

## **Main File: Nashe Podcast - Ep 3 Space and Places**

**Archie Cornish:** Britain today feels 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 it was the norm. One writer in particular explored what it felt like to be living on the edge. He's not a household name, but he wrote and published ceaselessly through the turbulent 1590s.

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.

**Callan Davies:** by the time that Nashe comes down in the late 1580s, London is really a buzz with all sorts of, of playhouses of all stripes. he's entering a really vibrant kind of commercial recreational world.

**Vanessa Harding:** This is the period when London's medieval government, which covers the city alone, begins to find itself as we're rather left behind as the city itself, as the metro metropolis spreads out beyond the boundaries of its jurisdiction.

**Archie Cornish:** I'm Archie Cornish. In this episode, I'm joined by Vanessa Harding of Birkbeck, University of London, and Callan Davies of the University of Roehampton. We'll be thinking about places and spaces, especially Nashe's London—what it was like as a place to live, work and have fun in—and how it related to the places beyond.

Born in Suffolk in the 1560s, Nashe remained in the east of England for university, graduating from St John's College, Cambridge, in 1586. A couple of years later he journeyed south to London. As Professor of London History Vanessa Harding explains, he wasn't alone.

**Vanessa Harding:** It's important to think about immigrants in a very broad sense, so that I'm using it to cover both those who migrate from the English counties and those who come to England from abroad. So there'd always been migration from other parts of England and that's very strong in the 16th century.

It's also now including, people from Wales, after the Union of England and Wales, and that there are migrants coming from the north of England as far as London, presumably on foot for most of the part, and that many of those—or the ones that we know most about—are what we might call betterment migrants, that they have, a clear plan for what they're going to do, which is to seek an apprenticeship, seek service, seek some permanent employment.

Inevitably, particularly in the 1590s when there are severe problems around the country, there are a lot of subsistence migrants, people who essentially are driven off the land or cannot find work locally and who therefore move around. And ultimately their destination may well be London.

And then there are significant numbers of migrants coming, particularly from the low countries in the 1560s, 70s, and 80s, and also from France—in many senses, refugees from religious wars, they tend to differ from the English migrants in the sense that they often come as whole families. Whereas English migrants tend to be younger people moving as singletons.

London by the 1590s is more diverse in a general sense than it had been before. But it's not diverse in the way that we would understand it now in the sense that there are very few non-Europeans, very few people of colour. There are some but not very many, and very few people who are non-Christian in their overall outlook.

**Archie Cornish:** Nashe moved around in London, looking for patronage and work. In the early 1590s, he lodged briefly with the printer John Danter, in Holborn.

**Callan Davies:** Nowadays, for people who know the geography in London, we would think of Holborn as the kind of real center of London. I mean, it's on the Central Line, and it kind of sits in the middle of the tube map.

**Archie Cornish:** Callan Davies, of the University of Roehampton, is also assistant manager of research and engagement at the Houses of Parliament. Holborn, near the Inns of Court and legal London, sits on the boundary of two ancient cities: to its east is the heart of London, run by its City Corporation. And to its west, well, Westminster, seat of royal power and Elizabeth I's court. Shops like Danter's were places of great significance for Nashe, who loved exploring the possibilities of print. Yet, as Callan Davies explains, they also relate closely to other key places in literary London.

**Callan Davies:** The print shop forms a major location for him. But one way of kind of thinking about how that fits into the wider culture of early modern London is to think about space like St. Paul's. So St. Paul's, you have a cathedral at the kind of dead centre of it and the cathedral.

Surrounding this, you've got printers and stationers. This is the kind of literary hub, I suppose, if you're trying to buy something of early modern London. In the middle or just to the right of the cathedral, you also have a playhouse from the kind of 1570s into the 1580s.

So again, we're imagining Nashe rocking up in London in 1588 or whatever it was and there would've been an active playhouse right next to all these kind of stationer shops. And you can take some of the texts that Nashe would've been buying and reading and possibly publishing and watch their movement either from the playhouse to the printing press and then to the stationer or vice versa. So we have a real kind of fluidity here.

**Archie Cornish:** So, the printing houses and the theatres were linked as spaces of play. Nashe must have spent a lot of time in theatres; he wrote plays, after all, and enjoyed watching them. London's theatres hadn't been permanent fixtures for very long when he pitched up. The oldest one was called, not very imaginatively, The Theatre.

