

The Precarious World of Thomas Nashe, Episode 4 ('Experimental forms')

Sam Fallon: Part of the reason he's so good at picking up and experimenting with these different genres is because he understands himself as on the margins of the cultural world.

Joe Black: Nashe would be on academic Twitter without a doubt.

Cathy Shrank: Welcome back to *The Precarious World of Thomas Nashe*, where we're exploring the underbelly of Elizabethan England through the life and writings of Thomas Nashe.

My name is Cathy Shrank from the University of Sheffield. In this episode, I'm joined by Professor Joe Black, from the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, and Dr Sam Fallon, from the State University of New York, Geneseo.

Together, we'll look at the characteristics of Nashe's style, and how these were shaped by the socio-economic, religious, and cultural circumstances of late Elizabethan England; how Nashe—and other professional writers—had to fight to get their voices heard amidst the clamour of print; how Nashe's authorial voice is transformed by his encounters with Puritan polemic; and how his works are driven by paradoxes: by an elitist contempt for the populist strategies he uses to make a living; and the sense of himself as both insider and outsider.

Here's Sam Fallon on the characteristics of Nashe's style:

Sam Fallon: Nashe's style is defined in the first place by this desire to create a sense of sort of liveness right on the page and to give you the sense that you're witnessing not an act of writing but an act of something happening in the present. And sometimes there's a sense of analogy to stage performance. And something that Nashe is really interested in is the charisma of actors on the stage and how that can be brought into the style of writing that sits there on a printed page. And sometimes he's thinking about preachers as a point of comparison and, how, from the pulpit, they project themselves a kind of charismatic authority, although often he thinks they're failing to do that well. And so in various ways, Nashe is drawing on, comparing himself to different forms of oral rhetoric and wit and invention and thinking about how he can create a sense of spontaneity on the page that might not just match what these different forms of live performance can do verbally, but might even outdo them, might go one better.

And so when, when you're thinking about what distinguishes Nashe's writing from his contemporaries as writers in the 1590s, it's that sense that he's thinking on the page, that he'll surprise himself and work back and have to register what even he has done, and that makes

things challenging for the reader, but it also means there's a kind of unpredictability and an excitement that that's always happening just at the level of sentences flowing one from the other.

Cathy Shrank: Nashe's efforts to make his writing sound spontaneous—improvised almost—certainly distinguishes him from his peers. Literary prose in this period was highly mannered, full of obvious rhetorical figures, such as alliteration and other forms of sonic or verbal repetition. Nashe—as we'll hear—abandons that in favour of a more colloquial language.

I talked to Joe Black about the circumstances in which Nashe found himself when he was first trying to make his living as a writer, and how those might have induced him to innovate and experiment.

Joe Black: Nashe leaves university and arrives in London in the late 1580s. It's a time of ongoing, rapid transition in social, political, economic, religious, cultural spheres. It also seems a time when many ambitious educated young men were feeling increasingly thwarted in all these spheres. The older rules, the older certainties just seem to be changing.

There seemed to be more applicants scrambling for fewer positions, a dynamic we're all familiar with. The patronage system that used to provide, you know, entry-level administrative and secretarial and other jobs seemed increasingly dysfunctional or blocked by the late Elizabethan equivalent of ageing boomers. The older literary patronage system also seemed broken.

There is this emerging marketplace of print. Everybody is complaining about the quantity of books being published. So, the problem then is, well, how do you make yourself heard above that clamour of voices? The other problem is everybody is also complaining about the quality of all these books. How can you make yourself heard while at the same time writing in a way that's good, that's new, that's current, that's your voice.

But it's a challenging world for aspiring writers. You know, it's quite literally gig work, so the whole professional cultural sphere just seemed more precarious than it once promised to be, more uncertain, more cutthroat.

Cathy Shrank: Nashe complains about this precarious world in the opening to *Pierce Penniless*, which was printed in 1592. Its protagonist—Pierce—is an impoverished would-be-writer, who's failing to make a living. He begins the work unsure where his next meal is coming from, or how he will pay the rent.

