

The Precarious World of Thomas Nashe, Episode 1 ('The underside of a humanist education')

Colin Burrow: The first Elizabethan age and the second Elizabethan age do have some unfortunate parallels between them. People didn't have mortgages back then, I suppose. So that was one fewer thing to worry about. But in general, people were profoundly concerned about the future.

Jenny Richards: You're going to be shocked. You're going to be surprised. And you're going to experience some really grotesque situations.

Oscar Haines: These expressions of discontent from students about the kind of world they're going into I think is still very significant today.

Cathy Shrank: There's a fairytale version of the Elizabethan era: a golden age of long-awaited prosperity, of palaces and pageants, of sea-faring exploration - all of it presided over by a spectacular queen governing alongside wise counsellors.

But there's a lot this story omits. Elizabethan England was an anxious, paranoid place, its government consumed by factional infighting and fears of foreign invasion. In its last full decade, the 1590s, things began to break down, with spiraling food prices, plague, and profiteering by the wealthy.

Britain today also feels like an increasingly precarious place. Many of us aren't used to precarity — a condition of uncertainty and exposure as emotional as it is economic. But to the average Elizabethan precarity was the norm. One writer in particular explored what was like to live on the edge. He's not a household name today, but he wrote and published extensively through the turbulent 1590s. In this podcast series we'll use his work as a way of thinking about what precarity meant then, and now.

Welcome to *The Precarious world of Thomas Nashe*.

[Theme music plays]

Cathy Shrank: My name is Cathy Shrank from the University of Sheffield. In this episode, I'm joined by Professor Colin Burrow, from All Souls' Oxford; Oscar Haines, who's just completed a Masters at the University of St Andrew's; and Professor Jenny Richards, from Newcastle University.

Together, we'll be thinking about sixteenth-century education: how it prepared its pupils for the world of work, how it failed those pupils, and how many of them would go on to mock their education and subvert its values. We're going to discover what Nashe and his generation learned at school and at university, about the kind of careers they were promised, and what actually happened when they graduated from university in the 1580s and 90s.

Thomas Nashe was born in 1567, which makes him a near-contemporary of Shakespeare. I spoke to Jenny Richards about the sort of thing that Nashe would have learned during his education.

Jenny Richards: The first thing they have to do is learn Latin because they need Latin for all of their scholarly, academic communications, and Latin, as we know, is the lingua franca of professional life in the 16th century, although it is increasingly in contest with the vernacular. So they learn the basics of Latin at school. They learn how to pronounce it and they learn its syntax. They learn how to construct sentences and they learn how to speak, read, write in Latin. And those skills are obviously going to be developed at university.

But they're learning other skills: the stylistic features, figures, speech, that pattern how you speak, that are meant to be persuasive. But they're also learning performance skills and these suit them for all sorts of careers. We know that students at university might be listening to lectures. They might be listening to disputations. They might be listening to Latin plays or performing in them.

Cathy Shrank: Student drama was certainly something Nashe experienced. While he was studying at St John's College, Cambridge, he's known to have written a rather scandalous play—now lost—called *Terminus et non-Terminus*, which means End and No End. He also pokes fun at university drama in his prose fiction *The Unfortunate Traveller*, where the protagonist Jack Wilton describes a terrible evening out in Wittenberg.

Actor reading excerpt from *The Unfortunate Traveller*: That very night the Duke was bidden to one of the chief schools to a comedy handled by scholars. *Acolastus, the Prodigal Child* was the name of it, which was so filthily acted, so leathernly set forth, as would have moved laughter in Heraclitus [the weeping philosopher]. One as if he had been planing a clay floor stampingly trod the stage so hard with his feet that I thought verily he had resolved to do the carpenter that set it up some utter shame.

Another flung his arms like cudgels at a pear tree, insomuch as it was mightily dreaded that he would strike the candles that hung above their heads out of their sockets and leave them all

dark. Another did nothing but wink and make faces. There was a parasite, and he with clapping his hands and thripping his fingers seemed to dance an antic, to and fro.

The only thing they did well was the prodigal child's hunger, most of their scholars being hungerly kept, and surely you would have said they had been brought up in hogs' academy to learn to eat acorns, if you had seen how sedulously they fell to them. Not a jest had they to keep their auditors from sleeping but of swill and draff; yes, now and then the servant put his hand into the dish before his master and almost choked himself, eating slovenly and ravenously to cause sport.

