

NASHE AND THE POETICS OF OBSCENITY:
THE CHOISE OF VALENTINES

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I N THE SECOND BOOK of *The Scholemaster* (1570),¹ Roger Ascham discusses his theory of *imitatio* and its importance for literary production. It bears some similarity to the ideas of Quintilian, Longinus, Vida, Valla, and Pico della Mirandola on the subject, not to mention those of Plato and Aristotle.² Great authors of antiquity emulated their predecessors, Ascham tells us, and if the writers of his own time would only follow suit, they "would bring forth more learning, and breed vp trewer iudgement, than any other exercise that can be vsed." In its broadest sense, *imitatio* "is a facultie to expresse liuelie and perfitelie that example which ye go about to folow" (5), whether one engages himself in imitative composition of an admired author, or in the comparative study of more than one writer. Ascham defines three basic varieties of *imitatio*, two of which function as aids to writing. The first: comedy and tragedy imitate life, an Aristotelian commonplace. The second seems more prescriptive. One should "folow for learning of tonges and sciences the best authors" (7), especially Seneca and Cicero. The third, related to the second, suggests that once a writer knows which author to emulate, he

know perfitlie, and which way to folow, that one; in what place; by what meane and order; by what tooles and instrumentes ye shall do it; by what skill and iudgement ye shall trewlie discern whether ye folow rightlie or no.

(8)

How one arrives at this blissful state, guided by reasoned intuition, seems obscure. Yet one can imitate badly, a pratfall to avoid. Those who misunderstand *imitatio*, like Macrobius,

¹ "Of Imitation": *The Scholemaster*, in *Elizabethan Critical Essays*, ed. G. Gregory Smith (Oxford: Oxford U Pr, 1904), 1: 1-45. Ascham will be cited in the text.

² For a fine summary of the history of *imitatio*, see the entry under "Imitation" in *Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, ed. Alex Preminger (Princeton: Princeton U Pr, 1965), 378-381.

be no more but common porters, caryers, and bringers of matter and stuffe together. They order nothing. They lay before you what is done: they do not teach you how it is done. They busie not them selues with forme of building.
(18)

A young writer should not only immerse himself in an author for the best possible outcome. He should also choose the right type of author, one who will teach a "yong scholer" literary structure. One can find no better way to learn than this method, usefully instructive because of its flexibility: "This *Imitatio* is *dissimilis materiei similis tractatio*; and, also *similis materiei dissimilis tractatio*" (8). Subject matter and its handling vary with the climate.

Ascham subdivides his paradigm of imitation into six component parts, and he uses Cicero's debt to Demosthenes as illustration. Although "Tullie reteyneth thus moch of the matter" of his precursor, "This and that he leaueth out." He adds a little here, and diminishes a little there, keeping in mind the principle of order. He may work alteration, even outright change, upon his material,

either in propertie of wordes, in forme of sentence, in substance of the matter, or in one or other conuenient circumstance of the authors present purpose.
(9)

Ascham grants the imitator endless license. He identifies himself as a product of this type of imitation, having gleamed his own mode of writing and learning from his master, Sir John Cheke. One assumes that Aristotelian *mimesis* lurks beneath all of this, something Ascham probably learned about from his reading of the *Poetics* with Cheke and Thomas Watson at Cambridge (23). Sidney's definition serves as the Elizabethan standard: "a representing, counterfetting, or figuring fourth."³

English writers can be used for imitation, Ascham continues, but Latin and Greek authors are preferable (22). Cicero, Quintilian, and Erasmus, all illustrations of Ascham's paradigm, constitute his appeals to authority (13). Besides, just as Latin poetry profited through comparative study and composition with its Greek models, English verse could well improve itself with close attention to the Latin (29). Therefore, neither Chaucer nor Petrarch can be fit models for a number of reasons (31), not the least of which is that "rude beggerly ryming, brought first into Italie by *Gothes* and *Hunnes*" (29). In fact, Ascham's demonology is largely Italian. Such writers

open, not fond and common wayes to vice, but such subtle, cunningy, new, and diuerse shiftes, to cary yong willes to vanities, and yong wittes to mischief, to teach old bawdes new schole poyntes, as the simple head of an English man is not hable to inuent.
(4)

Obviously, licentious Italian authors cannot serve as fit models for imitation, nor could they even if they avoided rhyming altogether. Like many Renaissance

³ *An Apologie for Poetry*, in *Elizabethan Critical Essays*, 1: 158.

humanists, Ascham finds it inconceivable that material not of the highest moral character could be useful in the education of the young. To circumvent such potentially damaging influences, a "yong scholer" would be better off if he avoided poetry at the outset of his studies and concentrated instead upon Latin oratory and history: Varro, Sallust, Caesar (37).

Nonetheless, the anonymous pornographic poem generally attributed to Thomas Nashe, *The Choise of Valentines*,⁴ serves as a veritable example of *imitatio*, whether we limit ourselves to some of Ascham's principles, or if we apply his very broad ideas more generally to literature. To propose such a meeting of minds may seem surprising at first, but comparative study of the two writers reveals several connections. For one thing, Nashe greatly admired Ascham, as well as his master, Cheke ("a man of men, supernaturally traded in all tonges."⁵ In *The Anatomie of Absurditie*,⁶ Nashe makes his admiration quite explicit, urging his readers to study Ascham:

I will referre you to his workes, and more especially to his Schoolemaster, where he hath most learnedly censured both our Latine and Greeke authors.

Nashe seems well versed in Ascham's literary theory, and praises his ideas as they show up in other writers like George Gascoigne,

who first beate the path to that perfection which our best Poetes haue aspired too since his departure; whereto he did ascend by comparing the Italian with the English, as Tully did *Graeca cum Latinis*.⁷

He does not use the word *imitatio*, but he clearly applies this principle to poetic composition. We can easily infer its presence in the passage when he champions Gascoigne for ascending the path to poetic perfection by "comparing the Italian with the English." Nashe then uses Ascham's chief example for his paradigm of *imitatio* in *The Scholemaster*, Cicero (and, presumably, Demosthenes).

