

## ***The Precarious World of Thomas Nashe, Episode 2 ('Hustlers')***

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**Emma Smith:** What it means to write for the press at this time is in flux. It's changing. But it means to be writing large amounts, to quite tight deadlines. It's a kind of work in which you must be always hustling, for the next thing.

**Andrew McRae:** This cohort of writers born in the 1560s, 1570s, they're competing for patronage, they're competing with each other in the press, and none of them are particularly settled.

**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.

My name is Kate De Rycker from Newcastle University. In this episode, I'm joined by Professor Emma Smith from Oxford University, and Professor Andrew McRae from Exeter University.

In the first episode, we heard that the safe jobs that a university degree seemed to promise were actually few and far between for Nashe and his generation of students. And yet there was also opportunity for these young men in what we might now call the creative sector; they had been trained to write convincingly, and to rework the classical stories and characters they knew from their school days. In this episode, I'm interested in what happened once these graduates found themselves working for the relatively new creative industries of the Elizabethan period.

One way of making money was to dedicate your book to an aristocrat, who in turn for a presentation copy would gift you a payment of on average £1. However, some writers were luckier than others. The writer Richard Robinson, who tended to write religious and patriotic texts, kept a meticulous record of all the 'gifts' and 'monies' that he had received in his life, along with a waspish commentary, which details his disappointment and humiliation by members of the aristocracy. Here he is talking about one such failed attempt at patronage:

**Actor Reading Excerpt of Richard Robinson:** The Harmony of David's Harp by me translated out of Latin into English and commended by George Close my countryman, preacher of St Magnus Parish in London. Dedicated by me to the Right Honourable Lord Ambrose Dudley, Earl of Warwick, who received my book at my hands, but rendered me no reward for the same.

**Kate De Rycker:** So basically the Earl of Warwick has broken the social contract here; he gave Robinson 'no reward' at all. Robinson tries again, this time with the fourth edition of this book:

**Actor Reading Excerpt of Richard Robinson:** A fourth proceeding in The Harmony of David's Harp, dedicated by me to the then and yet Right Honourable Sir Thomas Egerton, Knight, to honour him with my goodwill. His Lordship grudging to receive my book, or to render me any reward, his eloquent tongue tripped me in my suit, saying 'What have we here? Begging letters?' Not helping me, poor man, for the Commandments' sake, he turned me away because of my poverty.

**Kate De Rycker:** Sir Thomas Egerton also refuses to pay Robinson, instead choosing to humiliate him for (quote) 'begging' money. Robinson eventually finds a patron for his book, who generously pays him double the going rate. But he is bitter and hopes that Thomas Egerton will be shamed into giving him some work as a chancery clerk, which is writing and copying out legal documents.

**Actor Reading Excerpt of Richard Robinson:** His book [or, rather, my book] I bestowed upon a virtuous lady in the city, who gave me the double value thereof. I will abide patiently the redress of my wrong and relief of my necessity, until God the just judge of the world shall in his grace and mercy move this noble man's mind to do me more good, by helping me to some writing work in the offices of the Chancery, which God grant. Amen.

**Kate De Rycker:** Thomas Nashe had more success than Robinson in achieving help from his patrons during his career. While we don't know how much money he received for dedicating his books, we do know that he was often invited to stay at the homes of his patrons, often as a way to escape London either because of the plague or because he was in legal trouble with its aldermen.

**Emma Smith:** He's always a house guest of somebody, he's always seems to be inviting himself to stay with someone or other or ending up somewhere.

**Kate De Rycker:** This is Professor Emma Smith from Oxford University, who is working on a new edition of Nashe's play 'Summers Last Will and Testament', which was written while he was staying in the home of John Whitgift, the Archbishop of Canterbury. In it, the allegorical figure of summer, a king, is confronted by the lack of generosity that his courtiers have bestowed in his absence. It turns out, though, that even calling it a play is stretching things a bit:

**Emma Smith:** So it isn't a play like a Shakespearean play. It isn't designed for the public theatre. It's called a show and it has a kind of pageant-type feel. The scenario is that Summer is ageing. He is almost at death's door and he meets his servants and sort of stewards to get a sense of what they have been doing, how they have served him and to settle his will to settle his succession. And in the end, he has to adjudicate between Autumn and Winter, who are sort of arm wrestling about who's gonna take over. So it shows us a Nashe, perhaps, who's a little bit closer to the prose writer who makes a lot happen with words. But isn't doing quite so much with the kind of stage choreography that we might expect from a drama.

