

Humanities Institute  
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## The Old Wive's Tale. 1595

George Peele 1556-1596

### Background

George Peele was as a well born son of a London accountant, who was author of a groundbreaking text on accounting practice, especially double entry book keeping, which played an important role in the development of new commercial practices in the Renaissance. This influential position earned the elder Peele the post of clerk of Christ's Hospital, a large charitable organization in central London, and the young George found himself growing up accordingly among the elite of London intellectuals. It is no surprise to find Peele's name among those witty and ascendant entrepreneurs --- of the new literary world-- Lodge, Sidney, Spenser, Lyly--which was to encase its masters--Shakespeare and Marlowe--with that ambient richness that gives its texture to the Elizabethan Age. We are deep in a tight milieu of thinkers and writers, who were shaping a fresh cultural perspective.

Erudite and elegant--younger George Peele had collaborated on several Latin plays while at Oxford. (Peele's dramatic work played out in various genres, and on the whole, despite the elite company he kept, and his staging before the Queen, he did not register as one of the distinctive dramatists of his time. He did not come down heavily on one genre or another, and lost public traction, although his dramatic work was performed widely. The small tale we stress in this entry is a stand alone achievement).

Like his father, George continued in the benevolent spirited tradition of writing annual pageants for the City of London. As a pure man of letters, however, he wrote one brilliant, charming and unprecedented text which, to the literary reader, is likely to prevail in memory, like Lyly's Euphues, as a jewel of Renaissance literature.

### The Old Wive's Tale

Like Lyly's work, that of Peele comes out of imagination. In The Old Wive's Tale, the brief brilliant instance on which we concentrate here, he blends medievalism, magic ditties, folk songs, sorcerers' plays. In short, a tale that mimes the mediaeval enchantments it is about. Peele mocks sorcery and the mediaeval, while recognizing their spell.

Peele, like Cervantes a decade later, has a sharp sense of his historical position, He can stand sufficiently apart from that position, as a privileged heir of the Middle Ages, and look back on the quickly vanishing world behind him.

It is not as though the man or even writer on the street would have had a trained sense of historical movement at the time in question. Peele, as we know, was in part Oxford educated, thus rather rigorously educated, but the bulk of that preparation would have been rigorously classical, and no relative to the later perspectives of social science, which would be at home in an existential analysis of the feel of the passage of time. What Peele sees, especially as it is reflected back to his own moment in the present tale, is filled with claptrap, the fakery of the over characterized past, the Middle Ages in all its aura of lost mystery, and yet Peele would also have been conscious of the profound grace and charm of an age of greater faiths and ancestral memories than his own. The resultant romanticism leaves an aura of both grace and charm. both depth and insubstantiality, and Peele pays with both of them. The Old Wive's Tale is a small Jewel.

The Old Wive's Tale emerges organically from the epic spouting voice of a masterful and mystical lady. The author displays genius in bringing Madge' tale, the abduction of Delia, the eventual defeat of Sacrapant, out onto the stage where truly they enact a play within a play.

## The PLOT

Plot seems hardly the word, for it seems to imply--after all-- more sequential narrative than Peele gives us in this small work. There might indeed be a doubt about whether what follows before us is a play. It was, to be sure, presented before Queen Elizabeth. How about calling this piece a fancy or fantasy? Whatever it is there seems to be room for debate, in characterizing this work. Like the self-amused prose pieces of John Lyly, this ingenious tour de force is not without its argument and point.

Peele's writing here is a take off on the mediaeval romance, with its paraphernalia of damsels, knights, castle moats and evil sorcerers. (In this regard, one might say, Peele is training his sights on work like the 14<sup>th</sup> century *Le Roman de la Rose*, with its blend of spirituality, sexuality, and a sprinkling of the gothic. As for more recent work in his own sarcastic vein, Peele will have been sharply conscious of Beaumont and Fletcher in *The Knight of the Burning Pestle*, also a take off on the medieval, but with the comedic middle class factor played right into the center of it--a blend which would have been fascinating and uncomfortable to Peele.

In Peele's *Old Wive's Tale*, two brothers are in search of their sister, Delia, who has been abducted by a sorcerer. Several different tales appear to have made their ways from that starting nub.

Four pages of a certain courtier have lost their way in the woods. Two of them are given shelter by a smith, Clutch, who drops off to sleep, for he must get up early to work the next morning. We are made sufficiently clear of the pages' natures--Antic, Fantastic, Frantic--and we background them as comic Stoff into the remainder of the tale.

The pages are given shelter by Clutch and Madge. While Clutch and one of the brothers fall asleep, Madge recites *The Old Wive's Tale* which we and Peele are now reading. In the midst of the Madge Tale (In other words) we come on a tale within a tale, such as Shakespeare builds into *Hamlet*, 'the play's the thing wherein I'll catch the conscience of the king.' The searchers and the sorcery-struck Delia, about whom the frame tale is concerned, actually appear on stage, while other characters, not themselves involved in the play within a play, remain onstage. This whole theatrical ploy opens the way for a new story-relating vein.

In the play within a play Delia is held in a spell, cannot get free, and while she is waiting for help the two brothers themselves fall into the same fate, the same tale. Eventually they are freed of their spells by the passing knight Eumenides. The knight is aided, on this freeing action, by the ghost of Jack, whom the knight's generosity had contributed to burying at the outset of the story. It was this very same knight who down-to-earth had paid Jack's funeral expenses.

It is not as though some rush to conclude intervenes here. True enough the oncoming annihilation of the sorcerer, which of course you can see coming, and which has yet to reveal, demands further slowing. We need to savor it, as Peele might well have seen it. After all, the fanciful of the destruction of evil has to be paid off carefully and slowly. Huanebongo and the daughters of a poor old guy, Lampriscus, are out there on their own searches for a resting place in the narrative home.

Huanebongo is a scruffy and fantastical wandering Spanish knight who is inwardly charged with the duty to drive away evil. (Remind you of Cervantes' *Don*?) He will represent the hated Spaniard of the time--we are working through this international conflict, as we play out the present comic epic. The quixotic quest of the present anti-sorcery effort is perfectly embodied in this tattered figure. A more extravagant quest theme is embodied in the husband search of the two daughters of the poor man, Lampriscus. It is these two daughters who come on the Head in the Well of Life, and thereby open the path to the destruction of the sorcerer Sacrapant.

## The CHARACTERS who move across this plot

*Antic.* One of the pages, lost in the woods, who serve as background energy. They have lost their master and need guidance. Antic misses the *Old Wive's Tale*.

*Ball:* dog that accompanies the pages, and whose barking can be heard throughout the play

*Delia* Daughter of the King of Thessaly; the maiden who has been put under a spell by Sacrapant.

*Berecynthia* Name given to Delia by her sorcerer (Note the special importance of naming in this sorcery saturated landscape. Names and alternate names carry the whole power of the person.)

*Erestus.* Betrothed to Venelia. The sorcerer turns him into an old man

*Eumenides.* A knight, who in the end discovers and rescues Delia.

*Fantastic.* One of the initial pages lost in the woods

*Head in the Well of Life.* An eery appearance that emerges from the well, pleading to have its beard combed by the two daughters of Lampriscus.

*Huanebongo.* A mock mendicant, a braggart searcher for Delia.

*Sacrapant.* The evil sorcerer who has put a spell on Delia. He is a riddler by day and a bear by night. His power can only be broken by one who is neither his maid nor wife nor widow.