Nashe appears to have been somewhat embarrassed by *Valentines*,⁸ and thus does not discuss it very explicitly in his essays. Thus one cannot prove that *The Scholemaster* engendered his poem any more conclusively than one can prove, without qualms, which sources provided the impetus for Shakespeare's *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*. Yet Nashe immerses himself in a number of authors and recreates their effects in the *Choise*, using his skill and judgment to discern whether he follows them rightly or not, just as Ascham prescribes. No slavish imitator, and proud of his own style in all of his writings, he bristles at detractors like Gabriel Harvey: "the vaine which I haue...is of my owne begetting, and cals no man father in England but my selfe."⁹ Of course, such

⁴ *The Works of Thomas Nashe*, ed. Ronald B. McKerrow, 5 vols. (New York: B&N, 1966), 3: 141-226; hereafter cited as *Works* and the appropriate vol. number.

⁵ "Preface to Greene's *Menaphon*," in *Works*, 3: 317.

⁶ *Works*, 1: 48.

⁷ "Preface to *Menaphon*," in *Works*, 3: 319.

⁸ Stephen S. Hilliard, *The Singularity of Thomas Nashe* (Lincoln: U of Nebr Pr, 1986), 199.

⁹ *Strange Newes*, in *Works*, 1: 319.

a vein does not engender itself *ex nihilo*, and Nashe knows it. He adds and diminishes, orders and alters at will. Moreover, he clearly subverts some of Ascham's *dicta*, especially the idea that the Italians ought not to be imitated. Nashe owes something to Pietro Aretino (1492-1556), a well-known and well-documented fact in his time and our own,¹⁰ something for which Harvey criticized him mercilessly: "Cannot an Italian ribald vomit out the infectious poyson of the world but an Inglishe horrel-lorrel must lick it vp for a restoratiue?"¹¹ Another departure from Ascham concerns that rude and beggarly rhyming, the vehicle for Nashe's ridiculous story. Furthermore, Nashe knows that English authors are quite acceptable to imitate and satirize, especially old rhymers like Chaucer, Spenser, and those moldy romancers who stagger along in four-beat couplets. Yet the *Choise* owes its greatest debt to Ovid, not Aretino,¹² as Nashe clearly states in his epilogue:

...Honor brooke's no such impietie;
Yett Ouids wanton Muse did not offend.
He is the fountaine whence my streames doe flowe.
(3-5)

And flow he does, offending with Ovid's Englished muse, oddly fulfilling Ascham's call for English poetry to resuscitate itself by imitating Latin authors. He recreates the atmosphere of the erotic poetry, especially the *Amores*, expressing lively, if not perfectly, their example.

1.

I will not heere decipher thy vnprinted packet of bawdye, and filthy Rymes in the nastiest kind.

(*Supererogation*)¹³

—An unsolicited critical comment from Gabriel Harvey

¹⁰ David O. Frantz, "'Leud Priapians' and Renaissance Pornography," *SEL* 12 (1972): 157-172; 167.

¹¹ *Pierce's Supererogation*, in *Elizabethan Critical Essays*, 2: 259.

¹² In endeavoring to demonstrate the debt of *Valentines* to the works of Aretino, Frantz (above, note 10) stresses Nashe's admiration of his Italian predecessor in *Nashes Lenten Stuffe*: "of all stiles I most affect & striue to imitate Aretines" (*Works*, 3: 152). However, Frantz never makes any detailed or definite connections between the two, except that both authors can be pornographic. He fails to mention, for example, that a dildo appears in both the *Dialogues* and the *Choise*. David C. McPherson reminds us that in Aretino's own lifetime, he was best known for his polemical and religious works, not his pornography. In fact, Nashe admired Aretino as a satirist, not as a pornographer. McPherson emphasizes an "enormously important difference between Nashe's rhetorical strategy and that of Aretino," especially the former's "jocularity" and "lighter tone" in satire. See "Aretino and the Harvey-Nashe Quartet," *PMLA* 84 (1969): 1551-1558. McKerrow's commentary corroborates this: "I have been unable to discover any points of similarity whatever between the work of the two writers" (*Works*, 5: 129).

¹³ In *Elizabethan Critical Essays*, 2: 258.

A fewe Elegeicall verses of mine thou pluckest in pieces most ruthfullie, and quotes them against mee as aduantageable...but...With one minutes studie lte destroie more, than thou art able to build in ten daies.

(*Strange Newes*)¹⁴

had it not bin for his bawdy sister, I should haue forgot to haue answerd for the *bawdie rymes* he threapes vpon me. Are they *rymes*? and are they *bawdie*? and are they *mine*? Well, it may be so that it is not so; or if it be, men in their youth (as in their sleep) manie times doo something that might have been better done, & they do not wel remember.

(*Here with You to Saffron Walden*)¹⁵

—Nashe in response, allegedly on his authorship of the poem

Before Ronald McKerrow somewhat sheepishly included *The Choise of Valentines* in his five-volume *The Works of Thomas Nashe*, or at least an *apparatus criticus*, it remained, for the most part, in manuscript, one of the copies in cipher, which circulated widely in Nashe's time.¹⁶ Several of his literary acquaintances seem to have known that he had written it, and, with the apparent exception of Harvey, seem to have enjoyed deciphering it. The *Choise* even came in for some censure from an illustrious person like Sir John Davies in his 1611 *Scourge of Folly*,¹⁷ ten years after Nashe's death. Surely these ancient and modern effects have a cause: the poem is no schoolboy erotica, like *Venus and Adonis*, but both obscene (offensive to community standards) and pornographic (intended to arouse the prurient interest) by anyone's definition, whether it be Henry Miller's, Billy Graham's, or Susan Brownmiller's.¹⁸ Its notorious subtitle: *Nashe his Dildoe*.

¹⁴ In *Works*, 1: 307.

¹⁵ In *Works*, 3: 129.

¹⁶ J. B. Steane provides a brief textual history of the poem in *The Unfortunate Traveller and Other Works* (New York: Penguin, 1972), 34. McKerrow (*Works*, 3: 397-402) discusses the three extant manuscripts in some detail: Ms. (B), in the Bodleian Library (Rawl. MS. Poet. 216, Fol. 96-106 and Fol. 94), "somewhat carelessly written in a hand of the early part of the seventeenth century"; Ms. (D), the "Dyce manuscript" in the Dyce Collection at South Kensington, written partly in code, containing only half the poem (approximately 161 lines) and which omits the entire dildo episode (203-310); and Ms. (P) from a "private collection," written "in a small neat hand...not long before the end of the seventeenth century." On the whole, McKerrow prefers (P). This is reprinted in F. P. Wilson's updated version of the *Works*, which contains useful supplementary notes on the poem in volume 4, pages 481-482. This essay follows the Wilson edition.

