

Precarity Now:
A Report from the 'Penniless?' Project

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Summary

From May 2022-March 2023, a collaborative project between the University of Sheffield and Newcastle University studied precarity from an original perspective. Entitled '[Penniless?](#)', it was overseen by Professor Cathy Shrank (Sheffield), Dr Archie Cornish (Sheffield) and Dr Kate De Rycker (Newcastle), and emerged from a major project, funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC), to edit the works of the Elizabethan writer Thomas Nashe (1567-c.1601).¹

The 'Penniless?' project, also funded by the AHRC, paid particular attention to one of Nashe's prose texts, *Pierce Penilesse* (1592), which depicts and ponders the sixteenth-century equivalent of what today is called precarity. Drawing from several theorists, including Anne Allison, Judith Butler and Paul Walsh, this report defines precarity as a state both socio-economic and psychic, where the inevitable precariousness of life seems heightened and unequally distributed, in a manner that places both particular subjects and whole social systems under strain.² The project had several related aims: to use Nashe's text as a prompt for understanding precarity in an early modern context (referring to the time period of roughly 1500-1700); to think about precarity's long history; and to collaborate with various partners – freelancers, students and scholars – to create a series of public-facing [resources](#).

Some of these were artistic, such as a [devised theatre performance](#) based on Nashe's text with Newcastle-based company Cap-a-Pie, and an [exhibition](#) of pen-and-ink drawings by Sheffield artist Jessica Heywood. In other areas, the focus was more practical and contemporary: in collaboration with the English Association we hosted a [webinar](#) for undergraduates and sixth-formers on the complexities and opportunities of studying English today; we also created a small [oral history archive](#) of interviews with young people and mature students, on their experiences of precarious work. The project also included a reflective strand of five blog essays, written by Archie Cornish (included below in an Appendix). The most substantial resource created was a six-episode podcast series, '[The Precarious World of Thomas Nashe](#)'. Each episode, taking the form of a mini-documentary, used Nashe's writing to explore, with help of expert academic contributors, an aspect of Elizabethan England's underside.

After the project ended, a grant was secured from Sheffield's Arts and Humanities Knowledge Exchange program. This grant allowed for the extension of the project in two ways: the creation of a second podcast episode, examining 'Precarity Now', and the researching and writing of this report. Like the extra podcast episode, this report aims to think about contemporary precarity. It asks two related questions: how might a long perspective on precarity, beginning not in the late twentieth century but in the early modern period, illuminate our discussion of precarity in our society? And how might a literary perspective – most of the academics who contributed to the 'Penniless?' project were literary critics and literary historians – modify the debate on a topic which is mainly the preserve of sociologists and economists? The second of these questions also informs a special edition of the journal *English*, forthcoming in autumn 2024, edited by the three academics who collaborated on the 'Penniless?' project.

¹ At the time of writing, that edition is forthcoming with Oxford University Press.

² Anne Allison, *Precarious Japan* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013), and 'Precarity and Hope: Social Connectedness in Postcapitalist Japan', in *Japan: The Precarious Future*, ed. by Allison and Frank Baldwin (New York, NY: NYU Press, 2015), pp. 36-57. Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2004). Paul Walsh, 'Capturing Precarity', *Tribune* (2019).

Precarity: A Recent History

It's often assumed that the discussion of precarity in academic and political arenas originates from economically strained times, such as the period of low economic growth inaugurated by the 2008 financial crisis and deepened by the post-Covid recession. But this isn't the case. The term 'precarity' appears in French sociology and philosophy in the 1970s. Yet it enters the fringe of European politics in an era often regarded retrospectively as the high noon of prosperity: the late 1990s and early 2000s. Milan, centre of Italy's fashion industry, was an unexpected centre of consciousness-raising. The fluency of that industry's workers in graphic design and public performance proved useful, as the mobilisation by groups like Chainworkers and Molleindustria showed.³ It's important to note that opposition was expressed against precarious employment itself, rather than forms of hardship or austerity of which precarity was a symptom.

In economic terms the early-to-mid 2000s were a far more bountiful time than our own, but labour reforms towards greater flexibility in the last quarter of the twentieth century had still made themselves felt: with fewer guarantees of security than had been provided to their parents, young Italian workers protested against a socio-economic settlement which, however prosperous, denied them the feeling of true security. In the 2006 general election, the centre-left Democratici di Sinistra (DS) campaigned against Silvio Berlusconi's government with the slogan '*oggi precarietà, domani lavoro*' (today precarity, tomorrow work). 'Precarity' and 'work' here do not mean a stark opposition of 'employment' and 'unemployment', but a contrast between secure and insecure forms of employment.

After 2006 precarity dissipated as a principle both of strategic organisation on the left, and a term of academic analysis. But the fallout from the 2008 financial crisis, and the subsequent Great Recession (2008-2009) and Eurozone crisis (2009-2014) brought the concept back to the fore. In the Anglophone world, a particularly influential analysis came from Guy Standing's *The Precariat* (2011), which identified precarious workers as 'the new dangerous class'.⁴ In Standing's Marxist framework, young precarious workers comprised a 'class-in-itself', rather than a 'class-for-itself': they existed as a set of people with a particular relationship to the means of production, but without a consciousness of themselves or a strategy to advocate for their interests.

Standing's work was particularly useful for distinguishing different kinds of precarity, and the experiences of precarious work quoted below will demonstrate the usefulness of his taxonomy. Standing points out the various kinds of insecurity which exist *within* employment: job insecurity, for example, when a worker is moved around between positions at short notice, might exist within a broader *employment security* (where the worker can be sure of retaining general employment). Precarity, for Standing, is more than just the proliferation of insecurity in its various guises. Precarity's distinctive quality is powerlessness, both real and perceived. It's a 'dangerous' condition that arises when insecure and unstable employment is mixed with a lack of prosperity and opportunity, and rising inequality. The result is a class of young people who experience an unpleasant cocktail of feelings: on the one hand, strong feelings of anger and anxiety; on the other, alienation (modifying Marx) and *anomie* (modifying Durkheim).

³ Brett Neilson and Ned Rossiter, 'Precarity as a Political Concept, or, Fordism as Exception', *Theory, Culture and Society* 25 (2008), 51-72, 32.

⁴ Guy Standing, *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class* (London: Bloomsbury, 2011). The fourth edition of this book (2021) includes a preface on precarity in light of the pandemic.

In a 2021 essay for *Social Europe*, looking back on a decade of work since his 2011 book, Standing criticises a tendency for the term ‘precarious work’ to become too catch-all and widespread.⁵ For the purposes of this report, Standing’s commitment to precise categories – distinguishing insecurity’s various kinds, and insecurity from precarity – is very instructive. Yet Standing’s unease about the diffusion of ‘precarity’ as an analytical term reflects, perhaps, the limitations of his sense of the precariat as a class. The journey towards class consciousness to which Standing looked forward has not demonstrably happened: young people in the UK, and other European countries, have given their support to various leftist parties and causes, but without any major development of consciousness in their identity as the precariat. One of the limitations of Standing’s idea of the precariat as a class is that precarity is often understood to be temporary – a kind of social purgatory a young person endures before they find their job, or their place in the world. Precarity is less easily identified with, across a life, than (for example) the identity of being, or having been, ‘working-class’. For Neil Vallely, this narrative quality of precarity – its role as a transitory chapter in a life – means that we have to call enduring precarity something else; for Vallely, rather depressingly, this is ‘futility’.⁶

This report differs from Standing, then, in seeing the usefulness of broad and cross-disciplinary approaches to precarity. Precarity, a condition more nebulous and temporary than traditional categories of class, requires the perspectives of more than just sociology and economics to be fully captured. Standing’s own analysis foregrounds the destructiveness of strong feelings, such as anger and anxiety. A full understanding of those feelings will surely be gained if the conversation about precarity expands to include various critical fields, including literary criticism, as well as artistic representations.

Standing’s book was published before 2012, which in the UK was the year of the most rapid growth of apps and new tech platforms. The latter half of the 2010s saw the rise of the ‘gig economy’ (also called ‘platform capitalism’), in which the labour flexibility first promoted in the 1980s reaches its logical conclusion; there have been protracted debates about whether the workers for platforms such as Uber and Deliveroo can rightfully claim the status of employees, as opposed to the more casual designations in which the platforms sought to keep them – the digital equivalent of the freelance contractor.⁷ The coronavirus pandemic, whose restrictions in the UK were just ending as the ‘Penniless?’ project began, accelerated many antecedent shifts towards an economy hosted on digital platforms, as well as the rise of hyper-flexible forms of online work, such as the ubiquitous Zoom meeting. The precarity of the 2020s is clearly a structure of circumstances and feelings created by markedly novel circumstances.

⁵ Guy Standing, ‘Rescuing the Concept of Precarity’, *Social Europe* 2021: <https://www.socialeurope.eu/rescuing-the-concept-of-precarity>.

⁶ Neil Vallely, *Futilitarianism: Neoliberalism and the Production of Uselessness* (London: Goldsmiths Press, 2021).

⁷ See Jamie Woodcock and Mark Graham, *The Gig Economy: A Critical Introduction* (London: Polity, 2020).

Premodern Precarity

And yet, the argument of this report is that in many ways the precarity experienced by Thomas Nashe bears a striking resemblance to the challenges faced by the precarious young person seeking to access employment today. Histories of precarity frequently begin with a period of relative prosperity in the mid-century (in British popular historical discourse this is often known as the ‘postwar consensus’). There are many risks in positioning this period as a kind of utopia. It fails to account for the hostility of the labour market towards women, as well as the deprivations caused by social discrimination towards minority groups. There were frequent economic shocks and challenges, and even when they were overcome, Britain’s political stability in this period made it an outlier. The tendency of these foreshortened histories of precarity, especially in Britain, is to depict precarity as the contemporary aberration from a historical norm assumed to have had a solid historical basis. But the reverse is the truth. Reading Nashe’s work, and the 1590s, through the prism of precarity shows us that precarity is the norm and stable employment (however qualified) is a historical exception.

Exploring Nashe’s precarious world also belies our tendency, when analysing precarity, to submit to one of the governing assumptions of modernity – that modern technological innovations have zoned us off, irreversibly, from many of the risks and dangers that threatened pre-modern people. But this is not the case. Subsequent sections of this report show how the manifestations of precarity – as understood through a lens wider than the typical socio-economic one, and a historical origin point earlier than 1945 – live on today. The most striking of these pertains to health. A key manifestation of the modern assumption of invulnerability, bolstered by the internalising of the ‘postwar consensus’, is that the politics of precarious health is behind us. As we have seen, and as will be elaborated below, this assumption has dramatically turned out to be false.

