

# University wits

English dramatists

**University wits**, the notable group of pioneer English dramatists who wrote during the last 15 years of the 16th century and who transformed the native [interlude](#) and [chronicle play](#) with their plays of quality and [diversity](#).

The university wits include [Christopher Marlowe](#), [Robert Greene](#), and [Thomas Nashe](#) (all graduates of Cambridge), as well as [Thomas Lodge](#) and [George Peele](#) (both of Oxford). Another of the wits, though not university-trained, was [Thomas Kyd](#). Preceded by [John Lyly](#) (an Oxford man), they prepared the way for [William Shakespeare](#). The greatest poetic dramatist among them was Marlowe, whose handling of [blank verse](#) gave the theatre its characteristic voice for the next 50 years.

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 ([Oxford](#) or [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.

The term "University Wits" was not used in their lifetime, but was coined by [George Saintsbury](#), a 19th-century journalist and author.<sup>[1]</sup> Saintsbury argues that the "rising sap" of dramatic creativity in the 1580s showed itself in two separate "branches of the national tree":

In the first place, we have the group of university wits, the strenuous if not always wise band of professed men of letters, at the head of whom are Lyly, Marlowe, Greene, Peele, Lodge, Nash, and probably (for his connection with the universities is not certainly known) Kyd. In the second, we have the irregular band of outsiders, players and others, who felt themselves forced into literary and principally dramatic composition, who boast Shakespeare as their chief, and who can claim as seconds to him not merely the imperfect talents of Chettle, Munday, and others whom we may mention in this chapter, but many of the perfected ornaments of a later time.<sup>[2]</sup>

Saintsbury argues that the Wits drew on the ploddingly academic verse-drama of [Thomas Sackville](#), and the crude but lively popular entertainments of "miscellaneous farce-and-interlude-writers", to create the first truly powerful dramas in English. The University Wits, "with Marlowe at their head, made the blank verse line for dramatic purposes, dismissed, cultivated as they were, the cultivation of classical models, and gave English tragedy its Magna Charta of freedom and submission to the restrictions of actual life only". However, they failed "to achieve perfect life-likeness".<sup>[2]</sup> It was left to "the actor-playwrights who, rising from very humble beginnings, but possessing in their fellow Shakespeare a champion unparalleled in ancient and

modern times, borrowed the improvements of the university wits, added their own stage knowledge, and with Shakespeare's aid achieved the master drama of the world."<sup>[2]</sup>

The term "University Wits" was taken up by many writers in the 20th century to refer to the group of authors listed by Saintsbury, often using his basic model of dramatic development. [Adolphus William Ward](#) in *The Cambridge History of English Literature* (1932) has a chapter on "The Plays of the University Wits", in which he argues that a "pride in university training which amounted to arrogance" was combined with "really valuable ideas and literary methods".<sup>[3]</sup> In 1931, [Allardyce Nicoll](#) wrote that "it was left to the so-called University Wits to make the classical tragedy popular and the popular tragedy unified in construction and conscious of its aim."<sup>[4]</sup>

### Characteristics

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.<sup>[5]</sup>

G. K. Hunter argues that the new "Humanistic education" of the age allowed them to create a "complex commercial drama, drawing on the nationalisation of religious sentiment" in such a way that it spoke to an audience "caught in the contradictions and liberations history had imposed".<sup>[6]</sup>

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".<sup>[7]</sup>

## The University Wits

During the 16<sup>th</sup> century English drama settled into a regular entertainment. The stage offered massive opportunities for the dramatists, but it remained in a state of chaos. In the 1580s group of playwrights, who had their education either from Oxford or Cambridge, stepped into the theatre as professional playwrights and reformed it for once and all. They are known as University Wits. The group includes—John Lyly, George Peele, Robert Greene, Thomas Lodge, Thomas Kyd and Marlowe. With their professionalism, while they rescued English drama from the medieval mire of religion, they also paved the way for Shakespeare. John Lyly was the leader of the group. His receptive mind was hospitable to the more delicate graces of literature. In a series of witty comedies—Campaspe, Sapho and Phao, Endymion, Midas he addressed Elizabeth in delicate flattery praising by turn the charms of the chastity of the woman, the chastity of the virgin, the majority of the queen. It was Lyly who was largely responsible for the first elaboration of romantic sentiment.