¹⁷ Steane (above, note 16) 34.

¹⁸ There are several studies of sixteenth-century erotic verse; a recent one of note is Robert P. Merrix, "The Vale of Lilies and the Bower of Bliss: Soft-core Pornography in Elizabethan Poetry," *JPC* 19.4 (1986): 3-16. There are many modern views and definitions of pornography, most of them hostile. For example, Susan Brownmiller, *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape* (New York: S&S, 1975), 393-394: "hard-core pornography is not a celebration of sexual freedom; it is a cynical exploitation of female sexual activity through the device of making all such activity, and consequently all females, 'dirty'... Pornography, like rape, is a male invention, designed to dehumanize women, to reduce the female to an object of sexual access, not to free sensuality from moralistic or parental inhibition... Pornography is the undiluted essence of anti-female propaganda."

Small wonder, then, that one cannot find a single article devoted solely to the *Choise* in the *MLA Bibliography* between 1948 and 1986. Various studies devoted to Nashe's writings discount it as poetry.¹⁹ Others fault it for predictable reasons: "the poem, like much pornography, mechanizes sex and demeans women."²⁰ Some essays treat it as part of a larger idea about erotic verse. One critic in particular simply lays out huge swatches of the poem that he intends to speak for themselves, as if they were unworthy of serious analysis.²¹ For a variety of causes, then, no genuine discussion of the poem has been attempted.

The most significant cause is the plot of this narrative. A young man visits a brothel and attempts to engage in relations with a young woman, Mistress Francis. After much stylized description of her person, the young man finds himself at first unable to perform, then much too able, and thus unable to satisfy. This unfortunate circumstance necessitates a lengthy lament from Francis, who then justifies her use of an "autoerotic device" (hence the "notorious subtitle" above). The young man concludes this episode by condemning Francis and her device, and departs the scene with great haste.

Why, then, should we bother to read the *Choise*? Surely its subject matter cannot please someone sympathetic to the tenets of feminism or a purveyor of "good taste." Like almost all pornography, the poem is written for men, to be enjoyed by men. Thus, the author's intent would appear to be merely prurient, and his work belongs in the trash. Not so, suggests J. B. Steane, one of the few to discuss the poem even in passing:

the author's own gratification was to be found in his success not as an aphrodisiac but as a wit...it seems worth reprinting both as a curiosity, and for what...one can see as a certain charm and freshness. In its (not unimportant) way, it even does Nashe's century some credit.²²

Might this be some circumlocutious praise for the poem that dare not speak its name? Perhaps, and perhaps not: Steane is understandably cautious, and does not explain how the *Choise* does credit to the sixteenth century with its "charm and freshness." Few of us are as brave as Charles Nicholl: "As a piece of pornography...it is thoroughly wholesome."²³

Wholesome or not, Nashe surely makes comedy the bent of his poem, and directs his considerable writing skills to this end. We can see this in the use of the impotence convention (CV 123-142), made famous by Ovid in *Amores* 3.7, which Marlowe translated (*All Ovids Elegies*) and Nashe surely read.²⁴

¹⁹ G. R. Hibbard, *Thomas Nashe: A Critical Introduction* (Cambridge: Harvard U Pr, 1962), 57.

²⁰ Hilliard (above, note 8) 199.

²¹ Frantz (above, note 10) 168-169.

²² Steane (above, note 16) 34.

²³ Charles Nicholl, *A Cup of News: The Life of Thomas Nashe* (Boston: Routledge & Kegan, 1984), 92.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 30.

Few things create more amusement among men in any age than another man who cannot "perform." Also, the *Choise* contains a variety of wit more subtle than its detractors generally assume—superior to some of the recently unearthed Sir John Harington,²⁵ and surely no worse than the Rochester that never makes it into the anthologies.²⁶ Nashe never resorts to his successors' fondness for four-letter words, and seems gleefully unaware that future readers would take offense at him, or that he would have any readers at all:

Regarde not Dames, what Cupids Poete writes.
I penn'd this storie onelie for my self.
(CV 296-297)

Of course, no one who actually believes this needs to say it, and the author simply gives us another comic pose, a disingenuous "apology for his book" to the ladies. However, the most conventionally comic aspect of the *Choise* lies in its unrelenting satire and imitation of other authors and their styles: Ovid, Chaucer, Spenser. One critic even suggests that Nashe occasionally employs a species of anti-Petrarchism, one that seems almost cruel.²⁷ Clearly, then, this deceptively smutty poem depends upon much more than schoolboy hijinks for its effects, especially for its successes, even if its subject matter seems better suited for a large bathroom wall than a library of higher learning.

2.

In many respects, the Schoolmaster's broad precepts invite interpretation, extension, and subversion. For instance, parody, a type of *imitatio* that Ascham does not anticipate, fulfills some of his premises just the same. One writer can easily imitate another by satirizing him—adding, diminishing, ordering, and altering as the situation dictates. In another example, Ascham sometimes argues a one-to-one correspondence between novice and master, but his advice works just as well when we observe how the imitator utilizes a number of model authors, as Nashe does with his precursors. Most significant for Nashe's purposes, Ascham's suggestion that Classical texts serve as the best models and that English and Italian "rhymers" are unsuitable proves quite arbitrary, as all good writers in the Renaissance will show us if we examine the sources and influences of their works, Nashe included. Ascham himself implies as much: "trewre *Imitation* is rightlie wrought withal in any tonge" (9). Literary "Humanism" involves much more than a rigid adherence to Classical rules, themselves far from rigid. Nashe breaks many such rules, and expands

²⁵ See R. H. Miller, "Unpublished Poems by Sir John. Harington," *ELR* 14 (1984): 148-158, especially "Of a light huswive," and "Of a worde in Welsh mistaken in englishe."

