Main File: Ep 6 - Ghosts

Liz Oakley-Brown: He's thinking about all kinds of different spaces for these troubling—we might call them uncanny now if we're gonna be Freudian—but uncanny things happening to you.

Rachel White: If you're writing, theoretically, from beyond the grave or you're using a persona from beyond the grave, then you don't really have that worry anymore. So you can be much more direct, I think.

Kate De Rycker: Welcome back to the precarious world of Thomas Nashe, where we're exploring the underbelly of Elizabeth England through the life and writings of the author Thomas Nashe.

I'm Kate De Rycker from Newcastle University, and in this final episode, I will be exploring Nashe's interest in ghosts: supernatural beings stuck between this world and the next. What is it about living in precarious times, I wonder, that lends itself to this gothic mode of writing?

So far in this series, we've been thinking about financial precarity in the Elizabethan period, but we have also considered the impact of precarity as life-and-death problems like famine and the plague. As Andrew Hadfield reminded us in the previous episode, life was generally dangerous:

Andrew Hadfield: If you read so many Elizabeth writers, most of them don't expect to live very long. And they write like mad men and occasionally like mad women just producing as much material as they can because they don't think they're gonna be around that long.

Kate De Rycker: So there's a definite 'live fast, die young' vibe with this generation of writers. Two of Nashe's friends, Robert Greene and Christopher Marlowe, both died quite young: Greene died in 1592 after a boozy night out, while Marlowe was murdered in a tavern the next year, either after a fight over the bill or because he had got on the wrong side of an angry aristocrat.

Nashe himself died in his early 30s. We're not sure exactly why, but we do know that other writers paid tribute to him through comparisons with his most enduring character, that angry young student, Pierce Penniless. The playwright Thomas Middleton, for example, portrays Nashe as a ghostly figure, still haunting London. We heard a bit of this description at the end of episode 4:

Excerpt from Black Book Read by Actor: 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.

Kate De Rycker: Pierce a.k.a. Nashe is lying on a pillow stuffed with hay. Don't worry, 'horsemeat' here means the stuff you feed horses, rather than the horse's flesh itself. This is quite a gothic scene, though; Nashe is almost a zombie here, sleeping on bedsheets that look like they were stolen from open graves or like the black sheets used to decorate the streets of London at Queen Elizabeth I's funeral. The narrator—who by the way is the devil himself—continues, finding a copy of Nashe's infamous text 'Pierce Penilesse's Supplication to the Devil'. In that pamphlet, the hungry angry writer, Pierce, sends a letter to hell to beg for money. Middleton continues the story, with the devil returning to London a bit too late:

Excerpt from Black Book Read by Actor: 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.

Kate De Rycker: So Middleton has taken Nashe's premise of a young freelance writer, who is so desperate for work that he must write to the devil and writes a sort of fan fiction about it. In his 'Black Book', the writer is an infernal, possibly undead, figure. But why did Nashe and Middleton find this demonic theme so interesting? Well, they were living shortly after the Protestant Reformation, a theological revolution which had, amongst other huge changes, disposed of the belief in purgatory.

Now purgatory is a sort of celestial waiting room for Catholics; the very good might go straight to heaven, the very bad might go straight to hell, but the majority of people—who are neither especially good or bad—were meant to go to purgatory, a space where they would have their sins purged before being allowed to go to heaven. And people on earth could pray for their souls in order to expedite that process. When the new theology of Protestantism removed the option of purgatory, it also removed a potential comfort for many people, because the only other option for those of us who know we've not been that good was hell. So people started looking into alternatives. Dr Rachel White, from the university of Durham, explains:

Rachel White: The Protestant Reformation, it essentially removed a space where the dead would go. It removed purgatory. So these ghosts that appear in the Elizabethan period when

they're mentioned, they've come from somewhere else. They've come from hell like, I suppose, like old Hamlet's ghost. There's probably fairly widespread belief in ghosts, but possibly a bit more concern about where exactly they've come from because that entire theological space and system doesn't really exist anymore.

