

'IN THE COUNTRY'

'I lurke in no corners, but converse in a house of credit'

Strange News

As we saw, Nashe had left London sometime before the appearance of *Pierce Penilesse*, and he was still out of town when Harvey's broadsides against him were published. Writing to Abel Jeffes at the end of September, he says that *Pierce* had appeared 'uncorrected and unfinished' because 'the feare of infection detained mee with my Lord in the Countrey', and that at the time of writing the plague still holds him 'prisoner in the Countrey'.¹ He has heard of Greene's death, and of Harvey's assault on Greene. He says he has written an epistle 'to the Ghost of Robert Greene, telling him what a coyle there is with pamphleting on him after his death'. There is 'other news I am advertised of' – that certain 'obscure imitators' are hawking a spurious 'second part' of *Pierce* around Paul's Churchyard; that the 'antiquaries' are offended by his satirical passage about their 'musie vocation'; and that Greene's deathbed pamphlet, the *Groatworth of Wit*, 'is given out to be of my doing'. His angry denial that he was 'any way privie' to the latter is later confirmed by Harry Chertle, who had transcribed it from Greene's papers: 'I protest it was all Greenes, not mine nor Maister Nashes, as some uniuersally have affirmed.'² There is no indication that Nashe yet knew of Harvey's third and fourth letters, denouncing him as a 'mad hooreson'. He issues a threat – 'write who wil against me, but let him look his life be without scandale' – but this seems chiefly aimed at the troublesome political allusion-hunters, rife in 'this moralising age, wherein every one seeks to shew himselfe a Polititian'. The whole letter breathes a tetchy, frustrated sense of isolation. He is a 'prisoner' in the country, itching to be back in London.

The 'Lord' with whom Nashe was staying in September 1592 was Archbishop Whitgift. The place was the Archbishop's palace at Croydon. There Nashe composed, and no doubt helped to produce, his 'shewe', *Summers Last Will and Testament*.³ Various topical references in the play point to its composition in September-October. 'The horses lately sworne to be stolne' refers to an incident in late August involving the retinue of Count Mömpelgard at Windsor. The 'naked channell' of the

Thames refers to its drying up on 6 September. The 'want of Terme' refers to the postponement of the Michaelmas law term due to plague: this was decided on by the Privy Council on 1 October, the term eventually commencing in November at Hertford.⁴ The whole play, revolving round the 'death' of summer, suggests a performance in early October:

Forsooth, because the plague raignes in most places in this latter end of summer, Summer must come in sick: he must call his officers to account, yeeld his throne to Autumne, make Winter his Executour.

Nashe's allusions to the Queen's summer progress help to pinpoint the date of performance more precisely. At the beginning Summer says he would already have 'dyde' but that 'Eliza' had bidden him to 'live and linger' until 'her ioyfull progresse was expir'd'. At the end he dies, bequeathing to Eliza 'all my faire dayes remaining . . . To waite upon her till she be returnd'. The Queen returned to Hampton Court on 10 October. Whitgift himself attended Privy Council meetings there on the 11th and 12th.⁵ With the plague raging and the Queen off on progress, he had probably spent most of the summer at his Croydon residence: he had attended no Privy Council meetings since 6 August. News of the Queen's imminent return would have signalled the end of the long summer recess, and provided the occasion for Nashe's elegiac entertainment – 'Weepe heavens, moun earth, here Summer ends'. It seems likely, then, that *Summers Last Will* was first performed, in the Great Hall of Croydon Palace, sometime during the first week of October 1592.

