

Was “Thomas Nashe” a Pen Name of the Earl of Oxford?

by Robert R. Prechter, Jr.

Within this paper, the name *Thomas Nashe* does not refer to a real writer. It denotes a biographical construct purporting to represent a real writer. Using that name as a shortcut keeps terms such as *purported*(ly) and *supposed*(ly) to a minimum.

A variety of scholars have proposed that Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford, wrote under pseudonyms and allonyms, such as:

- Arthur Brooke: *Romeus and Juliet*, 1562 (Ogburn 449–451; Altrocchi 2007)
- Arthur Golding: *Ovid’s Metamorphoses*, 1565/1567 (Altrocchi 2005; Prechter 2007)
- John Lyly: *Euphues* novels, plays, 1578–1593 (Ogburn 625–629, 660, 706)
- Robert Greene: novels, pamphlets, plays, 1580–1592 (Hughes; Green; Prechter 2015)
- William Shakespeare: poems, plays, 1593–1623 (Looney).

Should Thomas Nashe, whose literary oeuvre comprises seven pamphlets, one novel, one poem, and two plays (one co-authored), all composed during 1589–1600, be added to that list? Evidence suggests that the answer is yes.

Nashe Is Everywhere Yet Nowhere

Biographers have described Thomas Nashe as

the roving eye about London, ubiquitous and inquisitive, hobnobbing with courtiers and captains, Inns of Court benchers and pettifoggers, surgeons, and apothecaries, butchers and brewers, alewives and victual-ers, colliers and hackney-men, box-keepers and pandars, porters and car-men. (Nicholl 100)

At the same time, Nashe escaped detection by all those who sought him out. As discussed below, four entities who tried to meet or apprehend the man—Gabriel Harvey in 1593, Richard Lichfield in 1597, the London city government in 1593 and the English national government in 1597—never located him.

In keeping with Nashe’s physical elusiveness, modern biographers have expressed exasperation over attempts to link Nashe’s writing to an actual life:

“Thomas Nashe is perhaps the most elusive of all the University Wits.”
(Brown)

Despite writing “vividly...in the first person” in book after book, “one feels that the man is too shadowy and unrevealed....” (Grosart vii)

One might propose that an actual writer named Thomas Nashe was uniquely adept at interacting with all strata of Londoners while simultaneously evading everyone determined to find him, and that he was uniquely suited to living an active life while leaving behind the distinct sense that one is dealing with a shadow.

Alternatively, such traits are compatible with the possibility that Nashe was not a real person but a literary persona. It is time someone challenged Nashe’s widely accepted yet highly improbable biography.

Links Among Nashe, Shakespeare and Oxford

Scholars have established that Thomas Nashe is intimately connected to Shakespeare in terms of language, ideas and even the degree of personal emotion attached to shared concerns. Remarkably, they have not identified any crucial way in which the two writers’ minds differ from each other.

Robert R. Prechter Jr. *has written over two dozen papers and articles related to Elizabethan authorship, which have been published in The Oxfordian, Brief Chronicles, Shakespeare Matters, the Shakespeare Oxford Newsletter and the De Vere Society Newsletter. He is author of an online book set titled Oxford’s Voices. Numerous articles and videos by the author are posted at oxfordvoices.com.*

Nashe and Shakespeare Share Linguistic Parallels

Penny McCarthy stated,

[Stylistic parallels are] distributed over almost the whole of Nashe's oeuvre and many of Shakespeare's histories and comedies[, including] *Titus Andronicus*, *Richard III*, *Henry IV*, *Henry V*, *Julius Caesar*, *Troilus and Cressida*, *Macbeth*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Merchant of Venice*, *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *King Lear*, *All's Well that Ends Well*, *Measure for Measure* [and] *Merry Wives of Windsor*. (McCarthy 146)

J.J.M. Tobin summarized scholars' discoveries:

Nashe is so much a part of the fabric of Shakespeare's works that it is not too much to say that Shakespeare without Nashe and his works would not be Shakespeare. (Tobin 109)

One cannot assert that only Shakespeare was the borrower because the overlap also works in reverse:

[W]e find in the Epistle [of Nashe's *Have with you*, 1596] no less than three echoes from the first seventeen of Shakespeare's *Sonnets*. (McCarthy 146)

So, conversely, Nashe without Shakespeare and his works would not be Nashe. The "borrowing" and "influence" work both ways.

A possible reason for such extensive textual connections might be that two real-life authors were working in close collaboration. Yet there is no historical or documentary evidence for that scenario. Nashe never mentions Shakespeare in his works; Shakespeare never mentions Nashe, and nobody mentions them as a team.

Orthodox scholars are bewildered by the extent of the literary correspondences:

J. Dover Wilson...said in conclusion that he could not account for them....

Tobin [speaks of] Shakespeare's habit of absorbing words and phrases from Nashe and weaving them into the texture and structure of his plays. (McCarthy 146)

It is hard to imagine the process by which scraps of five of Nashe's works keep floating into Shakespeare's head, and eventually forced their way into the diction of [*Hamlet*] with such huge freight of apparently personal emotion.... (McCarthy 149)

An explanation must be beyond "hard to imagine" because no scholar has proposed one.

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Why are the same figures of speech and personal emotions integrated throughout both bodies of work? Independent researcher Nina Green is the only person agreeing with the thesis proposed here. She studied the stylistic reflections of Shakespeare in Nashe's works and concluded, "Internal evidence in the tracts suggests that Thomas Nashe was a pen-name of Oxford's from 1589 to 1600" (Green).

Impossible Borrowing Scenarios

Biographers are certain that Shakespeare borrowed from Nashe, but they cannot make the chronology work. Observations regarding three plays illustrate the problem.

Although *Hamlet* was not published until 1603, Oxfordian scholars have deduced that the play was likely composed in the mid-1580s, before Nashe began his writing career. How could Shakespeare have drawn so deeply and broadly from Nashe's pamphlets, which were not yet composed?

Regarding *The Taming of the Shrew*, Charles Nicholl proposed that Shakespeare had read Nashe in 1589–1590, yet he observed that two of Nashe's *later* books feature the "closest parallels," even though they are "probably too late to be specific influences on *Shrew*..." (Nicholl 206). He stops there, offering no explanation.

Regarding *Love's Labour's Lost*, Shakespeare supposedly borrowed from *Strange Newes* (1593) to create Don Armado, but scholars have determined that the parallels within Nashe's body of work extend too far forward in time for the orthodox, much less the Oxfordian dating of the play. Nicholl wrote, "Nashe's whole account of Harvey's 'reveling and domineering' at Audley End [in 1578] appears in *Have with you to Saffron-Walden*, not published until 1596. Shakespeare cannot be 'borrowing' from it as such..." (Nicholl 214). Conversely, Nashe cannot have drawn exclusively from *Love's Labour's Lost* to produce *Have with you* because he offers more details of the event at Audley End than Shakespeare does.

If Nashe and Shakespeare are personas of the Earl of Oxford, the conundrums relating to literary borrowing disappear. It was one man covering the same topic under two guises.

All Three Men Share the Same Enemies and Friends

Nashe and Shakespeare share three enemies: Gabriel Harvey, Hugh Sanford and William Brooke, Lord Cobham. Why would that be?

Scholars have been unable to explain why Nashe and Shakespeare were equally annoyed over Gabriel Harvey's show of pride and disrespect toward the Earl of Oxford at Audley End in 1578. Nashe further charges Harvey with betraying Oxford in his Latin poem, *Tuscanismi*, in 1580. Yet Nashe

and William Shakspere were between 10 and 16 years old when those slights occurred. Why would either man have cared?