**Callan Davies:** The Theatre's a really interesting one. It's long been thought of as a sea change, a space that transformed London and in turn transformed, I guess, the whole literary history of English literature, partly because of its connection with Shakespeare. And it was certainly doing something very, very interesting. It comes out of a series buildings and financial investments over some 40 years, figuring out how you can make money by staging kind of play and sport before the paying public. And when, when the theatre was built in 1576, it's a huge amount of money and did something I guess, slightly innovative in the sense that it's modelled on this kind of classical vision of an arena. So it's a round playing space and a galleried space. So when you would walk in it you've got to kind of say the stage in front of you or to your rights. And then you've got a series of galleries.

**Archie Cornish:** Where you sat depended on your wealth and social status. But still, spaces like the Theatre were unusually inclusive:

**Callan Davies:** I suppose the sort of theatres that we are talking about—and especially when they kind of expand in this later 16th century—are fascinating in that there aren't many other such spaces in which you can gather a whole range of people from across the social spectrum.

**Archie Cornish:** If you've been to London, you might have visited the reconstruction of Shakespeare's Globe. It's an impressive building, and—fingers crossed—it isn't going anywhere soon. But in the 1590s, the theatres were, in more ways than one, spaces of precarity.

**Callan Davies:** An obvious example of that is the space, The Theatre. I mean, this is the ultimate precarious building if we are thinking of it like that, because the space is leased and then it's mortgaged pretty soon after they've built this grand very expensive structure called The Theatre.

And then over time, there's a sort of long argument that happens with the landlord. The landlord essentially has the power—so leases can be granted as they are now for sort of a particular amount of years. I think it's granted for about 20 years, in this instance, for the theatre, and by the time it comes around to be renewed, the owner, the landlord tells the people who own the theatre at that time, the Burbages that they're very welcome to renew the lease as long as they change the building to something that's not a playhouse, so you can keep the structure, but turn it into a block of flats on something like that. A tenement is the word that they like to use, which you know, is a structure that can be used and subdivided for all sorts of things. So this idea that a building can just change its use, that you can just stick up a wall, put in a floor. This is a really common way of kind of understanding how buildings worked in Elizabethan England. Nobody thought that when you put up a timber structure it would last forever. And in fact, the idea that these raw materials might be reconfigured in particularly interesting ways are, you know, that's just a common place for Elizabeth and early modern England.

And in fact, that's exactly what happens with The Theatre. So they decide they're not gonna renew a lease because they rather like the idea of running a playhouse. It's making them some money. It's kind of their main business operation. So what they do is they dismantle the whole of the theatre timber by timber.

And they take a lot of that timber and a lot of those materials over the river. And then eventually they get reincorporated into the structure that gets built as The Globe in 1599. So, yeah. So when we're thinking I guess the precariousness of a building, you can kind of think about how they mutate in these different ways, sometimes to different uses and sometimes to different locations.

**Archie Cornish:** It wasn't just the playhouses where London seemed colourful, though. As Vanessa Harding explains, commercial London was increasingly conspicuous with luxury goods.

**Vanessa Harding:** The high end of the market is certainly something that characterizes London. I mean, this is where the wealthiest clients, the wealthiest customers are to be found, and therefore, this is where people who manufacture luxuries or various kinds will also focus. It's very interesting when you look through the lists of aliens who've settled in England how many of them bring high-quality finishing skills, whether they're jewelry or goldsmithry or fine textile, silk, winding, those sorts of things.

You always find high-quality craft skills in towns and cities, but you find these extremely high-end, expensive material ones in London. And I think it's also becoming perceived that London is

a place where goods are displayed and sold. So it's partly, you know, persuading people to buy things they didn't know they wanted in the first place. Offering this, luxury, whether it is gold-plate or fine textiles or clothing or furs.

**Archie Cornish:** Nashe was suspicious of this luxury market—or rather, of people who bought clothes to dress as something they are not. *Pierce Penniless*, his pamphlet of 1592, features a vivid portrait of Seignior Greediness:

**Excerpt from *Pierce Penniless* Read by Actor:** In the inner part of his ugly habitation stands Greediness, prepared to devour all that enter, attired in a capouch of written parchment, buttoned down before with labels of wax, and lined with sheep's fells for warmness, his cap furred with cats-skins, after the Muscovy fashion, and all-to-betassled with angle-hooks instead of aglets, ready to catch hold of all those to whom he shows any humbleness.