In the 1590s, like almost every historical place and time, you had to work for a living. Sometimes Elizabethan government rhetoric targeted and scapegoated those who supposedly did not work in terms strikingly redolent of contemporary politics. The Vagabonds Act of 1597, proposed in reaction to the devastating impact of a failed harvest and the need to separate the ‘deserving’ from the ‘undeserving’ poor, outlines punishment for all those found ‘loytering, and refusing to work for... reasonable wages’. The state was prepared to co-ordinate protection of the poor at a bare minimum; there was no substantial economic safety net. We see in the late sixteenth century the growth of an early capitalist economy, in which the power of mercantile forms of work rose to ascendancy, and the most common mode of economic survival was gradually transitioning from seeking the protection of a social superior to the making of one’s own money. Yet if this was fully a world of work, it was not yet a world of *jobs*: that is, work had not acquired the deeply institutional culture it has in modern society, with its concepts of a linear career, a workplace understood in distinction to the private sphere of the home, and the work organisation as a corporate body with its own internal logic and customs. The 1590s was a world in which work was far more piecemeal, opportunistic and fragmentary than the jobs culture of the twentieth century. In some respects, the culture of work inaugurated by the ‘gig economy’ and catalysed the pandemic represents a return to a premodern culture of work. Many of our initiatives demonstrated that our culture is struggling to comprehend this strange shift, at once progressive and regressive. Our long historical perspective, given this struggle, proves useful.

Nashe, as we will see, belonged to an amorphous class caught between social estates: excluded, perhaps in part by his own choosing, from the professions open to

young men with a university education, such as the law, the church or appointments at court; and positioned above the various ‘mechanical’ trades, with their own hierarchy of prestige. To write ‘creatively’, as we would say today, was to engage in an increasingly fashionable practice: the last decades of the 1500s represent a key period in the history of English poetics, as writers from both aristocratic backgrounds (like Philip Sidney) and university-educated commoner backgrounds (like Edmund Spenser) strove to outline the kind of vernacular literature which would in today’s terms qualify as ‘high art’. Yet to write for a living was to risk disqualification: a stigma was still attached to the idea of selling printed works for profit, and in some cases to print itself. Many professional London writers associated themselves with the playhouses, where – with the exception of the high-prestige companies patronised by court figures such as the Lord Chamberlain’s Men – a similar stigma of disrepute and unruliness endured. Making a living from writing, especially when the playhouses closed, was hard, sometimes in absolute terms (Nashe often writes about the struggle to feed himself) and sometimes in the more metaphorical terms of the difficulty of carving out a life in the austere freedom of living only from one’s wits and evading the requirement to labour. Professional writers were continuously trying to find or maintain patronage from elite figures. Patrons supported writers both by supplying them with income and by defending their reputations, and expected to be praised in return. The Elizabethan writer frequently found that patronage was at once the guarantee of their intellectual freedom and a stay on it.

The precarity of the artist was a key theme in our project. We were interested in artistic lives as special examples of a precarious career, but also in precarity as subject matter, and even as a kind of style: in the fourth episode of our podcast series, Sam Fallon shows how Nashe translated the insecurity of his circumstances into a satirical, and then experimental style. Our exhibition featured the work of a young artist, Jess Heywood, who had recently weathered the storm of Covid. Our actors in ‘Propa Penniless’ drew extensively on their own experiences of the precarity of the performer’s life. And in our webinar about the uses of an English degree many speakers referred to the entrepreneurial and adaptive skills required to forge a sustainable career in the arts. As in the 1590s, two forms of precarity are to be distinguished: the exposure and uncertainty of economic survival for a young person, on one hand; on the other, the uphill struggle in tricky conditions to achieve the vocational life of an artist. Yet these conditions, in the tough post-Covid conditions of the early 2020s, can still overlap.

The next sections of this report will focus more deeply on specific themes emerging from our work, and will consider in each case how the experience of Nashe’s world compares and contrasts with the contemporary landscape, as well as situating these themes in wider socio-political and cultural contexts.

Precarity and Networks

The narrator of Nashe's *Pierce Penniless* (1592) has heard that the Devil has a habit of lending 'money upon pawns' – for a man's soul, he will loan a thousand – and is inclined 'to advance fools and asses'. So he goes in search of him in Westminster and enquires if there is 'any such sergeant, benchman, counsellor, attorney, or pettifogger as Seignior Cornuto Diabolo'. It's a damning indictment of the ethics of the contemporary English court that Nashe's narrator's first thought for where the devil might be loitering is Westminster Hall. But the scene also parodies a common experience for young men seeking employment, which could be described as the search for an elusive opening. Precarity for the young man hoping to gain a foothold in elite spaces (in this case, the world of English law centred in Westminster Hall) was a matter of standing around waiting, of knocking on doors that didn't open.

Nashe's world, we have seen, was one of premodern institutions. Elite institutions, such as the two universities and the Inns of Court, the legal system and the offices of state, exercised great influence and had developed internal cultures. However, they had not yet formalised the means of entering their ranks. Young men graduated with degrees, as students do today. But de-personalised and systematic mechanisms for accessing elite employment – recruitment drives, standardised criteria, job applications – did not exist. Advancement mostly depended on personal connections and encounters. Writers, to escape the stigma of the hack who works for profit, sought the support of a patron – but, as Andrew McRae suggests in our second podcast episode, there was a sense of the patronage system breaking down. In the absence of pre-existing contacts within this network, the young person seeking employment had to make the most of chance encounters, and trust to fortune that the network would open itself out.

But the greatest vice of the elite network, according to *Pierce Penniless* (1592), is that it has become excessively closed-off and remote. The 1590s were a febrile time economically, with the disastrous consequences of repeated harvest failures. Court politics polarised and became obstructively factional. Nashe's text communicates a deep frustration at an elite which, in these circumstances, is refusing to allow both capital and power to circulate. The second half of *Pierce Penniless* anatomises contemporary London through the semi-comic prism of the Seven Deadly Sins. Seignior Greedinesse lives in a house built 'to outward show', but whose interior reveals a secret, miserly selfishness. His bedchamber is a place of 'emptiness and vastity', where even 'the very spiders and dust-weavers' are 'decayed and undone through the extreme dearth of the place'. The world is run by an elite network that hoards wealth, and keeps its gates jealously closed.

This picture, our project suggests, has increasing contemporary resonance. In theory, today's modern institutions have dispensed with the older culture whereby access came through personal connections and other informal means. But in practice elite networks can seem as opaque as they did in the 1590s, and only appear accessible to those with some kind of pre-existing, informal knowledge of them. This might be a personal connection, but it might also be a general cultural familiarity, a knowledge of elite institutions and acquaintance with people belonging to them – friends and family – which renders entry into those elite spaces imaginable.

Lack of such familiarity might lead young people to exclude themselves from desirable paths. The most obvious example is the difficulty, both socio-economic and perceptual, of university entry for a 'first-generation' potential student. But equivalent barriers apply to graduates themselves. During our webinar on employability in the wake of a humanities degree, Gabbie Binnie stressed the inaccuracy of dominant discourse

about the 'destiny' of a humanities degree. The UK has quite a distinctively 'non-linear labour market', which is to say that it is widely accepted to study a subject at university which does not lead directly to specific employment in that field. But a widespread perception to the contrary, bolstered by an unhelpfully narrow window in which employment outcomes are surveyed (fifteen months, typically, which is far too early to assess enduring outcomes), means that students often opt out of the course that attracts them, for fear of not being instantly employable.

Another speaker, Rachel Pratt, who works as a language designer for an AI company, emphasised that the straitened perceptions for typical careers following an English degree are out of date: everyone assumed, she said, that she would become a teacher. For graduates who come from families who have experienced higher education and the careers to which it can lead, the flexibility of both a degree and a career path might seem obvious. But to those unfamiliar with university, heading there as the first in a family, or as a mature student, this world can seem intimidatingly closed, composed not of manipulable opportunities but of set paths. As argued above, the psychic dimension of precarity has at its heart a feeling of powerlessness. In a society where familiarity with elite networks has become a prized asset, those who lack such familiarity might find themselves reluctant to keep knocking on the doors. The standardisation of modern institutions can also, in a society of widening inequality, compound the perception of elite spaces as closed. Entrance to university, or to a graduate career path, has been de-personalised in order to make it fairer: where once there were informal conversations to be had, now there are online forms to fill in. Yet in an unequal world where social mobility is increasingly rare, those encountering prestigious institutions for the first time might experience such standardisation as just the opacity of the machine.

Traditionally, pathways into working in the arts have been less than modern: it has always been challenging to find a foothold in the 'creative industries', and personal connections are notoriously helpful. The dramatic decline in governmental funding for the arts since the early 2010s has further entrenched the norm of entry by personal networking. It's striking that the young artist without pre-existing connections faces today much the same obstacles and challenges in trying to establish themselves as those faced by a professional writer in the time of Nashe.

Precarity and Gender

Nashe began his literary career with *The Anatomie of Absurditie* (1589), an unbalanced work purporting to demonstrate the ridiculousness of women. One of the *Anatomie's* misogynist lines of attack is against women's supposed idleness, their reluctance to focus on the work assigned them:

They will not spend too much spittle with spinning; yea, their needles are nettles, for they lay them aside as needless, for fear of pricking their fingers when they are painting their faces.

The verbal dexterity (needles, nettles, needless) doesn't correspond, in this instance, to an equivalent inventiveness of meaning. It's an ordinary sexist sentiment: women neglect their work because they are too focused on themselves and their appearance. They should be entirely private people, confined to the home, but they insist on painting their faces and being seen in public.

Work, for sixteenth-century women, was theoretically confined to domestic labour, the running of a household governed by men. It was unpaid and unrewarding. Yet in the atomising precarity of Nashe's London, women sometimes found other ways of making a living. Often they were widows compelled by necessity to act commercially, though an alternative to subjugated domestic labour might also have seemed inherently appealing. Some women did occasional work in commercial trades, in a manner roughly comparable to today's 'self-employment'.⁸ Widows ran taverns and in some cases barber-shops, or made money by leasing property.⁹ In the third episode of our podcast series, 'Space and Place', Callan Davies mentions the figure of a landlady in Henry Chettle's *Kind Hearts Dream* (1592) who forces her tenants to buy all their food and fuel from the 'forehouse' on the ground floor of the building where she accommodates them.

Yet for sixteenth-century women all work and labour was precarious, in that it exposed them to the risk of violence in a deeply patriarchal society. Women routinely suffered abuse, discrimination and sexual assault. To labour domestically was to be at the mercy of a man ruling absolutely over his household; to work commercially was to expose oneself to a public realm dominated by men, and without the existence of modern regulatory structures such as a police force (at least in theory, though as history from Nashe's time to our own shows, such structures can also perpetuate the harms they supposedly restrict). Jess Heywood's pen-and-ink drawings based on Nashe's work – one of several moments in our project where female artists responded critically to the misogyny of Nashe's work and time – included 'Lechery', depicted as a goat's skull grafted surreally onto a woman's naked body, suggesting the precarious quality of life in a society where animalistic instincts are let loose.

What has changed today? One of the funniest moments of 'Propa Penniless' was an adaptation of the treatment of lust, the deadly sin, in *Pierce Penniless*. Nashe's language suddenly was replaced by a contemporary scene of three men in a gym, weightlifting while swapping misogynistic stories of sexual conquest. The subversive comedy of this moment came, of course, from the fact that these macho men were played by women. But the juxtaposition was especially clever in that it implied its opposite: not that Nashe's

⁸ See Alexandra Shepard, *Accounting for Oneself: Worth, Status, and the Social Order in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), pp. 191-131.