In our context, there is a clear answer: The Earl of Oxford attended the event at Audley End, where Harvey had the impudence to instruct him publicly on a proper course of life, and he was the sole subject of Harvey's disparaging poem of 1580. If Oxford is behind both personas, it explains why "Shakespeare's knowledge of the quarrel is intimate and acute" and in "sympathy with Nashe" (Nicholl 219).

Reasons for animosity toward Hugh Sanford, one of Mary Sidney's assistants, are uncertain, but the fact remains that Nashe and Shakespeare expressed dislike for the same minor clerk.

Lord Cobham suppressed theater activities while serving as Lord Chamberlain from August 1596 to March 6, 1597. His meddling would have annoyed a theater impresario such as Oxford, patron of two acting troupes, but Nashe was never involved with the public theater,¹ so why would he care?

Nashe has the same friends as Shakespeare and Oxford. He has kind words for war hero Sir Roger Williams, widely considered to be the model for Shakespeare's Fluellen in *Henry V* (Wikipedia). Nashe says he met the man at Arundel House on the Strand, which, we discover, "belonged to the Howard family" (Nicholl 223) of Oxford's cousins.

We are also told, "Nashe [knew] two of the Oxonian 'Wits' particularly well: John Lyly and Thomas Watson" (Nicholl 54). No historical record places Nashe with either man, but connections to Oxford are direct: John Lyly was Oxford's personal secretary, and Watson dedicated his only book of English poetry, *The Hekatompathia*, to the Earl of Oxford.

Nashe and Shakespeare depict attraction to the same type of woman. "Diamante, Jack Wilton's Italian lover in *The Unfortunate Traveller*... is a fiction, of course, but drawn with such warmth and buoyancy that we might almost think we have in her a portrait of Nashe's own lover" (Nicholl 93). And who might that be? "Nashe's Diamante is a 'black browd' Italian beauty with a 'licorous rouling eye'; Shakespeare's... famous 'dark lady' of the Sonnets sounds much the same, with her 'raven black' eyes and her hair like 'black wires'" (Nicholl 161–62).

All Three Men Cared About the Earl of Southampton, at the Same Time

Henry Wriothesley, 3rd Earl of Southampton, is the dedicatee of Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis*, published in 1593, and *Lucrece*, published in 1594. Southampton is also the dedicatee of Nashe's *The Unfortunate Traveller*, which was registered in 1593 and published in 1594. No scholar has reported

evidence of a real-life relationship between William Shakspere and Southampton or between Thomas Nashe and Southampton. If Shakespeare and Nashe are personas of the Earl of Oxford, their shared focus at that time makes perfect sense: Until November 1594, Southampton was the leading candidate for marriage to Oxford's eldest daughter, Elizabeth.

In the dedication of his novel, Nashe says to Southampton, "A new brain, a new wit, a new stile, a new soule will I get mee, to canonize your name to posteritie." This sentence makes no sense from the orthodox perspective. In our context, the meaning becomes clear: after creating Shakespeare to extol Southampton, Oxford has created a new persona, with a new style, to do so again.

Because of that "new style," many readers have considered Nashe to be a distinct individual. But Nashe's final pamphlet reveals the author's purpose: "of all styles[,] I most affect & strive to imitate Aretines," indicating the Italian satirist, Pietro Aretino (1492–1556). I think Oxford, an avid reader of Italian literature, was explaining his literary goal to fans, thereby explaining Nashe's distinctive subject matter and even accounting for the explicit *Choise of Valentines*, which is along the lines of Aretino's "erotically explicit sonnets" (Wikipedia).

***Pierce Penillesse* (1592) Presents an Allegory Pertaining to Oxford and a Beloved Cousin**

Nicholl proposed that the players in Nashe's animal allegory within *Pierce Penillesse* (1592) represent the following real people:

- The Bear is undoubtedly the Earl of Leicester...
- The Lion is the Queen...
- The Fox...is obviously the Puritan Thomas Cartwright...
- The Horse...Thomas Howard, [4th] Duke of Norfolk...
- The Ape [is] Sir Nicholas Throckmorton, Leicester's accomplice in dealings against Norfolk. (Nicholl 112–113)

Nicholl concluded that an interconnected set of clandestine events at the highest levels of Elizabethan society, which had occurred two decades earlier in 1572, "is precisely allegorized by Nashe" (Nicholl 114). Nashe's treatment raises five questions:

1. Why would Nashe know or care about events occurring when he was only four years old?
2. Where did Nashe learn details of events known only to certain members of the aristocracy?
3. Who was Nashe to "have taken the risk of offending so powerful a family" (Hibbard 83) as the Dudleys?
4. What motivation would he have for doing so?
5. How could he have gotten away with it?

If Nashe is Oxford, no such questions arise. Oxford was personally involved in events surrounding the downfall of his first cousin, Thomas Howard, 4th Duke of Norfolk, in 1572. He remained bitter over the stratagems employed against him, and his elevated social position allowed him to get away with writing about it.

Nashe Is Emotional About Oxford's Relatives

Nashe never relates warm tales about any of his own relatives or ancestors, living or dead. Yet he expresses deep passion for members of the Earl of Oxford's extended family, in fact twice:

Nashe's treatment of the Leicester-Norfolk affair suggests his total sympathy with the betrayed Catholic nobleman.... 'Alas, goodly Creature' [is] a curiously poignant epitaph for a Catholic who had been executed for treason.

...Nor is this Duke, Thomas Howard, the only member of the family Nashe praised: the poet Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey—Thomas's father—is featured prominently and approvingly in *The Unfortunate Traveller*. [Nashe] praises Surrey unstintingly. (Nicholl 117–118, 158)

In the orthodox context, these passionate stances are more than curious; they are inexplicable. Nashe knew nothing of Norfolk as a person, and he had no special reason to lionize Surrey.

If Nashe is Oxford, the motives become apparent. Norfolk was Oxford's first cousin, for whose life he had fought in vain, and Surrey was Oxford's uncle, whose poetic inventions he adopted.

Nashe's "curiously poignant" expression, moreover, shows up in Shakespeare. "Goodly creature" appears in *Pericles* (4.1), and "goodly creatures" appears in *The Tempest* (5.1).

Scholars have interpreted Nashe's praises of Oxford's relatives, both of whom were Catholic, as "Catholic sympathies" (Nicholl 104). The same scholars have informed us that Nashe was raised a Puritan. They have offered no explanation for the contradiction. If Nashe is Oxford, the situation resolves: He is not expressing Catholic sympathies; he is expressing *familial* sympathies.

Summers Last Will and Testament

In 1592, Thomas Nashe composed a short play titled *Summers Last Will and Testament* for performance at the Archbishop of Canterbury's residence at Croydon. Once again, questions arise.

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Why would the Archbishop of Canterbury, one of the most socially elevated personages in England, invite a budding prose satirist, with only two pamphlets to his name, to pen a light comedy skit substantially in verse, containing lute songs, when he had written no play, no songs, and penned but five stanzas of poetry in his life? In the weeks before the performance, moreover, “Nashe was busy with rehearsals, props, costumes, music, dances” (Nicholl 137). Where did a 24-year-old pamphleteer with no theatrical experience acquire those production skills? Scholars have answered none of these questions. They do not even pose the questions.

If Nashe is Oxford, there is no mystery: Whitgift had known Oxford for 30 years since their days at Cambridge when Oxford was a student and Whitgift a Professor of Divinity. Oxford had written and produced plays, comedies and songs since that time; he had been praised for his dancing ability at court; and he would soon be celebrated in print for his musical ability. Oxford’s known associations and talents fit the event, whereas Nashe’s do not.