²⁶ See the "Saires and Lampoons" section of Keith Walker's handsome recent edition of Rochester (*The Poems of John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester* [London: Blackwell, 1984]), especially "Signior Dildo," pages 75-76.

²⁷ Dorothy Jones, "An Example of Anti-Petrarchan Satire in Nashe's *The Unfortunate Traveller*," *YES* 1 (1971): 48-54.

Ascham's theories to their logical limits, demonstrating that one can be simultaneously subversive *and* imitative.

Consequently, to suggest that a writer like Nashe would write a poem suffocated in a literary vacuum seems inaccurate: "I do not think we would find the literary influences to be those of Ovid and Chaucer."²⁸ On the contrary, the *Choise* depends upon these two authors, parodying a number of English and Classical authors and fashions, imitating and satirizing them at will. Nashe conceived of his poem as a lively narrative of the type that medievalists call *fabliau*, and the broadly comic characters, simple plot, and surprising episode(s) of indecency resemble something like *The Reeve's Tale* in treatment if not in material: *dissimilis materiei similis tractatio*. The far-ranging periodic sentence at the beginning of the *Choise* that recreates the whole of the protagonist's world in miniature by way of details (the seasons, ritual dancing and mating, place-names), culminating in

And Ihon and Jone com marching arme in arme
Euen on the hallowes of that blessed Saint,
That doeth true louers with those ioyes acquaint,
(CV 14-16)

echoes Chaucer's *General Prologue* not a little in tone, rought couplets, cataloging, and even the number of lines in the first sentence (eighteen). The former quotation partially echoes the well-known

And specially from every shires ende
Of Engelond to Caunterbury they wende,
The hooly blisful martir for to seke,
That hem hath holpen whan that they were seeke.
(16-18)

As G. R. Hibbard puts it: "the opening lines have a Chaucerian flavour about them, or rather a smack of Chaucer's manner as refracted through the medium of Spenser."²⁹ In Nashe's satire of one of the most hallowed passages of English literature, St. Valentine works as a fiendishly clever analogue to St. Thomas Becket. John and Joan have their own "pilgrimage" to undertake, with quite another goal in mind. Yet such satire also signifies Nashe's admiration, just as T. S. Eliot, no stranger to *imitatio*, intends to pay tribute to Chaucer in his parody of the *Prologue* that opens *The Waste Land*.

Ascham, of course, is wary of Chaucer: "surelie to follow rather the *Gothes* in Rhyming than the *Greekes* in trewe versifying were euen to eate ackornes with swyne, when we may freely eate wheate bread emonges men" (30). However, Nashe prefers Chaucer's acorns, and rightly so. No matter what we think of Nashe's verse, even the most superficial survey of his other writings

²⁸ Steane (above, note 16) 34.

²⁹ Hibbard (above, note 19) 58.

indicates that he *understands* what a maker is supposed to accomplish. Nashe knows that the English language cannot tolerate the quantitative verse that Ascham champions. Our vowels are long and harsh, and our flinty consonantal clusters preclude sustained vocalic cadences. Thus, writers as diverse as the *Gawain* poet, Alexander Pope, Emily Dickinson, and Ezra Pound depend utterly upon the natural stress in our language to create their distinctive poetics. Not coincidentally, these four also demonstrate the utility of rhyme, not only as a pleasing device for the ear, but also as a method of unifying diverse material. Nashe possesses an understanding of such techniques (even though he lacks the skill to execute them with comparable results), and can therefore appreciate Chaucer's manipulation of meter and mastery of rhyme where his critical predecessor, Ascham, cannot. In fact, Chaucer's "rudeness" is the best thing to emulate, even to parody:

Withinne a while this John the clerk up leep,
And on this goode wyf he leith on soore.
So myrie a fit ne hadde she nat ful yooere;
He priketh harde and depe as he were mad.
This joly lyf han thise two clerkes lad
Til that the thridde cok began to syng.
(*The Reeve's Tale*, 4228-4233)

And then he flue on hir as he were wood,
And on hir breeche did thack, and foyne a-good,
He rubd', and prickt, and pierst hir to the bones,
Digging as farre as eath he might for stones.
(CV 143-146)

The action depicted therein, so intimate yet so baldly stated, makes for a kind of comedy. Chaucer makes us laugh by using, as Eliot puts it in another context, "the element of surprise so essential to poetry,"³⁰ relying upon unexpected pornographic description to effect this. Although the amusing shock value of such material is precisely what Nashe prized about Chaucer, he also found elements of craftsmanship to emulate, as well: rugged monosyllables studded with hard consonants, heavy stress on key nouns and verbs, and complementary rhyme words that make a kind of sense together. Nashe, no common porter, or bringer of matter and stuff together, busies himself with the form of building. In this instance, he understands *imitatio* as parodic tribute to a medieval master whom he considered the equal of Homer.³¹ Ultimately, he dismisses those who would criticize his native language and literature: "euery mechanicall mate abhorreth the English he was borne too."³² Thus, Nashe can follow Ascham and subvert his principles; he can parody Chaucer and pay homage to him.

³⁰ T. S. Eliot, *Selected Essays* (New York: Harcourt, 1950), 267.

³¹ *Newer*, in *Works*, 1: 299.

³² "Preface to *Menaphon*," in *Works*, 3: 311.

Nashe's defense of English and its poets worth imitating include other writers besides Chaucer. He has a healthy appreciation for other stars in the galaxy of his burgeoning national literature, especially the dear friend of his bitter enemy Harvey, Edmund Spenser:

I would preferre diuine Master *Spencer*, the miracle of wit, to bandie line by line for my life in the honour of England, against Spaine, Fraunce, Italy, and all the world.³³

As with Nashe's tribute to Chaucer, such an *encomium* signifies more than praise. If Spenser merits imitating, he also merits parody. Nashe's imitation clarifies itself in his superficial use of antiquated diction and syntax (e.g., "jolly roguery"; "for to tame"; the archaic negative "ne") that one assumes his readers would recognize as Spenserian. Apparently, Nashe thinks it amusing to parody Spenser in the dedicatory sonnet to *Valentines* in which he defends his aim and technique:

Ne blame my verse of loose unchastitie
For painting forth the things that hidden are,
Since all men acte what I in speache declare,
Onelie induced by varietie.

