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A NEW SOURCE FOR THOMAS NASHE'S  
*THE CHOISE OF VALENTINES*

There can, I fear, be little doubt that this poem is the work of Nashe.  
— Ronald B. McKerrow (1910)<sup>1</sup>

This formidable editor's comment is not as old-fashioned as it may first appear to be. Although a distinguished scholar of Renaissance intellectual history recently mentioned the *Choise* in the context of Calvinist passion-rhetoric,<sup>2</sup> it is customary to ignore this 316-line pornographic poem written in code in the sixteenth century, commonly subtitled "the Merie Ballad of Nash his Dildo." It was not published until 1899 — presumably for the delectation of fin-de-siècle connoisseurs of erotica — and only then by private subscription. The best books on Nashe mention the poem only in passing.<sup>3</sup> Through 1992, the *MLA Bibliography* lists only one article devoted solely to it.<sup>4</sup> This is an unfortunate gap in traditional scholarship devoted to imitation and the classical tradition in the Renaissance. It is also a strange oversight in the light of more recent trends: historicism, feminism, psychoanalytic criticism. A more thorough investigation of the *Choise* would be quite useful to those studying popular culture, pornography, and women's voices and their silencing in sixteenth-century England.<sup>5</sup>

A brief summary of the *Choise* will explain McKerrow's distaste, and perhaps even the reluctance of contemporary scholars who were not reared with Victorian taboos concerning the frank discussion of sexual matters. One 14 February, a young man named Tomalin visits a brothel in search of his valentine,

"mistris Francis" (CV 64). After he describes her body in a prelude to the act (100-20), he finds himself unable to perform, necessitating Francis's semi-successful attempt at revival (123-142). This revival is short-lived, even prematurely terminated. Francis laments this hasty demise, addresses her inadequate lover and his flaccid member, and then pays tribute to the autoerotic device of the subtitle that proves such a happy substitute (205-46). Tomalin ends his narrative with a heartfelt curse upon the "Eunuke dildo, senceless, counterfet" (246 ff.) that has so cruelly supplanted him.

Where, one may ask, does this piece of work come from? Ovid's love poetry, particularly the *Amores*, provides the main impetus. The erotica of Pietro Aretino (1492-1556) has been posited as inspiration. Christopher Marlowe's *All Ovids Elegies* (c. 1600) 3.6, a translation of *Amores* 3.7, has also been suggested.<sup>6</sup> Like any other work of Renaissance art, the *Choise* is cross-pollinated by myriad classical, medieval, and Renaissance sources. Nashe's fertile mind was particularly assimilative, a mind from which a strange flower such as the *Choise* could well have bloomed.

Another likely and hitherto unnoted source for Nashe is the fifth elegy of the late Latin poet Maximianus (fl. 550 CE), a friend to Boethius. Although Ovid's *Amores* 3.7 was an important precedent for both poets, Nashe gleaned several details and the narrative framework directly from Maximianus. Although Maximianus's narrator is *senex*, an old rather than young man, he too has an encounter with a kind of courtesan, a "Graia puella" (M5 6), or Greek girl. Like Tomalin, the *senex* provides us with a graphic description of his female object from top to bottom (31-38), whose charms also subject him to a bout of inexplicable and spectacularly embarrassing impotence: "Derigui, quantusque fuit calor ille recessit" (I went limp, and as great as my ardor was, it receded [43]). Like Mistress Francis, the *Graia puella* makes a futile attempt at revival, verbal as well as physical: "debita redde mihi" (pay your debt [M5 52]); "'Oh not so fast'" (CV 179). The women describe the sexual organs in violent conjunction: "tuo uotiuo uulnere uirgo" (virgin with your wished-for wound [M5 129]); "some will tent a deepe intrenched wound" (CV 254). Both poets go so far as to describe seminal fluid, characterizing it as necessary and life-giving (M5 45-46; CV 230-31).

The greatest similarity between the *Choise* and Maximianus 5 is that both Francis and the *Graia puella* deliver enormous laments for the fallen penis. There are no parallels for such arias in Ovid; there is nothing else like it that Nashe could have known.<sup>7</sup> The sorrowful Priapean speech of the *Graia puella* (M5 87-104; 109-52) is only punctuated by the brief and derisive laughter of the *senex* (107-08). Francis decries Tomalin's sudden finish, and then makes a similar valediction to the "faint-hearted instrument of lust" before her paean to her "little dildo" (CV 205-46). Nashe saves his narrator's derision for the end, who bewails the usurpation of "Poore Priapus" for the aforementioned "cursed" marital aid (247-95). Never a sacramental imitator, Nashe parodies the *auctor* from whom he borrows so liberally. He doubtless found it amusing for Francis to address a dildo in the same way that the *Graia puella* addresses the *mentula*, or penis (M5 87).