**Kate De Rycker:** While this 'show' might not have a nail-biting narrative, what makes it an interesting text for us, is that it explores a key theme about what the wealthy members of society—people like Archbishop Whitgift—owe to the rest of the community, especially during difficult times. Nashe was writing this 'show' in 1592 at the end of an especially hot summer, which had led to crop failure, so it was a potentially precarious time for everyone. Nashe draws an equivalence between the excesses of the real summer temperatures and the allegorical 'heat' that Summer's court have subjected the people to:

**Emma Smith:** So, partly what Summer hears is that his servants have sort of overdone it a bit. Summer has gone a bit...that the summer weather has been a bit excessive. So he hears about that, but he also hears pretty much a litany of failure or of self-interest. Most of his servants have not really done exactly what he might hope. And in particular, they have tended to have failed with one really key Elizabethan value, Elizabeth virtue: the virtue of hospitality or generous care for others. And at time after time, these figures come in and they're ticked off for a failure to be generous, a failure to look after those less fortunate than themselves.

**Kate De Rycker:** While Nashe was concerned about bigger societal issues like how the government of his day handled food shortages, as a freelance writer he was also understandably concerned about where his next meal was coming from. I asked Emma Smith how Nashe would have been paid for 'Summers Last Will and Testament'?

**Emma Smith:** I think in part Nashe's payment in Whitgift's household must have been sort of bed and board. He, like other members of that generation, is living and working sort of a little bit hand-to-mouth in the commercial print and theatre industries of early modern London. I think he's always grateful for a free meal; that's quite a good payment to have. So the idea that he might have been resident for some months must have actually been... must have been quite handsome payment, I would've thought. Nashe is so interested in listing and describing food, in particular, in lots of his works that I wonder if he was somebody who was often hungry or often

looking at things to eat that he couldn't readily get for himself. So being in a household running a big kitchen and all of those things must, must have been great.

**Kate De Rycker:** So, being a sort of 'artist in residence' must have been a fairly sweet deal, but one which to our modern sensibilities might also sound quite restrictive: after all, what happens if Nashe overstayed his welcome? Did he have to tread carefully, so as not to upset his patron? What about the commercial world of print, where he could write directly to a public readership? Professor Andrew McRae explains why this might have been a real alternative market for freelance writers:

**Andrew McRae:** You've got a booming population in London. You've got a big population of people who can read. So the apprentices, of course, all the mercantile activity in London. You know, people want entertainment, and they're buying pamphlets, they're buying, you know, they're buying ballads by the dozen and, and sticking them on the walls and sharing them through reading them aloud.

**Kate De Rycker:** So even if you couldn't read, this didn't shut off the world of print to you, as you could hear someone else reading aloud, or even teaching you the words of a new ballad, which was sung to a recognisable tune. For writers, popular print became a viable means to reach a wider audience, as well as a space where they could forge a public reputation for themselves.

**Andrew McRae:** They're questioning what it might mean to be an author in an era of the print. Even though the print, you know, offered not a lot in terms of material reward; it did offer a lot in terms of status, in terms of putting themselves out there, in terms of creating a kind of marketplace for the creation of careers, of identities, as much as anything else.

**Kate De Rycker:** And the speed at which you could try to improve your social status by becoming known as an 'author' in print was increasingly quick, thanks to the popular form in which Nashe wrote: the pamphlet:

**Andrew McRae:** Perhaps the one thing that unites a lot of the different kinds of writing at this time was not necessarily a genre, but a physical form: the pamphlet. You know, people talk about buying pamphlets, and pamphlets were nice and cheap and portable. So people were thinking about –Nashe among others– were thinking about what you could do in 30 pages of text, say, that someone could flick through on the bookstall and buy, whether it be prose or poetry or a bit of a mixture of both. Novelty, currency, topicality, a little bit of scandal, perhaps,

you know, a little bit something a little bit salacious, perhaps, that pushed the bounds of censorship.

**Kate De Rycker:** So a good way to build a regular readership was to create a sense of controversy through your writing. Emma Smith sees a parallel with social media platforms today:

**Emma Smith:** I mean, sometimes modern parallels seem a bit cheap, but if you were to think about what drives traffic on social media, it's disagreement or it's extreme statements, it's things that people...it's arguments and it's kind of show downs. And I think that's true to some extent of the commercial press in the 1590s.

**Kate De Rycker:** In our first episode, we heard about the university 'Parnassus' plays, and it is there that we find a character styled on Nashe called Ingenioso, who is haggling with Nashe's real-life printer John Danter about payment. Ingenioso tries to get more money for a salacious-sounding pamphlet called 'A Chronicle of Cambridge Cuckolds'—a cuckold being a man whose wife has been unfaithful to him.