(5-8)

Present are the Spenserian trademark "Ne," a line of mellifluous monosyllables, filler adjectives (e.g., "loose") that do very little to modify the nouns they precede, and the distorted word-order to fit the rhyme: all can be found in practically any passage of Spenser:

Ne any then shall after it inquire,
ne any mention shall thereof remaine:
but what this verse, , that neuer shall expyre,
shall to you purchas with her thankles paine.
(*Amoretti* 27.9-12)

Ironically, one of the frankest writers in our language justifies his pornography by using the style and trappings of a poet considered "chaste" in his time—furiously adding, diminishing, ordering, and altering. Again, the explanation that undergraduate hijinks simply got the better of him does not suffice. His apprehension of his craft was more profound, even when it appears to be superficial: "I account of Poetrie, as of a more hidden & diuine kinde of Philosophy, enwrapped in blinde Fables and darke stories."³⁴

³³ *Ibid.*, 323.

³⁴ *Anatomie*, in *Works*, 1: 25.

3.

That Steane and others would note the absence of Ovid in Nashe's little *fabliau* seems most puzzling.³⁵ Nashe owes as much to this Roman poet as English verse will allow and demonstrates it in those closed couplets that Elizabethan authors used to imitate the elegiac meter of Ovid, Tibullus, and Propertius: five-beat lines with the rhyming line indented. Donne would subsequently use this form in his own *Elegies*, as would Marlowe in his very literal translation of the *Amores* that seems to have inspired Nashe so much.

However, in his public utterances, Nashe remains quite protean in his evaluation of Ovid, and his admission of his debt to him. This is unsurprising, given Ovid's two-edged reputation in the Renaissance as a learned, yet indecent poet. That the lines in the concluding sonnet of the *Choise* clearly state such a debt, and that any devoted reader of Nashe will notice the dozens of lines from Ovid's erotic poetry cited in *The Unfortunate Traveller* and other works, implies that Nashe favors this Roman elegist above most other writers.³⁶ In *The Anatomie of Absurditie*, for example, he quotes with relish the first two lines of the *Ars Amatoria*.³⁷ However, he carefully qualifies such enthusiasm several pages later: "I woulde not haue any man imagine that in praysing of Poetry, I endeauor to approoue... *Ouids* obscenitie."³⁸ Nashe would have us believe him to be a fine and moral lad—no Italianate Englishman, the bane of his hero, Ascham, nor the lascivious pornographer that his enemy, Harvey, uses as the epitome of his criticism of Elizabethan letters. Yet Nashe refines his opinion further in the same sentence: "out of the filthiest Fables, may profitable knowledge be sucked and selected."³⁹ He never becomes more specific about whose fables he means, but Ovid's certainly qualify: simply because society brands something obscene does not mean that one cannot profit from reading—or imitating—it. A few lines later in the *Anatomie*, Nashe warns prospective imitators of Ovid:

³⁵ Steane (above, note 16, 376) notes Jack Wilton's three-page *encomium* for Aretino in *The Unfortunate Traveller*. Again, with McPherson, I would note that Jack-Nashe praises him for his satirical abilities, not his pornographic ones. I would also point out that the narrator makes a strange confluence between Aretino and, oddly enough, Ovid: "If lasciuious he were, he may answer with *Ouid*, *Vita verecunda est, musa iocosa mea est*; My tyfe is chast thought wanton be my verse. Tell mee, who is traucelled in histories, what good poet is, or euer was there, who hath not hadde a lytle spice of wantonnesse in his dayes? Euen *Beza* himselfe by your leaue. *Aretine*, as long as the world liues, shalt thou liue (*The Unfortunate Traveller*, in *Works*, 2: 266). For another such linkage see, *Summers Last Will and Testament*, lines 1398-1400 (*Works*, 3: 277): "Whoredom hath *Ouid* to vphold her throne, / And *Aretine* of late in *Italie*, / Whose *Corygiana* toucheth bawdes their trade."

³⁶ McKerrow (*Works*, 5: 133) highlights the influence of Ovid in Nashe's work: "Of classical authors Ovid is by far the most frequently used, there being from him about a hundred quotations, thus distributed: *Amores* 27; *Metamorphoses* 23; *Tristia* 18; *Heroides* 15; *Ars Amatoria* 11; *Remedia Amoris* 4; *Fasti* 2."

³⁷ In *Works*, 1: 10.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 29-30.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 30.

they that couet to picke more precious knowledge out of Poets amorous *Elegies*, must haue a discerning knowledge, before they can aspire to the perfection of their desired knowledge.⁴⁰

Here Nashe may be partially echoing Ascham's advice to those who would imitate others: "discerning knowledge" approximates that "skill and judgement" mentioned in *The Scholemaster* by which one "shall trewlie discern whether ye folow" a particular author "rightlie or no" (8). He imitates the Imitator in his advice about *imitatio*. If the *Choise* is evidence, Nashe thinks himself superbly qualified to pick knowledge out of Ovid, sucking and selecting it from filthy fables, approving of obscenity much more than he so disingenuously claims.

Nonetheless, some commentators relegate the poem to "a whole body of literature which cannot be categorized satisfactorily as...Ovidian."⁴¹ This misses the mark about both writers. Nashe imitates Ovid for the same reason that he imitates Chaucer's stroke-by-stroke account of erotic congress: he enjoys the graphically sexual. Jonathan Crewe has noted the excellence and precision of Nashe's "topography" of the female body that evokes the "pastoral present"⁴²:

A prettie rysing womb without a weame,
That shone as bright as anie siluer streame,
And bare out lyke the bending of an hill,
At whose decline a fountaine dwelleth still,
That hath his mouth besett with uglie bryers
Resembling much a duskie net of wyres.
(CV 109-114)

Nashe makes such idealized yet brutally frank description both anatomically correct and the stuff of "nature imagery," like the "sweet bottom grasses" of *Venus and Adonis*. "An Ovidian poem," suggests a critic, "would not be too explicit about what the poet sees upon lifting the smock."⁴³ Yet these notorious lines from the *Remedia Amoris* are by no means unusual for Ovid:

ille quod obscenas in aperto corpore partes
viderat, in cursu qui fuit, haesit amor;
ille quod a Veneris rebus surgente puella
vidit in inundo signa pudenda toro.
(429-432)

Nashe's merciless detail in describing something ordinarily unmentionable in polite conversation recalls Ovid, although the revulsion of the *praeceptor amoris*

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Frantz (above, note 10) 168.