Excerpt from *Pierce Penniless* read by actor: I tossed my imagination a thousand ways to see if I could find any means to relieve my estate, but all my thoughts consorted to this conclusion: that the world was uncharitable, and I ordained to be miserable. Thereby I grew to consider how many base men, that wanted those parts which I had, enjoyed content at will and had wealth at command. And have I more wit than all these, thought I to myself? Yea, and better favoured? And yet am I a beggar? What is the cause? Or whence this curse?

That men that should employ such as I am are enamoured of their own wits and think whatever they do is excellent, though it be never so scurvy: that learning is rated after the value of the ink and paper; that every gross-brained idiot is suffered to come into print, who if he set forth a pamphlet of the praise of pudding-pricks, it is bought up thick and threefold, when better things lie dead. How then can we choose but be needy, when there are so many drones amongst us?

Cathy Shrank: Through the penniless *Pierce*, Nashe gives voice to the challenges of being a professional writer, living hand-to-mouth, unsure where the next pay cheque is coming from or how he will pay the rent. But he's also giving voice to disgust and resentment. *Pierce* feels superior to his would-be patrons: the people he believes should be employing him, but who are too puffed up with a misguided belief in their own talents to realise that they need him.

And *Pierce* sneers at the quality of the works which are being printed, and at the 'idiots' who are getting published. It's hard to pin the views expressed in Nashe's works onto their author, because he frequently uses personae. But there must be some grain of truth and personal experience here, as Sam Fallon argues:

Sam Fallon: In some ways, Nashe comes into his writing career in print in the early 1590s as this figure who commands the pedigree of a Cambridge graduate, and he's bothered by what he sees as a literary field that's incapable of making distinctions between good and bad writing. It's filled with what he calls "babbling ballad makers" and "dull-headed divines" and what he wants to do is impose a kind of university-derived standard of taste and quality. And there's a kind of formality to that enterprise, but from the beginning, Nashe also realizes that to be persuasive and compelling in print, you have to begin to pick up its idioms.

Cathy Shrank: To make a living, then, Nashe had to learn the language of print, and to acquire a popular voice. He needed to change as a writer. Here's Joe Black on Nashe's first book, *The Anatomy of Absurdity*, printed in 1589.

Joe Black: Nashe is haunting the bookstores, haunting the stationer shops, contacting every contact he possibly has, trying to flog his first book for publication. And he does get it accepted eventually: *The Anatomy of Absurdity*. Quite conventional Elizabethan hodgepodge of borrowed ideas; he basically just dumped his notebooks under the page.

Cathy Shrank: So what happened to Nashe, to inspire a different mode of writing? For Joe Black, the pivotal moment is Nashe's encounter with a series of polemical pamphlets, published under the pseudonym Martin Marprelate.

Joe Black: Martin Marprelate is a Puritan polemicist, which sounds excruciatingly tedious. Martin Marprelate writes a series of pamphlets that attack the legitimacy of bishops in the Church of England, attacks clerical hierarchy, attacks the role of the church and the political and legal spheres, attacks a whole series of church ceremonies and practices that Presbyterians consider to be Catholic holdovers. Puritans and Presbyterians have been making these same arguments for decades.

What Martin Marprelate does is acknowledge that nobody wanted to read this stuff. Nobody on either side, either defending the church or attacking the church, had any interest in ploughing their way through these 400, 500, 1000-page defences of the church or attacks on the church. And so what's new with the Marprelate tracts is the style: they're colloquial, conversational, performative, playful, ironic. They use a lot of slang words. They use a persona. They use dialect. They use theatrical modes like conversations and dialogues.

Cathy Shrank: Let's listen to some of Marprelate's conversational style. The following extract is from *Hay Any Work for the Cooper*, printed in 1589.