⁹ For an excellent and detailed overview of this world, see Liza Picard, *Elizabeth's London: Everyday Life in Elizabethan England* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 2004).

world and ours are radically different, but that in some respects they are the same. Many of today's workplaces remain fundamentally hostile to women, and this hostility produces a form of precarity which is at once psychological and socio-economic.

Several of those who took part in our oral history project were young women who had recently started working. In several cases they were balancing paid work, often in the hospitality industry, with their studies. One of our participants, Emily, mentions the casual sexism experienced while working shifts at a Sheffield bar, as an exacerbation of already punishing employment conditions (long shifts, subject to change, and low pay). Paige, another participant, talks about the sexist manipulation of the culture of the workplace uniform. A related common thread of our oral history, which pertains to the gendering of the workplace but also to the earlier discussion of the opacity of prestigious networks, is the influence on young people of attitudes to work inherited from their families. One participant, Graham, remembers early experiences of explaining his creative ambitions to his father who worked in finance in the City; another, Tilly, describes her pride in the working-class heritage of the Potteries community where she grew up, and the significant influence of industrial but now outdated norms of gendered work. Paige describes the uphill struggle of infiltrating the elite world of the law from her precarious perspective. In a closed world in which prestigious networks and institutions seem opaque, such familiar models might command greater influence.

Any discussion of precarity that does not foreground gender, and the exacerbation of socio-economic hardship and exposure by sexism and misogyny, cannot hope adequately to capture the full character of precarious work. Standing's work is perhaps open to this criticism, but the problem is really a methodological and disciplinary one: even when they address themselves to measuring gender inequality, the social sciences alone cannot be able fully to capture the psychological experience of gendered precarity. In the extra episode of our podcast series, Sian Lazar elaborates on contemporary labour movements in South America, and their attempts to incorporate the perspectives of women and indigenous people, to expand a patriarchal idea of labour politics inherited from the west. Sian's focus, like these contemporary movements, is on the work of social reproduction – the work, ideally accomplished by all genders, that counters precarity by making life liveable.

Precarity and Health

When work began on the ‘Penniless?’ project the Covid-19 pandemic had just reached the end of its second year. All lives, of course, were massively disrupted, but especially those of the elderly and the young. Our oral history project was carried out with the help of four student interns, in their second year at the University of Sheffield. Mostly they were nineteen or twenty, and had experienced much of their education in the final year of school and first year at university online, while society was kept in lockdown. In the UK and Europe such an experience was entirely without precedent: the most recent comparable pandemic, the Spanish flu of 1918, existed outside the reach of collective memory. We experienced not only the novelty of a dangerous, sometimes lethal illness which could be contained but not fully controlled, but also a new relation to the state. As it intervened in the minutiae of what would normally be considered private life, the state suddenly revealed the full capacity of the power which it normally reserves.

As observed earlier, modernity is often perceived as the era of public health, in which mass exposure to sudden illness has been mitigated. In the UK, with its unusually long tradition of democracy, it’s equally easy to imagine that we have travelled irreversibly beyond the era of quasi-coercive state power. The Covid-19 pandemic revealed that we are not as modern as we think, or perhaps that our modernity is rooted more in myths and assumptions than in empirical truths. The pandemic conditions of the early 2020s, however, would have made sense to Thomas Nashe. There could be no guarantee of good health in the 1590s, and the state readily interfered in the lives of its subjects. What’s more, Nashe’s career was significantly disrupted by a pandemic. In 1592 a bad case of plague broke out in London. Aristocratic or gentry families with houses in the countryside retreated there but the city’s working population had to stay, and risk infection. In the absence of any state support comparable with the furlough scheme of 2020, Londoners had to balance the need to work for economic survival against the risk of exposure to the illness. The government’s decision to close the theatres cut off a key source of revenue for young professional writers like Nashe, who often collaborated on plays for the commercial stage and had perhaps contributed to Shakespeare’s *Henry VI Part One*. The fifth episode of our podcast series considers the precarity of London in plague-time. Kirsty Rolfe emphasises how the plague took on the status of an unfolding news story, in an age of early commercial print culture in which news was beginning to behave a little like a contagious illness. Andrew Hadfield observes, meanwhile, that the plague seems to make an impression on writers like Nashe not for the horrific suffering and death it can cause, but more widely as an illustration of the highly contingent and uncontrollable nature of life. ‘Never fear any plague’, says a drunk Will in Nashe’s play of 1592, *Summer’s Last Will and Testament*, ‘before it fall’.

Nashe himself escaped the early 1590s plague, though he was dead a decade later. But the outbreak was just one of several forces that rendered his life chaotically disrupted. His work, as the final episode of our original podcast series demonstrates, is full of ghosts: nightly spirits of superstition conjured up vividly even as their existence is ridiculed, in *Terrors of the Night* (1594); quasi-human beings like the personifications of vices in *Pierce Penilesse* (1592); classical masters and literary contemporaries summoned through allusions. In precarious times, especially those created or exacerbated by plague, ghostly writing feels appropriate.

Like the ghost, Kate De Rycker proposes in the final podcast episode, writers like Nashe occupied ‘marginal’ positions. Spectral figures stand not only for lives cut short by plague or hazardous bad luck, but also for the futures hanging in the balance, the

tantalising openings the young person waits for. Emily Hogg has analysed, in similar ghostly terms, literary narratives emerging from the contemporary moment. Reading fiction by Anneliese Mackintosh and Lee Rourke, she identifies ‘characters... who seem to live in the expanded present’.¹⁰ The inability to gain access, quasi-spatially, to the privileged echelons of society, becomes a temporal sensation of being ‘stuck’ in time, like a ghost. What is useful about Hogg’s work is that it thinks of literary precarity not just as a question of representation but as a question of form and technique: Ricoeur’s sense of narrative as a mediator between perceptions of time, she argues, is modified by the ever-increasing normalisation of the precarious condition, in which time becomes difficult to comprehend. Nashe himself could never be accused of employing intricately perfect macro-structures, narrative or otherwise: such perfection of structure would fail to account for the marginal and provision quality of precarious time.

Contemporary precarity maintains the uneven distribution of exposure to illness. The pandemic challenged any complacent notion that modern western societies have somehow moved beyond physical risk. Yet precarity’s interaction with health precedes the pandemic, and we should be careful not to let Covid dominate our analysis. In her oral history testimony, Emma remembers going back to work in a warehouse making equestrian products, and deciding that the risk (the warehouse was ventilated and PPE was available) was sufficiently low for the reward of more income and a relief to intense boredom. Not all experiences are as lucky. A scene from ‘Propa Penniless’ mixes Nashean material with verbatim testimony from one of the actors, remembering an unpleasant experience of working in a catering job during the flare-up of a skin condition, without adequate protection or consultation.

Nashe would perhaps have been puzzled by the contemporary discourse of mental health and mental illness – though melancholy in his lifetime was conceived as something halfway between a spiritual and physical complaint, and in the late sixteenth century had become fascinating and in some cases fashionable. *Terrors of the Night* explores the psychic torment, in dreams and visions, experienced by the melancholic in the privacy of darkness. Nashe would certainly have understood, however, how the feelings associated with precarity can cause mental suffering. Any analysis of the ongoing epidemic of depression and anxiety in the UK, especially among young people, must surely take precarity into account. It has become tougher for the younger and poorer members of society to make a living; at the same time, for a range of reasons, work has in general become more fluid and less social. It’s harder to find in work the dignity and solidarity which theoretically counterbalance life’s hazards, including those created by work itself. Charlie Colenutt, describing his forthcoming book on work in our extra podcast episode, recounts several stories from his research of individuals driven by the harshness of working conditions into spirals of mental illness.

¹⁰ Emily J. Hogg, ‘The Future is a Ghost: Precarity, Anticipation and Retrospection in Anneliese Mackintosh’s “Limited Dreamers” and Lee Rourke’s *Vulgar Things*’, in *Precarity in Contemporary Literature and Culture*, ed. by Emily J. Hogg and Peter Simonsen (London: Bloomsbury, 2021), pp. 160-175, p. 166.

Precarity and Place

One of the grimmest images of the pandemic's social consequences, for anyone connected with universities, was of the botched return to in-person student life in late 2020. In Manchester, students protested against the erection of fences around their halls, as well as the escalation of rents. Student life is idealised in our society as an experience of personal growth and exploration. Of course, the University of Manchester could not prevent a pandemic that put in-person social life on hold. But its clumsy handling of the situation rendered clear the precarity of young people, and showed that their precarious condition amounted to more than the effects of the pandemic. They were trapped in the place they were meant to be living and studying in, worrying about paying their rent.

Leaving home, as students in the UK tend to do, is an ambivalent experience, at once intimidating and exciting. Defining precarity as a structure of feeling, we might say that precarity is (like) a bad experience of leaving home. All the securities of familiarity and embeddedness – routine, community, solidarity and kinship – are taken away. In his oral history testimony, Kris recounts his first job after completing his degree in computer science: an office in Telford, a long way from his home town in Yorkshire, where he wasn't given enough work to do and where he lived in isolation. Precarious employment uproots people, forcing them to move intermittently from one job to another, and from rented room to rented room. Without the support of familiarity, and in a fluid world of work where new social networks are hard to make, the precarious worker easily becomes exhausted, struggling to summon the entrepreneurial capacity to take back control of their working life.

This exhaustion, however, applies not only to those displaced and uprooted physically, but also to workers whose professional identity has been fragmented while they have stayed in one place. Kris was one of several participants in the oral history project living in small towns in south and west Yorkshire, and often they described a sense of stasis: of struggling to progress beyond a series of low-paid jobs, often in retail; of being tied to a place even as that place saw its common working identity eroded by the effects of post-industrial social fragmentation. Viewed through the prism of place, precarity is at once a sensation of being uprooted, and of being stuck.

Nashe himself left home: after a childhood in East Anglia, and university education at Cambridge, he took off to London to seek employment and fame in both elite and literary networks. We know little about his living situation in London, though more than we might: around 1595 he lodged with the printer John Danter, having found temporary refuge in return for literary service at various prestigious houses outside London – Archbishop Whitgift's Palace in Croydon, during the plague of 1592, and George Carey's house on the Isle of Wight in late 1593. His private life in London was probably a succession of spartan rooms, some to himself and some shared, divided by a wainscot. To make life liveable, he depended on the generosity and solidarity of his friends, and on the existence of 'third spaces', such as the taverns where Callan Davies (in his podcast appearance) proposes the work of literary collaboration may well have occurred. More than once, however, Nashe left London. His last published work, *Lenten Stuffe* (1599) describes a stay in Great Yarmouth, and parodies a contemporary vogue for chorography (place-writing) by extolling the virtues of this self-contained place. Yet one of the most intriguing qualities of *Lenten Stuffe* is that the praise is (half-)sincere. Nashe finds in Great Yarmouth a refreshing antidote to the chaos of London, with its promotion of confidence tricksters of various kinds, and the highly provisional and temporary nature of life there.