It is reasonable to assume that Nashe had read the poems we now attribute to Maximianus, although he could well have believed them to be the work of C. Cornelius Gallus (70-26 BCE), the long-lost father of Roman elegy. In the Middle Ages, Maximianus was an *auctor* whom schoolmasters used to teach pupils their Latin. As Ernst Robert Curtius explains, the medieval epoch was "much less prudish than the Modern Period and zealously read Maximianus" (50).<sup>8</sup> Yet the Italian Renaissance editor Pomponius Gauricus attributed the elegies to Gallus in his *vita* preceding his *editio princeps, Corneli Galli fragmenta* (Venice, 1501).<sup>9</sup> In spite of a 1573 edition of Catullus with a supplemental *Maximiani liber, qui falso hactenus sub nomine C. C. Galli editus est* (the book of Maximianus which was previously published under the false name of Gallus), Gauricus's ruse persisted through the sixteenth and into the nineteenth century. The *Short-Title Catalogue* lists several editions of "Gallus": 1509, 1530, 1542, 1548, 1553, 1560, 1573, 1592. When the elegies were translated into English during the Glorious Revolution, they were still attributed to the wrong man: *The impotent lover, accurately described in six elegies upon old age . . . Made English from the Latin of C. Cornelius Gallus by H. Walker* (London, 1688-89). Only the careful scholarship of Emil Baehrens (1883-88) definitively restored the poems to Maximianus.

It is well documented that the English had ready access to Italian printed texts. Maximianus-Gallus was doubtless part of Nashe's university education, and Nashe's Latin was impeccable. Whether the author knew his source as Maximianus or Gallus, this additional line of transmission for his *Choise* is clear.

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Thomas Nashe, *The Works of Thomas Nashe*, 5 vols. (London, 1910. Rpt. and rev. ed. F.P. Wilson. Oxford: Blackwell, 1958) 5:141. McKerrow's text of the poem and critical apparatus are in *Works* 3: 397-416. My edition of Maximianus 5 is that of Emil Baehrens, *Poetae Latini Minores*, 5 vols. (Leipzig: Teubner, 1883-88) 5:340-47. All line references to the two poems are to these editions; my acronyms are *CV* and *M5*, respectively.

<sup>2</sup> I.e., Debora K. Shuger, " 'Good Manhood': Violence and the Sacred in Elizabethan England," Shakespeare Association of America, Albuquerque, NM, 16 April, 1994.

<sup>3</sup> These are: Jonathan Crewe, *Unredeemed Rhetoric: Thomas Nashe and the Scandal of Authorship* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1982) 48-50; Charles Nicholl's *A Cup of News: The Life of Thomas Nashe* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984) 92: "As a piece of pornography, [the *Choise*] is thoroughly wholesome"; and Stephen S. Hilliard, *The Singularity of Thomas Nashe* (Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1986) 197-200.

<sup>4</sup> See my "Nashe and the Poetics of Obscenity: *The Choise of Valentines*," *Classical and Modern Literature* 12 (1991): 29-48.

<sup>5</sup> The commentary on popular culture and pornography in Renaissance England is extensive. For the issue of women's silencing in a poem somewhat similar to the *Choise*, Shakespeare's *Rape of Lucrece*, see Katharine Maus, "Taking Tropes Seriously: Language and Violence in Shakespeare's *Rape of Lucrece*," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 37 (1986): 66-82; Jane O. Newman, "'And Let Mild Women to Him Lose Their Mildness': Philomela, Female Violence, and Shakespeare's *The Rape of Lucrece*," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 45 (1994): 304-26.

<sup>6</sup> McKerrow mentions some of the Ovidian elements in *Works* 5: 140 ff. "Nashe and the Poetics of Obscenity" treats the matter of Ovidian *imitatio* with some thoroughness. David O. Frantz discusses Aretino as source in "'Leud Priapians' and Renaissance Pornography," *Studies in English Literature* 12 (1972): 157-72. In *A Cup of News*, Charles Nicholl argues strongly for Marlowe's translation (30) as impetus.

<sup>7</sup> Bruce Thomas Boehrer's comment on the *Choise* is apposite to Maximianus: "literary self-assertion anthropomorphizes . . . the penis." See "Behn's 'Disappointment' and Nashe's 'Choise of Valentines': Pornographic Poetry and the

Influence of Anxiety," *Essays in Literature* 16 (1989): 178.

<sup>8</sup> *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton UP, 1952; rpt. 1990) 50.

<sup>9</sup> Baehrens 5: 313-14. Gauricus was the first editor to divide the *opera* into six elegies. Only one line of Cornelius Gallus survives. Ovid hints that this poet could hold neither his liquor nor his tongue (*Tristia* 2.445-46).