⁴² Jonathan Crewe, *Unredeemed Rhetoric: Thomas Nashe and the Scandal of Authorship* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1982), 49.

⁴³ Frantz (above, note 10) 158.

concerning exposed apertures and dirty sheets is nowhere to be found in Nashe's description of the *mons Veneris* (save "uglie"). Admittedly, to describe such things seems considerably more French than English, such as Ronsard's

doucement notie
Un petit flot que Venus droit sien.
(*Amours* I.CXV.7-8, *Pléiade* 1:48)

Yet Nashe must have seen that Ovid also pays considerable attention to such landmarks of natural beauty, particularly their "desecration" in the abortion poems (*Am.* 2.13; 14). We can attribute Nashe's boldness to the fact of anonymity or the desire to be true to the tenets of *imitatio*. He retains Ovid's directness and alters that poet's occasional distaste for the female body.

If we keep in mind all six tenets of *imitatio* (retention, subtraction, addition, diminishment, ordering, alteration), what Nashe chooses to retain and to alter from the *Amores* may indicate his debt most clearly. Yet Nashe's understanding of the other four principles also seems significant. Since the *Choise* is a *fabliau*, a simple set of actions compressed into a single ribald plot, we can say that Nashe's conception of order differs from Ovid's, whose *Amores* consist of a series of elegies that ruminate upon a love affair. Thus Nashe gains a great deal of immediacy by compressing his utterance into one white-hot episode. He "diminisheth" various aspects of Ovid as well, especially the tone. Nashe's narrator, no *desultor amoris*, would scarcely think himself qualified to provide advice to the unschooled, nor would he engage in disingenuous dialogue with a jealous married mistress:

Ergo sufficiam reus in nova crimina semper?
(*Am.* 2.7.1)

The jaunty gallant who struts into the house of venery after Mistress Francis has no conception of such urbanity, which he proves as he stumbles through the conclusion of the *fabliau*. Accordingly, Nashe "leaveth out" the sheer brutality of the *Amores*, among other things. The *Choise* contains no beatings (*Am.* 1.7), or bitterly egocentric recriminations about abortion (*Am.* 2.13; 14), or tendencies toward satirical allegory that reveal Mistress Francis's lover as cynical, jaded, and hardboiled:

Mens Bona ducetur manibus post terga retortis
et Pudor et castris quidquid Amoris obest.
(*Am.* 1.2.31-32)

He simply has none of this clan. Yet we can see what Nashe "addeth" when we compare his Mistress Francis to Ovid's Corinna. Surely both characters are "objects" in that they are both subjects of erotic verse, of the stuff meant to arouse the prurient interests of men. Ovid develops Corinna over a number of poems as a person who acts and feels, but she ultimately resembles the sonnet

ladies who succeed her—she does not express herself in words, nor does she really possess a psychology. We cannot say this about Francis. She has a consciousness, and speaks her mind for a good part of the *Choise* (cf. 205-246). When the speaker reaches his erotic moment of truth, he refers to sleep as the natural conclusion to this evening's love:

I faint, I yeald; Oh death rock me a-sleepe;
Sleepe-sleepe desire, entombed in the deepe.
(CV 203-204)

This stereotypical male behavior aggravates Francis considerably, and she begins her *aria* concerning the importance of her own sexual pleasure. She will not allow her lover to do all of the talking, or to be the sole recipient of venereal delight. He will certainly not be permitted to roll over and go to sleep:

Not so my deare; my dearest Saint replyde;
For, from us yett thy spirit maie not glide
Vntil the sinowie channels of our blood
Withoutd their source from this imprisoned flood;
And then will we (that then will com to soone)
Dissolued lye as-though our dayes were done.
(CV 205-210)

The exact meaning of what she says remains somewhat unclear (i.e., does Francis detail the need for birth control or the nature of her impending orgasm?), but the general drift is most un-opaque. Francis refuses to "Dissolued lye" until *she* has received satisfaction from the tryst—a woman all too accustomed, it seems, to a "then" that "will com to soone," an occupational hazard. Her experience has taught her that men like her current bedfellow often promise more than they can pay, in the physical sense. Eventually, she seems to reach her moment of bliss, as well:

The whilst I speake, my soule is fleeting hence,
And life forsakes his fleshie residence.
(CV 211-212)

Unfortunately, so has her young swain, circumventing her ultimate enjoyment:

Staie, staie sweet ioye and leaue me not forlorne,
Why shouldst thou fade, that art but newelie borne?
(CV 213-214)

She refers not only to her passion, but to its source, the narrator's tumescence:

Staie but an houre; an houre is not so much.
But half an houre; if that thy haste be such:
Maie, but a quarter; I will aske no more.

That thy departure (whlich torments me sore)
Maie be alightned with a litle pause,
And take awaie this passions sudden cause.
(CV 215-220)

The lack of enjambment is just right. Francis remonstrates with her lover's member for a lack of "staying power," desperate to receive whatever it can provide, whether it be sixty minutes, thirty, or fifteen, pausing to strengthen her plea. This diminution in time parallels the young man's sexual incompetence. A woman must beg (in frontal rhyme, no less) for what she should have without begging, or much prompting, really, and a man lacks the virility (this is Nashe's meaning) to provide it. Francis bewails the loss of her own pleasure, criticizing the "hero" of this male-engendered poem in a most unconventional way. This represents one of the more interesting things that Nashe chooses to add to his Englished Ovid, for his Latin predecessor will only allow his speaker to criticize his recalcitrant organ—Corinna has nothing to say about it.

