

B.A part-I

THE UNIVERSITY WITS

The English drama as it developed from the Miracle plays has an interesting history. It began with schoolmaster, like Udall, who translated and adapted Latin plays for their boys to act, and who were naturally governed by classic ideals.

The University Wits were usually actors as well as dramatists. They knew the stage and the audience and in writing their plays they remembered not only the actor's part but also the audience's love for stories and brave spectacles. Often their training began as actors and then they revised old plays, and finally became independent writer. They often worked either as Shakespeare worked with Marlowe and Fletcher either in revising old plays or in creating new ones. They had a common store of material from which they derived their stories and characters and so we find frequent repetition of names in their plays. They were romantic in their attitude and represented the spirit of the Renaissance.

The University Wits were more or less acquainted with each other, and most of them led irregular and stormy lives.

(a) There was a fondness for heroic themes, such as the lives of great like Mohammed and Tamburlaine.

(b) Heroic themes needed heroic treatment : length and variety, splendid descriptions, long swelling speeches, the handling of violent incident and emotions. These qualities, excellent when held in restraint, only too often led to loudness and disorder.

(c) The style also was '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 result is quite impressive. 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.

(1554-1606)
(a) **John Lyly**—Among the makers of Elizabethan comedy Lyly occupies the first rank and his plays have the refinement of tone, polished style, nimble wit and feminine delicacy about them which distinguish them sharply from the popular comedies of gross humour, vulgar witticism and rough blister and coarse mirth.

So Lyly established prose as the medium of comedy; he brought first of all the elements of high comedy on the English stage. High comedy demands a nice sense of phrase, and Lyly is the first great phrase-maker in English. He knew the use of skilled phrases for purposes of characterization and the weaving of plot. He gave great English comedy, after plot and characterization, the third great essential—a witty phraseology.

Peele's style can be violent to the point of absurdity; but he has his moments of real poetry; he can handle his blank verse with more ease and variety than was common at the time; he is fluent; he has humour and a fair amount of pathos. In short, he represents a great advance upon the earliest drama, and is perhaps one of the most attractive among the playwrights of the of the time.

Greece was the first to delineate woman in the manner of Shakespeare. He is called by Nashe 'the Homer of women'. He introduced the heroine disguised as a page, and the blending of the tragic and the comic. (1567-1601)

(d) **Nash** is more important for his fiction than drama. Being troubled with religious doubts he published his repentant reflections in Jerusalem. He finished Marlowe's *Dido*, but his only surviving play is *Summer's Last Will and Testament* (1952), a satirical masque.

(e) **Thomas Lodge**—According to Nicoll, he is the least of University Wits, who gave nothing practical to the theatre. His only play is *The Wounds of Civil War*. He probably collaborated with Shakespeare in *Henry VI*. The chief point that distinguishes him from his contemporaries is his comic attitude towards life. Eschewing the literary affectations and manners of his day he did his best to cultivate an individual style, vigorous, easy, and vital which was well suited to his subject-matter. Thomas Lodge (1558-94)

(f) **Kyd** achieved great popularity with his first work *The Spanish Tragedy* in the early 590's. "Sporting Kyd", as Jonson called him, must be mentioned for his adherence to the Senecan School; and for popularizing the 'blood and thunder element that proved one of the attractive features of the pre-Shakespearean drama. Violent and extravagant he is always but at any rate he helped to break away from the nerveless monotony of Gorboduc.

(g) **Christopher Marlowe** (1564-93) was the most important of the University Wits. He wrote about six plays. The most important plays by him are *Tamburlaine*, *Dr. Faustus*, *The Jew of Malta*, and *Edward the Second*. He 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 *Dr. Faustus*, and ambition for gold as in *The Jew of Malta*. He put forward a new concept of the tragic hero; he gave up the medieval concept and removed the Aristotelian concept of the hero with some tragic flaw. He also gave unity to the drama. He reformed the chronicle play; they were formless and without strong characterization; he gave them both form and characterization. He gave life and reality to his characters. He enriched blank verse, and became the master and creator of the mighty line to a great extent. He imparted passion, the flame of vigour and power and life. As Legouis remarks, "Grace, wit and fancy had been scattered on it but never hitherto had it known this dash, his vehemence animating a whole play, this rapid march to victory, by which drama inspires the belief that thus to march is to be alive."

But Marlowe's plays lack unity of plot construction and seem to be collections of heterogeneous scenes. He also lacks in humour and portraiture of women. But his influence was enormous. Helen Morris says that the Elizabethan drama 'seems to have sprung fully armed from the heads of Marlowe and Shakespeare.'

The University Wits gave drama a chaster medium. They refined verse and made it suitable to dramatic action. They also improved plot-construction and the art of characterization. "The Elizabethan drama is not a Minerva-like creation, springing full grown from the head of one man; it is rather an orderly though rapid development in which many men bore the past." These many men were the University Wits of Oxford and Cambridge who blossomed and then disappeared during the last decades of the 16th and the first two decades of the 17th century.