Ver (Spring) Uses Shakespeare’s Song and Oxford’s Words

Eva Turner Clark stated, “Nashe lifted the ‘Song of Ver’ from Shakespeare[’s *Love’s Labour’s Lost*], making little effort to alter it” (Clark 152) in *Summers Last Will*. Under our interpretation, Nashe did not lift anything; Oxford simply wrote the song and used it in two plays.

In a 1601 letter to Robert Cecil, the Earl of Oxford wrote the following words:

yf yt shall pleas her Magestie in regard of
my youthe tyme & fortune spent in her Courte....

Using nearly the same language nine years earlier, Ver in the play admits to having dissipated

all my flowry treasure, and flower of my youth...spent
on good fellows, in these sports you have seene.

Ver’s words, “in these sports you have seene,” reveal how Oxford had spent a goodly portion of his family fortune: on producing plays to entertain members of the highest echelons of society.

Nashe’s Play Is an Allegory of the Cecil Family

A Nashe scholar declared that *Summers Last Will* follows a “basic dramatic structure in which each of the seasons appears in turn, as in a pageant...” (Steane 37). That description is inaccurate. Summer, Autumn and Winter are on stage for nearly the entire play, while other characters enter and exit. What, then, is going on?

Waugh (Waugh 2023) proposed that Shakespeare’s characters often reflect members of the Cecil family. The main characters in Nashe’s

play appear to do so as well. In my view, they represent the following individuals:

Summer: William Cecil, Lord Burghley

Autumn: Burghley's elder son, Thomas Cecil

Winter: Burghley's younger son, Robert Cecil

Ver (Spring): Burghley's son-in-law, Edward de Vere.

The Play Adheres to Cecil Family Allegory and Burghley's Will

Nashe's play repeatedly contradicts the seasonal metaphor. Each time it does so, it adheres instead to the Cecil family allegory. The playwright even seems to have possessed knowledge of provisions in Lord Burghley's will. Consider the following examples:

1. Autumn should be the only heir of Summer. But Summer claims two heirs: Autumn and Winter. Summer says, "These two will share betwixt them what I have." Compatibly, Burghley had two primary heirs: Thomas and Robert.
2. If Autumn and Winter are somehow heirs of Summer, Spring should be as well, but Ver is excluded. Summer even places a curse on Ver: "Lent shall wait on thee." Sentencing the lushest season of the year to austerity makes no sense with respect to the seasonal metaphor. In line with Summer's curse, however, Burghley's will bequeathed nothing to his son-in-law.
3. In the seasonal analog, Spring's wealth should flow to Summer. But Summer demands that Ver explain "How well or ill thou hast imployd *my* wealth," which is backwards. The relationship fits Oxford, who had benefited from Burghley's wardship by way of a well-stocked library and social and political connections.
4. Spring should yield custody of the earth to Summer, but Summer says that Ver is the one "unto whose custody I have committed more then to the rest." How so? He hints at the reason: "And what thou hast, of me thou hast and holdst." "To have and hold" is a legal term meaning to fully possess something, but it is more famously known as a phrase used in wedding vows. Summer (Burghley) is saying to Ver (Oxford), "I gave you more than I gave them; I gave you my daughter."
5. Winter protests Autumn's legacy of a crown and details Autumn's shortcomings as a ruler. These protestations make no sense within the seasonal metaphor. Summer effects a compromise, saying he will "yeeld his throne to Autumne, [but] make Winter his Executour." Accordingly, Burghley's will passes the title of Baron Burghley on to Thomas but names Robert executor over three specific stipulations within it.²

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6. Seasons may well be depicted as having personalities, but the ones in the play are unnatural. Autumn is portrayed as bookish, and Winter as a champion of the state. These attributes fit the personalities of Burghley's sons, and Burghley's will doles out paper treasures to them accordingly. The text reads, "I give all my books in my upper library...in Westminster to my son Sir Thomas Cecil..." and "I give unto my said son Sir Robert Cecil all my writings concerning the Queen's causes...."

It is difficult to imagine how Thomas Nashe of orthodox biography could have known all this information, it is impossible to imagine him displaying secrets of the most powerful family in England in a comedy skit, and it is ridiculous to suppose that Archbishop Whitgift would have invited a commoner to do so. But Oxford was qualified on all counts to produce the entertainment.

The Writer Escapes Punishment

Jonathan Bate protested the idea that the play contains an allegory: "it is absurd to suppose that any Elizabethan play might contain satiric references to any aristocrats of the day. The author of the portrait would have found himself in prison before he could turn round" (Bate 90). Lamb understood that parody was involved but could not fathom how Nashe got away with producing the play, much less publishing it eight years later, "without a flicker of response [and] no record, or even report, of Nashe being formally punished" (Rita Lamb).

If Nashe is Oxford, there is no imperative to deny the play's satirical content and no mystery as to why the author escaped punishment. Oxford was perfectly free to caricature members of his own family, including himself.

What About the Dedication in *Strange Newes*?

Nashe dedicates *Strange Newes* (1593) to the pseudonymous "Apis Lapis." Charles Barrell observed that his description fits the Earl of Oxford (Barrell). Accordingly, Oxfordians have proposed that an actual Thomas Nashe may have served as one of Oxford's secretaries or proteges. That idea has now become suspect. One would have to imagine an independent youngster who could continually sound like Shakespeare while writing in the first person as he repeatedly delves into topics close to Oxford's mind, heart and knowledge, often in contradiction to his own biography. It is more plausible that a gifted writer known to have used at least one pen name simply used another.

Just as knowledge of Oxford elevates one's appreciation of Shakespeare's plays, readers who approach the dedication of *Strange Newes* and the Ver character in *Summers Last Will* with the idea that Oxford is the author will find new levels of humor and meaning.

Independent Writers Reveal That Nashe Is Oxford

Gabriel Harvey's Conflations

Margo Anderson pointed out, “sometimes when Harvey writes of ‘Pierce Penillesse,’ he means Nashe. Yet... ‘Pierce’ was at [other] times a sobriquet for de Vere” (M. Anderson 29). In other words, Pierce is “a conflation of Nashe and Oxford” (Hutchinson 66). I concur, but Harvey was not being sloppy or lazy; he did it by design.

Harvey knew more than just that Oxford was Thomas Nashe. In *A New Letter of Notable Contents* (1593), he conflates four literary personae of the Earl of Oxford:

[They may] wonder how Machiavell can teach a Prince *to be*, and *not to be* religious? [who] within few moneths is won, or charmed, or inchaunted, (or what *Metamorphosis* should I terme it?) [and] whom shall he cunnycatch...?

Here Harvey links Nashe (as Machiavelli), Shakespeare (referencing *Hamlet*), Arthur Golding (referencing *Metamorphoses*) and Robert Greene (whose name is on four pamphlets about “cony-catchers,” or con men). Orthodox scholars are unaware of what is going on here, but our hypothesis clarifies the matter: Harvey is telling Oxford that he knows about four of his pseudonyms and allonyms.

In *Pierces Supererogation* (1593), Harvey, in a state of increasing agitation, drops the pretense that he is talking to a real Thomas Nashe and threatens to tell the world what Oxford has been doing:

I could here dismaske such a rich mummer, &...make this Pamflet the vendiblest [most saleable] booke in London, and the Register [Harvey] one of the famousest Autors in England.

A *mummer* is “one who goes merrymaking in disguise” (*Webster's*). Harvey says he could reveal to the world that Oxford has been masquerading under pen names.

Harvey quickly adds that he will refrain from unmasking his nemesis, for an obvious reason. Thirteen years earlier, he had been forced to hide out in a nobleman's house after disparaging Oxford in *Tuscanismi*. He was not about to risk a worse fate by disclosing Oxford's role as a clandestine author.