Lenten Stufe expresses, wryly, a longing for something more stable: deliverance from the non-place of precarity to solid ground.

‘At the most intimate levels’, says Judith Butler in *Precarious Life* (2004), ‘we are social; we are comported towards a “you”; we are outside ourselves’.¹¹ What Butler defines as ‘precariousness’ is ultimately an exposure to being social: to the realisation that we depend on more than ourselves (other people, as well as social environments) to be able to keep going or move forward. But when ‘precariousness’ becomes ‘precarity’ – in Butler’s terms, when the inevitable precariousness of life becomes unequally distributed – a paradox emerges. The precarious are those whose social needs are most exposed and pronounced, and yet frequently the ones rendered isolated. Precarity creates lonely people who badly need social support, but who cannot find it.

¹¹ Butler (2004), p. 45.

Poor Scholars / Precarious Universities

Nashe's arch-enemy in print was the Cambridge scholar Gabriel Harvey. Harvey and Nashe waged a barbed war of words in the 1590s, exchanging waspish pamphlets.¹² In *Have With You To Saffron Walden* (1596), Nashe takes aim at Harvey's pompousness, calling him 'his Gabrielship'. He defends himself, conversely, against the charge of following trends at court: someone trying to exploit the court must study it, he says, just as 'there is no husbandman but tills and sows in hope of a good crop'. It's this exposure to the contingent nature of life in London, Nashe implies, that makes him the wittier writer. In *Pierce Penniless* Nashe satirises Gabriel's brother Richard for the absurdity of his solemn astrological predictions, none of which came true.

The Harvey brothers are trapped in a tedious world where everything must be taken back to first principles, and there is no witty moving with the times. Gabriel is the kind of person, Nashe says in *Have With You*, who would only drink with someone who had attended a three-hour lecture on the art of drinking. This is a satire, then, on academia – or academia at its worst. Nashe himself was university-educated, at Cambridge, though he left before he received his MA. Despite leaving Cambridge for London, Nashe flirts at times with the persona of the impoverished young scholar, a trope in English literature extending back to Nicholas in Chaucer's 'Miller's Tale'.

Though our project's main focus was elsewhere, this kind of 'academic precarity' became a recurring theme in our work. This is natural, of course, as the project was carried out by academics.¹³ It's also worth noting that the 'Penniless?' project took place against a climate of especially pronounced difficulty for the UK university sector. The causes of this crisis are various and hotly debated. One marked consequence has been the precarity of young academics, especially those in 'early career' stages of doctoral research and postdoctoral positions. This report does not address itself to the precarity of early-career academics, but a few instances of overlap with themes elaborated are worth pointing out. As established above, precarity applies both in 'absolute' terms to those who struggle to find socio-economic security, and to the artists who are trying to make a living from an idealistic and ambitious practice. The plight of the young academic falls somewhere in between these poles. Academia resembles an artistic career in that it often feels vocational, and entails personal expression; on the other hand, it is a job, and its elective, quasi-artistic nature should not be weaponised to justify exploitative or precarious conditions.

Since Gabriel Harvey's time, universities have changed considerably – despite the inevitable jokes about how many academics it takes to change a lightbulb ('change?'). They have professionalised: academics now are accountable to both institutional and governmental requirements for the research they publish. They have also become far more accessible, open now in theory to the various identities (women, minorities and the working-class) they used to exclude. The gap between theory and practice is often wide, however. What's more, precarious times cause universities to behave in ways that

¹² The feud's origins are complicated, but relate to Nashe's friendship with Robert Greene, a friend of Harvey's, as well as Nashe's authorship of a pro-episcopal pamphlet during the controversy surrounding the Marprelate Tracts of the late 1580s and early 1590s.

¹³ The forthcoming issue of *English* on 'Precarity in Perspective' contains several treatments of the figure of the precarious scholar: Simonova, 'Precarious and Fatiguing: Elizabeth Elstob and Women's Intellectual Careers as Tragedy'; Hallsworth, 'Borderline Academic: Precarious Work, Life and Self'; and Williamson, 'Who is more scorn'd than a poor scholar is?': Academic Precarity and the Early Modern Theatre'.

perhaps resonate with the analysis above of elite spaces and networks. In a climate of funding cuts and prolonged governmental hostility, universities are incentivised to act defensively, most obviously in which areas of research they choose to invest in. Such caution has created an especially challenging environment for the study of the humanities in the UK. Our webinar aimed to articulate the fruitfulness of studying English in defiance of this environment, and the subsequent 'Skills for the Future of English' initiative, led by Cathy Shrank in collaboration with the English Association, extends this work.

Generational Divides: Debt and Anxiety

Recent electoral politics in the UK has been unusually generational. Young people, across Britain, are overwhelmingly likely to vote for left-wing parties; people above 65 have been extremely likely to vote for right-wing parties.¹⁴ A key part of the precarious experience, as our various initiatives indicated, is the sense of intimidation by the prospect of student debt. Since the introduction of £9,000 annual tuition fees after the Browne Review in 2012, debt has become a key influencer of educational and economic decisions made by young people. A report by William Davies and others, entitled 'Financial Melancholia', argues that there is a direct correspondence between the experience of financial debt and the condition of depression (since 2012, the incidence of depression in the UK has also climbed, though Davies of course does not chalk this up exclusively to debt).¹⁵

This internalisation of debt is a core component of precarity, but not its only one. Alongside the depressive inertia comes a nervous, shifting feeling born of extreme insecurity, a sense of constantly needing to work in a world where nothing can be taken for granted. As Standing says, for the precariat 'everything becomes contingent and open to renegotiation'.¹⁶ In theory, such conditions beget a flexible, entrepreneurial spirit; but this hustling mentality can easily turn into an exhausting kind of vigilance, a feeling of being 'always on' that soon overwhelms.¹⁷ We could say, in this light, that precarity includes emotions analogous both to depression and to anxiety.

Our work is attuned to the disproportionate impact of post-2008 (and post-Covid) conditions on young people: most of those we worked with were in their early twenties. Precarity does not only affect young people, and a revealing component of our oral history project was its focus on the experience of mature students. Furthermore, not all of those who feel precarious are precarious; and among those who are precarious, actual socio-economic status might differ greatly. In the popular imagination, precarity is bound up closely with the condition of the struggling young artist: someone whose actual socio-economic status might be adequate, but who nevertheless embraces a protracted period of uncertainty and personal risk in order to achieve their creative ambitions.

Nashe himself died young, in 1601. He was just arriving in his mid-thirties. When we described his career to the actors who devised 'Propa Penniless', they immediately recognised points of similarity: the early years of writing opportunistically, gradually giving way to discernment and the discovery of a voice; the need to find allies and collaborators; the constant struggle to make money. One of the actors, during the rehearsal process, pointed out that part of her wanted to make Nashe into a working-class hero, a voice for the oppressed, even though she knew this didn't make sense – partly because of the haziness of terms like 'working-class' for the proto-capitalist Elizabethan period, but also because Nashe's position in life was clearly not inherently wretched. In

¹⁴ In various parts of Europe, including perhaps the UK, there are also signs of an emergent right-left split along gendered lines, with men (especially among young voters) likelier to vote for right-wing parties. Yet the most observable difference remains between generations. The starkness of this division reflects another distinguishing feature of precarious times: their disproportionate loading of burdens onto young people.

¹⁵ William Davies, Johnna Montgomerie and Sara Wallin, 'Financial Melancholia: Mental Health and Indebtedness', report by Political Economy Research Centre, Goldsmiths (University of London), for the project *Crafting an Alternative Politics of Debt* (2015).

¹⁶ Standing (2011), p. 35.

¹⁷ On the social implications of this originally technological category, see Rory Cellan-Jones, *Always On: Hope and Fear in the Smartphone Era* (London: Bloomsbury, 2021).

Pierce Penillesse, as we saw, he protests not on behalf of the common people, but against the sense that he might have to become one of them. Nashe continually represents his lack of employment as an injustice and a sorry sign of the times. But lurking between the lines of his work is the fact that his precarious life was, in some senses, a choice. Nashe preferred the uncertain and haphazard life of a writer to the forms of security on offer.

This brings us to a final paradox about precarity as a structure of feeling. To experience precarity is to witness the flaws in a social system, its failure to distribute security beyond the boundaries of its elite networks and institutions. Yet after a while, witnessing the inefficiencies and injustices of such systems begins to produce a desperate desire to gain access to them. If the walled city is so bad for those living outside it that all possibilities for alternative life are eroded, then the only hope is to get inside the walled city. Lauren Berlant calls this 'aspirational normativity', the desire of those excluded or oppressed by society for nothing more than the securities and comforts the oppressive society affords to those whom it enriches.¹⁸

¹⁸ Lauren Berlant, 'Nearly Utopian, Nearly Normal: Post-Fordist Affect in *La Promesse* and *Rosetta*', *Public Culture* 19 (2007), 273-301.

Conclusion: Building Solidarity

Precarity affects anyone who finds themselves – by choice or circumstance – outside the normalised trajectory of an economic good life, where gradual progression through an institutionalised job culture brings an ever-increasing degree of protection and security. To return to Neil Vallely's critique of Standing's identification of the precariat as a class, it is difficult to see how such a transitory condition – and though transitions might dilate, or even go on forever, they still *feel* temporary – could produce something like class consciousness. It is vital that we make distinctions: between the stark socio-economic precarity of the gig economy worker at one extreme, and the young artist trying to get published or exhibited at the other; somewhere in between, the young graduate tries to turn years of debt-funded study into the long-anticipated more comfortable life. But it's also worth looking for common ground in the various experiences of the precarious condition. Whether this would amount to something like class consciousness remains to be seen. What seems likelier is that an expanded notion of precarity, encompassing the gig economy worker and the frustrated young artist, might show up the ways in which the system – like that in England in the 1590s – has ceased to work properly.

The nature and status of work in our society is clearly undergoing a huge and complex transformation. The pandemic ushered in various shifts, such as the move to remote working and the blurring of the boundary between workplace and home. But many of these were already in motion, triggered by technological disruptions and more fundamentally by the deregulation of employment. We are struggling, as a society, to comprehend this shift. This might be because our normative conceptions of work are at once highly specific and rather ahistorical. This report began by noting the dominance in the UK of the narrative of the 'postwar consensus', the era of stable employment within living memory. As many of the participants in our oral history project suggested, when speaking of their parents, there is a marked tendency to imagine the jobs culture of the twentieth century – stable employment, linear progression, work marked off from the rest of life – as a kind of transhistorical norm. In order to understand and adapt to the shifts currently taking place in how we work, we need a longer historical perspective, and this is what the 'Penniless?' project has tried to offer.

The precarity of the artist, as noted above, is often distinguished from other kinds of precarity by its voluntary character. The artist is someone who has opted out of the securities and comforts offered by conventional work, sacrificing them for autonomy and creative freedom. This is not to say that artists are compromised by working for money, or that they deserve to remain precarious, but merely to observe that the precarity of the artist implies a critique of contemporary norms of work. Nashe himself remained a trenchant critic of his own society throughout his literary career; he hoped, of course, for less exposed circumstances, but it seems that this exposure struck him as preferable to at least some of the forms of security on offer. The artist's precarity thus cuts against the chief danger of precarity in its non-artistic variety – the deterioration of feelings of hopelessness and anxiety into Berlant's 'aspirational normativity'.