**Actor Reading Excerpt of *The Return from Parnassus*:** You'll give me forty shillings? A fit reward for one of your rheumatic poets. But as for me, I'll be paid dear even for the dregs of my wit. Little knows the world what belongs to the keeping of a good wit in waters, diets, drinks, Tobacco, etc. It is a dainty and costly creature, and therefore I must be paid sweetly: furnish me with money, that I may put myself in a new suit of clothes, and I'll suit thy shop with a new suit of terms. It's the gallantest child my invention was ever delivered of. The title is, 'A Chronicle of Cambridge Cuckolds', speak quickly, else I am gone.

**Kate De Rycker:** Part of the problem for fictional writers like 'Ingenioso' and real writers like Nashe was that while controversy sold, it was also quickly out of date. This meant that it was still incredibly unusual for a freelance writer to make enough money to live on, purely through the commercial sales of their writing. Here's Andrew McRae again to explain why:

**Andrew McRae:** One of the reasons why patronage is so important is the simple economics of publishing, that there wasn't much to be made from selling the rights to your work. And there was no copyright, so once you'd sold the rights to your work, it could sell a million copies and you'd still only make, you know, a pound or less. That's just the way it was. And not many people did make much money at all from actually publishing.

**Kate De Rycker:** So if the authors aren't making that much money from print, who is?

**Andrew McRae:** Some of the printers are doing reasonably well; I mean, they're taking risks, but it's a commercial enterprise, isn't it? I mean, there's risks everywhere and there's risks in the playhouse and so forth. And if you are publishing short, cheap, works and paying the author relatively little...not a lot to lose.

**Kate De Rycker:** So it seems like writing short pamphlets for publication was more useful as a means to build a reputation, than it was to make enough money to live comfortably. But that one-off payment from the publisher wasn't the only way a writer could make money from print. As we've seen from Richard Robinson's meticulous records of patrons who had wronged him, writers could also earn money by dedicating their text to an aristocratic patron. Think of it as a type of PR exercise for the aristocrat: their name becomes associated with exciting new works. And that benefit to one's reputation worked both ways: not only was there the potential for payment for a writer, but by aligning themselves to a certain patron, writers like Nashe were also basking in some of their reflected social capital.

**Andrew McRae:** They're getting a sense of authorization, that their words are authorized. They're trying to balance their sense of responsibility towards a patron with a much more modern sense of integrity as a writer.

**Kate De Rycker:** Some Elizabethans were bothered by this modern sense of an author who doesn't need a respected aristocrat to vouch for their quality. This included Nashe's nemesis in print, a man named Gabriel Harvey.

**Andrew McRae:** Gabriel Harvey is so anxious about that. You've got all these people speaking without authorization, and the nightmare that leads to this kind of radical atomization, fragmentation of society. So, there's no hierarchy anymore, you know, all order breaks down. Harvey says that he was afraid of authors becoming like a monarch in the kingdom of his own humour. "A monarch in the kingdom of his own humour." There's so much going on in that phrase, that an author is kind of assuming almost the authority of a king or a queen, and the authority derived from your humour, you know, your individual personality, and in a sense that's kind of bourgeois individualism.

**Kate De Rycker:** While some writers like Harvey worried about the anarchy unleashed by authors breaking free from hierarchical structures, others made a virtue of this individualism.

**Andrew McRae:** John Marston, he published some of the most salacious satires of the time, and dedicated one book to himself. That's not completely unknown [for someone to do that], but it's quite a statement. It was a book of satires that he must have known not many people

would want to be associated with, you know, and yet he gets them into print with that statement on just inside the cover that is dedicated to himself.

**Kate De Rycker:** So we can see the seeds of modern individualism starting to appear around this time, but not enough that a freelancer could go it completely alone. Conveniently, though, there was another creative industry in town, which a writer could turn to pay the bills: the theatre industry. Of course, there had always been actors and theatre companies, but with the big population boom in London that Andrew spoke about earlier, came more demand for new plays. Emma Smith explains why the decision to set up permanent theatres in London made a huge difference not only to actors but also to professional writers:

**Emma Smith:** What changes, once we get these purpose-built theatres in London and effectively a kind of repertory system of plays in performance, is that that's an economic mode, a business model which depends on the same audiences coming back multiple times. That's quite different from when you took touring theatre around, where you could take the same play all around the country because your audience had to change every day, because you were in a new place. So this is a golden, this is a really sort of high moment, this is a great moment for writers. Playhouses have a real appetite —[because] they're working through play scripts all the time—they want new plays. It's definitely one of the places where university-educated young men can find work in London. And I think one of the really exciting things, we're just starting to uncover is a more sustained dramatic career for Nashe. We know that he's involved with *The Isle of Dogs*, which is a controversial play with Ben Jonson that is lost. We have been interested in the possibility of his collaborating with Shakespeare and probably others on the first part of Henry VI and perhaps elsewhere in those that Henry VI trilogy, but Nashe himself talks about his theatre work as if it is a more sustained part of his kind of portfolio career, if you like, than those few examples that we know of would really support.