Richard Lichfield's Read if thou Canst

In *The Trimming of Thomas Nashe* (1597), Richard Lichfield says something mysterious in the orthodox context. He challenges Nashe as follows: “Now I

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give not every word their litterall sense...to see if by allusions you can picke out the true meaning..." To what hidden meaning might he be referring?

Oxfordian scholars will recognize Lichfield's references to the Earl of Oxford, especially by his repeated use of *true* (Ver) and *ever* (E. Ver):

I say you say **true**, Then what I say of you is **true**, for babes and fooles say **true**. Now I give not **every** word their litterall sense...to see if by allusions you can picke out the **true** meaning...for if you **will** understand any thing aright, you must **ever** apply it to your selfe.
["You must, E. Ver, apply it to yourself."]

Orthodox scholars have no theory as to what this wordplay means. But we can see that Lichfield knows who Thomas Nashe truly is. Like Harvey, he resorts to code words because he is unwilling to risk the repercussions of disclosing a state secret.

A Short List of Additional Biographical Contradictions

A valid biography should be free of contradictions, but Thomas Nashe's is replete with them, as established above. Some additional biographical characteristics problematic to the orthodox account, and my explanations for them, are as follows:

- **A full-time, professional writer with improbably meager output:** In his entire life, Nashe issued, along with some minor items, only one novel, seven pamphlets and two plays (one co-authored). I think it's because Oxford was busy.
- **A landsman with knowledge of sailing dialect:** In the manner of Shakespeare, Nashe "is casually at home with nautical terms" to the extent that "few Elizabethan writers have it in their bones like Nashe" (Nicholl 14). The only open water Nashe traversed was a four-mile ferry ride to and from the Isle of Wight. Oxford crossed the English Channel six times.
- **Knowledge of M.A. ceremonies at Cambridge and Oxford:** In *Lenten Stuffe*, Nashe mentions that M.A. graduates wear miniver, which was true at the University of Oxford. Nashe did not attend Oxford, but the Earl of Oxford participated in the Master of Arts ceremony there in 1566.
- **Knowledge of the estates in Italy:** In *The Unfortunate Traveller*, Nashe's hero claims to have visited the most sumptuous homes and gardens in Italy, one of which he describes in detail. The English Passport Office has no record of Thomas Nashe traveling abroad. Oxford lived in Italy for a year, and an earl would have been welcome at the country's premier residences.

- **Knowledge of Italian, French, Greek and Spanish:** In the second edition of *Christes Teares*, Nashe claims to know these four languages in addition to Latin, but there is no record of where he learned them. Oxford was fluent in all of them.
- **Nashe “invented neologisms on a large scale” (Hibbard 208):** Coining words is an exceptionally rare talent among writers. Shakespeare had the same talent and exercised it at the same time.
- **Knowledge of the law:** “The whole [of *Strange Newes*] is conceived of in terms that recall...those used in a court of law” (Hibbard 201). Nashe did not attend law school. Oxford matriculated at Gray’s Inn when he was 17 years old.

Orthodoxy skates past such anomalies, just as it does with those relating to Shakespeare. If Nashe is Oxford, there are no contradictions.

SCRUTINIZING THE LITERARY AND DOCUMENTARY EVIDENCE

Biographers who believe in Thomas Nashe’s corporeal existence have based their opinion partially on literary and documentary evidence. Such evidence, however, fails to support the case for a real Nashe, and most of it reinforces the conclusion that Nashe is a literary persona of the Earl of Oxford.

Literary Evidence

Was Nashe Arrested or Imprisoned?

In *The Trimming*, Richard Lichfield presents a fanciful depiction of Nashe in chains (figure 1). Some biographers have him serving time in Fleet prison. Documentary evidence, however, contradicts the literary evidence.

State records on *The Isle of Dogs* affair, in which the producers of a seditious play were hunted down and arrested, clarify the matter. In October 1597, the Privy Council “release[d] Gabriel Spencer, Robert Shaa [Shaw], and Ben Jonson from the Marshalsea” (Knutson). There is no mention of Thomas Nashe having been arrested or released. McKerrow, one of the more



Figure 1: Lichfield’s depiction of Thomas Nashe.

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careful among Nashe’s biographers, firmly declared, “It has generally been stated that Nashe was actually arrested and sent to the Fleet prison, but so far as I can discover there is not the slightest evidence for this” (McKerrow 31).

If Nashe is Oxford, there is no mystery: The police could not apprehend someone who did not exist. If they discovered that an earl was behind the name, they would have dropped the matter.

Did Nashe Have an Illustrious Heritage?

In *Pierce Penilesse*, Nashe berates Gabriel Harvey for being the “sonne of a ropemaker.” At the same time, Nashe claims for himself “pedigrees,” “patrimonies” and illustrious ancestors. Harvey challenges none of it.

The orthodox view admits no basis for Nashe’s claims and no reason why Harvey fails to defend his pedigree. After all, he was the son of a successful businessman who sent all three of his sons to college, far exceeding Nashe’s status as the son of a lowly minister’s assistant in a remote fishing village.

If Oxford is Nashe, the issue is resolved. Oxford possessed pedigrees, patrimonies and noble ancestors. Harvey’s ancestry was mundane by comparison.

Does Nashe Have a Traceable Heritage?

In *Lenten Stuffe*, Nashe briefly tells readers where to look to find his illustrious ancestors, stating, “my father sprang from the Nashes of Herefordshire.” The accompanying map shows that Nashe was inviting investigators to travel 240 miles west of his hometown (figure 2) and explore a 634-square-mile area containing 235 parishes. He offers no other information.

Not surprisingly, biographers have been forced to admit, “Nothing is known of the Herefordshire family” (Nicholl 11). From their use of the word *the*, one can see that biographers have referred to



Figure 2: Lowestoft and Herefordshire.

the Herefordshire family as if it existed, but there is no evidentiary support for that assumption.

If Nashe is a pen name, the ancestral void is no mystery. Oxford merely wrote a brief sentence to misdirect the curious.

Why Didn't Nashe Stay with Relatives When He Traveled Up the Coast?

When people are destitute and in trouble, they tend to seek out family for succor and support. When Nashe traveled to Great Yarmouth in December 1597, purportedly to escape authorities searching for him in London, he passed through his supposed hometown of Lowestoft and stayed in Great Yarmouth, ten miles up the coast. Why didn't he stay with the people who, biographers tell us, were his brother and half-sister, who were living with their families in Lowestoft?

If Nashe is Oxford, the reason is obvious. Oxford had no family in Lowestoft. Verily Anderson noted that Oxford's ancestors had a long history in the area as defenders of the coast, where "invaders could land...at Yarmouth and Cromer" (V. Anderson 99). With that background, it is easy to understand why Nashe "goes on to relate that he was treated with great kindness and hospitality" (Nicholl 235) during his stay. To the locals of Yarmouth, a de Vere would have been a celebrity.

Biographer Alan Nelson criticized Oxford's sparse attendance at Parliament, saying, "of 34 sessions, he attended four..." (Nelson 343), implying that Oxford acted irresponsibly. I think the real reason, at least in this instance, is the opposite: He acted diligently to create the illusion that Thomas Nashe had connections to a family of similar name in Lowestoft. As shown in the Table, the time of Nashe's travels up the coast³ (basis the new calendar) fits neatly into Oxford's known activities and absences.