Nashe retains several Ovidian conventions and puts them to work for him in the *Choise*, especially the first-person narration of the erotic poetry, such as the *Amores*. This technique, extremely congenial to Nashe, surfaces in most of his prose writings. He instinctively understands the immediacy of *I am*, and its usefulness in bonding the reader to the writer. Relying upon this device, he appeals to his audience in the way that his Ovidian narrator does:

quae nunc ecce vigent intempestiva valentque,
nunc opus exposcunt militiamque suam.
(Am. 3.7.67-68)

What shall I doe to shewe my self a man?
It will not be for augh that beawtie can.
(CV 127-128)

Ovid's speaker assumes that most of us have endured what he laments, and uses this evocation of shared feeling to propel his poem. Behold, he confides, the member that hung slack when it counted now ironically stands at attention when it has nothing to do. Nashe imitates this confessional impulse throughout the *Choise*, nowhere more successfully than when his speaker admits his own impotence. Like his Ovidian model, Nashe intends the effect upon the reader to be spontaneous and immediate. His narrator, like Ovid's, excises no detail, no matter how banal. He reminds us that we are always with him, a constant companion—a very personable and intimate fellow.

Since this type of narrator admits his sexual failures for comic effect, we can expect that he may reveal other personal shortcomings and errors in judgment. Ovid's *persona* even has a tendency to flagellate himself for his misdeeds. Besides confessing his own impotence (Am. 3.7), he tells us that he has beaten Corinna and is immensely contrite about it (Am. 1.7). In fact,

the *Amores* are filled with "confessions" such as "Non ego mendosus ausim defendere mores" (2.4.1). Since our narrator often dares to defend his mendacious morality, we are surely meant to question his reliability at this point. Ovid probes this reliability most ruthlessly in parallel poems in which the second piece contradicts or undercuts the first. In *Amores* 2.12.2, the speaker congratulates himself for conquering Corinna at last "in nostro est ecce Corinna sinu" but tells us in the next poem, much to his surprise, that she has aborted his child (2.13), which dampens the conquest somewhat. Similarly, he assumes that Corinna abstains from sex with him because of the festival of Ceres (3.10), yet then bitterly relates that her abstinence results from her interest in another man: she has been unfaithful (3.11). The narrator admits his foolishness for comic effect, and hints that he will be foolish again, banging his head against the door that the eunuch, Bagoas, guards.

Nashe imitates this self-flagellating narrator. Building himself up as a virile and sophisticated lover just as Ovid's narrator does (e.g., "I com for game, therfore giue me my Jill" [CV 34]), Nashe's speaker then undercuts such bravado by relating his failure at erotic combat, and his unsuccessful efforts to combat impotence:

I kisse, I clap, I feele, I view at will,
Yett dead he lyes not thinking good or ill.
(CV 129-130)

Such failure obviously undercuts the previous material; the crestfallen *amans gloriosus* suddenly has nothing left to brag about. Efforts to resuscitate the stubborn member are of no avail, of course, and Francis's lengthy lament about its recalcitrance and the need for Signor Dildo to "tent a deepe entrenched wound" (254) does nothing to rescue the reputation of the humiliated lover:

I am not as was Hercules the stout,
That to the seauenth iournie could hould out.
(CV 301-302)

Mortified to the marrow of his bones, he has little left to say in his own defense, and then goes on to condemn his substitute:

Curse Eunike dildo, senceless, counterfet,
Who sooth maie fill, but neuer can begett.
(CV 263-264)

Such peevishness, as Ovid demonstrates, is the last refuge of a fool: "vicimus et domitum pedibus calcamus Amorem" (*Am.* 3.11.5). In his own way, Nashe's chastened speaker also tramples the house of love with his feet: "so more men are beguilde / With smiles" (CV 83-84).

Like Catullus and Martial, Ovid is an astute epigrammatist, even though he plants his aphorisms within verse considerably more discursive than that

of his precursor or successor. These cryptic statements possess an amusingly terse brevity that can seem informal and conversational, even offhand. Yet Ovid weaves his epigrams into the verse in precisely the right locations, infusing them with a type of jocularity about women, a slight ebb to counteract the clocklike flow of the poetry: "usque adeo dulce puella malum est" (*Am.* 2.9b.26), or, "A girl is such a sweet affliction." Such a concise general statement contains a number of assumptions about women that the male poet and his male audience undoubtedly share, most of which revolve around the idea that love barely merits the difficulties that it causes. Hence, "nil ego, quod nullo tempore laedat, amo" (*Am.* 2.19.8); the lover can love no one who does not hurt him a bit. Therefore, one's *amica*, emboldened by the power and license she is granted, usually gets what she wants, "quod voluit fieri blanda puella, facit" (*Am.* 2.2.34), as unfair as the more mercenary aspects of male-female relations may seem: "altera cur illam vendit at alter emit?" (*Am.* 1.10.34).

Nashe attempts to emulate such jocularity in the *Choise*. Of course, he alters the subject matter somewhat, nor does his narrator possess Ovid's considerable *savoir faire* in these affairs of the heart:

Oh, I am rauish't; voide the chamber streight,
For, I must neede's upon hir with my weight.
(CV 79-80)

Yet Ovid's cryptic humor makes itself evident, a type of gentlemanly crudeness about women. Nashe creates his epigrammatic effect through sound, not general statement. For epigram, English poetry demands rhyme so that the reader's ear may comprehend the necessary closure to a given statement, and Nashe does not disappoint. Such humorous euphemism as this anticipates Donne:

Oh, who is able to abstaine so long?
I com, I com.
(CV 98-99)

As she prescrib'd, so kept we crotchet-time,
And euerie stroake in ordre lyke a chyme.
(CV 187-188)

Through this sort of rhyme and wordplay, the Elizabethans understood the term *elegie* and the techniques necessary for imitation of the genre. It is Ovid, Propertius, and Tibullus "Englised." Matters of considerable intimacy are masked in metaphor, and in puns of sight and sound.