Cathy Shrank: Aside from having a dig at bad amateur dramatics, this extract raises the figure of the hungry scholar and of the prodigal son, the Biblical parable, told in Luke 15, of the son who disappoints his father's expectations, and spends all his inheritance, but then, having repented of his folly, is welcomed back to the family home. Both these motifs recur throughout the writings of Nashe and his generation.

Nashe himself had first-hand experience of penury. He didn't come from a rich family; he was one of seven children, born to an impoverished Suffolk clergyman. At Cambridge, he was a "sizar," one of the students who performed menial tasks around the college—and for other, richer students—in return for free rations.

But education should have offered Nashe a way to gainful employment, as Colin Burrow explains.

Colin Burrow: Humanists thought that education was to encourage eloquence and virtue and thereby enable people to serve the state.

Cathy Shrank: Humanists are sixteenth-century educators. They're called humanists because the system of education was one based on the Humanities: on reading literature and history (mostly in Latin, as we've heard).

Colin Burrow: And it's a very strange set of ideals because I think for most modern people, the idea that eloquence necessarily goes along with virtue is an extremely dubious one. But people in ancient Rome and in the 16th century did tend to believe or want to believe that eloquence naturally led to virtue, and that virtue naturally led one to serve the state.

Literature fitted into the overall picture of education in virtuous eloquence in very strange ways. There were some people writing in Elizabethan England who attempted to produce an

ideal fusion of eloquence and public service. The key example of somebody who tried to do that would be Edmund Spenser in the *Faerie Queene*, where the heroes of his allegorical narrative are all notionally serving the queen, Gloriana.

Cathy Shrank: Edmund Spenser was about 15 years older than Nashe. He was one of those university graduates who did secure a government job, as an administrator in Ireland. That was what paid the bills and got him a castle... not his poetry. Nashe wasn't so lucky. Colin Burrow goes on to explain the impact of this on his writing.

Colin Burrow: Professional writers in this period—I mean, people who tried to make a living out of publishing pamphlets as Thomas Nashe did—sat in a very old relationship to their education because they had all the eloquence, but they didn't have jobs. And a key feature of the Elizabethan period really was that grammar schools in universities were overproducing students who were highly skilled in the arts of language, but who didn't get jobs. People who were born like Nashe in the very east of England, who enjoyed a relatively low social status, really had nothing to live off or to sell apart from their words. And as a result, their words could spin free of those goals of virtuous service of the state, which underlay the whole humanistic program of education.

Cathy Shrank: This over-supply of educated young men was something that Edmund Spenser's old schoolmaster, Richard Mulcaster, was worrying about in the early 1580s. This is from Mulcaster's book *Positions Concerning the Training Up of Children*, printed in 1581:

Actor reading excerpt from *Positions Concerning the Training Up of Children*: I say thus: that too many learned be too burdenous; that too few be too bare; that wits well sorted be most civil; that the same misplaced be most unquiet and seditious. Too many burdens any state too far, for want of provision, for the rooms which are to be supplied by learning being within number, if they that are to supply them grow on beyond number, how can it be but too great a burden for any state to bear?

To have so many gaping for preferment, as no gulf hath store enough to suffice, and to let them roam helpless, whom nothing else can help: how can it be but that such shifters must needs shake the very strongest pillar in that state where they live and loiter without living? what ill can it but breed?

Cathy Shrank: Mulcaster was right. Lacking jobs, Nashe's generation was "most unquiet" and started to question the ideals of their humanist educations.

Colin Burrow: If your mental foundations are the idea that you are learning all, all this Latin in order to get a job, and you don't get a job, almost inevitably you start to subvert your intellectual foundations. Erasmus himself had acknowledged that you might end up piling up a heap of meaningless words through copious eloquence.

Cathy Shrank: Erasmus was the author of a schoolroom textbook, *De Copia*, which taught pupils how to say the same thing in multiple different ways. It was incredibly influential and copiousness became a marker of good style. It also became a way through which Elizabethan writers could undercut their education.