Table		
Oxford's Activities	Dec. 14, 1597	Attends Parliament for the final time
Nashe's Travels	Dec. 15, 1597– Feb. 8, 1598	Trip to Great Yarmouth (outbound Dec. 15–20, homebound 1 st week of Feb. 1598.
Oxford's Activities	Feb. 9, 1598	Misses closing session of Parliament

Literary evidence establishes why Oxford took this trip. Orthodox biographies of Thomas Nashe assume the following chronology of events: Nashe was born in Lowestoft, he left home for Cambridge and then London, and at age 30 he traveled to Great Yarmouth. That chronology is based on the

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false assumption that the writer was born in Lowestoft. The true chronology is as follows: In October 1597, Richard Lichfield published *The Trimming*, in which he scoffs, “Nashe, borne I know not where.” Two months later, Nashe departs for the coast. After his return, Nashe issues *Lenten Stuffe*, in which he announces, “I was borne [in] Leystofe.”

If Nashe is Oxford, we can deduce what happened: After Lichfield’s public challenge, Oxford traveled up the coast to locate or enhance evidence connecting the name Thomas Nashe to a family in Lowestoft, then directed readers there.

Documentary Evidence

Eleven pieces of documentary evidence suggest that a writer named Thomas Nashe existed. None of them rescue him from non-existence, and most of them better fit the case that he is a persona.

The Depiction of Nashe Is Not Genuine

Nicholl declared that the cartoon of Thomas Nashe published by Lichfield “was undoubtedly cut by someone who knew Nashe by sight” (Nicholl 9). If that assessment were true, it would constitute evidence that Nashe existed. Nicholl’s claim, however, is not only unsupported but also demonstrably false.

In *The Trimming*, Lichfield proposes a mock court to seek “anyie manner of man” who “can bring anie tidings of Tho: Nashe gentleman,” indicating that he did not know the man. Had he commissioned an artist to locate Nashe and draw a true-to-life picture, he would not have put out the call in the same publication in which the cartoon appears because the cartoonist would have brought back with him knowledge of Nashe’s whereabouts. So, the cartoon cannot have been drawn by someone who knew Nashe by sight (figure 3).



Figure 3: Lichfield’s depiction of Thomas Nashe.

Three Entries in Henslowe’s Diary

Scholars initially assumed that three entries in Philip Henslowe’s diary connecting Nashe to *The Isle of Dogs* and Fleet prison proved that Nashe had been incarcerated for co-writing the banned play.

Later scholars determined that all three entries⁴ in Henslowe’s diary are forgeries by John Payne Collier:

These three entries, which incidentally provide the only evidence that

Nashe was ever imprisoned over the [*Isle of Dogs*] affair, appear...in an ink that G.F. Warner (1881) thought “plainly doctored to give it a fictitious appearance of age”, and in a hand that scholars since Warner (e.g., Greg 1904–08, McKerrow 1910, and Chambers, *ES*) unite in condemning as modern. Greg called the third entry “the most clumsy forgery in the volume”.... (Freeman 206)

One may surmise that Collier was frustrated by the dearth of evidence relating to Thomas Nashe, so he decided to manufacture some of his own. His motivation is compatible with the case that Nashe did not exist.

No Records of an Early Life for Thomas Nashe

No record attests to a life, much less to a preparatory education, for Thomas Nashe until the University of Cambridge registered his matriculation on October 13, 1582.

Documents record the pre-university education of real people of the Elizabethan era whose names are printed on the title pages of plays. Historians have established, for instance, the following affiliations:

Christopher Marlowe attended King’s School in Canterbury.

Thomas Lodge attended Merchant Taylors’ School.

William Gager attended Winchester College.

George Peele was educated at Christ’s Church Hospital boarding school.

Ben Jonson attended Westminster School.

Biographers have been mystified as to where Nashe learned enough English, Latin and math to be admitted to Cambridge. There were no grammar schools in or near the two remote villages—Lowestoft and West Harling—where Nashe’s parents resided. As a small-town preacher’s assistant, Nashe’s father would have been too poor to own books, and so were the villages. Even allowing for a bachelor’s degree, one must ask: Where did Nashe learn enough to impress readers with “a parade of classical learning” (McKerrow 1) in his first pamphlet, started when he was only 19 years old? Orthodox scholars have failed to provide an answer.

On the other hand, Oxford began his education at age five with one of the most celebrated scholars of the day, Sir Thomas Smith. He entered the University of Cambridge at age eight. As a teenager, he received honorary degrees from both Cambridge and Oxford. Records and published comments by contemporaries attest to the youngster’s voracious appetite for exactly the kind of learning Nashe displays in his first and subsequent pamphlets.

Did Nashe Attend St. John's?

Robert Greene and Thomas Nashe both emerged from nowhere to matriculate as sizars at the same Cambridge college the Earl of Oxford attended: St. John's. This coincidence may not seem, at first glance, to be problematic. But consider the odds: In 1580, there were 14 colleges at the University of Cambridge and 18 colleges at the University of Oxford. That is a total of 32 colleges (Wikipedia). The probability that two writers suspected of non-existence—Greene and Nashe—entered the same college Oxford did is $1/32^2$, or 1 in 1024, in short, a thousand to one. That both named students have no record of a preparatory education increases the improbability of the coincidence.

It may seem bold to ask whether Oxford might have chosen to domicile his personas at his old college because doing so made it easier for him to fabricate records. Yet the likelihood of that scenario with respect to Thomas Nashe increases, thanks to testimony from Gabriel Harvey.

Gabriel Harvey was active and “prominent at both Oxford and Cambridge” (Ogburn 43). His involvement with Cambridge lasted nearly twenty years, from 1566 to 1585, where he served as Professor of Rhetoric. He would have been aware of renowned students there, and Nashe was purportedly famous for participating in a Show on campus. Records indicate that Nashe matriculated in 1582 and received a B.A. in 1586, overlapping Harvey's time there by a full three years, enough time for Harvey to learn of Nashe's presence and reputation. Harvey was also well acquainted with contemporary men of letters working in and around London. Yet in the preface to his brother's *A Theologicall Discourse of the Lamb of God* (1590), Gabriel Harvey (as Nashe later deduces⁵) firmly declares that Nashe is “one whome I never heard of before.” It is implausible that Thomas Nashe could have spent three years alongside Harvey at Cambridge, been a genuine man of letters, and still be unknown to Gabriel Harvey.

Three years later, Harvey reports in *A New Letter of Notable Contents* that he “earnestly, and instantly craved personal conference” with his rival, yet he is told, “All must be done by the mediation of a third, and a fourth.” Nashe—yet again—makes no physical appearance.

Under my hypothesis, Harvey had never heard of Nashe, and then was disallowed to confer with Nashe, for a good reason: there was no such person.

As the most socially prominent alumnus of St. John's, Oxford would likely have been permitted to arrange for a few records at Cambridge suggesting the existence of a student named Thomas Nashe, who, we should recall, had no evidence of a life prior to the appearance of the records.

Did Thomas Nashe Participate in a Show at College?

In *The Trimming of Thomas Nashe*, Richard Lichfield claims that Nashe participated in a Show called *Terminus & non terminus* and dropped out of college as a result. There is no documentary or supporting literary evidence for that claim.

As McKerrow pointed out, “Harvey, who would certainly have heard of [Nashe’s disgrace] and would have made the most of it, says not a word on the subject” (McKerrow 11). That certainty and Harvey’s silence confirm that the show never took place.

From that basis, one can discern that Lichfield’s report of a Show is not literal but metaphorical. The title refers to two of Oxford’s personae: Robert Greene, whose presence Oxford *terminated* when Harvey threatened to sue over Greene’s libels, and Thomas Nashe, who took over Robert Greene’s fight with Harvey⁶ and was as yet *not terminated*.

