

# The Shakespearean Comedy: An Artistic Quality Of University Wits

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*Abstract: In order to reach understanding of the historical role of comedy in England, of its nature and the overall literary value, it is necessary to study the social circumstances of its development, with a survey of chief authors and works. After the times of Moralities, Christian moral allegories in dramatic form, Renaissance brought development of the so called learned comedy under classical influence, with a decisive role in the formation of comedy proper. The age of Tudors and early Stuarts was that of transition from feudal order to commercial capitalism. The absolute monarchy was a reflection and instrument of this transition, a process begun as early as the 14th century. The society of Shakespeare's times (cca.1580-1625) was a shifting scene, in which the survivals of the mediaeval order existed side by side with new elements struggling into life. The comedy of Shakespeare's times, however, first took definite shape and artistic quality in the hands of the University Wits, a group of young authors with university education, of bourgeois origin, who wrote for popular as well as Court theatres. They were in fact first professional dramatists, creators of the first fully shaped comedy. Their dramatic work started somewhat earlier than Shakespeare's, as they were all older than Shakespeare except for Marlowe. John Lyly (1554-1606), Robert Greene (1558-1592), George Peele (1558-1598), Thomas Nashe (1567-1601), Thomas Lodge (1558-1625), Thomas Kyd (1558-1594), Christopher Marlowe (1564-1593) have all been known as variegated creators, however the importance of comedies of at least three of them being often unjustly neglected.*

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## I. THE SOCIAL AND CULTURAL BACKGROUND OF THE RENAISSANCE COMEDY

The age of Tudors and early Stuarts (Elizabeth, 1558-1603; James I, 1603-1625) was an age of transition from feudal order to commercial capitalism. The absolute monarchy, established under the first Tudors (Henry VII, 1485-1509; Henry VIII, 1509-1547), was a reflection and instrument of this transition, which was a continuous process, begun as far back as the 14th century. This means that the

society of Shakespeare's times was a shifting and changing scene, in which the survivals of the mediaeval order of things existed side by side with new elements (Salingar 1973). Speaking of the survivals, one must bear in mind that England was still an agricultural country, with London as the only big city. In many villages the subsistence economy, with no surplus and almost no trade, still prevailed, so that a great mass of population was dependent on the land. Although the peasants were already free from feudal bondage, they were still in some ways dependent on their lords, who had not yet

entirely lost their feudal prestige and economic strength. In some parts of the English countryside there were other sources of wealth, production of wool and mining, but these served mainly to enrich the big landowners and enterprising merchants, not the peasantry. In such a situation it was natural that ways of life and thought changed but slowly in the countryside, while many old customs, traditions, and superstitions still persisted.

London and other towns were in the meantime the scene of a rapid development of capitalist economy, attended by an increase of wealth and luxury in the upper and middle classes never witnessed before. The causes are well known: geographical discoveries of the 15th and 16th centuries led to the opening of the sources of gold and silver in America, and the influx of precious metals brought about a revolution in European trade, which proved favourable to England. The struggle with Spain was an expression of the English effort to get a share in this new wealth, and the struggle was victorious in the end; but more was gained by English commercial ventures, fast multiplying in this period, carried out by joint-stock companies or so-called Merchant Adventurers. These trading expeditions, which frequently included piracy and plunder, bore enormous gains to the Queen (later King), and to the Court aristocracy and bourgeoisie. This led to the rise of prices (not attended by a comparable rise in wages) and to an acceleration of capitalist developments in town and even in country. Money economy prevailed, which meant the gradual ruin of many aristocrats, those that had their economic support only in their lands. Many of these lands passed into the hands of wealthy merchants or rich yeomen, who grew in social power. There was a general craze after gold, and speculation of all kind flourished. The bearers of these were "projectors", people with money or ideas who tried to start new branches of trade or industry on the basis of a monopoly bought from the Queen (King), or of shares. Many of these were swindlers, but some became the first organizers of capitalist industries, especially in mining. There was also a fast increase of usury, banking, and money market (Trevelyan 1974).

The transition in the economic field was reflected in the transitional character of the social order and class relations. The inherited social order was still half-feudal in form, but its content was more than half capitalistic, and this contradiction was manifest in many ways. Aristocracy still kept a privileged position in the society, but it was mainly an aristocracy of money, not of blood; the titles could be bought, and the wealthy bourgeois or yeomen were buying them, together with the lands of impoverished nobility. The class relations were fluctuating, although the boundaries were still observed and although there was an antagonism between the Court and the city, which grew under James I (Salingar Trevelyan 1974).