The Archbishop's manor house at Croydon (Figure 8(a)) – it was Whitgift who first called it a 'palace' – was a convenient rural retreat some ten miles from Lambeth Palace. Whitgift spoke of 'the sweetness of the place' in summer-time, though its low-lying grounds, girded with streams and ponds, were not to every taste. Henry VIII complained that it 'standeth low and is rheumatick' and he could never be there 'without sickness'. Whitgift's predecessor, Grindal, called it 'no wholesome place'. Francis Bacon remembered it as an 'obscure and darke place' surrounded by an enormous wood.⁶ Nashe himself called it 'this lowe built house', and it is perhaps ironically that Summer bequeaths

My pleasant open ayre and fragrant smels
To Croydon and the grounds abouting round.⁷

The Queen periodically visited Whitgift, her 'little black husband', there, though there were complaints that the 'lodgings' were inadequate, there being insufficient 'romes with chymeneys' for her ladies-in-waiting. In some such a chimney-less nook, 'a Closet no bigger than would holde a Church Bible', we may imagine Nashe billeted, his status in the household hovering ambiguously between guest and employee, scholar and

showman. His presence may well have been thanks to Richard Bancroft, who became Whitgift's private chaplain in 1592. Nashe had worked under Bancroft's *aegis* in the anti-Marprelate team; Bancroft is known to have been an *aficionado* of the drama, and when he himself became Archbishop he was wont, according to Bishop Hacket, to 'recreate himself with such diversions at Lambeth'.⁸ It was perhaps he, rather than the aloof Whitgift, who commissioned Nashe's show. Whitgift was noted for the 'feudal magnificence' of his household. He 'maintained an army of retainers' and travelled 'with a princely retinue' on his episcopal visitations: 'is seven score horse nothing', chided Martin senior, 'to bee in the traine of an English Priest?'⁹ Nashe was simply a temporary part of the retinue. We get a glimpse of him as such in an undated letter from the eccentric Puritan scholar, Hugh Broughton, who wrote to Lord Burghley complaining of various 'injuries' he had received from Whitgift, among them: 'how his brother misused me most deadly in his owne hearing; how his Nash gentleman scoffed my Ebrew studies; how Hutton, his preferred, ragged and rayled upon my Daniel'.¹⁰ Here we find Nashe in the company of George Whitgift, an officer in his brother's household, and Matthew Hutton, later Archbishop of York. Their scoffing and railing is done to please Whitgift, long exasperated by Broughton's controversial theologizing. Broughton thinks of Nashe as Whitgift's 'gentleman'.

The night of *Summers Last Will* drew near. Nashe was busy with rehearsals, props, costumes, music, dances. He complains of his lack of 'leysure' in the letter to Jeffes. A sense of rush and amateurish chaos is incorporated into the opening of the play, where the clown-chorus, Will Summer, stumbles on with 'his foolles coate but halfe on', grumbling that his costume was 'but now brought me out of the Lawndry', and that with all the 'turmoyle' and 'care of being petrif' (i.e. learning his lines) he has 'not yet supt to night'.¹¹ The chief part of Will Summer was played by a well-known professional comic called Toy, perhaps a friend of Nashe's, no doubt glad of an engagement now that the London play-houses were shut due to plague. The rest of the cast were probably members of the household – we hear of Ned the Fool, of Harry Baker playing Vertumnus, of actors named Hall and Butcher, of Dick Huntley the prompter: these names would hardly be mentioned, if they were not familiar to the audience.¹² The morris dancers are introduced with 'Now for the credit of Wostershire' – they were perhaps a troupe engaged by Whitgift when he was Bishop of Worcester (1577–83). 'A couple of pratty boyes' lead the opening songs, their 'voyses as cleare as Christall' – pages of the household, or possibly choristers. There are 'Musitians' mentioned. The famous lyric, 'Adieu, farewell earths blisse', is sung to the accompaniment of a lute. The venue for the show was undoubtedly the Great Hall, a magnificent building nearly 60 ft long, with a dizzying