There is an obvious dividing line here between precarious artists and the precarious working-class: unlike the artist, the Deliveroo driver or young person working in a care home has not chosen their circumstances. Yet it has been the contention of this report that there is some overlap between these different experiences of precarity. Building solidarity, therefore, would mean finding ways for the precarious to take possession of their condition. Precarious artists don't tend to enjoy their precarity: it's the sacrifice they have made to be able to commit to their artistic work. But they have in

some senses chosen to be precarious, and with choice comes a sense of conscious ownership. Most of the precariously employed have not made this choice, and nor should they. What they need is to be allowed to *own* their condition: to document and communicate it; to understand its historical context; and to perceive in it the grains of a more autonomous way of working. The political and personal benefits of this sense of ownership would be great, and potentially transformative.

APPENDIX: Five Blog Essays

These five informal essays, written by Dr Archie Cornish, comprised one of the strands of the 'Penniless?' project. Each describes in detail one of the other strands: our podcast series, our oral history project, our devised performance, our exhibition, and our webinar. They were originally published on the online long-form writing platform Medium, where they are still accessible:

<https://medium.com/@a.cornish>

They are included here for ease of reference and for more detail about each strand.

Podcasts and Pamphlets

In February 2023 we released our podcast series, '[The Precarious World of Thomas Nashe](#)'. The six-part series was one of the key components of the 'Penniless?' project from its first stages, and has been a consistent thread running through the various initiatives and outputs on which we've worked in the past year. We aimed to create an accessible, original resource to introduce listeners to Nashe's world as well as his work – to enter Elizabethan London through the writing of one of its lesser-read but most stimulating authors.

Nashe's untimely death compresses his literary career into what we might call his 'long twenties': he started publishing soon after leaving Cambridge and his last published work, *Nashe's Lenten Stuffe* (1599), appeared when he was about 31. Nashe's twenties – today the decade most associated with struggle, experiment and other precarious conditions – coincided with the 1590s, the last full decade of Elizabeth's reign and one in which the fractures in England's politics began to deepen: bad harvests and climbing prices exacerbated the factional polarisation of the court, consumed with paranoia and indecision about European wars of religion. Our series concentrates on Nashe, but finds in his life and work a window on a particular time and place.

The 1590s saw key developments in the printing and commercial theatre industries, and a profusion of literature we continue to enjoy. These years are easy to romanticise: among the constellation of extraordinary writers beginning their careers in the 1590s was Shakespeare, whose own early career is often narrated retrospectively as sure ascent. The romanticising can easily obscure the unsavoury and desperate aspects of experience in that decade. Those aspects are worth preserving not only for historical accuracy, but also because they seem so central to the cultural blossoming. Uncertain times produce good art. Our series portrays the 1590s in all their tense, stimulating precarity.

Throughout the project we have tried to take a wide, imaginative view of what it means to be precarious. We begin by thinking about socio-economic insecurity, with the first two episodes focusing on the [crisis of employment for graduates](#) of Nashe's generation, and the ways in which hard times compelled them to innovate in order to enter a [burgeoning entertainment industry](#). Even here, though, we focus on the subjectivity of these graduates as well as their part in composing objective economic patterns: we contemplate the effect of an education system that prepared schoolboys for public offices they rarely filled, and inculcated them with a classical ideology of rhetoric in which eloquence opens all doors – setting them up for disappointment when they realised that their eloquence might only equip them to describe things, and not to change them.

Other episodes think similarly broadly about precarity. We examine the [places and spaces](#) of Nashe's London, comparing them with the provincial England beyond to which Nashe retreated when he had made waves. We think about his [experimental forms](#), tracing the origin of his restless, edgy style but also analysing how he absorbs contemporary innovations in printing and publishing. The two final episodes address specific motifs: the [1592 plague](#), whose various morals resonate through Nashe's work; and the recurrence of [ghosts](#) and other less-than-human figures.

The series was created, written and presented collaboratively by the team working on the 'Penniless?' project: Archie Cornish, Kate De Rycker and Cathy Shrank. Our producer was Hannah Hethmon, of [Better Lemon Creative Audio](#), who specialise in working with museums, universities and other cultural non-profits. Each of the team

wrote and presented two episodes each, and all episodes featured two or three guests. Our guests were academics, speaking with authority but without the conventions that sometimes constrain conversation in purely institutional contexts like conferences or the classroom. A mixture of senior and early-career scholars, they came partly from the community of Nashe critics and editors that has emerged from the recent edition of Nashe (from which 'Penniless?' emerges) but also from other disciplines such as history, providing complementary perspectives on Nashe's time and place.

Many of the episodes return to Nashe's *Pierce Penilesse* (1592), responding to that text's central focus on precarity. Yet the digressive nature of Nashe's work and his satirist's preoccupation with certain foibles – vanity, certainty, stupidity – led us to cover works from across his career, from the early play *Summer's Last Will and Testament* (performed c.1592) to the mature *Lenten Stuffe* (1599), as well as texts rarely mentioned even in academic criticism, such as the *Anatomie of Absurdity* (1589) and *Christs Teares Over Jerusalem* (1593). These texts were brought to life by James Tucker, an actor who has also voiced Nashe in previous collaborative projects, such as artist Anna Brass's [film response](#) to *Lenten Stuffe*, and the original editorial project's podcast series, '[Thomas Nashe's Acoustic World](#)'.

We structured each episode in the form of a mini-documentary, with a narrator steering listeners between extracts of Nashe, moments from contemporary Elizabethan literature, and commentary by our experts. We chose this format for reasons that are both Nashean and un-Nashean: it allowed us to impart some shape to the discussion, moving from theme to theme; but it also means that we could let our initial conversations flow and digress like one of Nashe's texts, enjoying the freedom of picking up earlier threads and re-assessing in mid-stream. The result is a set of shaped discussions which move both thematically and narratively, refusing to conform fully to set models for either method – a refusal which also characterises much of Nashe's writing.

Nashe, alive to the rhetorical possibilities of the page's visual arrangement but also to its ghostly preservation of the speaking voice, might well have tried his hand at making a podcast. If he'd lived in our era he might well have preferred them over radio for their flexibility, their freedom from a particular time-slot or house style.

Reflecting on having produced the series, Hannah Hethmon reminds us that it's easy to discount a podcast for its informality, to lump it in with 'a fun Twitter thread or an accessible article in a popular magazine'. In actual fact it's 'hard to overestimate', Hannah points out, 'the amount of information that's communicated' in an episode of 25-30 minutes. Yet the expression of that information as conversation, rather than formal instruction, opens the podcast to non-expert listeners as well as those already familiar with Nashe. Conversation also makes naturally for transhistorical analysis: 'I love those moments', Hannah says of the series, where 'academics compare their subject to an experience of the world today'. At the time of writing, we are working on an extra episode for which we secured funding from the University of Sheffield's Arts and Humanities Knowledge and Exchange initiative. This follow-up builds on the previous six episodes specifically to address precarity today, and to compare it with precarity in the late sixteenth century. It's worth reflecting on Hannah's observation, however, about the comparisons latent in the existing series. Academics who specialise in aspects of the literature and culture of the past often love the particularity of what they study. Yet this particularity, and what Hannah calls their 'passion' for it, also prompts them into intuitive comparison. We all wonder what the writers we read and teach would make of us, and our time. Our heavily periodized intellectual culture sometimes prevents these comparisons, and the thought underscoring them, from seeing the light.

In Their Own Words: Oral History

This summer (July-August) we oversaw an oral history project, as one part of our wider project 'Penniless?' on precarity in the work and world of Thomas Nashe. The project was based in Sheffield, and involved two members of the Nashe team (Cathy Shrank and Archie Cornish), as well as four student interns recruited from undergraduates studying English and History at the University of Sheffield. Our interns – Áine Connell, Katie Smullen, Kevin Harris and Archie Wood – participated at every stage of the project.

Our aim was to talk to young people (18-25) and mature students about their experience of precarity, with particular reference to the relationship between education and employment. This was not meant to be an ethnographic or sociological study, so our approach throughout was to focus on quality rather than quantity, and to identify interesting motifs and micro-patterns in our interviews rather than point to social 'trends'. The results of the project can be seen, and heard, at ['In their own words: Work in the 21st century'](#), hosted by the University of Sheffield's Witness Project.

Oral History

It's worth emphasising, however, that we set out to do more than simply to record some conversations. Oral history is a particular and well-defined practice, with an especially long tradition in the United Kingdom. With its core principle of listening to and recording testimonies in spoken form, oral history possesses the ability to amplify marginalised voices and experiences which often pass under the cultural radar.

All who participated undertook training in the tenets and practicalities of conducting oral history interviews with Dr Michelle Winslow, University Teacher in Adult Palliative and End of Life Care, who has extensive experience of using oral history methods in her own field, and is an accredited trainer for the Oral History Society. We were struck by the unusual nature of our project. Much oral history is about preserving a forgotten past, and thus moves chronologically through a life story. Our focus was more on under-reported aspects of the present. The majority of our interviewees were in their early twenties, and were looking forward rather than back, describing experiences that were ongoing rather than unearthed memories.

Taking advantage of widespread virtual communication in the post-Covid era, we conducted most interviews online, and this widened our reach considerably. Many of our interviewees were studying at the University of Sheffield, or had recently graduated. Several, however, were older and either reflected on their experience of higher education or described current experiences as mature students.

Recurring Themes: Debt

Having recorded, transcribed and summarised our interviews, we reflected on the themes emerging from them. Our skills as literary critics, and the small number of interviews, allowed a detailed analysis that is both like and unlike a literary 'close reading': as in a text, specific images and phrases are of great suggestiveness; on the other hand, these are real experiences being described, with a purely communicative and expressive end rather than an aesthetic one. We compared notes extensively to exchange information on what we found surprising and revealing.

One of the most common themes was the presence in all our interviewees' lives of student debt. Since Conservative government reforms in 2010, undergraduate students

in England and Wales face high annual fees for university education – in a majority of cases, the maximum yearly fee of £9,250. High debts accrued from student loans, on which interest starts immediately, have a cognitive as well as a material impact. As well as instilling a feeling of melancholic powerlessness (Davies et al, 2015), high levels of debt put pressure on liberal notions of a university education: students feel no option but to look on their degree as an investment, judged on whether it will guarantee a particular employment destiny in the short-term, and thus greater financial security.

There's a striking similarity between this debt-straitened conception of university education and recent government policy, which places increasing burdens on degree courses to demonstrate their short-term employment outcomes, or to frame themselves in nostalgic 'vocational' terms. Some of our interviews describe a similar feeling of powerlessness in the workplace – a perceived lack of permission to be entrepreneurial and take risks, and a sense of going through the motions or 'ticking boxes'.