Although the mass of peasantry were still backward and poor, the effects of capitalist development in the town reached the countryside, and class differentiation became stronger. The layer of tenant-farmers and yeomen, independent peasants who worked their land with the help of their family only, grew in economic strength, while on the other side the poorest layer—field labourers grew in number. The number of workers in wool, cloth, mining, etc. was also growing, while village handicraftsmen were becoming small capitalists. The manorial lord was still towering above the rest of village dwellers; his

home, together with the vicarage, was the only seat of learning and entertainment in villages. Such lords (who were also Justices of Peace) usually had around them a number of intellectuals as their dependents. Such households are to be met in Shakespeare's and Jonson's comedies (Puhalo 1968, Trevelyan 1974).

In London and other towns, the different middleclass groups – merchants, shopkeepers, handicraftsmen, goldsmiths who were also usurers and bankers, were still gathered in their medieval organizations, guilds or corporations, but these were now disintegrating under the impact of the enrichment of some and impoverishment of many, and of the growing economic individualism which was breaking the old links of solidarity. There was also a mass of the poor citizens of all kinds, and crime was flourishing, although even small thefts were sometimes punished with death. On the other side there was the Court with its numerous dependents, many of whom were now intellectuals of humble social origin, and city aristocracy. However, they were connected with citizens in many ways, among which even intermarriage was not infrequent. The wealthy bourgeois were aspiring to nobility, and the nobles were always in need of money; such situations offered subject-matter to many comedigraphers. The Court was the leading force in manners and fashions, and it was also one of the seats of theatrical activity, especially in the 1580s, when popular theatres were not yet numerous (Glišić 1964).

In the field of ideology, the religious view of the world was dominant, although the secular learning was rapidly advancing – this is the age of Bacon and Harvey in England, Bruno and Galileo in Italy. The Anglican form of Protestantism was the accepted religion, and the scholastic pseudo-Aristotelianism was its philosophy, although Bacon was dealing it fatal blows. However, among the intellectuals there were many idealistic Platonists like Sidney and Spenser, or freethinkers like Marlowe and Raleigh. The most important new force, rapidly growing in this period, were the Puritans, a democratic and individualistic-libertarian opposition to the established Church. Their Calvinistic ideology of predestination and their moral strictness were an expression of the aspirations of the lower middle class, which was destined to be the leading force of the coming bourgeois revolution. Some intellectuals, Spenser among such, were in sympathy with their views, but the majority adhered to the Court and the Established Church. The comedigraphers were generally anti-Puritan, among them Ben Jonson, although his own moral position was not very far from theirs (Legouis and Cazamian 1971).

The ideology of the period was thus seething with new trends and general change, but there were some ideological elements that were shared by the majority of the population, and so by all the dramatists who cared for the support of their public. The first among them was patriotism, the English national pride which was growing rapidly after the Armada Year (1588). It included a strong anti-Roman-Catholic and anti-Spanish stand, the worship of the Queen while she was living, and the general support to the Tudor dynasty and absolute monarchy. Soon after the accession of James I, however, this support ceased to be general, as the Court became more and more corrupted. Another general tenet was in essence a medieval survival: it was the organic view of the State, i.e.

that the State was an organism with a strict and unchanging hierarchy of parts, and the consequent observation of “order” and “degree”, which Shakespeare upheld so eloquently in the famous speech in *Troilus and Cressida*. But this order was breaking up on all sides. Many superstitions were also generally shared, such as the belief in witches and ghosts, in black magic and alchemy. Although the capitalist forms of economy and life were rapidly gaining ground, the mass of people did not value profit, but honest work and sufficiency, and condemned luxury, spending, greed, usury, and idleness. Some modern-time authors (Willey 1950) see in these views medieval survivals, but these were in fact the elements of a new, bourgeois ideology. This moral code – of honest sufficiency against immoral riches – held an important place in the ideology of the comedigraphers of this period (Puhalo 1968, Salinger 1973). With the increase of wealth in the upper classes, and comparative prosperity of the middle ones, came an increased demand for entertainment of all sorts, from bear-baiting and cock-fighting to poetry and music. The Court was patronizing poets and dramatists, and the nobles began to give their names and protection to the actors’ companies since the 1570s. Popular theatres were built one after another in the 1580s and 1590s, attracting a large audience recruited from all the classes. The first comedigraphers wrote mainly for the Court (children’s companies), and the later for Lord Admiral’s Men (Henslowe’s company), who performed in popular theatres. The playwrights were generally underpaid, and that was probably the main reason for their frequent collaboration and fast writing. The work for the stage, however, still paid better than other kinds of authorship, and that was the reason why almost every writer tried to write for the theatre. There was still some difference between aristocratic and middle-class authors: the former wrote mainly poetry, as the “highest” kind of literary art, and never stooped to the “low” art of the stage. This means that the stage was left in the hands of middle-class authors. Francis Beaumont and John Fletcher were the first aristocratic dramatists, but by their time the drama had gained in reputation, thanks to King James’ patronage. The great drama of the Age of Shakespeare drew its vigour and power, at least in part, from the fact that its authors were middle-class men, near to common people. When it passed into the hands of court followers, withdrew into the closed “private” theatres, and became a court entertainment with little appeal to the general public, it withered and died (Glišić 1964, Puhalo 1968, Kostić 1978).