For his breeches, they were made of the lists of broadcloths, which he had by letters patent assured him and his heirs, to the utter overthrow of bow-cases and cushion-makers, and bombasted they were, like beer-barrels, with statute merchants and forfeitures. The house [or rather the hell] where this earthworm encaptived this beautiful substance, gold, was vast, large, strong built, and well furnished, all save the kitchen, for that was no bigger than the cook's room in a ship,

**Archie Cornish:** Too much finery and not enough food; too much self-projection and not enough hospitality. The kind of greedy people at whom Nashe took aim weren't just after luxury goods—they also wanted property. Renting in Nashe's London was a precarious business, draining in more ways than one. As Vanessa Harding explains, the city was expanding so quickly that its older systems of government couldn't keep up.

**Vanessa Harding:** This is the period when London's medieval government, which covers the city alone, begins to find itself rather left behind as the city itself, as the metro metropolis spreads out beyond the boundaries of its jurisdiction. So the city centre, the city within the walls and immediately outside the walls has actually a very practiced experienced well-organized system of government with a mayor, with an alderman representing each of the wards, with a common council, which gives citizens some voice in government, and with a whole infrastructure of local administration, both at ward level and a parish level. So, I mean, I don't think anybody would say that London is, in any sense, ungovernable or even lacking in government, at least as far as they're talking about the city. But again, I think it's the suburbs where population and building is spreading beyond the area, under the jurisdiction of the mayor Alderman, where this sense

of London being disorderly or not easily controlled, not easily contained is, again, most prominent.

It was about that time in the early 1580s that the government starts to get anxious about this and issues proclamations that there should be no new building or no building on new foundations, no subdivision and so on. I mean, that just seems to be completely hopeless. It doesn't do anything to stem the flow, but I would think that most people in London at that time, many of whom are of course migrants themselves would be really aware of the sense that London is changing under their eyes, under their feet, as they live there.

**Archie Cornish:** The result was a premium on space in central London, and a chaotic rental market in which landlords held all the cards. If you live in London in the 2020s, that might sound familiar.

**Callan Davies:** There's a really interesting example in Henry Chettle's *Kind Heart's Dream*, which is a pamphlet from 1592. So again, this is a near contemporary of Nashe. Someone he may well have known, probably did know. And he writes this kind of pamphlet. And in the middle of it, there's a meditation on what it is like to be a renter in 1590s London.

And he describes this kind of alley-like space. So a space that has got a number of small rooms in it that are being rented out to individuals and the person who owns them in this case, it's a landlady. And I suppose it's worth emphasizing that actually a number of the kind of property owners and property managers across Elizabeth in London are women as well as men. And this is one area in which they're kind of important economic agents. But in this instance, one of the landladies of this space insists that all of the people who are kind of living within their tenement block, they're all owing her rent. So as a means of kind of payday lending that rent or "pay it to me in two weeks", they have to buy all of their food and their drink from her tippling house at the front.

So you've got kind of, not only the fact that you are in a really rubbish accommodation in centre of London, it's probably costing way too. But you're having to do all your shopping at your landlady's pub, basically, in order to get by. And whilst this is a kind of satirical sketch, the city of London records, there are so many examples of people exactly. Like this woman.

**Archie Cornish:** Here's Henry Chettle himself.

**Extract from Kind Heart's Dream Read by Actor:** I would the heart of the city were whole, for, both within and without, extreme cruelty causeth much beggary. Some landlords, having

turned an old brewhouse, bakehouse or dye-house into an alley of tenements, will either themselves, or some at their appointment, keep tippling in the forehouse [as they call it] and their poor tenants must be enjoined to fetch bread, drink, wood, coal, and such other necessaries in no other place, and there till the week's end they may have anything of trust, provided they lay to pawn their holiday apparel.

Nay, my landlady will not only do them that good turn, but if they want money, she will on Monday lend them, likewise upon a pawn, eleven pence, and in mere pity asks at the week's end not a penny more than twelve pence. O charitable love! Happy tenants of so kind a landlady!

**Archie Cornish:** I can think of happier motivations to go to the pub than being blackmailed into buying my groceries there. For a writer like Nashe, there were plenty of reasons to head down the tavern. Callan Davies is keen to stress that these were more than places of refreshment—they were literary spaces too.

**Callan Davies:** It's easy to forget that a lot of these lodging houses that we've just been talking about, they don't have the facilities for you to cook food or prepare food. So you've really just got a room or a bedroom. So if you want to go and eat and drink anything at any time of the day, you have to go and put yourself in an alehouse or a Tavern.