Family

A very different kind of pressure comes from familial history and expectations. The influence of family on attitudes to work and employment was another prominent theme in our interviews. Some of our interviewees reported expectations that children would replicate the career patterns of their parents. But others, especially those who were the first in their family to attend university, highlighted a separate issue: the heavy influence on perceptions by families who were supportive but unfamiliar with university education and the altered employment it would bring. Several interviewees mentioned an assumption, inherited from well-meaning parents, that the completion of a university degree would bring 'a job for life'. It's not just university itself which is an intimidatingly mysterious experience to working-class and precarious young people; it's also the bridge between university and what happens next.

Several of our older interviewees are currently embarking on career changes, some of which involve a return to education mid-career. For some, these moves have taken years of planning. They report contending with a traditional European conception, still normative for older generations, of a career as something lasting a lifetime. In some cases they also describe the constraints placed on professional change or risk-taking by family duties, in a country that's increasingly expensive to live in.

Gender

We did not set out to have explicitly political conversations, but neither did we seek to avoid politics; we were struck by how our conversations tended to the politics of the workplace, and how workplace politics were linked to the politics of identity.

Gender was a recurrent theme. Gender norms influenced familial expectations and pressures, but also the experiences of precarious work itself. Workplaces in Britain, like most traditional Western workplaces, are mostly lacking in democracy or accountability; many workplaces lack any structural mechanisms for resisting sexism in all its forms. We are seeing a revival of workplace organisation, but this is yet to reach many of the precariously employed: university students struggling to get by, working on zero-hours contracts often in the hospitality sector. In a related way, workplaces remain unthinkingly patriarchal, and several of the young women among our interviewees report intimidating workplace experiences.

Post-Covid Crises

There's a common perception in the UK that work is getting harder for everyone: as of autumn in 2022, we're entering a new, brutal phase of the cost-of-living crisis. Most of our interviewees referred to the crisis. But what they described in their own working lives was a different, though related, form of precarity: the erosion of bonds of solidarity at work. For many who had worked in retail or hospitality this was the most attractive and sustaining part of the job: camaraderie between colleagues, and the opportunity to see or help others develop in a position. The decline in solidarity was traced to several factors: the removal of mandatory qualifications and subsequent devaluing of work; the rise of zero-hours contracts and precarious labour; the endurance of digital and hybrid work after its use in the Covid-19 pandemic.

For several of our interviewees the pandemic intersected with the sixth form and university years conventionally held to be formative. Its impact created a diversity of perspectives: some were anxious about the world of work opening back up physically; others were keen to return to it. Both the pandemic, and pre-existing forms of precarity, overlap with the ongoing crisis of mental health among young people in the UK.

Conclusion

We encountered a few difficulties: not everyone in Britain is as accustomed (addicted, perhaps) to using email as those in academic communities; we felt the lack of a means of communicating with recruited participants that was at once friendly, intuitive and professional. Yet the project was, based on feedback both from participants and our student interns (whose reflection and analysis are summarised here), a success. Oral History initiatives often present themselves, accurately, as recoveries of what is in danger of being forgotten. Our project, addressing an unfolding present of precarious work in today's UK, shines a small light not so much on what is forgotten, as what is neglected: experiences and attitudes of work which are commonplace but too often ignored. It indicates that conversations about work and conversations about identity – in our interviews most prominently social class and gender – are often difficult to separate.

Thanks to all participants, to our student interns, and to Michelle for the training. For more details about the [Penniless?](#) project, see the Thomas Nashe Project webpage.

Propa Penniless

Precarious work can be grimly dramatic. Jobseeking sends you on wild goose chases, forcing you to pretend to be someone you feel you aren't. Much of the work available to young people fails to alleviate their precarity, and force them into exposing, low-status encounters – with bosses, competitors and customers. Covid-19 removed personal interaction from work (though not for the most essentially and precariously employed); interactions were shifted online, where we spoke through pixelated personae of ourselves. In today's bureaucratic culture, where rules and regulations feel more like a barrier to shield those in charge than a safety net to catch the vulnerable, a young worker coming up against the system might feel like they're interacting with something uncannily other than human: a machine, a ghost, a robot.

Even in happier economic times, there's an unacknowledged theatricality to the world of work. Many adults spend the majority of their working hours at the workplace, but we talk surprisingly little about its rituals and practices, perhaps because it's the last thing we want to dwell on when we get home. This was the genius of Ricky Gervais and Stephen Merchant, creators of *The Office*: the insight that even somewhere as ostensibly boring as the headquarters of Wernham Hogg is the setting for scenes of extraordinary tension, comedy and pathos.

Nashe and Theatre

Our own interest in the theatricality of work was one reason to collaborate with Newcastle-based theatre company [Cap-a-Pie](#) as part of our project on Thomas Nashe and precarity. The result was 'Propa Penniless', a devised piece created in response to Nashe's *Pierce Penniless* (1592), performed at the Star and Shadow Cinema in Newcastle, 28 October 2022.

Another spur for this collaboration was our ongoing attempt to emphasise Nashe's unacknowledged theatricality. The editing project from which 'Penniless?' follows has placed particular emphasis on Nashe as a dramatic writer, correcting a tendency to think of him as a writer squarely at home in prose forms – as *Encyclopedia Britannica* puts it, 'the first of the English prose eccentrics'. We'd be more familiar with Nashe's plays if they hadn't so successfully outraged the great and the good. Nashe collaborated with Ben Jonson on a play, now lost, called *The Isle of Dogs*; the authorities suppressed the play and prosecuted its authors.

But Nashe's engagement with London's theatre amounted to much more than this self-sabotaging foray. His familiarity with playhouses and their culture is evident from his early work; critics no longer think of the spaces of theatre and print in antithesis (for a discussion of their symbiotic relationship, check out the third episode, about 'Places and Spaces', of our podcast series on Nashe's world). There's a good case to be made that Nashe had a hand in the first act of Shakespeare's early history play, *Henry VI Part One* (first performed in 1592, and written *after* the success of the play now known as *Henry VI Part Two*). Perhaps Nashe made himself a reputation as a good 'starter' – a writer adept at dashing off a first act, and leaving it to his friends to continue.

Collaborating

Cap-a-Pie were new to Nashe, but specialise in collaborating with academics to bring research to life in the theatre. They also have recent experience working on themes

adjacent to those explored in our research on precarity. In 2020 they staged (in a Covid-adapted online format) a [rehearsed reading of Laura Lindow's play *Credit*](#), based on verbatim accounts from those navigating the labyrinth of Universal Credit.

We worked closely with Brad McCormick, artistic director at Cap-a-Pie, and Katy Vanden, the company's producer. We selected excerpts from *Pierce Penniless* which struck us especially theatrical: the parade of deadly sins, for example, in which Pierce – Nashe's outspoken mouthpiece – portrays to the devil's man the vices currently infecting London. (Re-editing this text from its forthcoming edition, adapting its footnotes for a non-specialist audience whose purposes were theatrical rather than scholarly, was an enjoyable challenge and a good reminder of how all editions attune themselves – however overtly – to particular audiences.) We also included the summaries from the interviews conducted in the summer for our oral history project, '[In their own words](#)', on the experience of precarious work for young people and mature students. We hoped that this combination of contemporary and early modern source material would provoke some thematically and dramatically rich juxtapositions.

Propa Penniless

We weren't disappointed! The performance devised under Brad's direction was a resonant exploration of the social attitudes that create precarity, as well as the interactions – darkly terrifying and bleakly funny – that await those who find themselves precariously employed. Brad worked with three actors (Emily Corless, Rachel Stockdale and Mahsa Hammat Bahary) and an appropriately minimal set – a foldable screen and a few wooden chairs. Like this pared-back set their rehearsal methods, which incorporated material thrown up by improvisation and conversation, resonated with the 'rough theatre' of the Elizabethan age, as well as with Nashe's own aesthetics of edgy extempore.

At the heart of 'Propa Penniless' was an irreverent take on Pierce's description of London's sins. The three actors brought Nashe's figures – Pride, Envy, Gluttony & Co – to life with a clown-like irreverence and exaggeration, cutting Nashe's florid metaphors with everyday comparisons and fragments of slang. Here the piece made imaginative use of our glosses, adapted from footnotes and shaken loose of some academic conventions: particularly opaque Nashean sentences were glossed by actors directly addressing the audience; this glossing rhythm, with its sudden lurching from florid to plain style, from enigma to plainness, captured Nashe's own tendency to be looking over his shoulder and to catch himself in the act.

The sequence of sins was framed and interspersed with scenes inspired by the summaries of our oral history interviews; in rehearsals, Brad encouraged the actors, all of whom have direct experience of precarity as young people trying to forge creative careers, to share their similar experiences.

'Propa Penniless' (the title, and its implied Geordie pronunciation, alludes to the actors' roots and those of the company in the north east) also included an inventive take on Nashe himself. At the beginning of the piece Nashe was split into three, each actor assuming one of his characteristic personae: the cocky wit; the angry young commentator; the stylish but self-conscious performer. It ended with the slipping of the mask: the actors spoke directly to us – though in each other's words – about their motivations for the precarious career they had embarked on.

To accompany and record the performance, we worked with members of the Star and Shadow creative network to make a short documentary film. It features excerpts from the devised piece and glimpses into the rehearsal process, with some commentary from

those of us working on the ‘Penniless?’ project: Archie Cornish, Kate de Rycker and Cathy Shrank. The film demonstrates, we hope, the value of collaboration between academic and creative approaches. We wanted this aspect of the project to provoke new thinking and start conversations, among and beyond the humanities and the creative world, and for this reason we paid lots of attention to how our audience responded. We staged a Q&A session immediately following the performance, and asked the audience to fill in questionnaires.

Feedback

Exploring the responses of our audience reflects some of the tensions latent both in ‘Propa Penniless’ and our work as a whole. Our audience was mainly drawn from academic, creative and social initiative networks in Newcastle, and many (though not all) watching had prior interest and engagement in the material from one of several angles: Nashe, precarity, the usefulness of art and creativity for young people. Our questionnaires asked audience members whether they found ‘the theme relevant to today’s world’, and many of the answers expressed versions of ‘yes, unfortunately’. It struck those unfamiliar with Nashe as incredible that a socio-economic situation that obtained in the 1590s has returned. This doesn’t imply a naive belief in the orderly progress of social justice through history. Yet it does show an awareness of precarity as a condition that feels pre-modern: chaotic, whimsical, highly personal and bodily. So much of twentieth-century social reform was about trying to build buffers against precarity, but those buffers no longer work. They’ve become barriers in a clunky and often cruel system that has failed to tackle precarity.

‘The use of female performers added a new dimension’, one audience member commented. Exposure to the casual misogyny of patriarchal workplaces is a good example of the precarity which modern economics should have replaced, but has ended up compounding. The piece featured a particularly comic transition, where the pageant’s movement into ‘Lust’ suddenly abandoned Nashe’s words, replacing them with three lads shifting tin in the gym, swapping stories of sexual conquests. The obvious, parodic juxtaposition of women actors and hyper-male characters drew laughs, but they were knowing laughs.