## II. THE COMEDY OF THE UNIVERSITY WITS

The comedy of Shakespeare’s times first took its definite shape and artistic quality in the hands of the “University Wits”, a group of young authors with university education, of bourgeois origin, who wrote for popular as well as court theatres, and were in fact the first English professional dramatists – Lyly, Greene, Peele, Nashe, Lodge, Kyd, Marlowe. John Lyly, Robert Greene, and George Peele contributed to the development of comedy, and that is why their work deserves to be studied in some detail.

## III. JOHN LYLY – THE FOUNDER OF THE ENGLISH ROMANTIC COMEDY

John Lyly (1554?-1606) came from a family of intellectuals. His father was a Church official at Canterbury, and his grandfather was William Lyly, a famous grammarian in the time of early Humanists. John Lyly studied at Oxford (Magdalen College), got his B.A. in 1573 and M.A. in 1575, and in 1579 got his M.A. from Cambridge. He published his famous prose work, *Euphues*, in 1578, and during the 1580s and 1590s did dramatic work for the choir children of St. Paul’s Cathedral. Most of his plays were performed at Court. He enjoyed the patronage of Burleigh, lord Cecil, and De Vere, Lord Oxford, for some time, but his aspirations to some court “preferment” were never satisfied. True, he was a M.P. intermittently between 1589 and 1601, and as he married an heiress he must have been well off, but he was insatiate in his social ambitions to the end (Puhalo 1968).

Lyly’s *Euphues, an Anatomy of Wit* (1578, revised 1579) and its sequel, *Euphues and his England* (1580), are rhetorical and moralistic narratives of little interest today. They are distinguished by a peculiar style which set a fashion of “Euphuism” at Court and in the world of letters. The chief characteristics of this style are: long and elaborate sentences, symmetrically composed in pairs of opposites; abundant use of comparisons and metaphors, whose materials are taken from natural science (which was in its infancy, mixed with legends) and classical mythology; and an immoderate use of alliteration. It was an attempt at imposing a geometrical regularity upon prose expression, which resulted in a highly artificial and ornate writing (Kostić 1978: 74). Its enthusiastic acceptance by the Court was a manifestation of the general tendency towards civilizing and refining of speech and manners. It was too artificial to last long: after a decade or so euphuism was rejected, and it even became an object of derision. Nevertheless, it is an interesting phenomenon, and has provoked a lot of discussion and research in later times, because of its comparative uniqueness. It is important, however, to note that Lyly has used the same style in his prose comedies, in varying degrees of orthodoxy. The rest of his prose works – some religious tracts, directed against the anonymous Puritan author, “Marprelate” – are of no significance here (Puhalo 1968).

Lyly’s dramatic work consists of comedies, eight in number. Their titles and dates of publication are as follows: *Alexander, Campaspe, and Diogenes, Sapho and Phao*, early 1580s; *Endimion, the Man in the Moon*, 1586–87. *Midas*, 1589; *Mother Bombie*, 1589; *Gallathea*, 1592; *The Woman in the Moone*, 1594; *Love’s Metamorphosis*, 1589 (Ousby 1998).

All these comedies have some common characteristics, to be summed up after a survey of the most important ones. R. W. Bond, the editor of what has since 1902 been the standard edition of Lyly’s works (Bond 2 1992), has divided them into four groups: historical (*Campaspe*), allegorical (*Sapho and Phao, Endimion, Midas*), pastoral (*Gallathea, The Woman in the Moone, Love’s Metamorphosis*) and realistic (*Mother Bombie*). The division is plausible to a degree, although *Campaspe* has little to do with real history, and the “allegorical” ones would be better described as mythological, for the allegory in them has hardly any meaning for present-

day readers, and is not always clearly ascertained. In any case, the traits they have in common are more striking than the differences (Puhalo 1968).

