREATMENT: GREAT FULLNESS AND VARIETY; SPLENDID DESCRIPTIONS, LONG SWELLING SPEECHES, THE HANDLING OF VIOLENT INCIDENTS AND EMOTIONS. THESE QUALITIES, EXCELLENT WHEN HELD IN RESTRAINT, ONLY TOO OFTEN LED TO LOUDNESS AND DISORDER.

(C) THE STYLE WAS ALSO ‘HEROIC’. THE CHIEF AIM WAS TO ACHIEVE STRONG AND SOUNDING LINES, MAGNIFICENT EPITHETS, AND POWERFUL DECLAMATION. THIS AGAIN LED TO ABUSE AND TO MERE BOMBAST, MOUTHING, AND IN THE WORST CASES TO NONSENSE. IN THE BEST EXAMPLES, SUCH AS IN MARLOWE, THE RESULT IS QUITE IMPRESSIVE. IN THIS CONNEXION IT IS TO BE NOTED THAT THE BEST MEDIUM FOR SUCH EXPRESSION WAS BLANK VERSE, WHICH WAS SUFFICIENTLY ELASTIC TO BEAR THE STRONG PRESSURE OF THESE EXPANSIVE METHODS.

(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. THE GENERAL LACK OF REAL HUMOUR IN THE EARLY DRAMA IS ONE OF ITS MOST PROMINENT FEATURES. HUMOUR, WHEN IT IS BROUGHT IN AT ALL, IS COARSE AND
IMMATURE. ALMOST THE ONLY REPRESENTATIVE OF THE WRITERS OF REAL COMEDIES IS LYLY.

FOR OBVIOUS REASONS, BLANK VERSE WAS THE MEDIUM SO THAT THE HIGH EMOTIONS COULD BE SUSTAINABLY EXPRESSED. SENEECA BEING THE GUIDING STAR, THE DRAMATISTS OPTED TO WRITE TRAGEDIES AND NEGLECTED TO WRITE COMEDIES, CONSIDERED A LOWER FORM OF DRAMATIC ART. NATURALLY, REAL HUMOUR WAS LACKING, AND EVEN IF PRESENT SOMEWHERE IT WAS COARSE AND BOORISH. COMEDY HAD A DAY WHEN LYLY APPEARED IN THE FIELD, AND HIS CAMPASPE (1584), ENDMION (1592) AND THE WOMAN IN THE MOONE ARE FORERUNNERS OF SHAKESPEARE’S ROMANTIC COMEDIES LIKE THE TWELFTH NIGHT OR AS YOU LIKE IT.

NAME OF THE UNIVERSITY WITS:

01. GEORGE PEELE (C.1558-98) WHO WAS BORN IN LONDON WAS EDUCATED AT BROADGATE HALL, OXFORD, WHERE HE COMPLETED HIS DEGREE IN ARTS IN 1579. PEELE WAS AN ACTOR AS WELL AS A WRITER OF PLAYS, AND FOR SOME TIME, HE WAS A MEMBER OF LORD ADMIRAL’S COMPANY. PEELE HAS LEFT BEHIND SOME HALF DOZEN PLAYS, RICH IN POETIC BEAUTY PARALLELED BY NONE EXCEPT MARLOWE’S. THE ARRAIGNMENT OF PARIS (C.1584) IS SUPPOSED TO BE HIS EARLIER WORK. A KIND OF ROMANTIC COMEDY, IT CONTAINS AN ELABORATE TRIBUTE TO THE QUEEN AND SHOWS GREAT SKILL IN THE VARIATION OF METRE. LESS MUSICAL THAN DAVID AND BATHSHEBA (1599), IT HAS SOME STRIKING PASSAGES OF MELODIOUS BEAUTY. DAVID AND BATHSHEBA CONTAINS MANY LINES OF GREAT BEAUTY –
"THE SWEEPING BEAUTY OF MARLOWE, BUT A GENTLER AND MORE INSINUATING CHARM." PEELE’S OTHER WORKS INCLUDE EDWARD I (1593), AN INCOHERENT CHRONICLE PLAY; THE OLD WIVES’ TALE, A CLEVER SATIRE ON THE POPULAR DRAMA OF THE DAY; THE HUNTING OF CUPID, AN EARLIER PLAY NOW LOST. PEELE’S POETICAL WORKS INCLUDE POLYHYMNIAS (1590), A POEM IN BLANK VERSE, THE HONOUR OF THE GARTER (1593), THE FALL OF TROY, AND A THUMB BOOK 1.5” X 1”.