Something we regularly confront on the ‘Penniless?’ project is that Nashe, for all his deft posturing, is not ‘one of the people’: his plight is of a highly educated young man disappointed and frustrated by the lack of opportunity to penetrate elite fields of employment – and perhaps this frustration is itself a figure for something even more rarefied, which is Nashe’s own internal reluctance to take the conforming opportunities theoretically available to him. Nashe did not come from money, and had little to fall back on, but could feasibly have secured a position in the church, teaching at school, or as a chancery clerk; perhaps he didn’t want to, and perhaps such opportunities didn’t arise. The paradox of Nashe’s writing on precarity is that he describes a situation pertaining to the cultural elite – well-educated but insecurely employed young writers – in terms that strike a chord with other, more widespread and contemporary experiences of precarity.

A divergence in audience responses about relevance expresses this paradox. For some, ‘Propa Penniless’ was about the problems which befall young people trying to establish creative careers: as one audience member put it, ‘the same issue we all face, the questions around living an artistic life’. But for others, the piece was about the deeper and more fundamental kinds of precarity that prevail in today’s economy: ‘these issues are longstanding and need to change’; ‘some of the issues I see in my work are even more

extreme than the ones you included'. 'Lovely to see daily struggles in play', commented one audience member, finding something relatable but also pleasurable in these 'daily struggles'. The playfulness of the piece achieved a light (though satirically irreverent) tone which is often missing from how our establishment culture narrates precarity. Mass media is currently shining a light on the cost-of-living crisis; it's also saturated with stories told by people who overcame hard times. But we rarely hear from people who are in the middle of making it; we don't hear stories of everyday precarity before it lapses into full crisis, or bears fruit.

Limits

Relatable to whom? The struggles of young creatives overlap, of course, with those enduring the most fundamental forms of socio-economic precarity – those for whom the primary question is not 'how can I be an artist and pay the bills?' but 'how can I pay the bills?'. They overlap not just because the arts are open – though [decreasingly so](#) – to people from working-class backgrounds, but also because the vast majority of young creatives balance their artistic work with part-time, precarious jobs in hospitality, retail or other sectors. But there's an undeniable tension here, which is that the precarity of the young artist is not always the same as that of the striking nurse, or postal worker, or immigrant, trying to stay afloat in hostile conditions.

'As a young person', one audience member commented, 'it did feel like stuff that is already well-known and very familiar, so not really new / groundbreaking'. It's worth dwelling on this constructive piece of criticism, because it highlights structural and institutional challenges for the kind of work our project is trying to accomplish. We must remember that some experiences which strike researchers and artists as shockingly new are, to the most socio-economically exposed, old hat. Of course, there's plenty of precarity in academia and the arts, especially for young people. But they remain dominated by middle-class perspectives, and thus have their blind spots. Precarity is a kind of knowledge.

Our Q&A discussion was lively and stimulating. All three academics working on the project were joined onstage by Brad and all the actors, to reflect on the making and meaning of 'Propa Penniless'. Katy Vanden, producer at Cap-a-Pie, pointed out valuably that most of those who participated in the discussion were university researchers – despite representation in the audience of several other sectors and fields, such as creative initiatives and social enterprises. Our conversation was informal and supportive in tone. But its structure was academic, featuring detailed questions and digressive answers. As Katy put it, when a university works with creative partners, it's often the case that 'its culture overrides'. We should be more aware of our blind spots as academics who work with conventions and structures which make more sense to us than those outside institutions. We might have thought of different ways to format the discussion so that we could have the opportunity to hear from people with different experiences: for example, turning more consciously in the Q&A to voices from outside academia; or facilitating anonymous written questions.

Participants

We asked the actors whether they'd like to reflect on making the piece, and how its themes resonated with them. Emily Corless found lots to like in Nashe, despite the unsavoury nature of some of his implied views. His satirical energy – 'roguish, boyish, vulgar with

his language' – is tempered by his ability to self-deprecate, his awareness that his critiques could rebound. In this respect she found Nashe 'empathetic'.

'Reading *Pierce Penniless* for the first time', writes Rachel Stockdale, 'I really connected with his bitterness as a freelancer and it made me think there's a Pierce persona in all of us'. Precarious work can make us oddly compliant, keen to ingratiate ourselves. Perhaps we benefit from re-connection with the frustration of precarity, its capacity to act as a spur to changing the system. Rachel describes herself as a 'benefit-class theatre-maker... an anomaly who has slipped through the net' (once again, this isn't a safety net, but a social filter, a net of exclusion). 'Being a freelancer today, with the cost of living crisis, little pension options and no time for illness or accidents, it is incredibly precarious. I think I had slightly numbed myself to this lifestyle, so it was good for me to personally readdress it'.

Emily spoke also about the place of courage in the freelance artistic career, both in Nashe's time and today. Nashe's satirical portrayal of the nobly precarious writer reminded her of the utopian forms of encouragement she sometimes receives: the vague notion that 'if you quit that job and put more energy into your art, so many more things would happen for you'. Of course, this is easier said than done, and the capacity to take risks is not independent of socio-economic status: the more financial and social stability you have to fall back on, the more courageous you can be. We need to talk less airily about individual courage and more practically about networks of solidarity and support.

'There was something comforting', commented Mahsa Hammat Bahary, 'about about knowing that no matter what time period you live in, being in the arts is always a bit of a precarious career path!' This note of admirable optimism suggests a key insight: one benefit of taking a long view of precarity, as our project does, is to free us from the overwhelming sense that the conditions we face are unique. This is not to normalise or excuse precarity: we should hope and expect to live in a world in which we don't have to take such exposing risks and make such sacrifices. But knowing that other cultures and other artists have tussled with precarity liberates us from the often exhausting perspective that thinks of precarious work only as a current crisis.

Brad's own reflections on making this piece are available [here](#), but he also wrote to us reflecting on his experience of directing the piece. 'If I were his friend', he says of Nashe, 'I think I'd probably worry about him. He seems troubled, unhappy and intensely dissatisfied'. Like the actors, Brad was new to Nashe, but found in his work an indication of what gave this 'unhappy and intensely dissatisfied' young man the energy to keep going. 'I think you can tell that he loves to write or is compelled to write'. Often it's artistic work, the magic of creativity, which banishes all the overwhelming feelings of precarity – even as the life of an artist is thrown open to them. 'Devising the characters as an all-female ensemble', writes Rachel, 'was incredibly cathartic'. Mahsa agrees: 'I loved working with the girls and Cap-a-Pie... it was all very collaborative'. In precarious times, collaboration and creativity offer a form of solidarity which is as sustaining as any.

You can read more about Cap-a-Pie [here](#), and watch the short documentary film [here](#). Thanks to Brad, Katy and Ree at Cap-a-Pie, to all the actors, to all those who produced the film, the team at Star and Shadow, and to our audience.

Seven Deadly Sins: Our Exhibition

To read Nashe is to be confronted by a restless series of images – often grotesque and uncanny, but always vivid, despite Nashe’s refusal to linger on them. It was natural, then, that our project should include collaboration with a visual artist to create images in response to Nashe’s. This [digital gallery](#) contains drawings by Jessica Heywood, one of our principal collaborators on the project. It was created after a physical pop-up exhibition held at the University of Sheffield’s Diamond Building, 7-17 February 2023. We opened with a small but well-attended launch party, featuring other collaborators from the project, colleagues from the Faculties of Arts and Humanities and Social Sciences, and bowls of delicious rice crackers.

Jessica has worked with us since the beginning of the project to produce an artistic response to *Pierce Penilesse* (1592), in particular the speaker’s survey of vices besetting early modern London. The result is a series of pen-and-ink drawings presented both as a collection of prints and as a zine. (Jessica also made some badges especially for the exhibition – ‘everyone loves a good badge’.) If you’ve been reading these blogs, you’re already familiar with Jessica’s work: each essay has been illustrated by one of the drawings. Jessica has also engaged with other parts of the project, travelling with us to Newcastle to watch Cap-a-Pie’s devised theatre piece, ‘Propa Penniless’, and to take part in the after-show discussion.

Based in Sheffield, Jessica’s practice combines drawing and textiles – stitching and crochet. She is a fascinated, close observer of anatomy, in particular of bodies positioned on what she describes as ‘the boundary between life and death’. Animals have a central place in Jessica’s work, which means their dead bodies also occupy a place in her freezer. We began our collaboration in the Special Collections at Sheffield, examining Renaissance drawings of fantastical beasts. Her ‘Deadly Sins’ drawings are full of animals: a bat swooping above a looming mouth from which spills a lolling heart (Wrath); a crocodile wielding a bloody dagger (Envy); worms, forming a wriggling border (Avarice).

There’s a natural affinity here, as Nashe also is very drawn to animals, throughout his work. In *Anatomy of Abuses* (1589) they stand for what is trivial, a poor replacement for the spiritual life only humans can access. ‘Woman’ is accused of ‘delighting more... to play with her dog than to pray to her God’ (‘dog’ and ‘God’ spell each other in reverse, as if Nashe is accusing women of getting it the wrong way round). But across his career Nashe develops from this kind of crude comparison. *Lenten Stuffe* (1599) sings – semi-parodically – the praises of the red herring of Yarmouth, and features two beast fables, one of which sets the fish against the falcons in a mock-epic battle.

It isn’t animals that Nashe is ridiculing so much as the human tendency to pretend to be something you’re not. The sins condemned in his parody of the medieval pageant of seven deadly sins aren’t just the traditional excesses of (animalistic) appetite, like lechery, but also forms of falsehood that feel more contemporary: courtiers living off their parents, pretending to be sophisticated, wasting their time. Nashe pays attention to clothes, especially the fine skin and fur garments beginning to dominate London’s luxury market. Dressing ourselves up to look good, he says, we are guilty of pride:

We divide Christ's garment amongst us in so many pieces, and of the vesture of salvation make some of us babies' and apes' coats, others strait trusses and devil's breeches... others, with the Martinists [contemporary puritan agitators], a hood with two faces, to hide their hypocrisy.

London is full of wolves in sheep's clothing – that is, sheep (intellectually) in the clothing of wolves (economically); or humans wearing expensive animal skins to try to 'hide' their animal-like vulnerability and need. Nashe also finds monstrous juxtapositions within the animal kingdom: the puffin in *Lenten Stuffe* is 'half fish half flesh... an ambodoxter between either'; in *Pierce Penilesse* a 'poor lean mare with a galled back' inadvertently carries two calves, hitched to willow branch, 'into the fens'.

In 'Avarice', Jessica takes her cue from Nashe's description of Signior Greediness standing in his 'ugly habitation', wearing a costume that combines appetite and meanness. His cap is 'furred with cats-skins, after a Muscovy fashion'. But his shoes are made from 'a couple of crab-shells... toothed at the toes with two sharp sixpenny nails', and he 'gnaws' constantly on 'a sergeant's mace in his mouth'. In Jessica's drawing the mace and shoes surround a doublet and breeches, suspended in the centre of the composition. From the sleeves protrude 'angle-hooks instead of aglets, ready to catch hold of all those to whom he shows any humbleness'. The clothes suggest both the person of their invisible wearer, and items among his pointless collection of stuff, hanging up like trophies. It's a brilliant image of the simultaneous superfluity and emptiness of greed.