Kate De Rycker: In Renaissance revenge tragedies, ghosts are also quite subversive figures, prompting their living relatives to take revenge for their untimely deaths. Think of one of the most famous examples, the ghost of Hamlet's father, who sets the bloody actions of that play into motion.

Nashe makes fun of this stock character by turning the vengeful stage ghost into a comic character. In his play, 'Summers Last Will and Testament', Nashe has a character called 'Will Sommers' who acts as an interpreter for the audience. He's the ultimate 'go-between' or 'marginal' figure. For one thing he hovers between where the audience is sitting and the stage. For another thing, the first time we see him, it is not entirely clear if we are looking at the character 'Will' who is the ghost of Henry VIII's by now very dead clown, Will Sommers, or if we are looking at the actor portraying him. Here he is speaking directly to the audience, seemingly while struggling into his costume:

Excerpt from Summer's Last Will and Testament Read by Actor: There is no such fine time to play the knave in as the night. I am a goose, or a ghost at least, for what with turmoil of getting my fool's apparel, and care of being perfect, I am sure I have not yet supped tonight. Will Summer's ghost I should be, come to present you with Summer's last will and testament.

Kate De Rycker: This opening gets even more meta. The actor—seeming to be speaking off the cuff—explains that he is actually speaking the words of the author, Thomas Nashe, who he calls: 'the idiot, our play-maker':

Excerpt from Summer's Last Will and Testament Read by Actor: So it is, that one fool presents another, and I, a fool by nature and by art, do speak to you in the person of the idiot, our play-maker. He, like a fop and an ass, must be making himself a public laughing-stock, & have no thanks for his labour, where other *magisterii*, whose invention is far more exquisite, are content to sit still and do nothing.

Kate De Rycker: There are many layers of irony here. Is the actor speaking as himself, or is he speaking in character? Are he and Nashe really the struggling hungry creatives who are wasting their time trying to entertain a wealthy patron? The fact that these words are meant to be spoken not only by a clown but by a ghost, is important. Both clowns and ghosts are

commentator figures in fiction. Because of their marginal status, they are able to say some of the most subversive things, without much consequence.

Nashe seems especially drawn to these marginal figures in his writing. The main character of his novel 'The Unfortunate Traveller' is a servant called Jack Wilton, and as Sam Fallon—who we heard in episode 4—explains:

Sam Fallon: He's not a main player in the history that he's gonna unfold here. He's a servant, right? He's a marginal and precarious and vulnerable figure, and so I think what we're seeing every time Nashe wants to talk about himself, directly or indirectly, is this sense of ambivalence and uncertainty.

Kate De Rycker: So, ghosts, servants, clowns—they are all 'in between', marginal characters. As we know, Nashe was himself often in this marginal position as a writer. He'd be invited to stay as a type of writer in residence in a patron's country house for a few months then go back to his freelance lifestyle, hustling for work and making his money stretch.

I'm editing a text for the new Thomas Nashe collection called 'The Terrors of the Night', which he wrote while on the Isle of Wight as the guest of the aristocratic Carey family. As you might be able to tell, it is a text which grapples with the question of nightmares; are they the result of the devil trying to make you despair or just some badly digested cheese? Nashe is not sure. What he does know, though, is that the more vulnerable we feel in the daytime, the worse we will feel at night. Here's a quotation, which—fair warning—is not for the squeamish:

Excerpt from Terrors of the Night Read by Actor: A solitary man in his bed is like a poor bedrid leper lying by the highway side, unto whose displayed wounds and sores a number of stinging flies do swarm for pastance and beverage. His naked wounds are his inward heart-griping woes, the wasps and flies his idle wandering thoughts, who to that secret smarting pain he hath already, do add a further sting of impatience, and now launch his sleeping griefs and vexations.

Kate De Rycker: Life was precarious for almost everyone at this time, but while Nashe was writing 'Terrors', his life was even less predictable and secure.