An Official Summons Produces Nobody

Thomas Nashe’s pamphlet of 1593 caused him serious trouble. “The aldermen of London took umbrage at the insinuations made...” (Hutson 200) in *Christes Teares* and issued a summons dated November 20, 1593: “Item Thomas Nash generosus et Johannes Snowe generosus [to] personally appeare at the next sessions of...Newgate [prison].” Nobody answered the summons.

Conveniently, we are told, Nashe escaped authorities due to “the timely interference of George Carey, bearing Nashe away with him to the Isle of Wight to spend Christmas” (Hutson 200). Yet Carey, as Captain-General of the Isle of Wight, was an authority of the realm and therefore unlikely to have been disposed toward acting illegally to harbor a fugitive.

There is another compelling reason to question the orthodox account of what happened. Consider similar circumstances involving the following writers:

- When authorities sought out Thomas Kyd, they found him and tortured him so severely he died shortly thereafter.
- When authorities sought out Christopher Marlowe, they found him and killed him.
- When authorities sought out Ben Jonson, they found him and jailed him three times.
- When authorities sought out the three producers of *The Isle of Dogs*, they found and arrested them.
- In April–May 1593, shortly before *Christes Teares* was published, authorities apprehended, tried and executed three men for “seditious words” and “seditious books” (Hutson 200).

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All these people faced prosecution, and five were killed. In short, when authorities set out to locate writers, they found them and dealt with them harshly. But Thomas Nashe is an exception. *He* spent the holidays in a castle.

Carisbrooke Castle, Isle of Wight

That is not the only curiosity involved. Given the rigidly stratified society of Elizabethan England, there is serious social dissonance in the very idea that the Archbishop of Canterbury in 1592–93 and the Captain-General of the Isle of Wight in 1593–94 each opened their doors to entertain a person whom even Nashe’s most admiring biographer



Figure 4: Carisbrooke Castle gatehouse, Isle of Wight, looking in from the east, built in 1464. (Wikimedia)

describes as a “seedy...scrawny...grubby...ragamuffin” (Nicholl 8–10) for weeks on end, in both cases over the Christmas holidays. Moreover, George Carey’s wife, Lady Elizabeth, is known to have been especially haughty. The Isle of Wight covers a sizeable 147 square miles, yet she “regarded but three ladies in the island (Mistresses Ogländer, Meux and Hobson) as worthy of her company” (Nicholl 183). Should we believe that she was nevertheless content to provide hospitality to a young, penniless, troublemaking fugitive for an entire month?

These implausibilities disappear if Nashe is Oxford. Initially the aldermen did not know who Thomas Nashe was; when they discovered his identity, they dropped the inquiry. Oxford departed London with his friend George Carey and spent the holidays in the governor’s mansion. In that context, Lady Carey’s houseguest was an earl of the realm, whose presence would have enhanced, not damaged, her social standing.

Does a Complaint Dated 1593 Prove Nashe’s Existence?

Only two men complained officially of Thomas Nashe, and neither one contacted the censors. Instead, they wrote to Oxford’s father-in-law.

In the first instance, “a Puritan member of the Privy Council, Robert Beale...wrote to Lord Burghley” (Nicholl 116) on March 17, 1593, to complain about a passage denigrating Danes in *Pierce Penilesse* and to request its suppression. Beale names the pamphlet but not its author. He must have presumed that Burghley knew about whom he was complaining. Naturally in our context, “Burghley...ignored it” (Nicholl 116).

Incredibly, Nashe was given access to Beale’s private letter. In *Lenten Stuffe*, “Nashe speaks of an ‘infant squib of the Innes of Court’[, a] ‘statesman’... who peruses one of his pamphlets and [complains in terms] close to Beale’s letter to Burghley” (Nicholl 121). How could it happen?

First, consider the language, by which we find a member of Queen Elizabeth’s Privy Council berated as an “infant squib” and a mere “statesman.” These slights make little sense coming from the lowly pamphleteer of orthodox biography. We can dispense with the anomaly: Oxford’s titles—17th Earl of Oxford and Lord Great Chamberlain—elevated him above members of the Privy Council. From his perspective, Beale was a social inferior.

Second, consider the implication that the Lord Treasurer of England sought out a troublesome commoner and arranged to have a Privy Council member’s letter delivered to him. Is it not more logical that Burghley simply forwarded the letter to his son-in-law?

Third, this is yet another instance in which Thomas Nashe escaped reprisal for acting in a manner upsetting to governmental officials. Again, an earl could get away with such behavior.

Does an Official Reference to Nashe’s Lodging Prove Nashe’s Existence?

In 1597, when authorities investigated *The Isle of Dogs* incident, the Privy Council directed Member of Parliament and spymaster Richard Topcliffe to “peruse soch papers as were fownde in Nash his lodgings, which Ferrys, a Messenger of the Chamber, will deliver” (Nicholl 244). Yet there are no further reports regarding these papers. Why would authorities fail to follow through?

If Nashe is Oxford, we can deduce what happened. The earliest dated official record of *The Isle of Dogs* affair is a letter from Topcliffe to Lord Burghley dated August 10, 1597 (Nicholl 319), giving him *advance notice* of the investigation. Burghley was positioned to send word to his son-in-law, giving him an opportunity to retrieve certain papers and/or make peace with the authorities.

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Do Parish Records of a Nayshe Family in Lowestoft Pertain to Thomas Nashe the Writer?

The parish records at Lowestoft attest to the existence one William *Nayshe*, his wife Margaret *Nayshe*, and their children, Mary, Israel and Thomas *Nayshe*. Most biographies of Thomas Nashe do not mention the spelling of the Lowestoft family's name, which was relegated to an appendix to Nicholl's book that quotes the parish record. Other biographers have evaded this fact, just as orthodox scholars have evaded the difference between the spellings of Shakspeare and Shakespeare.

In terms of pronunciation, *Nayshe* relates to *Nashe* as *Shakespeare* relates to *Shakspeare*. Nicholl acknowledged the difference, conceding, "A pun of Richard Lichfield's, however, implies that Nashe rhymes with 'ash'" (Nicholl 277). The common spelling of Nashe's name as *Nash* among writers of the period confirms that pronunciation.

Thus, the *Nayshe* family lived in Lowestoft, whereas Thomas *Nashe* lived in Cambridge and London. No record proves they were related.

A Handwritten Note in a Book

Somebody wrote "Thomas Nashe" and marginal notes about Faustus in a copy of John Leland's *Principum* (1589). I think this is the Earl of Oxford playing a role (as he seems to have done in 1592 at Croydon), but I cannot prove it. There is no proof that an actual Nashe wrote it, either.

Does Margaret's Will Prove that Nashe the Writer Was a Member of the Lowestoft Family?

Nicholl claimed to find "Nothing very unusual..." (Nicholl 80) about the will of Thomas Nashe's supposed mother, Margaret (wherein her name is spelled Nashe). It is unclear why Nicholl used the qualifier *very*, but there are indeed problems with the will, two of which are serious:

1. Margaret's will provides no identifier allowing the local executor to locate her son. If Thomas were living far away in London, she would have mentioned his location in the will.
2. The will bequeaths to Thomas household items, including a featherbed. How would Thomas Nashe of London have been expected to retrieve, or even care to retrieve, a featherbed from 143 miles away?

Those aspects of the will constitute evidence that Margaret's Thomas is *not* the writer. If the will is real—a moot point under this analysis—her Thomas was likely a local fellow whose whereabouts the executor knew and who could have carted away the household goods he inherited.