On first reading, Jessica found *Pierce Penilesse* fairly impenetrable. She describes 'the lack of relief'. The sentences come thick and fast; Nashe moves from place to place, thought to thought, without much warning. There's a similar immediacy in the drawings which thrust their figures at us, setting them not against a background but alongside a jumble of other, bordering images. This flatness, and the scrolled banners declaring each vice's name, create a playful resemblance to Renaissance illustrations – didactic woodcuts of personified figures, similarly labelled.

In Jessica's zine, relevant phrases from *Pierce Penilesse* are printed after the images. Nashe wants us to see the looseness of his text, its timely rough-and-readiness – accepting his invitation, Jessica's captions chop the sentences into fragments divided by slashes. Like the early modern pamphlet, the zine is a good form for speaking to occasion. Preserving the ephemerality of its creation, the zine's aesthetic combines precarity and artfulness. With this in mind, and thinking of Nashe's extensive engagement with the material practices of print, Jessica created a zine on varying kinds of paper – some thick and luxurious, some thinner and more insubstantial. At their thinnest, the pages are of tracing paper: behind their images lurk others, alluding to the bleed-through effect of cheaply printed early modern books, and suggesting a visual metaphor for the crowded density of Nashe's prose. Copies of the zine will live in the Special Collections at the University of Sheffield, as well as the dedicated collection of zines at the Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art in Gateshead.

In Episode Five of our podcast series, 'The Precarious World of Thomas Nashe', Kirsty Rolfe reflected that, had he lived today, Nashe would have perfected the art of the withering online in-joke. (Other guests, such as Emma Smith in Episode Two and Joe Black in Episode Four, make similar comparisons.) Perhaps Nashe would have been one of those acerbic voices on Twitter who proclaim to despise the platform but can't stop using it. The centrality of images and video in our online discourse has created a sophisticated culture of interpretation. But we often forget, as scholars of early modern culture, that this was also true in the 1590s. The spread of commercial print flooded the market not only with words but also with images. Nashe is often praised for the brilliance of his sentences – the anarchic energy of their structure, somehow preserving his train of thought. But these sentences are also energetic for the pictures they draw: fantastical, monstrous, obscene, but always alive.

My Useful English Degree: Our Webinar

The study of English at UK universities faces significant challenges. The subject is declining in popularity at A-Level and university departments are experiencing consequent recruitment problems. What is pushing them away? Some of the social factors appear in other blogs from this series: concerns about [student debt, for example](#), which push students to courses perceived as safer and more 'vocational'. But even among the humanities, English seems to be facing particular problems. In many UK universities the decline in numbers is not matched by closely related subjects, such as history. Colleagues suggest perceptive, if anecdotal, explanations. The current English A-Level seems to strike many sixth-formers as boring and excessively difficult. Successive Conservative governments have not been friends to UK universities. Their hostility is particularly acute towards the humanities, which they love to paint as worthless luxuries. English, with its emphasis on expression and subjective interpretation, might seem particularly vulnerable to being caught up in a poisonous culture war.

Throughout the 'Penniless?' project we've contemplated these challenges, and have tried to keep them in mind across our various initiatives and projects. To try to address them directly, we partnered with the English Association, which is waging an excellent and comprehensive [campaign](#) to defend and promote the subject. We organised a webinar, which took place on 13 February 2023, entitled 'My Useful English Degree'. Before reflecting on the webinar – a [recording](#) is available on the English Association website – it's worth contextualising the contemporary situation, and sketching out the strategies for coming to the subject's defence.

In Nashe's world there was no such thing as English studies, but serious discussion of literature was at the heart of a classical humanist university education. The universities, especially Cambridge, flourished in the sixteenth century; everything else was in crisis. Today, by contrast, UK universities are at breaking point, themselves dependent on the often precarious labour of early career researchers and teachers. Yet there are compelling parallels between Nashe's generation and today's graduates: young people whose intellectual capabilities greatly outstrip their economic power, entering a world in which the social and political odds are stacked against them.

Most commonly our defences take the form of a humanist articulation of the subject's goodness: English, and the other humanities, have a value that is not reducible to instrumental or economic utility. At its best this argument highlights the knowledge afforded by a humanities degree – of works of art, ideas, other cultures – that makes life enriched and more fulfilling. At its worst the humanist defence is a kneejerk assertion that the humanities simply 'justify themselves': tell that to the government minister angling for cuts and looking to score cheap points in the culture war.

A more streetwise, but complementary, way to promote English is to highlight its suitability from the point of view of employment: its attractiveness to employers, the many doors it opens, the transferability of the particular skills it imparts and their premium in today's economy. Among the several components of the 'Penniless?' project our webinar was the most present-orientated: we began the sessions by explaining our rationale in the project as a whole, and some of our speakers made adept references to Nashe, but we wanted to focus mainly on the here and now. We wanted to help our audience to think differently about the study of English, but also to give them practical help. And most of all we wanted to be resilient and defiantly optimistic.

The webinar took the form of three panels: on the place of the humanities in the contemporary conception of the career; on so-called 'classic' careers such as journalism,

with a focus on the contemporary realities of those careers; and on supposedly left-field or unexpected careers for English graduates such as technology and finance. In the first panel we heard from two speakers whose work addresses 'the career' from different angles: Dr Kate Daubney, Director of the Careers Group at the University of London, who stressed the transferability of skills from the humanities in an economy that needs transdisciplinary thinking; and Gabi Binnie, of the Sheffield-based Gradconsult, who expertly unpacked some of the data on graduate outcomes to show what paths an English graduate might expect, and firm up a sense of their typical strengths. Gabi usefully outlined some ways of conceiving the contemporary career, stressing throughout that a 'linear' career of long-term employment in one place is no longer the norm in any field; to embrace the possibilities of contemporary careers which move not in a straight line but in a 'squiggle', we can use terms like 'protean', 'boundaryless' or 'portfolio' to imagine how we do more than one thing in our working lives.

Dr Jane Nolan, of Newcastle University, then spoke about her ethnographic research on employability for English graduates. She emphasised the value of listening to individual stories in understanding the nature of a subject like English – but also stressed the need for English graduates to be better storytellers about where their studies had taken them. Again, there was an emphasis on skills. Jane highlighted the skills which are imparted by the experience of a humanities degree, its flexible rhythm and individuality: empowerment, resilience, self-challenge. She also pointed to the skills which are inculcated specifically by the detailed study of literature, some of which Kate Daubney had also mentioned: creativity, analysis and – with an under-acknowledged prominence – problem-solving.

The need for particular case studies was answered in our second two panels, in which we heard from several English graduates about their careers. All of them had studied English at Sheffield or Newcastle. The first of these two panels, concentrating on 'classic' careers from English, began with Lucy Shields, whose experience in publishing has taken her to a freelance career in copywriting and marketing in the arts. Lucy stressed how a journey which at some stages had seemed like a series of sideways moves now resembled, in retrospect, a forward progression, and highlighted the importance of having faith that this is the case. Charlotte Rose, a reporter with the BBC, made the valuable point that it's important, in the early stages of your career, not to assess yourself as if you're at school or university. At any time, self-comparison with one's contemporaries is often 'the enemy of joy'. The world of work can seem like a level playing field, but it isn't: people have different priorities and approaches in their careers, and one is not more valid than others. This isn't to say that university experience should be forgotten – quite the reverse! Ellen Jurczak, who works in fundraising, spoke about the skills gained not only from her studies but also from the extra-curricular activities that melded with them.

Next we heard from graduates whose careers aren't typically associated with English studies. (Throughout the day, we pushed up against both a traditional British association between an English degree and a selection of institutional career, such as law, and a newer, more European understanding of university education as narrowly vocational, in which an English graduate is destined to be a librarian or an English teacher.) Liam Hulmes works in digital product management for the retail bank NatWest, and Alex Keen is head of Communications and Marketing for Sent Into Space, a company based in Sheffield but who work in the stratosphere. Both Liam and Alex stressed the relevance of communication in what they do: in particular, they framed what they did as 'translation': transposing technical information into captivating or accessible language. In

their accounts, an English degree is a matchless way to acquire and develop communicative skills: analytical understanding, argumentation, appreciation of tone and register. These various communicative skills are one of the most common practical ‘uses’ ascribed to the study of English.

What’s significant here, though, is that for both Liam and Alex communication is not the ‘soft skill’, the welcome adjunct to the ‘hard’, central service or competence for which they’re paid; it *is* that central service. In our bizarre national conversation the government pretends – from nostalgia and from techno-utopianism, each of which appeals to separate wings of its coalition – that Britain’s economy is dominated by technical sectors such as manufacturing and engineering. It isn’t: ours is a service economy, where most jobs have communicative skills at their heart. Marketing, and related roles, emerged in our webinar as a key demonstration of this fact: a job in which communication is not some generalised, second-order advantage, but something more like rhetoric in the Renaissance conception: a facility in verbal expression which is very hard to acquire, and which makes or breaks.

Of course, our economy is changing, and preserving the UK’s status as a world-leader in innovation depends in no small part on the development of our capability in technological fields such as Artificial Intelligence (AI). We heard from Rachel Pratt, a Conversation Experience Designer for Nuance, an AI company. Like Liam and Alex, Rachel’s work has translation at its heart: not just the conversion of code into English, but also the effective presentation of clients’ needs to software developers. What emerged from Rachel’s presentation was that AI’s development will throw into relief the uniquely, weirdly human character of language. Expertise like Rachel’s, in fields such as syntax, will become more and more important as we seek to harness the capacities of AI for the useful and the good. Rachel’s presentation was a provocative note on which to end, as it brought home to us a crucial strategic insight: we must resist the idea that STEM subjects, especially within the academy, are not on our side. The intellectual climate in Britain is still benighted by a ‘two cultures’ paradigm, and the government is often only too happy to frame the debate about university education as an opposition between sensible scientists and useless, tofu-eating humanities scholars. In reality the conflict is between our world-leading universities, with all their varied expertise, and a philistine populism which wants to degrade them.

After the webinar the ‘Penniless?’ team (Cathy Shrank, Kate De Rycker, Archie Cornish) compiled a list of themes which had emerged from the day’s discussions. Some of them have been covered in this essay: the validity of a career which goes, or seems to be going, in a squiggle; the importance of self-belief, resilience and initiative; the centrality of skills, like communication, associated with the humanities. Another thread running through all the presentations was the value of passionate interest – or, as Kate Daubney called it, ‘love of subject’. The basis on which a prospective undergraduate chooses English, it was suggested, should be carried forward into choosing a job: do something you’re interested in, and you’re likely to find yourself motivated and successful. Of course, these are hard times, and it’s much easier said than done to simply ‘choose’ your dream job. Here, though, our interests and passions, such as our love of English literature, can help us to keep faith in a time of hardship where the economic odds are stacked against young people. Our love of subject can orientate us, but it can also sustain us: the skills and attributes we especially cultivate from studying literature – communication, expression, analysis, argument, empathy, cultural understanding – and the countless things we learn from the texts themselves, can keep us going, and enable us to imagine how things might be different.