In London, in particular, people would be hanging out in specific playing specific kind of inn or tavern spaces. So inns, taverns, and alehouses in this period were marked out by a sign that would be kind of flying or painted outside it.

**Archie Cornish:** Like the happening cultural spaces of today, some of them became romanticised.

**Callan Davies:** So we have something like The Sign of the Mermaid. The Mermaid tavern is maybe a little later than Nashe, but this is a real space, but also one that's become slightly mythologized because that's where Shakespeare is said to have hung out with other of his contemporary play of contemporary playwrights, like Ben Johnson and so on maybe, maybe some five or 10 years later. And Johnson has this fantastic phrase in one of his plays when he talks about people “haunting the Globes and Mermaids. | So in, in Johnson's mind, you have these kind of fashionable literate people, people like Nashe, who are on the one hand at a playhouse and then on the other hand, they're at the Mermaid. Chatting to people, chatting to people like him.

**Archie Cornish:** Haunting and chatting but also, Callan Davies thinks, writing.

**Callan Davies:** Playwriting and, to an extent, sort of other forms of authorship in this period are extremely collaborative ways of working. We're moving away from this idea that kind of comes from a romantic sense of the writer of the kind of Shakespeare who sat in his room with his pen and he's pouring his genius onto the page without distraction, but actually, what many decades of scholarship have continued to show is that is not how people wrote in this period. It's not how people created. It was a really kind of social environment. So you may well be in the pub writing this, dividing up the play, "I'll do the first act and you do this." There are lots of different ways in which we might speculate how some of these plays are divided.

**Archie Cornish:** And perhaps this rhythm of work lives on in Nashe's style:

**Callan Davies:** His writing has got this improvisatory style. Scholars and Nash himself call it a kind of *ex tempor* style, meaning to kind of come up with things on the hoof, *ad hoc* as though you're making up in your head.

And that really is rooted in precisely those spaces whose cultures are improvisatory. You know, you could be sat in The Mermaid and some other type of entertainment may well be going on. So you've got constant yeah sort of fuel for someone like Nashe's creativity. And the idea that you are writing as, as his prose can sometimes suggest, a stream of consciousness that is just yeah, on-the-street reporting, kind of Gonzo pamphlet writing.

**Archie Cornish:** What a great job description: a gonzo pamphlet writer.

Nashe's life in London seems to have been one continuous circuit between printer's shop, playhouse, and tavern. All of these were spaces of creativity, but also of precarity—just like the lodgings for which he paid punishing rent. For London writers of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, the city wasn't just a place in which to eke out a literary living - it was also somewhere to describe. As Vanessa Harding explains, plenty of writers had already described London—but Nashe and co did it differently.

**Vanessa Harding:** London has a long tradition of London as writing about London and it's very prominent in the 15th century in the London Chronicles, which use writing about London's history as a way enhancing civic awareness and civic sense of belonging.

There is a long tradition of encomia, of praises of London in which people talk about all the good things, about its prosperity and its healthfulness and its beauty and its public spending

and so on. But the idea of actually looking at the underside of London and London life is in fact perhaps something that comes up with Decker and people writing like him

**Archie Cornish:** That's Thomas Dekker, London playwright and pamphleteer, one of Nashe's contemporaries and competitors. Dekker was especially fascinated by the rich sensuality of London's grimy underside. Here he is in *Work for Armourers*, published in 1609, describing the horrible practice of bear-baiting:

**Excerpt of *Work for Armourers* Read by Actor:** What merry gale shall we then wish for? unless it be to ferry over the river and cross from London to the Bear Garden? The company of the bears hold together still; they play their tragicomedies as lively as ever they did.

**Archie Cornish:** More theatricality there in the idea of bears staging their own tragicomedies. In the end, the narrator decides that he will go along.

**Excerpt of *Work for Armourers* Read by Actor:** No sooner was I entered but the very noise of the place put me in mind of Hell: the bear [dragged to the stake] showed like a black rugged soul that was damned, and newly committed to the infernal charle, the dogs like so many devils, inflicting torments upon it. But when I called to mind, that all their tugging together was but to make sport to the beholders, I held a better and not so damnable an opinion of their beastly doings: for the bears fighting with the dogs was a lively representation [me thought] of poor men going to law with the rich and mighty.