A Letter from George Carey to His Wife Attesting to Nashe's Actuality

In a private letter to his wife, dated November 13, 1593, George Carey declares that his friend Nashe had been jailed for writing *Christes Teares*, and he must stay in London to bail him out. We have already confirmed, however, that Nashe was never jailed. The aldermen's summons for Nashe, moreover, did not go out until a week later. How could Nashe have been in prison a week before authorities even started searching for him? Something is seriously amiss with Carey's account. Did he mislead his wife?

The work of two independent scholars, both operating under the assumption that Nashe was a real person, clarifies matters.

First, Rita Lamb discerned Carey's motive. She wrote,

he comes up with four good reasons why he can't [return home]. I think that's three excuses too many, and a scurrilous lampoon a few years later...suggests that if Lady Elizabeth worried about her husband's 'business trips' away from her she had good reason.

[Among his excuses,] the Queen learned he'd arrived...and before he knew it he was agreeing to stay for the Accession Day celebrations on November 17.... (R. Lamb)

This event was to be attended by "many...beautiful ladies...men, women and girls" (Ridgeway). So, we have a reason why Carey would have been eager to stay away from home: to attend a magnificent party.

Second, historian Katherine Duncan-Jones discerned something heretofore unappreciated about Carey's letter: a close affinity between its writing and that of Thomas Nashe:

Carey...shows a Nashe-like relish for strongly physical and tactile images—"rubbe my hors heeles"—and for coined compound adjectives—"comody-tragedicall." (Duncan-Jones 167)

She further observed that the letter "may contain [a] literary allusion...to 'Fryer Alphonso'...about whom Nashe tells a funny story in *Pierce Pennilesse*" (Duncan-Jones 167) and that Carey employs verselike constructions, a polyp-ton and a "conceit about his multiple commitments, which 'hath made an university in my brayns', [an] elision of academic and legal disputation..." (Duncan-Jones 167).

In short, George Carey's letter emulates Thomas Nashe in rhetoric, poetic expression, coining boisterous words and crafting sophisticated metaphors. Yet Carey never published a word of creative literature in his life. His corpus

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of writing comprises dry, bureaucratic memoranda. How did he become such a poetic writer, and how did he learn to emulate Thomas Nashe?

Nashe is not the only writer who seems to have influenced the text of Carey's letter. Scholars have overlooked the genesis of some of his most colorful constructions. Consider that "my horse's heels" shows up in Shakespeare's *Henry VI, Part 1* (1.4), and "comody-tragedicall," shows up in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (2.2) as "tragical-comical."

Equally curious, the letter slips into the third person when speaking of Carey and "*his* delay" and things "not in *his* power," etc. That is an unusual shift.

Finally, Duncan-Jones recorded two impressions of rapid writing: "The final list of 'games in court' has been scribbled very hastily.... The opening phrase...is rather blotted and confused" (Duncan-Jones 167).

What, then, can explain Carey's composing in Nashe's style, borrowing phrases from Shakespeare, shifting to the third person point of view, and writing in haste? Carey, it seems, was taking dictation.

From whom was he taking dictation? The orator seems to have been a combination of Nashe and Shakespeare. In short, Carey was taking dictation from the Earl of Oxford.

By understanding the setting and Carey's motive, we can reconstruct the scene: George and his friend Ned were making plans to attend the Accession Day festivities. Carey complained to Ned that he needed to convince his wife of why he needed to stay another week. Oxford took up the challenge and dictated text for Carey, at times speaking in the third person, a form he also employed when creating titles, *Nashes's Dildo* and *Nashes's Lenten Stuffle*. He spoke swiftly, so Carey was forced to keep up, giving his writing the rushed quality that Duncan-Jones discerned. The final excuse Oxford proposed was that Carey must remain in town to bail Nashe out of prison, a false "fact" that only Oxford reasonably could have invented because the summons, which he must have known was coming, had yet to be issued.

So, a letter that on its face seems to confirm Nashe's existence instead confirms his fictional nature.

A Handwritten Letter to William Cotton from 1596 Implying Nashe's Actuality

A letter addressed to William Cotton was discovered by John Payne Collier. Though once suspected of being a forgery, the letter was authenticated as a genuine artifact from the Elizabethan era (figure 5).

The letter is suspicious because it was found among the papers of Robert Cotton, who, as scholars have carefully established, was not related to any

known William Cotton, including George Carey's servant by that name, whom most scholars have presumed is the addressee. There is no signature on the letter, part of which is (conveniently) torn away where a signature should have been.

Nor is there a single personal comment in the letter. Just as in Nashe's books, talk is plentiful, but nothing personal is revealed. Most of the letter is a rant disparaging popular literature of the time.

The text is designed to imply that Thomas Nashe is the writer. But it reads as manufactured literature because every other line can be traced to text from Nashe's books. Nashe's title, *Pierce Penniless*, echoes in "I have nere a penny in my purse"; Nashe's mention in the preface to Greene's *Menaphon* of "Jhon a Brainfords will" shows up in the letter as a mention of "Gillian a Braynfords will"; and so on.

One aspect of the Cotton letter unquestionably fits Oxford's authorship better than Nashe's. As noted above, Thomas Nashe never attended law school. Yet we find that "the letter makes use of...legal phraseology..." (Mackerness 343), indicating that the law was an integral part of the writer's intellect. In 1949, E.D. Mackerness explained:

The first simile, "as unfortunate as a terme at...St. Albons to poore cuntry clients", is followed by a mention of Jack Cade's dealing with

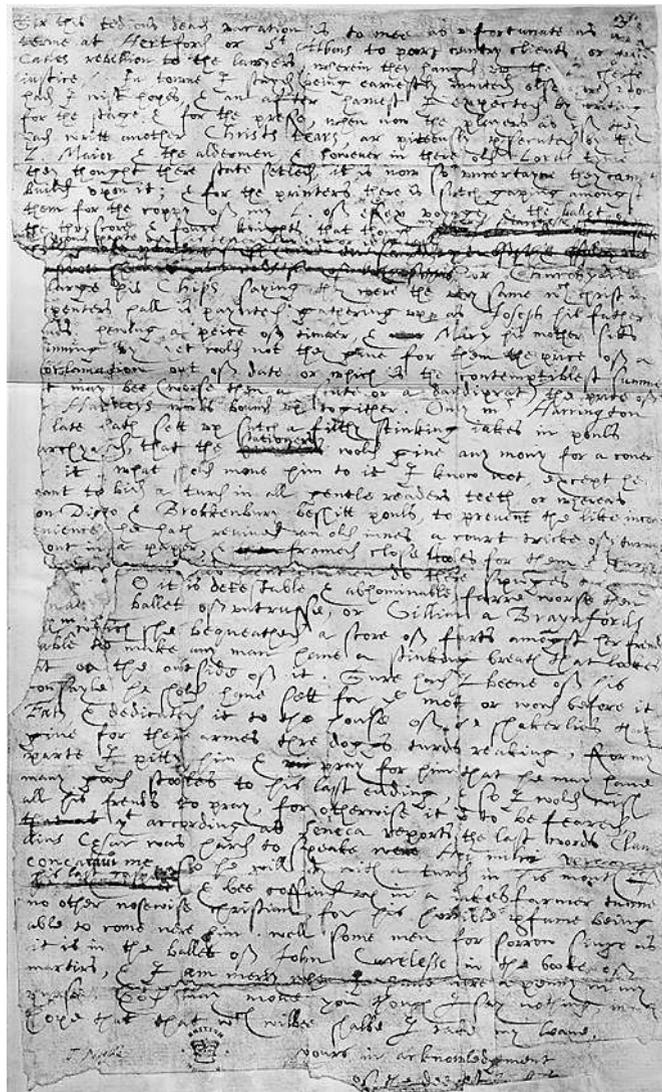


Figure 5: Letter addressed to William Cotton (Illuminarium website.)