Like many others, Nashe had spent time in debtors' prison when he hasn't been able to pay his bills, but in autumn 1593 he had also been sent to jail for antagonising the London authorities, who he had described as a 'seeded garden of sin' in his pamphlet 'Christ's Tears over Jerusalem'. His then patron, George Carey, had helped to secure Nashe's release from prison

and had invited him to spend Christmas with his family. Here's Professor Liz Oakley-Brown from Lancaster University, to tell us more:

Liz Oakley-Brown: Elizabeth Carey, one of the famous aristocratic families, the Carey family. At the time of 1594, she was about 18, and she's also known to be a patron of the arts and Nashe dedicates his text to Carey and he praises her for her sharp wit and religious piety. And I don't find myself saying this very often, but Psalm 91 you know, from the Geneva Bible, ‘Thou shall not be afraid of the night,’ is perhaps something that sparks this text off in terms of its patron.

I think if you were to read this, it's quite calming in a bizarre way. It's a very conversational tone. Because it does start really with the devil. And this text talks about, you know, in the quiet silence of the night, the devil will surprise us.

Kate De Rycker: Which doesn't sound very calming or reassuring, does it? But let's think ourselves back into the religious world of the Elizabethans. Psalm 91 reassures believers like Elizabeth Carey that God will protect her from the devil: ' I will deliver thee from the snare of the hunter' i.e. the devil, hunting for human souls. 'Truth shall be thy shield..and thou shalt not be afraid of the fear of the night'.

Liz Oakley-Brown: It is like having someone in your room with you, which clearly a pious young woman would not have. But I thought, what if you had a young woman of 18? So what might help, if you wake up in the middle of the night with one of these terrors and you haven't got a podcast to pop on and you haven't got Twitter to doom scroll through, which is a pretty good thing.

So I wondered what this text might read like, if you had it by your bed as a pamphlet, let's say, along with your Bible. I think there's there are aspects of this text, which can seem quite comforting.

Kate De Rycker: So maybe this text was written as a way to reassure a young woman suffering from nightmares, or needing reassurance that God will protect her. And let's be honest, the night really is a scary time whether you believe in the devil or not; you are quite vulnerable while you're asleep, and your mind amplifies everything in the dark:

Liz Oakley-Brown: It's very difficult to imagine anything as dark as the Elizabethan period, I think. It's just impossible. We have so much light pollution. Even if we go to very dark bits. I'm near the Lake District, so you can get quite dark there. But even that I don't think captures what it must be like to be in the darkness of 1590s London. Something that Nashe talks about is how

we're affected by sounds in the midst of this absolute darkness. I'm gonna say a general question: who hasn't been spooked by the sound of something that drops in your kitchen at 2:00 AM in the morning, and if you can imagine not being able to put the light on and then trying to imagine what that sound is, then I think you get some way to perhaps another, another reason for writing this text.

Kate De Rycker: So Nashe is interested in the way our mind amplifies and exaggerates naturally occurring phenomena.

Liz Oakley-Brown: He's coming up with very material reasons for feeling disturbed at night. And some of those reasons can be because of what you've eaten. Some of those reasons can be because you have a fever, because you're ill. Some of those reasons could be because you've been really bad during the day. So sin does crop up here.

Kate De Rycker: As you'll remember, Nashe had been suddenly moved from one extreme, prison, to the other, the luxury of an aristocratic household, all thanks to the intervention of his patron. The following section of 'Terrors' uses a fairly common Christian image of the mind as a prison, but it's hard to read this and not think about Nashe's own recent experience in a 'dark dungeon':

Excerpt from Terrors of the Night Read by Actor: The night is the devil's black book, wherein he recordeth all our transgressions. Even as when a condemned man is put into a dark dungeon, secluded from all comfort of light or company, he doth nothing but despairfully call to mind his graceless former life, and the brutish outrages and misdemeanours that have thrown him into that desolate horror, so when Night in her rusty dungeon hath imprisoned our eyesight, and that we are shut separately in our chambers from resort, the devil keepeth his audit in our sin-guilty consciences.