Colin Burrow: Professional writers in this period subverted the ideals of humanist education chiefly by doing just that: they spewed out words—eloquently, unstoppably. They also tended to do so in stories that suggested that eloquence and virtue don't go together. So in Nashe's *Unfortunate Traveller*, for example, one of the characters becomes a victim of a rapist and she makes a huge, eloquent speech trying to persuade him not to rape her. It has absolutely no effect at all. He just goes ahead, and you can see again and again in Elizabethan literature an almost deliberate splitting of the causal relationship between speech and action. That's to say people repeatedly make impassioned speeches, which have absolutely no practical effect. And you can see over and over in both the drama and the prose narratives of the period, and it is really a projection of what you might call the Elizabethan failures who wrote most of the Elizabethan literature that we now read: they were failures in practical terms. They hadn't got jobs, but they had this skill and they used that skill to describe people being eloquent and not getting what they want.

Cathy Shrank: There's a bitterness, then, and an anxiety amongst Nashe's generation. We can see this in the *Parnassus Plays*, an extraordinary trilogy that was written and performed by students of St John's College, Cambridge—Nashe's old college—over three Christmases between 1598 and 1601. These three plays trace the fortunes of two scholars, Philomusus, whose name means 'lover of the arts', and Studioso, 'studious one'. I spoke to Oscar Haines, who recently wrote his Masters dissertation on the trilogy.

Oscar Haines: The first play, *The Pilgrimage to Parnassus* is much more clearly a student comedy in favor of education. The plot of the play is based on this allegorical pilgrimage to Parnassus, as the educational system is kind of figured. So they pass through various realms of rhetoric, logic, philosophy, and poetry in order to achieve their education, in short. And so they're sort of performing on the stage an enactment of what an education looks like in the period.

Cathy Shrank: *The Pilgrimage to Parnassus* puts a positive spin on Elizabethan education, but its two sequels tell a rather different story.

Oscar Haines: Whereas the second to the third plays are much more concerned with, well, we've got our education: what comes now? What kind of a living can we expect? And the answer really isn't very promising.

They quickly fall into very typical employment for graduates of the period. Philomusus becomes a sexton in a parish church and Studioso becomes a private tutor to a kind of country manor. And these are very typical employments, but they quickly fail in them, and they don't find these kinds of professions commensurate with their education at all.

And they're very much displeased with the kind of environments they find themselves in. And so they're very quickly fired. And from there, they really slide down the socioeconomic ladder quite quickly, becoming fiddlers at one point, even trying out for the theatre. And eventually, they end up as shepherds on the downs of Kent, so really withdrawn totally from society. This is all very much an indictment of what education means in the period. Obviously, shepherds have no real need of a Cambridge education.

That's partly I think what the plays are really concerned with. You have these scholars who have these ideals drilled into them in the course of their education, that they will become, you know, very useful servants of the state and the church, and they'll use their education for, you know, the benefit of the state. But when they find themselves in the reality of late Elizabethan professional life, those skills are really not required.

Cathy: It's quite a comedown for Philomusus and Studioso, after years of being taught to expect that their education would reap the rewards of a successful career earning them money and respect.

Oscar Haines: Instead they find themselves in quite demeaning circumstances, inquiring after stray cattle in the countryside rather than using their rhetorical training, as you know, statesmen and orators, as they've been kind of promised. They're instead driven into kind of quite base, quite low-status occupations.

There's a real tension, I think in terms of the class relationship that the plays present. The scholars who have this education are nominally considered gentlemen. That really isn't borne out with the reality of their situation.

And so whilst they consider themselves gentlemen, the people who are employing them consider them essentially inferior tradesmen or crafts people. And they don't find their intellectual capabilities are really being put to any use whatsoever. And that's a real source of resentment and discontent for those scholars who want to put their rhetorical training in all of these years of education to good purpose. And the reality is that they simply can't.

Cathy Shrank: It's striking that these plays, which are mocking education, are being put on within a university, and are permitted by the college authorities. Oscar explains the significance of the plays' setting.

Oscar Haines: Taking place in the Christmas vacation, they would've been quite the highlight of the year. They would've been a chance for the students to kind of express how they were viewing the world, essentially. And there's a lot of rebellious sentiment creeping out of the corners of the text. Beneath the surface, there is a lot of kind of class resentment. There's a lot of anti-authoritarian sentiment. There's a lot of anxiety about the role of the scholar in society, and remembering that these are written by students performed by students in front of students, these are very much expressing those tensions and anxieties, I think.