Extract from *Hay Any Work for the Cooper* read by actor: Ha, old Martin! Yet I see thou hast it in thee. Thou wilt enter into the bowels of the cause in hand I perceive... py hy hy hy. I cannot but laugh, py hy hy hy. I cannot but laugh, to think that an old soaking student in this learned age is not ashamed to be so impudent as to presume to deal with a papist, when he hath no grue in his pocket.

And I tell you true, our brother Westchester had as lief play twenty nobles in a night at primero on the cards, as trouble himself with any pulpit labour, and yet he thinks himself to be a sufficient bishop.

'What, would you have men take no recreation?' Yea, but it is an old said saw: enough is as good as a feast. And recreations must not be made a trade and an occupation, ka Master Martin Marprelate.

Cathy Shrank: Here we can hear outbursts of scornful laughter, as well as moments when the text voices an objection to itself and has a conversation with an imagined interlocutor. Even the title, *Hay Any Work for the Cooper*, strikes that oral note. It interjects: "Hay!" It asks a question. Marprelate also uses familiar, commonplace wisdom like a proverb. But Marprelate's tracts aren't only colloquial, attempting to capture orality; they are also intensely aware of their status as printed books, as Joe Black goes on to explain:

Joe Black: They play with the conventions that govern print publication. Marprelate uses marginal notes. Marginal notes appear in many early modern books, summarizing, providing references, but in Marprelate tracts there are voices in the margins that are in conversation with voices in the text. So at one point, Marprelate has a really, really, really long sentence and a voice in the margin says "well Martin, that's a pretty long sentence. You put more in your point than the sentence can hold." And then in the text, Marprelate responds to the voice in the margin. And of course, it's all the same writer, but he's just playfully creating the sense of onlookers.

The errata are playful. So often the list of errata at the end will just say, please fix the following typos. In one of the Marprelate tracts, it says something like "If I have accidentally called any Bishop, my Lord, please strike that out because they're none of my Lords." He's sort of giving the reader instructions to go back and revise the text whenever there's any accidental respect shown to the bishops.

Cathy Shrank: Here's one of those playful errata lists, from *Oh Read Over, Dr Bridges*, printed in 1588.

Extract from *Oh Read Over, Dr Bridges* read by actor: Errata, or faults escaped

1. Wheresoever the prelates are called my lords, either in the epistle to the confocation house, or in this epitome, take that for a fault. Because they are none of Master Martin's lords, neither shall any priest of them all be my lord.
2. There is nothing spoken at all of that notable hypocrite Scambler, bishop of Norwich. Take it for a great fault.

3. But the greatest fault of all is that I could say against our ungodly priests, but unless they mend, I'll fully amend this fault, and I can do it with a small warning

Cathy Shrank: In those two excerpts, we get a taste of the outrageous things that Marprelate says about the bishops: the Bishop of Westchester who spends more time playing cards than preaching; the forthright denunciation of Edmund Scambler, Bishop of Norwich, as a hypocrite; and the mock admission of error because the book hasn't devoted any space to criticising him until this final page. There's even a smutty joke in the spelling of "confocation", not convocation. Marprelate is savage about the bishops; he doesn't pull any punches. And his readers seem to have lapped it up. Joe Black again:

Joe Black: Marprelate tells stories, he names names. These tracts sought to stage a trial of bishops in the court of public opinion. And so therefore you had to write in a way that encouraged people in the public to read them. In fact, you had to write in a way that encouraged people to read them out loud to one another, which he did, and they were immensely successful and they were immensely controversial.

People were reading him all over the country. Authorities were complaining that undergraduates were reading the Marprelate tracts in lectures by hiding copies of the pamphlet in the sleeves of their academic gowns, the Elizabethan equivalent of texting in class. And they can only do that because these are just pamphlets, so you can just roll up and, and hide in your pockets, hide anywhere on you. So they were widespread. They were suddenly ubiquitous.

And they got personal. Martin Marprelate said, let me tell you about John Aylmer, the Bishop of London. Let me tell you about the cloth he stole from these cloth workers. Let me tell you about his habit of swearing while lawn bowling on Sundays.