02. ROBERT GREENE (1558-92) TOO WAS A STUDENT OF ST. JOHN’S COLLEGE, CAMBRIDGE, AND LATER OF CLARE HALL, OXFORD WHEREFROM HE TOOK HIS M.A. DEGREE IN 1583. HE LIVED A LECHEROUS LIFE, AND HIS LIFE, WHICH HAD MUCH PROMISE, CAME TO AN END NEARLY IN THE BUD. GREENE WAS, FIRST OF ALL, A STORYTELLER AND A PAMPHLETEER WHO TURNED TO DRAMA FOR THE LUCRE IT OFFERED. HIS PLAYS ARE FOUR IN NUMBER: ALPHONSUS, KING OF ARAGON, (1587); FRIAR BACON AND FRIAR BUNGAY (1589), ORLANDO FURIOSO (C.1591) AND THE SCOTTISH HISTORIE OF JAMES THE FOURTH (1592). ALPHONSUS IS MODELLED ON MARLOWE’S TAMBUURLAINE; ORLANDO FURIOSO (C.1591) HAS ITS SOURCE IN AN ENGLISH TRANSLATION OF ARIOSTO; AND THE SCOTTISH HISTORIE OF JAMES, THE FOURTH, STAGED IN 1592, IS NOT A HISTORICAL PLAY, BUT HAS FOR IT THEME AN IMAGINARY INCIDENT OF KING’S LIFE. FRIAR BACON AND FRIAR BUNGAY, THE FINEST OF GREENE’S WORKS IS A TALE OF LOVE OF A MAID WITH TWO MEN. THOUGH IT LACKS IN COMPLICATIONS THAT IT COULD HAVE, THE CHIEF MERIT OF THE PLAY LIES IN THE LIVELY METHOD OF PRESENTING THE STORY. IT CAN, TO A GREAT EXTENT, BE CALLED A DOCUMENT OF ELIZABETHAN LIFE.
GREENE WROTE THIRTY-FIVE PROSE PIECES. THEY ARE ALSO IMPORTANT WORKS IN THAT THEY REVEAL THE AUTHOR’S ERRATIC ENERGY, HIS QUICK, MALICIOUS WIT, AND HIS POWERFUL IMAGINATION. “GREENE IS WEAK IN CREATING CHARACTERS, AND HIS STYLE IS NOT OF OUTSTANDING MERIT, BUT HIS HUMOUR IS SOMEWHALE GENIAL IN HIS PLAYS, AND HIS METHODS LESS AUSTERE THAN THOSE OF OTHER TRAGEDIANS.”


04. CHRISTOPHER MARLOWE (1564-93): HE IS THE MOST IMPORTANT FIGURE AMONG THE UNIVERSITY WITS, THAT COULD BE PLACED IN THE RANK OF SHAKESPEARE. THE GREATEST AMONG THE PRE-SHAKESPEARIAN DRAMATISTS,
MARLOWE WAS EDUCATED AT CANTERBURY AND CAMBRIDGE. HE LED A DISSOLUTE LIFE, AND COULD BE ARRESTED BUT FOR HIS UNTIMELY DEATH IN A FIGHT IN A TAVERN.

THE “SWEET FRUITION OF AN EARTHLY CROWN”, IN **THE JEW OF MALTA**, BARABAS SEEKS “INFINITE RICHES IN A LITTLE ROOM”, WHILE THE QUEST IN **DOCTOR FAUSTUS** IS FOR INFINITE KNOWLEDGE. IF NOT THE FIRST EXPERIMENTER WITH **BLANK VERSE**, MARLOWE RAISED IT TO A CERTAIN HEIGHT. HIS VERSE IS NOTABLE FOR ITS BURNING ENERGY, ITS SPLENDOUR OF DICTION, ITS SENSUOUS RICHNESS, ITS VARIETY OF PACE, AND ITS RESPONSIVENESS TO THE DEMANDS OF VARYING EMOTIONS.’ MARLOWE’S CONTRIBUTION TO ENGLISH PLAY MAY BE SAID TO HAVE BEEN:

- **HE GLORIFIED THE MATTER OF THE DRAMA BY HIS SWEEP OF IMAGINATION AS REFLECTED IN THE STORIES.**
- **HE VITALIZED THE MANNER AND MATTER OF THE DRAMA, AS REFLECTED IN CHARACTERIZATION.**
- **HE CLARIFIED AND GAVE COHERENCE TO THE DRAMA, AS REFLECTED IN HIS BLANK VERSE.**

05. THE ‘UNIVERSITY WITS’ INCLUDE ANOTHER PLAYWRIGHT, **THOMAS NASH (1567-1601)**. AFTER COMPLETING HIS EDUCATION AT CAMBRIDGE, HE WENT IN 1586 TO LONDON TO EARN BY WRITING. HE TOOK AN ACTIVE PART IN THE POLITICAL AND PERSONAL QUESTIONS OF THE DAY, AND HIS AGGRESSIVE METHOD TOOK HIM BEHIND THE BARS. HE FINISHED MARLOWE’S **THE TRAGEDY OF DIDO**, BUT HIS ONLY SURVIVING PLAY IS **SUMMER’S LAST WILL AND TESTAMENT**, A SATIRICAL MASQUE. NASH ALSO WROTE **THE UNFORTUNATE TRAVELLER OR**
THE LIFE OF JACKE WILTON (1594), A PROSE TALE THAT HAS ENOUGH IMPORTANCE IN THE GROWTH ENGLISH FICTION.

06. BORN IN THE SAME YEAR (1558) AS THOMAS NASH, THOMAS LODGE (1558-1625) WAS EDUCATED AT BOTH OXFORD AND CAMBRIDGE WHERE HE STUDIED LAW. HE, HOWEVER, GAVE UP HIS LEGAL STUDIES AND TOOK TO WRITING, AND WHILE WRITING, HE ACTED TOO. NASH PRODUCED VERY LITTLE IN QUANTITY, AND IT IS ASSUMED THAT HE COLLABORATED WITH SHAKESPEARE IN HENRY VI. THE WOUNDES OF CIVILE WAR, A KIND OF CHRONICLE PLAY, IS CONSIDERED TO BE LODGE’S OWN WORK. HE ALSO WROTE PROSE ROMANCES, THE MOST FAMOUS OF WHICH IS ROSALYNDE: EUPHUES GOLDEN LEGACIE (1590) WHICH WAS THE CHIEF SOURCE OF SHAKESPEARE’S AS YOU LIKE IT.

CHARM BY A GREAT MEASURE. HIS DIALOGUES ARE REALLY ADMIRABLE AT TIMES, HAPPY IN CLEAR-CUT PHRASES AND ALLUSIVENESS. AFTER ALL SAID AND DONE, THE FAME OF LYLY RESTS ON HIS PROSE WORK *EUPHUES* AND THE PLAY, *ENDYMION*.

WHILE *MARLOWE* IS THE MOST FAMOUS DRAMATIST AMONG THEM, *ROBERT GREENE* AND *THOMAS NASHE* WERE BETTER KNOWN FOR THEIR CONTROVERSIAL, RISQUÉ AND ARGUMENTATIVE PAMPHLETS, CREATING AN EARLY FORM OF JOURNALISM. *GREENE* HAS BEEN CALLED THE "FIRST NOTORIOUS PROFESSIONAL WRITER".

THE UNIVERSITY WITS WERE “A NEW SCHOOL OF PROFESSIONAL LITERARY MEN. OF THIS LITTLE CONSTELLATION, MARLOWE IS THE CENTRAL SUN, AND ROUND HIM REVOLVED AS MINOR STARS, LYLY, GREENE, PEELE, LODGE, AND NASH.” IN THEIR HANDS, ELIZABETHAN PERIOD SAW THE DRAMA IN ITS ADOLESCENCE, STRUGGLING HARD TO MATURITY THAT WAS ACCOMPLISHED BY *SHAKESPEARE*. 
FINALLY I FINISH MY LECTURE WITH FOLLOWING SLOGAN:

STAY AT HOME
STAY SAFE
STAY HEALTHY

SEE YOU ALL IN NEXT CLASS

THANK YOU