**Archie Cornish:** Dekker conjures up a boisterous city, never far from social conflict, encountering itself in crude, overpowering spectacles. But In another pamphlet, *Lanthorne and Candlelight*, Dekker describes London at night. Suddenly the city is eerily quiet, full of anxious stillness:

**Excerpt of *Lanthorne and Candlelight* Read by Actor:** Every door on a sudden was shut. Not a candle stood peeping through any window; not a vintner was to be seen brewing in his cellar, not a drunkard to be met reeling, not a mouse to be heard stirring. All the City showed like one bed, for all in that bed were soundly cast into a sleep. Noise made no noise, for every one that wrought with the hammer was put to silence. Yet, notwithstanding, when even the Devil himself could have been contented to take a nap, there were few innkeepers about the town but had their spirits walking.

**Archie Cornish:** So far we've concentrated on London, and rightly so—it's where Nashe spent most of his writing life. But what happened when you left the capital? Of course, one way to

exit was by dying - like Nashe did, before his time in 1601. We don't know what killed him, but it's likely to have been plague or another disease. According to Vanessa Harding, problems of burial in this period reflect London's growth, and the convergence of the two ancient cities from which it emerges:

**Vanessa Harding:** An intrinsic problem with death, which is very frequent and common at this time—literally thousands of people die in London—is that the bodies have to be disposed of. And that's actually a problem on a number of different levels. Both are sort of a psychological one, but also a very practical one. So that the 1590s are when we are seeing a lot of city parishes, a lot of churches in the city centre and outside, really struggling with the problem that they don't have enough space to bury everybody. So dealing with death, dealing with the dead is mostly comes down to parishes. And this works fairly well when the parishes are comparatively prosperous and afford the costs of acquiring new land can charge their parishioners appropriate sums for burial, but it does become more of a problem for the large sprawling parishes outside the walls and over towards Westminster, where the population is growing, but the resources to deal with them—if we can regard the dead as an environmental problem—are lacking.

So I think this is a time when probably burial is not as orderly, as well managed in parts of London. Most people would like to think it was,

**Archie Cornish:** Of course, there were other ways to leave London than in your coffin. Nashe himself left towards the end of the 1590s, under a cloud - he'd written a controversial play called *The Isle of Dogs* and got into trouble. During his exile, he went back to East Anglia—to Great Yarmouth in Norfolk—which he described in the satirical but affectionate pamphlet *Lenten Stuffe*. We shouldn't fall into the trap, says Callan Davies, of thinking that the journey away from London was into a cultural desert.

**Callan Davies:** That can create a misleading sense that London is the place where culture happens and that when you kind of go north of, well, not even Watford in this period, but when you go north of Shoreditch, that you are in a completely different world and perhaps a backwards world, but that's not at all the way that Nashe would've experienced it when he headed north on the Cambridge road out towards Norfolk. There's a real rich provincial you know, for want of a better word culture across this, across England, in this period. There's been some amazing work done to think about what vernacular might mean. So vernacular in the sense of expressing it in your native or kind of local fashion. So we talk about vernacular speech in separation from Latin to speak English, but there's also vernacular expressions that are hyperlocal. So we might think of vernacular arts for instance, and, and look at the way that

Chester or Cheshire do portraiture, compared to what people in London might expect to get when they have their portrait painted.

Precisely the same thing applies to performance culture, too. And to the kind of pamphlet culture that, that Nashe was engaged in. So all of the performances that took place in London, toured around these companies would be on the road and they would also find themselves in Chester and also find themselves in Norfolk and Great Yarmouth exactly where, where Nashe ends up in, in Lenton stuff.

So, yes, there's a kind of movement of London outwards, which is the movement that Nashe does towards the end of his life. But there's also a movement and an influence inward. So space is, you know, these places are innovative in their own, right. And have their own kind of cultures.

And I think what's interesting is we can kind of flip some of the discussion we've just had about playhouses on its head because in the 1530s in Great Yarmouth, somebody opens something called a game house.

And this is really early for thinking about these kinds of commercial playing spaces. But this is happening up there in the town that Nash eventually goes to, you know, 60 years later. So if we wanted to, you might choose that space as the origin of kind of this theatre history that tends to be situated in 1570s London.

**Archie Cornish:** So maybe London was forty years behind Norfolk. It wasn't all about the capital, just like today, London and the rest of the country existed in a two-way economic and cultural relationship, variously harmonious and tense. Nashe's writing doesn't belong to London, but was certainly inspired by it, by its playhouses and taverns and printing shops, and maybe even its multi-tenanted lodgings. These were places of extreme precarity - and also of great invention.

In the next episode, we'll be thinking about Nashe's experimental forms: his sentences and genres, and his rich inventiveness on the printed page.

Thanks for listening.

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

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