Nashe recreates the atmosphere of Ovid's erotica by adhering to a number of minor conventions. Such borrowing and imitation indicates most clearly what he "retains." Nashe understands Ovid's adeptness in caricature. Like Corinna's thickheaded *vir* in 1.4 and her soldier lover in book 3, Nashe's "Good Justice Dudgein-haft and crabtree face" (CV 21) are practically cartoon

characters. The worldly-wise old lady who advises Corinna about the best techniques for manipulating a suitor (*Am.* 1.8) shows up in Nashe as the jaded procuress, "a foggie three-chinnnd dame," who has a similar view of the sexes and their politics (*CV* 29f.). The *ancilla* who knows all the details of her lady's affairs throughout the *Amores*, but who keeps her own counsel, makes a brief appearance at the end of the *Choise*: "Saint Denis shield me from such female sprites" (295), gasps the speaker, staggering out of the room, his hose around his ankles. Nashe also represents his main female character as paradoxically pure and idealized in spite of her unchastity, like Corinna (*Am.* 1.5, *passim*). He invests Mistress Francis, a demi-goddess during the act of love, with the trappings of neo-Platonic imagery:

She faire as fairest Planet in the Skye
Hir puritie to no man doeth denye.

So fierce and feruent is hir radiance,
Such fyrie stakes she darts at eueric glance,
As might enflame the icie limmes of age.
(*CV* 163-164; 169-171)

Yet as Dorothy Jones claims, such a passage could be doubly satirical. In using idealized imagery at such an erotic juncture, Nashe may be parodying both the neo-Platonic theory and the Petrarchan convention which hold that devotion to one beautiful woman leads to the contemplation of divine beauty⁴⁴—or in Petrarch's case, to the contemplation of the Blessed Virgin. I would add that it seems *contra* Petrarch to place the beloved in an overtly sexual situation, not to mention making her the aggressor in it. However, with Hibbard, I would stress the Ovidian first: "there is...something of [Ovid's] exuberant wealth of conceit in the[se] lines."⁴⁵ Nashe indicates his debt to his Latin master by his use of an Ovidian commonplace, the myth of Danae:

Hould wyde thy lap, my louelic Danae,
And entretaine the golden shoure so free,
That trilling falles into thy treasure.
(*CV* 193-195)

The image of a woman whom a lust-crazed god tricks into capturing a stream of gold in her lap would naturally appeal to an erotic poet. Ovid's reliance upon this myth says a great deal about his view of the more ingenious manifestations of the male sex drive, as well as female recalcitrance about lovemaking and the mercenary aspects of "giving in." Even a cursory reading of the *Amores* and the *Ars* will reveal that the Danae story dramatizes the dynamic of Ovid's poetry.⁴⁶ The image also works well for the *Choise*,

⁴⁴ Jones (above, note 27) 51-52.

⁴⁵ Hibbard (above, note 19) 57.

⁴⁶ For references to this myth in the erotic poetry, see *Amores* 2.19.27-28, 3.4.21, 3.8.30, 3.12.33; *Ars Amatoria* 3.415, 631-632.

especially in an ironic way. Nashe usefully intertwines male lust, gender politics, and money. Far from recalcitrant, Francis's eager ardor makes for unconventional comedy. The mercenary imagery that this puny Zeus attaches to his passionate Danae speaks volumes about his anger at his own sexual failures, and signifies little about her.

What Nashe chooses to take from Ovid and imitate involves considerable alteration, an inevitable consequence of the process of *imitatio*, as Ascham suggests. Again, one can work change upon an author

either in propertie of wordes, in forme of sentence, in substance of the matter,
or in one or other conuenient circumstance of the authors present purpose.
(9)

The possibilities seem endless. The vague phrase "convenient circumstance" embodies Nashe's alteration of Ovid, and fittingly so. The suggestive elasticity embodied in convenience is conducive to Nashe's protean mind—especially when he handles matter of a sexual nature, the Ovidian material that he works the most changes upon, perhaps because it interests him the most. One significant alteration concerns the presenters of various episodes, the narrators of the *Amores* and the *Choise*. Ovid's speaker resembles Wycherley's Master Horner, turning a jaundiced eye upon all and sundry, whereas Nashe makes his narrator something of a *naif*, a slightly smutty Dick Whittington. Thus Nashe and Ovid treat similar phenomena in their own distinctive fashions (*similis materiei dissimilis tractatio*). Corinna's sophisticated and jaded lover, constantly on the prowl, proves to be a bitter pill indeed about his impotence. Since he attaches such importance and expertise to himself, his natural egotism causes him to blame someone else for the failure of his equipment; he castigates his lady and blames her for his dysfunction, waxing antifeminist. Francis's customer takes himself much less seriously, criticizes himself for his impotence, and comically endures his playmate's sexual aggression, only becoming disagreeable when she reaches for Signor Dildo. He does not know quite what to make of it all, and confides in us about his confusion, a subject of immense hilarity, it appears, to his creator. Sexual comedy often relies upon the device of the blunderer who lacks the good sense to keep his mouth shut about his intimate adventures. This allows Nashe to be more directly sexual in a Chaucerian way, and to be more explicit about premature ejaculation and the like.

More evidence of alteration or change from Ovid appears in the infamous "dildo episode." No such activity occurs in the *Amores*, Corinna having other options. Without digressing upon this matter in a way that would strain the boundaries of good taste, I would suggest that here especially Nashe reveals what Aretinian leanings he has, especially the Aretino of the first book of the *Dialogues*, where Nanna gleefully relates the story of her first night in the convent to Antonia (30-33). Her extremely graphic description of her experiences, related under the shade of a fig tree, no less, may have been

something that Nashe was acquainted with, if the *Choise* is evidence. Then again, Nashe seems imaginative enough, and well-acquainted enough with the trulls of London through his friend Robert Greene, to have come up with this business himself.

Informed by Ascham's *imitatio*, Nashe follows the Schoolmaster as rightly as he can. Thus "Togeather lett our equall motions stirr" (CV 183) seems not just a call for mutuality on Francis's part, but also perhaps a statement of what Nashe is trying to do with (and to) his literary masters. In a certain respect, he out-Ovids Ovid as he imitates him, expressing somewhat imperfectly his example. Clearly, the poem does not represent a completely serious literary exercise, nor should high school seniors around the nation be required to read it. Yet the poetics of obscenity involve more than mere titillation or clever undergraduate effort. As a sustained piece of pornography, highly unusual for the English Renaissance, the *Choise* has much to recommend it, which the preceding essay has endeavored to explain. The poem deserves some critical commentary—as much as, say, a play like *Titus Andronicus*. In an offbeat way, *Valentines* expresses certain facets of the spirit of humanism, making new, for Nashe's time, the Classical past.