What Martin Marprelate is doing is appealing to people who just want to read stories of errant bishops out loud to one another and laugh. And we have documents that say yes, I was at this house and the servants are reading these pamphlets and laughing aloud at every mention of John Whitgift, Archbishop of Canterbury. That generation of scornful disrespectful laughter was the polemical purpose of Martin Marprelate's style.

Cathy Shrank: Nashe wasn't just reading Marprelate: he was also one of the writers hired by the frustrated, humiliated bishops to counter Marprelate by taking him on at his own game. Nashe anonymously authored at least six such anti-Marprelate tracts. Joe Black draws analogies between the resulting pamphlet war and social media.

Joe Black: What becomes interesting about this transition is that in effect the church realizes that it's kind of unleashed something it couldn't quite control. So with the popularity of Marprelate, then the popularity of the anti-Marprelate pamphlets, satire becomes an increasingly popular mode, and like any kind of new kind of mode, like social media, rewards engagement and extremes generate engagement.

And so over the 1590s as satire becomes more and more ubiquitous and more daring and more extreme, it's like this kind of media monster that authorities realize we have to control this and, within 10 years, the authorities say no, that's it, no more satire. It gets banned as a genre with a long list of names of banned writers.

Cathy Shrank: Nashe was one of those writers named in the so-called Bishops' Ban of 1599. But this close engagement with Marprelate had immediate effect a decade earlier in 1589. It taught Nashe the power of a colloquial style, of personae, of playing around with print conventions, of telling irreverent stories, of generating scornful laughter.

Joe Black: There seems to be clear shift in Nashe's style between his really early works, pre-Marprelate, and the pamphlets he wrote after. Even though he's attacking Marprelate, he borrows all these stylistic ideas from Marprelate. If you want to make yourself heard in the emerging marketplace of print, here's a template because Martin Marprelate was certainly being heard.

Nashe is drawing on these popularizing strategies from a writer like Marprelate who really is targeting a popular readership, even an oral readership. But I think Nashe wants to be taken seriously as a writer. So I think maybe he's drawing on his resources in order to show off to a more educated audience, a more elite audience. He's always calling attention to his own education, to his own cleverness, to his own vocabulary, to his own allusions. So the people he's trying to impress are readers who would be impressed by the fact that he's correcting his opponent's Latin, that he's mocking the education and learning of his opponents. So he's using populist strategies, but to target a fairly educated audience.

Cathy Shrank: Joe Black highlights what seems to have been a dilemma for Nashe and many other university-educated writers: namely, the way in which the literary marketplace required them to tout for business: pumping out pamphlets, sucking up to potential patrons. It's a scenario captured in the student play, *The Return to Parnassus*, performed at Nashe's old college, St John's, at the very end of the 16th century.

Excerpt from *The Return to Parnassus* read by actor: It is an unfortunate thing: I have observed that the head where wit dwelleth hath seldom a good hat, or the back it belongs to, a good suit of apparel. But, to the point, for the husbanding of my wit, I put it out to interest, and make it return two pamphlets a week. I have indeed a pamphlet here, a snare to catch a dotterel.

I have better hope of this gouty patron now that he is sick, that the devil and his conscience betwixt them will let him bleed in the liberal vein. Crows fly to carrion, and good wits to dying churls.

Cathy Shrank: These words are spoken by the character Ingenioso, who is an avatar for Nashe. Wit and poverty are seen to go hand-in-hand, whilst the people with money are conversely seen as dotterels or fools. And it's such fools that writers like Ingenioso—or Nashe—need to impress. There's a contempt both for the world of print exemplified in the way that Ingenioso churns out pamphlets. And there's a contempt for the readers who consume them. Sam Fallon talks more about this tension and the way that it runs through Nashe's writing:

Sam Fallon: When you get to *Pierce Penniless*, which may be his greatest piece of writing, published in 1592, Nashe is having to rethink his oppositional stance to print. He's realized that print is going to be his meal ticket, that if he's going to support himself and make a living as a writer, it's going to be by catering to this print marketplace that in some ways he disdains.