Cathy Shrank: When Nashe described student drama in *The Unfortunate Traveller*, in that clip we heard earlier, he made it sound like a very dull affair. Oscar Haines paints quite a different picture.

Oscar Haines: It's quite something to get one's head around because when you think of a play, a performance in an Oxford college or a Cambridge college today, you think of something very sedate and very relaxed and very kind of academic and high. But in the period, these were really popular entertainments and for students whose lives were so straitened and so regimented and who dedicated so much of their time to really quite serious study, these performances would've been an opportunity to really let loose and to have fun.

And a lot of that translates into really quite riotous behavior. And so there is this element of unruliness that comes with the Christmas revels, and there are accounts in the period of quite severe rioting, from students of one college who want to get into a play and they can't get in because the hall is full. And so what do they do? They start throwing rocks through the windows and that kind of behavior.

Cathy Shrank: As Oscar has explained, the last two *Parnassus Plays* explore the travails of its student protagonists after they've graduated. They also feature a character called Ingenioso, who is based on Nashe, and whom we see running after unappreciative patrons and trying to

persuade printers to buy his salacious pamphlets. Jenny Richards picks up what happens to Nashe after he leaves St John's.

Jenny Richards: He doesn't get any plum jobs, does he? So, 1588, he's on his way to London. And he's looking probably for a different kind of career. Why he doesn't go for any of those plum jobs...we know that he loves particular preachers. He is a big fan of Lancelot Andrews in Cambridge. That's another career opportunity open to him, but he doesn't choose to do that. Instead, he goes to London and then he rubs shoulders with the underworld of the entertainment industry, the Shakespeares of this world, the Robert Greenes of this world. He's, following, perhaps his friend, Christopher Marlowe, who chooses a different career path as well.

Cathy Shrank: Christopher Marlowe was one of Nashe's contemporaries from Cambridge. He's famous now as the writer of plays such as *Tamburlaine* or *Dr Faustus*; for his rumoured atheism and homosexuality... and for his death, stabbed in the eye in a brawl in a Deptford tavern.

It's Marlowe's poetry which is probably the most subversive, though. He translated Ovid's elegies, which are erotic poems about adulterous liaisons. And his unfinished narrative poem, *Hero and Leander*, shows its male protagonist using his eloquence and learning to try to persuade the heroine to go to bed with him.

That's the kind of scenario that we find over and over in Elizabethan literature: a misuse of the rhetorical skills that these writers, and their protagonists, should have been putting to virtuous ends.

Take Philip Sidney's *Astrophil and Stella*, a work that Nashe knew because he was involved in a pirated publication of it in 1591. *Astrophil and Stella* is a sonnet sequence in which we see Astrophil using all his eloquence to convince a married woman to have sex with him. He fails, but not for want of trying. The twenty-first sonnet find Astrophil replying to a friend, who has just been castigating him for frittering away his time and talents. Here is Astrophil's response.

Actor reading extract from *Astrophil and Stella*:

Your words, my friend, right healthful caustics, blame
My young mind marred, whom Love doth windlass so,
That mine own writings like bad servants show
My wits, quick in vain thoughts, in virtue lame,
That Plato I read for nought, but if he tame

Such coltish gyres, that to my birth I owe
Nobler desires, least else that friendly foe,
Great expectation, wear a train of shame.
For since mad March great promise made of me,
If now the May of my years much decline,
What can be hoped my harvest time will be?
Sure you say well, your wisdom's golden mine
Dig deep with learning's spade; now tell me this,
Hath this world ought so fair as Stella is?

Cathy Shrank: Astrophil knows his friend is right, but as that last line shows, he just can't help himself. He knows he should be doing useful productive things, serving the state, but he just can't stop thinking about Stella.

As such, as well as staging Astrophil's own abandonment of his duty, it also shows the failure of rhetoric that Colin Burrow mentioned earlier. The friend's efforts to persuade Astrophil to be a responsible citizen and to put his learning to good use, in service of the state, have absolutely no impact. He remains fixated on another man's wife.