Kate De Rycker: Even though Nashe is fairly materialist about the causes of nightmares, we need to remember that concepts like Sin and the devil were very real in the Elizabethan worldview. Rachel White explains that the boundaries between the material and the supernatural were much more porous than they are today:

Rachel White: I think in the past there's been a desire to separate out early modern beliefs. So 'this is scientific, this is magical. this is something else.' And actually, what critics have realized more recently, the last sort of 10 or 15 years in particular, is that these beliefs were not incompatible with one another, not incongruous, weren't even separate many times, that they kind of are all interwoven together in early modern experience.

There's an edited collection by Marcus Harmies and Victoria Bladen that they mentioned this porous boundary between the supernatural and the secular. So there's this sense that there aren't these hard boundaries that we maybe have imagined and that early modern people were far more comfortable with ideas that perhaps to us seem to be in complete conflict, but to them were not and were really part of lived existence.

Kate De Rycker: As Rachel points out, there are examples of scientists who managed to square their specialism in the 'new' field of natural philosophy with older belief systems:

Rachel White: I suppose a quite famous one is Isaac Newton. You know, he's often credited as being the father of modern science, but he also believed in alchemy, this practice of turning base metals into gold, et cetera, which doesn't seem like the kind of thing the father of modern science would have believed in, but it wasn't incompatible with other things he was doing and discovering at the time.

I suppose another example might be somebody like John Dee who is in many ways, I suppose an early scientist. He was a mathematician, an advocate for the English language, but he was also an astrologer. Lots of people believe in astrology, but he also communicated or believed he communicated with angels to try and gain further knowledge.

Kate De Rycker: I asked Rachel whether John Dee's contemporaries would have seen him as having a legitimate type of career, or whether he was instead seen as a con artist, or even a threat?

Rachel White: His contemporaries didn't really know how to respond to him, I don't think. And I think many of them were probably quite worried about what he was trying to do, particularly the more sort of esoteric parts of his philosophical inquiry, if we could call it that.

I think the thing with legitimate and illegitimate knowledge is no one at the time or now would know exactly where that boundary is. So John Dee would have said—or indeed did say—that he had never strayed beyond that boundary and he'd always acted in accordance with a sort of Christian framework.

But other people at the time were concerned about what he was doing. He failed to achieve the level of patronage he wanted when he came back from the continent. Later in Elizabeth's reign he ended up in Manchester without patronage, without friends really.

When he left for the continent, his library at Mortlake was burnt down by local people who were worried and scared about what he was doing. So I suppose that's the thing. No one really knows what is legitimate and what's illegitimate or when that line has been crossed, and that's the subject of debate within the period as well.

Kate De Rycker: Nashe was both attracted to and slightly repelled by people who claimed they could communicate with supernatural beings. That line between legitimate and illegitimate knowledge, between true and false prophecy, is one which Nashe explores in both 'Terrors of the Night' and in his very first pamphlet 'The Anatomie of Absurdity'. Kirsty Rolfe, who we heard speak about the plague in episode 5, is the editor of Nashe's 'Anatomie' and explains why he is so bothered by other writers claiming to predict the future:

Kirsty Rolfe: So he's thoroughly, thoroughly interested in prophecies. And he mocks them quite a lot. This idea of being able to predict the future.

And here he really kind of links into a wider criticism that's often levelled at lower-class people who consume news: that they just don't understand, that they don't have the frame of reference and the knowledge and the education to know what they're reading. So in ‘Anatomie’ there's a bit where he refers to kind of a cartman reading a prediction and thinking that he's, he's gonna see a dragon in the sky and that the puddle is a flood and just misinterpreting the landscape around him.

Kate De Rycker: We also think that Nashe wrote anonymous mock versions of these predictions, which were called 'prognostications'. Rachel White, who is editing some of these prognostications for the Nashe edition, explains that they were aimed at a popular audience:

Rachel White: So prognostications, they're often printed alongside almanacs, which are sort of yearly publications, annual publications, cheap, I think, I'm trying to remember the figures, but I think there was like one almanac for every two or three households at some point in the period, which is also why they're quite rare because they were so many of them. They were sort of reused as other things like lining pie dishes and stuff. So we actually don't have that many of them, considering how prolific they were.