And so from that point on, he's got to make a compromise and constantly negotiate his relationship to a print marketplace that he both sees himself as in some way superior to and opposed to, but also as inextricably a part of. And so his writing comes to be defined by this tension between being an insider and an outsider, being part of this world and being outside and critical of it. And his style in some ways is going to be determined, constrained, and motivated by the pressures of that double. At the same time he also gets better at writing in print and his ability to evoke the sense of spontaneous thought and self-correction, tacking back and following a new path, of effects of surprise or the sort of copious building up of language on it itself.

Cathy Shrank: Like Jenny Richards in Episode 1, Sam finds a moral purpose in Nashe's difficult and evasive style.

Sam Fallon: Nashe comes out of Cambridge determined to show that what rhetoric has to offer, that the forms of rhetorical writing, the building up of language, the copious use of figures—that these are not just ornaments but modes of thinking and that he wants to remind

us in his writing that the sentence is not just a form of decoration, but is itself a tool with which to think.

He gets more daring, he gets bolder, and he gets more comfortable challenging his reader. If on the one hand, he's disdainful of the print marketplace and can be critical of the kind of readers that it supports, he also starts to see them as readers he might challenge and maybe cultivate into being the kinds of discerning readers that he hopes England can support and that he hopes the print marketplace can maybe educate.

Nashe is always playing games of a very hard-to-determine irony. In *Pierce Penniless*, he gives us this moral treatise on the seven deadly sins. But the framing narrative is that this is presented to the devil, and so from the beginning, this moral purpose is ironized. So the overlay of these moments where Nashe is being ironic and these moments where he's being sincere becomes very hard to parse. And so I think that part of what Nashe is trying to do is cultivate a reader that is alert to the problems of judgment that irony poses – irony then being an extreme example of the ambiguity and the difficulty that language always possesses.

And the reason that his language constantly surprises us and cuts against itself is because he wants us to take seriously language at the level of style as something that has real intellectual import and significance.

Cathy Shrank: Nashe's bold, challenging style won him many fans amongst his early readers, and writers that followed frequently tried to emulate him. Our final extract is from Thomas Middleton's *Black Book*, printed in 1604. It not only imitates Nashe's thick, descriptive style, but also reprises the character of Pierce Penniless, whom the devil finds in a state of extreme poverty.

Extract from *The Black Book* read by actor: I stumbled up two pair of stairs in the dark, but at last caught in mine eyes the sullen blaze of a melancholy lamp that burnt very tragically upon the narrow desk of a half bedstead, which descried all the pitiful ruins throughout the whole chamber: the bare privities of the stone walls were hid with two pieces of painted cloth, but so ragged and tattered that one might have seen all nevertheless, hanging for all the world like the two men in chains between Mile End and Hackney.

In this unfortunate tiring-house lay poor Pierce upon a pillow stuffed with horsemeat, the sheets smudged so dirtily as if they had been stolen by night out of Saint Pulcher's Churchyard when the sexton had left a grave open, and so laid the dead bodies woolward. The coverlet was

made of pieces, a black cloth clapped together, such as was scattered off the rails in King's Street, at the Queen's funeral.

Upon this miserable bed's head lay the old copy of his Supplication in foul written hand which my black knight of the Post conveyed to Hell, which no longer I entertained in my hand, but with the rattling and blabbing of the papers, poor Pierce began to stretch and grate his nose against the hard pillow.

Cathy Shrank: By the time Middleton published this, Nashe was dead. The fictional Pierce still lives, barely, but the extract is threaded through with references to death: the hanged men, rotting in chains between Mile End and Hackney; the dead bodies exhumed from the grave; the black cloth that is reminiscent of Queen Elizabeth's funeral procession in 1603.

The next episode goes on to look at other Elizabethan and early Stuart works that are composed against a backdrop of death. Join Archie Cornish in Episode 5, which explores writing in a time of plague.

Thank you for listening.

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.

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