roof of arched braces and collar beams, and coats of arms hung round the walls (Figure 8(b)). The archbishop's dais stood at the west end of the hall. Here 'my Lord' and some of his 'Honourable Trayne' would probably have sat, with the rest of the audience ranged round on stools and trestles. The stage would have been erected at the eastern end, in front of the screens passage, with the doors to kitchen, pantry and buttery serving as entrances.¹³ The dances were performed on the floor of the hall – the Hobby-horse of the morris is warned, 'goe not too fast, for feare of wearing out my Lords tyle-stones with your hob-nayles'. We must imagine torches, candles, the fire flickering in the hearth, the comfortable post-prandial chat of the audience, the general air of festivity ('a hundreth to one' that the players 'will all be drunke e're they go to bedde'). Nashe is somewhere there, for Will Summer calls out to the 'beggarly Poet that writ it' – 'Repayre to my chamber, poore fellow, when the play is done, and thou shalt see what I shall say to thee.'¹⁴

The whole show is typical Nashe. The nucleus is ancient: harvest home, the seasonal cycle, growth and decay. Around it Nashe weaves his topical and particular tone. The plague of 1592 is a haunting presence, deepening the intimations of autumn. The figure of Will Summer – the 'ghost' of Henry VIII's famous jester – is the *pièce de résistance*, enlivening the conventional masque format with a Rabelaisian commentary. He is supposed merely to deliver the prologue, but to be 'reveng'd' on 'the Idiot our Playmaker' he strays onstage throughout – 'Ile sit as a Chorus, and flowte the Actors and him at the end of every Scene: I know they will not interrupt me, for feare of marring of all.' He becomes the authorial voice, the master of ceremonies:

Actors, you Rogues, come away, cleare your throats, blowe your noses, and wype your mouthes ere you enter, that you may take no occasion to spit or to cough when you are *non plus*. And this I barre, over and besides: that none of you stroake your beards to make action, play with your cod-piecc poynts, or stand fumbling on your buttons when you know not how to bestow your fingers.¹⁵

In his personification of times and seasons – Summer the ailing Lord, Verumnus the fussy court official, Ver the flighty young gallant, Sol the ambitious courtier, Harvest the miserly churl, Backwinter the railing malcontent, Christmas the stingy Puritanical 'snudge', etc. – Nashe shows his facility for catching characteristic gesture, attitude, psychological ambience. We are a long way from that special Shakespearean empathy which speaks from inside a character's skin, but not so far from the 'comedy of humours' which Ben Jonson made so popular with the Everyman plays at the end of the decade. *Summers Last Will* is the only whole piece of Nashe's play-writing extant, also the only sustained

instance of his blank verse skills: competent enough but clearly not his medium. Backwinter's lines merit a mention as a deliberate echo of Marlowe's 'mighty line':

Would I could barke the sunne out of the sky,
Turne Moone and starres to frozen Meteors,
And make the Ocean a dry land of Yce;
With tempest of my breath turne up high trees,
On mountaines heape up second mounts of snowe,
Which, melted into water, might fall downe,
As fell the deluge of the former world.

Marlowe makes him think of hell and Faustian demons –

Ile beate down the partition with my heeles,
Which, as a mud-vault, severs hell and thee.
Spirits come up; 'tis I that knock for you . . .

– and a few lines later, 'I see my downfall written in his browes' echoes Marlowe's 'I see my tragedie written in thy browes' in *Edward III*.¹⁶

Nashe's show is full of little touches that remind us of his perhaps rather precarious position in the clerical circles of Croydon Palace. A remembering of decorum: 'Fye, drunken sot, forget'st thou where thou art?' A hasty qualification amid a dispraise of learning: 'All bookees, divinitie except, Are nought but tales of the divels lawes.' A deferent note in Sol's claim –

What do I vaunt but your large bounthood,
And shew how liberrall a Lord I serve?

– and in Summer's bequest of

My shady walkes to great mens servitors,
Who in their masters shadowes walke secure.¹⁷

There is, perhaps, some expediency in the creation of Will Summer. The traditions of the jester, the 'all licensed Fool', sanction Nashe's comic language. Some of Will's raunchier remarks may have raised an episcopal eyebrow, but his 'fooles apparell' vindicated him and 'the Idiot our Playmaker'.