The earliest one of Lyly's comedies, *Alexander, Campaspe, and Diogenes* (1584) is based on a Greek legend about the rivalry between Alexander of Macedon and the painter Apelles for the love of a beautiful slave girl, Campaspe, whom Alexander has brought from his wars. Alexander's friend Hephaestion tries to dissuade him from his infatuation, but he persists until it becomes clear that Campaspe and Apelles are true lovers and that he has no chance. Beside this main plot, melodramatic and sensational, there is a subplot of little dramatic interest, Alexander's convocation of Greek philosophers, whom he has called together to try their knowledge. The chief attraction of these scenes for Lyly's audience must have been to see the greatest figures of Greek philosophy, Plato and Aristotle among them, displaying their knowledge. But the display, made out of the scraps of Lyly's classical learning, is rather shallow and almost boring. Apart from these stands a more vivid portrait of Diogenes, who is depicted, according to an existing hostile tradition, as an embittered misanthrope, full of hate and spite. However, his hatred of the world remains psychologically unexplained and therefore unconvincing. All these persons have servants, who make a group apart, meeting frequently without their masters to crack jokes at their expense or mock at one another, or carry out little intrigues on their masters' behalf or against them. Such a group will be present in all of Lyly's comedies: the servants are thus given a role of *fools*, and more rarely that of plot-makers, in the Plautian tradition.

This comedy is written in prose, which becomes euphuistic in monologues and love scenes, and is elsewhere conversational but never descending to the level of everyday speech – except in the scenes with servants, who speak colloquially and are sometimes even coarse in their joking. The division into five acts is strictly observed, but there are no unities. The text is enlivened with some lyric songs, among which is to be found the well known one “Cupid and my Campaspe played...”. Doubt was sometimes expressed as to Lyly's author-ship of these songs, but there is no certain proof to the contrary (Bond 2 1992). *Campaspe* strikes the readers in some parts as a school boyish production, forcefully reminding that it was written for children-actors. Yet the action is moving fast enough, and there is some real pathos in the love scenes between Campaspe and Apelles, especially when they feel uncertain of their fate. The humor of the comic scenes is mainly crude and naive, except when Lyly borrows anecdotes from ancient Greeks – but most of these are well known from school textbooks, and therefore uninteresting. The final impression is that of something artificial and stiff in tone and geometrically correct in construction, with but few glimpses of real life and normal feeling, although with some dramatic movement and liveliness.

*Endimion* (1586–87), the best known of Lyly's comedies, has a more complicated plot and more artful construction, leading by almost mathematical planning to a happy ending. Its *dramatis personae* are mythological or fairy beings, and the main plot is based on the story of the love of the shepherd Endimion for the Moone-goddess, Diana or Cynthia. In Lyly's presentation Endimion and his friend Eumenides are courtiers

and intellectuals, who speak in the true euphuistic vein which is the case of all his main personages, except the servants. The play contains a topical allegory: Cynthia is a flattering personification of Queen Elizabeth, Endimion may represent the Earl of Leicester, etc. But the allegory is unobtrusive, and has no bearing on one's acceptance of the play. Lyly handles the old story with considerable freedom: he adds to it the dramatic element of rivalry and revenge of Tellus (the Earth), a female figure in love with Endimion, who charms him to a deathlike sleep, aided by Dipsas, a witch. There is also the element of faithful friendship (one of the most ancient dramatic motives), in the search of Eumenides for a remedy that would revive Endimion, as well as a parallel love story of Eumenides and Semele. In the comic subplot there is an interesting figure, Sir Thopas, a far offspring of Plautus' *miles gloriosus*, but more immediately influenced by Chaucer's comic knight of the same name. By his noisy, naively hyperbolic speeches he reminds the readers most of Herod in moralities. His love for Dipsas is an intentional parody on the main plot. There is again a group of servant-fools, who mock Sir Thopas and incite him to more thundering speeches. Their fooling is here more successful than in *Campaspe*. The “happy ending” of the play is not entirely happy: Endimion can never reach his divine love, but he rests content, assured of her chaste favour. It is the only point where the allegory intrudes upon the story: it was forbidden, on political grounds, to represent the Queen as married to anybody; and Queen herself was present at the performance. Endimion develops in full the elements that were to remain characteristic for Lyly's comedies: a regular, geometrical construction in the unchanging five-act frame, a mythological or fairy-story main plot based on rivalry in love and struggle of ideal lovers with hostile forces, and a comic subplot, sometimes a parody of the main plot, with a group of servants as fools. These elements, especially the double plot and love theme, formed the basis of Shakespearean romantic comedy.