Lyly wrote in Euphuistic prose, artificial in structure and language, but refined in manner, witty and graceful. Lyly's plays with their sparkle and courtly air the first artistic plays. They made ready the way for Shakespeare's Love's Labour's Lost, A Midsummer Night's Dream and As You Like It.

Like Lyly, George Peele flattered Elizabeth in his graceful pastoral, The arraignment of Paris. He used the same ornate manner in his scripture drama The Love of David and Fair Bathsabe in which he followed closely the Bible record. In his play Edward I, he turned to national history. He parodied the romanticists in The Old Wive's Tale. By far the most original of the peoples' plays was The Old Wive's Tale which has a perfect charm of romantic humour. Robert Greene was a member of both the universities. He tried an imitation entitled Alphonsus after Marlowe's Tamburlaine. His second play was written with Lodge and entitled The Looking Glass for London and England. It is a mixture of elements from the moralities and modern Elizabethan satire. Then there followed Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay and James IV. With Greene, we find a dramatic form in which realism and idealism meet.

Thomas Lodge was educated at Oxford. He was a facile writer and in a quick succession wrote two plays The Wounds of Civil War and A Looking Glass for London and England. But he is better known as the writer of euphuistic prose romance Rosalynde, the source for Shakespeare's As You Like It. another University Wit, Thomas Nash is known for his Summers Last Will and Testament and The Unfortunate Traveller.

Among Shakespeare's predecessors, Thomas Kyd and Marlowe occupy a permanent place. They were both influenced by Seneca, at the same time contributed something of their own towards the development of English tragedy. Though Kyd does not seem to have any of the universities, his contribution to drama is intrinsically as well as historically important. His Spanish Tragedy established itself as a lasting genre in the Elizabethan and Jacobean theatre in the form of revenge tragedy. [The central motive in the drama is the revenge of Hieronimo for the murder of his son, Horatio. The play is a well constructed; and Seneca's ghosts and revenge themes have freely been borrowed.] He wrote forceful and capable dialogue. He also presented in the hero a new type of vacillating tragic hero. At the time of Marlowe's arrival upon the English stage, the

English drama was in a chaotic stage. It needed a great genius who could give the drama its shape, direction and stability. And this was fulfilled by Marlowe. In the first place, he raised the subject matter to a higher level. He provided heroic subjects which appealed to his imagination. In his person the spirit of Renaissance—boundless passion or knowledge, power and beauty was incarnated. His heroes are Tamburlaine, Dr. Faustus, Barabas, embodying passion for world conquest, knowledge and wealth respectively. He gave life and reality to these characters. In the next place, he gave the approval of his authority on the blank verse of the classical school and put aside the old rhyming lines of the Romantic or native drama, “jigging veins of Rhyming mother-wits”, as he says in the Prologue to Tamburlaine. Marlowe also added to the conception of tragedy. He broke, partly with medieval conception in which tragedy was the fall of a great man. With him, as later with Shakespeare, tragedy results in catastrophe from some overweening feature of weakness of strength in the character himself. Here we see the medieval conception of the royalty of tragedy being supplanted by the Renaissance ideal of individual worth—virtue. Marlovian heroes are all governed by this virtue which leads them to ultimate tragedy. Marlowe was a great poet. His poetry raises crude medieval drama to the realm of high tragedy. The poignantly pathetic death scene of Faustus, the scene of King Edward at Kenilworth castle and the rapturous cry over the dying Zenocrate remain permanently in the mind of the reader.

<https://www.literaturewise.in/mdl/mod/page/view.php?id=127>

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/University\\_Wits](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/University_Wits)

<https://www.britannica.com/topic/University-Wits>