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lawyers[, and] he uses other legal terms in speaking of the “proclamation out of date” and the ribald bequest of Gillian of Brentford: “Sure had I beene of his [c]ounsayle he should have sett for the mott or word before it...” And he recalls an old “innes of court trick”. The letter concludes with a legal phrase: “yours in acknowledgement of deepest bond”. (Mackerness 343–34)

Seven legalisms appear in this one-page letter. Scholars have documented a similar density of legal phrases in Shakespeare’s plays and poems. The letter-writer even implies that he was qualified to provide legal counsel, befitting a law-school graduate.

Just as pub chat fails to account for Shakespeare’s knowledge of Italy and the law, nothing in Nashe’s biography—including socializing at the Inns of Court—accounts for the legal terms breezily dispensed in this letter. The impact of Oxford’s formal legal education on Shakespeare’s writing was so profound that historian Ramon Jiménez (Jiménez) was able to date early versions of Shakespeare plays based on their use or non-use of legal terms, which Oxford weaved into his writing only after his education at Gray’s Inn in 1567–68.

The combination of a literary sensibility and legal knowledge was, moreover, a rare occurrence in Elizabethan England. Shakespeare had such an intellect; so did Nashe.

Once again, if Nashe is Oxford, all four oddities attending the Cotton letter evaporate. Nashe was a literary creation, so Oxford used the language of his literary creation in crafting the letter.⁷ There are no personal reminiscences in the letter because Oxford had no personal relationship with the addressee. Legal references flow as naturally from Nashe as from Shakespeare because both writers are literary personas of the Earl of Oxford. Finally, Oxford left the letter in Robert Cotton’s care because Cotton was an antiquary who was developing an extensive library, and if there was anyone whom Oxford could trust to protect and maintain the letter for posterity, it was Cotton.

Oxford’s Motives for Leaving Behind Documentary Evidence

In *Oxford’s Voices*, I proposed that Oxford wrote under various pseudonyms and allonyms to establish the impression that Elizabethan England was as peopled with accomplished men of letters as ancient Greece, ancient Rome and Renaissance Italy. To that end, he employed mostly allonyms, so that real people would receive the literary credit. In a few cases, he simply invented notional characters, including William Shakespeare and Thomas Nashe, each of whom was later linked to a real person or a real family to enhance the deception.

Oxford crafted more documentary evidence for Thomas Nashe than for other invented personas. I can think of three reasons why:

- The Nashe persona caused a scandal twice, sparking curiosity about him among readers.
- Harvey and Lichfield publicly tried to draw Nashe out of hiding.
- Oxford would have wanted posterity to believe that a real, independent writer defended Oxford and Robert Greene against the Harvey brothers and their allies.

All it took to provide a trail of evidence of Nashe’s actuality were four items:

- a few college records
- brief, handwritten notes in a book
- a letter sounding like Nashe
- and a trip up the coast either to locate or to embellish parish records pertaining to the William Nayshe family.

The gambit was so successful that its effect has endured for over four centuries.

A Substantial Absence of Definitive Documentary Evidence

As noted above, Thomas Nashe was the subject of two official complaints. The second one is the only non-literary mention of Nashe as a living person. In 1594, Hugh Broughton wrote (as did the first complainant) to Oxford’s father-in-law, protesting ridicule he had endured at Croydon from someone he calls Whitgift’s “Nash gentleman.” Does Broughton’s note confirm that Thomas Nashe was real? I don’t think so. Broughton does not speak of “Tom Nash” or “that upstart pamphleteer named Nash” but instead uses a cautious construction that Burghley would understand. His language equates to complaining about Samuel Clemens as “that Twain gentleman.” As in the first instance, Burghley did nothing.

Otherwise, no person, court or office left a painting, a letter, a memo, a memoir, a bill, a payment, a lease, a contract, a grammar or prep school record, a legal proceeding, a marriage record, documentation of children or a burial record attesting to the existence of the popular writer, Thomas Nashe. After *Summers Last Will* was published in 1600, Nashe simply disappears.

Contemporary records indicate a real person behind the names Thomas Lodge, George Peele, Christopher Marlowe, Edmund Spenser and many other Elizabethan writers. In *Lamb of God*, Harvey declares that the only Thomas Nashe he ever knew was a man of that name who served as “our

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Butler of Pembroke Hall”⁸ at Cambridge, to whom he refers again in *Four Letters*. Even for *that* humble person, there is documentary evidence of actuality, in the form of a record of his involvement in a college legal proceeding in 1598. But no such definitive record confirms the existence of Thomas Nashe the writer.

Nashe Offers Five Clues of His Non-Existence

Nashe’s pamphlets provide at least five statements compatible with the case that he is merely a fictional persona. Nashe’s first pamphlet, *Anatomie of Absurditie*, explains to fans of the hidden author why he chose to adopt this new persona:

“pensiveness...hath compelled my wit to wander abroad unregarded in this satyricall disguise...”

In *Have with you to Saffron-Walden*, Nashe taunts those who wish to locate him:

“I...shall...steale out of your companie before you bee aware, and hide my selfe in a Closet no bigger than would holde a Church Bible, till the beginning of Candlemas Terme, and then, if you come to Paules Church-yard, you shall meet me.”

In *Lenten Stuffe*, he grouses,

“my enemies [are] busie nibbling [like minnows] about my fame,” yet, “perhappes I may proove a cunninger diver then they are aware.”

Then he gripes of being treated by critics

“as if I were a deade man thrown amongst them to feede upon,”

quickly admitting,

“So I am, I confesse, in the worldes outward appearance.”

In three of his pamphlets, then, Nashe offers five striking confessions:

- His wit is in disguise, so he can wander about unregarded,
- he is as small as a stack of papers slid into a Bible nook,
- he will be found only in bookstalls,
- he cunningly hides from inquisitors,
- and he is as unavailable to the wide world as a dead man lying six feet under.

All this is nonsense if viewed from the orthodox perspective, but it becomes logical and clever when considered under the hypothesis presented here.

Conclusions

I believe a careful investigation of all relevant evidence demonstrates—contrary to virtually all previous commentary—that no writer named Thomas Nashe existed. I think inductive reasoning confirms that Thomas Nashe was a notional character hiding behind a pen name employed by the 17th Earl of Oxford.

Note: The Thomas Nashe chapter within *Oxford's Voices* is ten times the length of this paper. Readers who wish to access more detailed information about any aspect of the case presented here as well as numerous additional points are invited to access that source.

Endnotes

1. A few months later, Nashe wrote Act 1 of *The Isle of Dogs*, but he gave it to another playwright to complete and produce for the public theater.
2. The relevant passages are quoted in the Thomas Nashe chapter of *Oxford's Voices*.
3. The Thomas Nashe chapter of *Oxford's Voices* explains the determination of Nashe's travel dates.
4. Collier's three forged entries are quoted in the Thomas Nashe chapter of *Oxford's Voices*.
5. Nashe's deduction is confirmed by textual parallels in Gabriel's *Four Letters* of 1592. Even if one were to credit the address in *Lamb of God* to Richard, the point remains. Richard would have been unaware of any corporeal Thomas Nashe only if his brother, who was also his brother-in-arms in the Pamphlet War, did not know of him.
6. The Thomas Nashe chapter of *Oxford's Voices* discusses the Pamphlet War between Oxford and the Harveys.
7. Oxford or an assistant could have held the pen.
8. Oxford may well have borrowed the college butler's name, with its homonym of *gnash*, for his satirist persona.

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