In *Sapho and Phao* (early 1580s), a play based also on mythological and legendary material, there again is a rivalry in love, this time between love goddess herself, Venus, and Sapho, her match in beauty, who is here represented as a queen of Sicily, not the historical poetess. The subject of their rivalry is an ordinary young man, the ferryman Phao, whom Venus has made irresistible for women. Phao becomes a page to Sapho, and falls in love with her. Venus tries to break the connection, and there is an intricate struggle between her and Sapho, with Cupid as Venus' agent. At the end Sapho lures Cupid away from Venus and carries the day; she is to step in the place of Venus in future. Phao's end is similar to Endimion's, but more melancholy; as Sapho cannot be won, he goes into the wide world to spend the rest of his days in sighing for her.

The subplot in *Sapho and Phao* is much more variegated and crowded, but also less relevant to the main plot. There are, first, some young students and courtiers at Sapho's court and city, in whom the readers have a glimpse of con-temporary student life; commentators see in them a picture of Lyly's Oxford cir-cle of friends, and in one of them, Pandion, a self-portrait of Lyly himself. Then there are Sicilian women, who make something like a chorus, commenting on Phao's beauty; there is Vulcan, Venus' husband, presented as a fool, his man

Calypho who leads mock debates with the servants (a group of servants appears too), and finally there is Sybilla, the prophetess, who serves as Phao's oracle and friend. The first two acts are slow and almost dull, with long euphuistic speeches by Venus and Sapho, but after that the plot moves faster and in parts becomes really entertaining. Some of the fooling is witty, and there are three songs, two of which, that on Bacchus and that of Vulcan's men at work, are quite good. But the play is not so well constructed as *Endimion*, and has no depth of meaning. It contains a topical allegory: Sapho represents the Queen, and Phao one of her suitors to whom she had shown a temporary favour, the French duke d'Alençon (Bond 2 1992). The allegory has not much relevance to our reading of the play today.

Lyly's next play, *Gallathea* (1592), has a fanciful plot, woven out of mythological stories and popular legends. Gallathea, a beautiful country girl, is to be sacrificed to the dragon Agar – it is an annual sacrifice exacted by Neptune and her father disguises her as a boy and sends her to the woods. There she meets another girl, Phyllida, disguised in the same way and for the same reason. Doubtful about the disguise, the two fall in love with each other. At the same time, however, by Cupid's mischievous stroke Diana's nymphs fall in love with the two beautiful "boys". Venus, Diana, and Neptune meet to solve the puzzle, and there is a quarrel between Venus and Diana i.e. between lust and chastity – the symbolic meaning is obvious here (Bond 2 1992). The author's sympathies are on the side of Diana, who represents the Queen, as usual, and she is victorious in the end: Gallathea is to remain a girl, but Phyllida is changed into a boy, so that their love can be consummated. Neptune renounces his right to sacrifice, Cupid is punished, and Diana's nymphs restored to chastity.

The subplot in *Gallathea* has a pastoral flavour: it is made of the girls' fathers, quarrelsome rustics, and their fellow villagers. By all these elements the play is a distant but clear foreshadowing of Shakespeare's *As you Like It*, written ten years later. The most important new element is that of disguise, to be used so much, with comic and pathetic effects, by Shakespeare and others. Lyly was the first to use it, and he showed the way to all the rest. Some of the dialogues between his two girls are full of wit which springs quite naturally out of the equivocal situation, and gives us a foretaste of those between Shakespeare's Rosalind and Orlando. That is why *Gallathea* is the most influential of his comedies (Puhalo 1968).

Mention should be made of one more of Lyly's plays, *Mother Bombie* (1589), because it is the only one in which a realistic presentation of everyday life is attempted. The scene of the action is the English countryside, Rochester in Kent, and the persons are rich peasants, their children and their servants; there are some scenes in a village tavern which smack of a comedy of manners with some local colour. Yet Lyly upholds the learned character of his play by giving the persons Italian or Greek-Latin names, and using a distinctly Plautian plot. The theme is a conflict between the old and the young, the action is complicated and full of intrigue, but symmetrically planned as usual. The traditional Plautian scheme is doubled here: there are four fathers and four young couples, whose amorous wishes are contrary to the wishes of their elders. The fact is that parents here look after material

gains in their children's marriages, which is another realistic trait. The group of servants functions as a collective counterpart of the Plautian clever servant, but they also provide some fooling of an inferior sort. Another Plautian-Menandrian theme are the "supposes", two children whose mother has fraudulently imposed them upon other parents. They are exceedingly foolish, so that in them we can see the prototypes of some of Ben Jonson's "gulls" or half-wits. The deceit is exposed after many years, thanks to the good offices of Mother Bombie, a village "cunning woman" or a good witch, coming from the English folklore. There is certainly a breath of country air and some taste of real life in the play, but it is still far enough from a felt human reality, and a general impression is of something stiff and artificial, although entertaining and witty at moments.