**Kate De Rycker:** So while we don't know the titles of the plays that Nashe worked on, he does seem to be getting an income not only from patrons, from publishing his work, but also from writing for the new commercial theatres. We have a diary kept by Philip Henslowe, the owner of the Rose theatre, which tells us a lot about the way playwrights were paid. For example, an old play might be revived, and so a completely different writer would be paid to rewrite certain scenes. This was the case for Christopher Marlowe's play *Doctor Faustus*. Henslowe paid £4 to the writers William Bird and Samuel Rowley to update it over a decade after it was first performed. It's possible Nashe could have been doing this type of anonymous piece-work for the theatres, kind of like a Hollywood 'script doctor' today.

**Emma Smith:** I mean, we do imagine that Nashe is part of Henslowe's stable of writers who can be brought in to do part of a play or part of work that needs to be done quickly. I think there is a majority of theatre writers who are freelance. It's one of the many ways that our view of the literary and theatrical culture of this period has been distorted by Shakespeare, who is exceptional in lots of ways, not least sort of economically.

**Kate De Rycker:** Indeed, what set Shakespeare apart economically speaking was that he was not only a writer, but an actor and importantly, also a 'shareholder' in the theatre company he usually wrote for: the Chamberlain's Men. That meant that he took home a portion of the money made at the box office.

**Emma Smith:** So Shakespeare's...he is a writer attached to a theatre company and also an investor in that, in that company. So he has a different payment structure, both for what he writes himself and for how the theatre performs commercially. Nashe is much more dependent on being given commissions.

**Kate De Rycker:** If we're thinking about precarity, then Shakespeare was in a relatively stable position. As an in-house writer, he's not having to go out and persuade different theatre companies to employ him. In contrast, Nashe really has to hustle, whether he's securing himself a 'writer in residence' position with an aristocrat, pitching new ideas to a publisher, or looking for piece-work with the commercial theatre companies.

**Emma Smith:** Well to write as a kind of freelance writer, probably then as now is to have periods of enforced quiet, perhaps which are rather worrying in terms of cash flow and then periods of extreme activity and deadline pressure. I think that must have been how it was for Nashe, that it's not a career that pays in any steady way.

**Kate De Rycker:** Nashe writes about this experience of interrupted cash flow in a text called 'Have with you to Saffron Walden,' which was essentially an extended take-down of his nemesis, Gabriel Harvey. Two or three times a month, Nashe says he has to put his other writing projects on hold, and, as he puts it, 'prostitute his pen' by writing fashionable erotic verses for foppish aristocrats.

**Actor Reading Expert of *Have with you to Saffron Walden*:** Twice or thrice in a month, when the bottom of my purse is turned downward, and my conduit of ink will no longer flow for want of reparations, I am fain to let my plough stand still in the midst of a furrow, and follow some of these newfangled 'Galiardos' and 'Signior Fantasticos', to whose amorous 'villanellas' and 'quipassas' I prostitute my pen in hope of gain.



**Kate De Rycker:** Nashe is responding to Harvey's accusation that he writes only what is popular, or 'newfangled', rather than what is useful to society. Harvey had also accused him of being 'idle' or lazy, which Nashe also rejects, saying that he spends his days pounding the streets in search of writing work:

**Actor Reading Expert of *Have with you to Saffron Walden*:** But otherwise there is no 'newfangledness' in me but poverty, which alone maketh me so unconstant to my determined studies, nor 'idleness', more than discontented idle trudging from place to place, to and fro, and prosecuting the means to keep me from idleness.

**Andrew McRae:** I think it's worth thinking about these people as quite mobile. They're mobile socially, upwardly as well as downwardly. They're mobile geographically. They're moving about where the opportunities are, and a lot of those opportunities are in London, and they are opportunities in terms of the theatre in, are in London, but a lot of them are moving around in in search of patronage, and that happens with Nashe as well as with, with a number of his peers. So they're, they're quite unsettled, I think.

**Kate De Rycker:** So to be a freelance writer was to be unsettled in the sense that you had to hustle, and keep on the lookout for new sources of money. Writers like Nashe, who would mostly have come from the 'middling sort', also had the potential to improve their social standing, or to end up in penury, as unfortunately seems to have been the case for Nashe.

In the next episode of this podcast, we'll hear more about the importance of mobility through the spaces of London.

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.

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