Astrophil is one of the prodigal son figures found so often in Elizabethan literature: a disappointment to the expectations of his family. Only, unlike the Biblical story that we heard about being ineptly performed by the students in Nashe's *Unfortunate Traveller*, the prodigal Astrophil doesn't repent of his sins: he ends the sequence as he began it... hopelessly in love, or in lust, with Stella.

There's thus a strong strain of immorality, or amorality, that runs through Elizabethan literature. Supposed heroes are often very badly behaved. That's certainly true of Nashe's protagonists, such as the con artist Jack Wilton, in *The Unfortunate Traveller*.

I discussed the morality of Nashe's writing with Jenny Richards.

Jenny Richards: He's interested in Pietro Aretino. So Aretino, as we know, is regarded as one of the most salacious pornographic, shocking writers of the Italian Late Renaissance, so bad that he's banned.

He writes about prostitutes. He writes about low subjects, not acceptable, but being published, printed in London in the 1580s. And we know that Nashe is aware of Aretino, reading him. But he talks about Aretino as being a highly moral writer, as someone whose purpose is to put a

magnifying glass over the reader. So he talks about the reading experience as being hot and uncomfortable, being scorched by reading Aretino.

Cathy Shrank: Jenny went on to talk about how Nashe does this in *The Unfortunate Traveller*.

Jenny Richards: His protagonist, Wilton, is like a clown who turns to the audience and pulls them in at his side. You feel like you're going on a romp with this chatty narrator, you feel like you're being drawn in. You're going to have a lot of fun with Wilton. You're going to be shocked. You're going to be surprised. And you're going to vicariously experience some really grotesque situations. And yet at the same time, you know, you're being tested, you're being made uncomfortable by Nashe. He knows that there's loads of pamphlets, literature, there's lots of news coming from the continent, full of gory detail details about wars, details about torture. People are buying this and reading it. They're consuming it. They're interested in it. Perhaps they're being titillated by it. Nashe knows that about his readers. You think you're going to get that and then you get these little moments of shock, where suddenly you feel uncomfortable as a reader. The text turns around and looks at you and suddenly you're pulled up short and it's quite confrontational. That for me is moral Nashe. He's being amoral to provoke a moral response from the reader or he's being provocative to provoke deeper thinking.

Cathy Shrank: Nashe is a writer who takes risks. His works are often confrontational. They're not a comfortable read. I asked Colin Burrow and Jenny Richards how representative Nashe was of his generation.

Colin Burrow: Like all great writers, he was both. I mean, Shakespeare was in some respects, entirely representative of his generation and entirely exceptional. I mean, Shakespeare was a grammar school-educated boy who went to London to earn his fortune, who took up with the players because that was where you could earn a quick buck and went on to write amazing plays.

Nashe was very, very similar in that he had a training in eloquence. He went to London and he tried to sell his wares on the literary marketplace, and so they've got that much in common. What's distinctive about Nashe is that he took things so much further than many of his contemporaries. If we compare him with Robert Greene, we can see what was distinctive about Nash.

Because Robert Greene was a pamphleteer who wrote and wrote and wrote and wrote just in order to make money. And Nashe was a pamphleteer who wrote and wrote and wrote just to

make money. But what Nashe managed to do was to create a grotesque vision of Elizabeth in England that is teeming with life and verbal energy in a way that nothing Greene wrote ever matched.

He was in that respect, like Shakespeare. He grew from a very clear socioeconomic and educational background, but he did things with that background, which were far, far better and more vigorous and invigorating than anything that his contemporaries managed to do in the same media.

Jenny Richards: I think he's a one-off, Cathy, I really do. The thing I really love about Nashe is the way he makes you think. The other thing I really love about Nashe is just the liveness of his presence on the page. I love his sentence that just move in ways you can't predict is almost as if you're thinking with somebody or you're hearing somebody think out loud.

And I just think that he used his education and his experiences in theatre, his experiences out on the street to learn how to craft sentences that feel alive in the moment. I think that is really remarkable about him.

Cathy Shrank: We'll be thinking more about Nashe's style in Episode 4. In the meantime, in Episode 2, you'll hear about Nashe and the world of work for the freelance writers of the 1590s.

I'm Cathy Shrank. *The Precarious World of Thomas Nashe* is produced and written by myself, Kate de Rycker, and Archie Cornish. Editing by Hannah Hethmon of Better Lemon Creative Audio. Readings by James Tucker.

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