The general character of Lyly's comedies has by now certainly become apparent. They are court comedies, designed to please the Queen and her circle; and these courtiers, perhaps just because their manners were still rather coarse, were passionately set upon refinement in everything (Puhalo 1968). This ambition must have been enhanced by the growing contact with the more civilized European countries, among which Italy, with its rich city-states and the great Renaissance art, was the leading force. For Elizabeth and her Court the refinement consisted in a display of classical learning, in the use of classical mythology in writing and speech, in euphuistic expression or latinized diction, in a preference for allegory, stylization, pastoralism of the well known artificial sort. Together with these, however, there went their more homely and traditional taste for the spectacular, for colourful pageants with dance, music and song. Besides, to be borne in mind is the fact that these circles shared the view that was common to the society of Shakespeare's times, that all art should be didactic, and that "moral counsels" or lay sermons were in great vogue when Lyly began to write (Bagley 1960, Counsell *et al.* 3 1997, Trevelyan 1974). This didactic vein was not taken too seriously in the Court circle. It was rather a taste for moral rhetoric than any deep moral concern. Lyly gave this audience what it wanted, and his plays, like his prose writings, are a faithful expression of the kind of taste described here. He did even more, because he tried, sometimes successfully, to instill into them a deeper symbolic meaning, or make of them stylized reflections of enduring human passions; this is particularly the case with *Campaspe*, *Endimion*, and *Gallathea*. Music and song must have played an important part in them, and that is why some critics see in them a hybrid kind between *drama* and *mask*. The progressive change in his language, from euphuism to a more colloquial speech, and the realistic traits in his *Mother Bombie* show that he was moving towards a kind of comedy nearer to popular taste. However, he never completed this development, because for some reason he left the writing for the stage. He was certainly the founder of English romantic comedy, but he has left us little of lasting value. The positive and negative sides of his dramatic art have been perhaps best summed up by John Dover Wilson: "On the technical side his dramatic advance is immense, but we may look in vain in his dramas for any of that appreciation of the elemental facts of human nature which can alone create enduring art" (Wilson 2 1969: 123–124).

## IV. A SIGNIFICANT STEP FORWARD

Lyly was the most uniform and single-minded among the University Wits, while the rest tried their hand at everything, and comedy was only a small part of their literary output. George Peele (1558?–1597?), a poet and multifarious dramatist, left only one comedy worthy of attention, but this one has been exceptionally influential. Peele was a son of a London citizen, salter, presumably well off. He studied in London and Oxford, and got his M. A. probably in 1579. After that he worked for the public theatres and children's companies, and some of his plays were performed at Court. He led a dissipated life, and died in poverty. The posthumous collection of "Jests of G. Peele" (*Merrie Conceited Iests of George Peele Gentleman / sometimes student in Oxford*) shows him as an unpleasant and even dishonest character, but the authenticity of these anecdotes is doubtful (Neilson 1911). Peele was a poet of some merit, although his compositions in verse were mostly occasional, patriotic celebrations of national events. His dramatic work includes histories (*Edward I*, 1593; *The Battle of Alcazar*, 1594), mythological and pastoral plays (*The Arraignment of Paris*, 1584), one play based on a Biblical story (*David and Bethsabe*, 1599), and one comedy, *The Old Wives' Tale*, 1595. There is also a number of plays of uncertain authorship ascribed to him in whole or in part (Baskervill 1934).

His histories, not very successful in themselves, have shown the way to Shakespeare and others. His Biblical play *David and Bethsabe*, 1599, is remarkable because of the extreme rareness of Biblical subjects in the contemporary drama (Puhalo 1968: 86). It is written in blankverse, in a declamatory style similar to that of Marlowe's early plays, and it shows a considerable psychological insight. *The Arraignment of Paris* (1584) is a mask-like pastoral mythological play (Baskervill 1934: 205–206) on a well known theme: the quarrel of three goddesses (Juno, Athena, Venus) over the golden ball of Ate that had to be given to the most beautiful one, Paris' arbitration, his acceptance of Venus' gift (Helen of Troy) for whose sake he abandons Oenone, and his "arraignment", i.e. accusation and trial before a tribunal of gods, where he skillfully defends himself and is acquitted. Peele treated the old story with considerable freedom and originality. Among his many additions worth mentioning is the lyrical introductory scene with Pan, Sylvanus, Flora, Pomona, etc., which shows him as a poet of nature, and a melancholy pastoral subplot of frustrated love, influenced by Spenser. But the most original – or preposterous, on the other hand – is his ending, in which the gods leave final arbitration to Diana, and she gives the golden ball to the "nymph Eliza", or Queen Elizabeth (who was present at the performance). Notwithstanding this, the play is valuable for its originality and some good lyrical parts.