Kate De Rycker: A modern equivalent would be a newspaper. Like the almanac it's a useful textual object, but also something you throw away when it's out of date.

Rachel White: And many of them did have these prognostications attached, which were essentially prose descriptions of what would occur during the year using the astrological signs and calculations to explain why there'd be a particularly bad winter or et cetera.

Kate De Rycker: And we still have star signs in our newspapers and magazines. So really, Nashe is writing mock versions of star signs, something which is quite easy to do because they tend to be quite vague; you know the sort of thing, 'money is going to be especially important to you this month'...when isn't it?.

Nashe is punching down in 'The Anatomie' and his mock prognostications; he's mocking the type of working-class readers who believe in, or at least enjoy reading these type of star-sign predictions. While he is still a snob in 'Terrors of the Night', his criticism is instead aimed at the type of men like John Dee, who are either deluded enough to think they really can predict the future by talking to angels, or who are cynically exploiting the gullible and the scared. Here is Liz Oakley-Brown to say more:

Liz Oakley-Brown: There was a couple of really interesting moments in the text and one of them is to do with people's vulnerability and how tricksters and conmen and con people will take advantage of the many poor people that they want to believe in. There are some parts of society that realize that these are precarious times and that people will have these terrors of the nights and will exploit them for material gain.

Kate De Rycker: In warning people about the dangers of conmen pretending to have supernatural powers, Nashe had to be careful to distinguish between 'true' and 'false' prophecy. A text Nashe refers to repeatedly is Reginald Scott's 'Discovery of Witchcraft', which was an unusual text for its day because it debunked a lot of contemporary beliefs in witchcraft, superstitions, and magic. Scott demonstrated how certain magic tricks actually worked and argued that it was wrong for communities to accuse the poorest and most marginalised women of witchcraft.

Both Nashe and Scott still needed to be careful about the sceptical claims they made, as Rachel White reminds us:

Rachel White: You know, when he's saying, ‘beware false prophets, but the biblical ones - they’re fine’, he's also having to toe a line of being careful to what he denies because to deny all prophecy, you are heading quickly into sort of heretical territory or you know, being labelled an atheist, which is not something you, particularly the label you particularly want at that time. I think Reginald Scott in his ‘Discovery of Witchcraft’, he's another one that has to kind of tow

that line, acknowledging what is kind of, I suppose, almost mandated belief whilst also advocating for rationality and that witches don't really exist, except he kind of has to acknowledge that they might.

Kate De Rycker: This ambivalence continues when we turn to the Elizabethans' belief in ghosts. In 'Terrors of the Night', we see Nashe balancing a story about the psychedelic apparitions which he says appeared to a dying man, with the suggestion that maybe these apparitions were not supernatural, but instead the hallucinations of an ill mind.

Rachel White: So I think early modern people, their beliefs about ghosts would've been quite varied. You do have publications coming out that are more in support of a sort of rationality. So Ludwig Lavater's 'Of Ghosts and Spirits Walking at Night,' he's, you know, advocating rationality that chances are you haven't really seen a ghost.

And quite interestingly, he picks upon the idea that it's mostly people who are already fearful that are more likely to see them. He says people who have nothing to fear, who are stout of heart or whatever, they don't tend to see ghosts. So I think there is a recognition that ghosts and apparitions are possibly creations of the mind. So I suppose it's almost like early, sort of early psychological approach in a way, which Nashe sort of toys with when he talks about the 'bubbling scum' and things like that.

Kate De Rycker: Rachel is referring to a line in 'Terrors' where Nashe describes a dream being 'nothing else but a bubbling scum or froth of the fancy which the day hath left undigested,' which does have a surprisingly Freudian ring to it.

And it's with that image of undigested froth that I must leave you. This is the final episode of our limited series on Thomas Nashe, but don't unsubscribe yet. In the next few months, we'll be releasing a bonus episode where we will reflect on how Elizabethan themes like precarity manifest today.

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

This podcast was made possible by a grant from the UK's Arts and Humanities Research Council. To find out more about our project and to access other Thomas Nashe resources, visit research.ncl.ac.uk/thethomasnasheproject.