*The Old Wife's Tale* (the spelling *Wives'*, which we meet in original editions, is not justified by the contents), is Peele's only comedy. It is an amazing medley of motives, most of them coming from folk stories and some from romances of chivalry. The names of persons are mostly borrowed, with corruptions, from Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso* (Baskervill 1934: 205–206). It is a drama-tized fairy story,

and at the same time a burlesque or parody of some contemporary dramatic attempts; the chief target is Gabriel Harvey, a Cambridge professor who tried to base English verse on classical quantitative metrics. The comedy has an introductory story which serves as a frame to the main plot: three pages are lost in a wood, they chance upon the cottage of an old smith, Clunch, and the smith's wife Madge tells them the "tale", which is immediately presented on the stage. The main line of the plot is that of a quest after a girl, Delia, who has been enslaved by the magician Sacrapant. The quest is done independently by three groups of persons: the two brothers of the lost girl, two comic characters, the knight Huanebango and his servant Corebus, and the girl's lover Eumenides, aided by a dead man, Jack, whom he has helped to bury. The first two groups come to grief, and only the lover is successful in the end. There are secondary stories, among them that of a man-bear Erestus and his mad wife Venelia, and his neighbour, a peasant Lampriscus, with two daughters, one beautiful and vain and the other ugly and humble, who ask for help from a magic well and get according to their deserts. At the end the lover is put to a sore trial of honesty: the dead man asks from him a half of his girl, because he has promised him a half of everything he gains. But everything ends happily, as it should in a fairy tale.

The play is not divided into acts, but its construction is not as loose as it might appear from a summary. The three lines of action converge round the fate of the lost girl, and the secondary persons are introduced quite naturally. The plot does not offer any symbolic meanings: it is quite frankly an excursion into the childish world of popular imagination, of supernatural terror and wonder, with the usual moral – that the good must win in the end, in spite of all the guiles of evil powers. It is presented, however, with a light irony and a certain detachment, expressed more by style and tone than by the action. The chief instrument of this detachment, of course, is the frame-story itself, which tells us that we have to do with a tale told to pass the time, not with reality. But with all this, there is in a sense more reality in this comedy than in any Lyly's: although the characterization is superficial, the characters speak a racy, colloquial prose, or a lively verse. There are some passages of incantation (Erestus' advice to brothers) and some lyrics, e.g. the song of mowers, with real emotional intensity (Puhalo 1968: 86). The peasant Lampriscus and his daughters belong to the real English village, and the comic characters are funny enough, in a delightful nonsensical way which Lyly could not reach. *The Old Wives' Tale* leads us from the stuffy and artificial court atmosphere into the freer air of the English countryside, with its enchanting fancy world of folklore. This delightful medley, although not a great work of art, is an example of the power of imagination and of freedom and variety of the Elizabethan dramaturgy, and as such marks a significant step forward in the development of the romantic comedy. It influenced Shakespeare, and served as a model for Milton's *Comus* (Baskervill 1934: 205–206).

## V. THE FIRST SHAKESPEAREAN COMEDY

Robert Greene (1558?–1592) was a bourgeois son from

Norwich. He studied at Cambridge, and got his B.A. in 1580, and M. A. in 1583. Then he took to writing and travel, and led a dissipated life, which shortened his days. Considering the short span of his life he was the most fertile among the University Wits, but the bulk of his literary work is made of prose narratives, which are either romantic and rhetorical tales interspersed with verse (*Pandosto, Menap-hon*), or social-journalistic pamphlets dealing with London criminals, or again moralizing autobiographical writings. He wrote for the popular stage only in his last years. It seems that he collaborated on a number of plays, and some historians find his hand in some parts of Shakespeare's *Henry VI*, but there are only five plays that are ascribed to him with some certainty. Three of these are of some interest *George a Greene, the Pinner of Wakefield; Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay; James IV* – although only one can be described as comedy proper (Lavin 1967: 9–10).

*George a Greene* is a historical-legendary play of adventure and heroism, celebrating the exploits of the title hero, a common peasant with uncommon strength and wisdom, who aids the king (Edward I) in his fight against the rebel lords, proves to be stronger than Robin Hood and his best men, and wins the beautiful girl, "Bettris". He is offered knighthood by the King, but he refuses, preferring to remain a yeoman. The play is a naive patriotic pageant with idealized characters, but it has a dramatic suspense, as well as some freshness and lyricism in its poetic language. The note of the pride of honest country-men, opposed to corrupted nobility, is present in all his plays.

*James IV* is a better constructed play, a tragicomedy with an interesting frame-story, a colloquy between Oberon the fairy king and Bohan, a misanthropic Scotch nobleman who has chosen to live in a tomb: the play is given as Bohan's illustration of wickedness of the world. It deals with the pathetic story of Queen Dorothea, an English princess married to James IV, King of Scots. The king becomes infatuated with young Ida, countess of Arran, and under the influence of his wicked counsellor Ateukin tries to kill his wife. However, Dorothea is warned and flees in man's disguise, and the virtuous Ida rejects the king's advances. After many adventures the good are rewarded and the wicked punished. The play, written in fluent blank verse, is remarkable for its female characters, convincing though idealized, which may be taken as first versions of Shakespearian romantic heroines. The exact date of composition of *James IV* is not known, but it is regarded as Greene's most mature play (Lavin 1967: 11).

*Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay* (completed about 1589, printed in 1594), Greene's only comedy and his best play, written for the most part in blankverse (prose is given only to comic characters), is in part a parody of Marlowe's *Dr. Faustus*, and in part pseudo-historical play of love and adventure, with the inevitable patriotic and popular tendency. There are two parallel lines of action, loosely connected; the more important one is that of Prince Edward's love for a peasant girl, Margaret of Fressingfield. Two motives are combined in it: of love crossed by the social barriers, and of the betrayal of friendship – Earl Lacy, wooing Margaret for his friend the Prince, falls in love with her himself, and wins her in the end. The situation becomes almost tragic when Edward discovers the deed, but the girl saves her lover with her

frankness and intrepidity; the scene is treated with lyrical pathos and psychological insight, and is central to the play. Margaret is a living and admirable character, a free and intelligent woman of the people, one among the finest heroines of the Elizabethan drama, close to some of Shakespeare's heroines (Puhalo 1968: 87). The secondary plot is superficial and sensational, with some comic features. It presents the exploits of Friar Bacon, a magician (based on the historical Roger Bacon), his contest with the German magician Vandermast in which he is victorious, his project to surround England with a wall of brass, etc. When the project is frustrated through the stupidity of his servant Miles, the fool of the play, and when his art leads to the death of four people, he renounces magic, and Miles is carried to Hell by a facetious Devil, in a good comic scene which ends the play. Although amateurish in part and loose in construction, the play possesses lyrical charm together with some good fun, and may be attractive even to present-day readers. It is the first romantic comedy of that recognizable type which we have come to call "Shakespearean".

## VI. CONCLUSION

The decades of the 1580s and 1590s, just before Shakespeare started his career, saw a radical transformation in popular drama in England. A group of feisty, well-educated men chose to write for the public stage, taking over native traditions. They brought new coherence in structure, and real wit and poetic power to the language. They are known collectively as the University Wits, though they did not always work as a group, and indeed wrangled with each other at times. As a diverse and talented loose association of London writers and dramatists they set the stage for the theatrical Renaissance of Elizabethan England. They were looked upon as the literary elite of their time and they often ridiculed other playwrights such as Thomas Kyd and Shakespeare who did not have a university education. Greene calls Shakespeare an "upstart crow" in *Greene's Groats-Worth of Wit*, a posthumous pamphlet attributed to him.

By the authors such as John Lyly, George Peele, and Robert Greene the English comedy was first formed into a distinct kind of play, however not yet for social satire or any criticism of life. The development from Lyly to Greene is a development from the clouds of mythology, fairy-land, and artificial rhetoric, towards everyday reality, living characters, and social divisions. It is also a development from a court entertainment to popular play, devised to please a larger and more varied audience. The comedy of University Wits contains already the seeds of all the later kinds of comedy, but none of these is fully formed, except the court variety. Lyly's main theme is love, but it is an abstract and idealized scheme, only a shadow of the living thing. Peele has no single theme: his fanciful beings are shadows too, but they are more varied and nearer to reality. Greene's theme is again love, but it is now set in a recognizable social environment and experienced by first living female characters.

Shakespeare was indeed to learn from them all, but it is also true that he infused his plays with much more of real life.

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