

Nashe, Southampton and Shakespeare's Sonnets  
By Ian Steere

**Synopsis:** In this paper I bring together an array of evidence, much of it new, to show that the satirical author, Thomas Nashe, had a much closer and more vitriolic relationship with Henry Wriothesley and, by extension, William Shakespeare than has previously been realized. The discovery sheds more light on the relationship of the third earl of Southampton with Shakespeare and strengthens the probability of a significant element of biography within Shakespeare's *Sonnets*.

Thomas Nashe (1567-1601) was a satirical poet, playwright and author who studied at St John's, Cambridge, leaving around 1587. Here he would have become acquainted with Henry Wriothesley, Earl of Southampton, who attended the same college from age 12, between 1585 and 1589.

After graduation, Nashe became part of the London literary scene. Constantly in need of funds, he was aided by a facile wit, but often afflicted by the reactions to its sarcasm, unleashed with little regard for the consequences<sup>1</sup>. He mocked a number of his contemporaries in print and, famously, he had a literary feud with the scholar and author, Gabriel Harvey (another Cambridge man), which lasted several years.

In the late 1580s and early 1590s, he collaborated with Robert Greene (yet another Cambridge man), to whose work *Menaphon*, published in 1589, he provided a lengthy and rather pompous preface addressed "to the gentlemen students of both universities". Early on in this missive Nashe snipes at the misplaced verbosity of common workers who imitate "vain-glorious tragedians". However, he blames this development mainly on the latter's "idiot art-masters who intrude themselves to our ears as the alchemists of eloquence, who (mounted on the stage of arrogance) think to out-brave better pens with the swelling bombast of bragging blank verse". He goes on to typify such authors as "deep-read schoolmen or grammarians," who have "no more learning in their skull than will serve to take up a commodity, nor art in their brain than was nourished in a serving man's idleness". In other words, Nashe was saying, he deplored, even more than vainglorious actors, those playwrights who had not received a university education and who were daring to attempt to emulate their betters.

Greene died in September 1592. Soon after his death a publisher, Henry Chettle, produced a pamphlet entitled (in its modern rendition) *Groatworth of Wit*, which was attributed to Greene. It comprises a rambling monologue of semi-autobiographical parables and poems, repentance for his own deeds, advice to and castigation of certain acquaintances and a letter of remorse to his wife, all said to have been left by Greene for posthumous publication.

Towards the end of this collection is a section addressed to "fellow scholars about this city", which includes the famous words: "there is an upstart Crow, beautified with our feathers, that with his tiger's heart wrapt in a player's hide, supposes he is as well able to bombast out a blank verse as the best of you: and being an absolute Johannes factotum [Johnnie-do-it-all], is in his own conceit the only Shake-scene in a country".

Most scholars consider that, with the parody of a line in *Henry VI, Part 3*, the Crow (and Shake-scene) was probably Shakespeare (who never went to university and who was not then accorded the status of gentleman). However, the passage contains attacks on several writers, some, or all, of whom suspected Nashe as being the true author of these words. This is evidenced by Chettle recording their accusation (and denying Nashe's authorship) and by Nashe's need to issue his own denial (in a letter published in the second edition of his work, *Pierce Pennilesse*).

Despite the denials (and the fact that Nashe himself fits the profile of one of the writers taken to task by Greene – albeit as a "sweet boy", dealt with more lightly than the others) a number of scholars down the years have continued to believe that he was the author of the attacks. However, whether or not this was the case, the point here is that people who knew Nashe at the time must have had good reason to believe that he continued to hold the above-mentioned strong views on unqualified actor-authors.

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<sup>1</sup> Within an affectionate epitaph (discovered by Professor Duncan-Jones), his friend and collaborator, Ben Jonson, wrote the lines: "Of wit, throughout this land, none left behind: to equal him in his ingenious kind" and "When any wronged him, living, they did feel: his spirit, quick as powder, sharp as steel".

Between 28 April 1593 (when it was registered at the Stationers Company) and 12 June 1593 (when a purchase of a copy was recorded<sup>2</sup>), Shakespeare published his poem, *Venus & Adonis*, which he dedicated to Southampton in the following terms (presented in modern spelling and with slightly modified punctuation).

*To the Right Honourable Henry Wriothlesley,  
Earl of Southampton, and Baron of Titchfield.*

*Right Honourable,*

*I know not how I shall offend in dedicating my unpolished lines to your Lordship, nor how the world will censure me for choosing so strong a prop to support so weak a burden, only if your Honour seem but pleased, I account myself highly praised, and vow to take advantage of all idle hours, till I have honoured you with some graver labour. But if the first heir of my invention prove deformed, I shall be sorry it had so noble a godfather: and never after ear [cultivate] so barren a land, for fear it yield me still so bad a harvest. I leave it to your Honourable survey, and your Honor to your heart's content, which I wish may always answer your own wish, and the world's hopeful expectation.*

*Your Honor's in all duty,  
William Shakespeare.*

Subsequently, in September 1593, Nashe registered at the Stationers Company a novel entitled (in its modern form) *The Unfortunate Traveller*. Shortly thereafter he spent a few weeks in jail before being rescued, then sheltered, by Sir George Carey, the Captain-General of the Isle of Wight<sup>3</sup>. It was February 1594 before the novel was published, though its first edition carried an imprinted date of June 27, 1593, suggesting that Nashe had completed it shortly after *Venus & Adonis* was published.

In this first edition Nashe included the following lengthy dedication (whose spelling I have standardized, with minor punctuation changes and a split into paragraphs for easier assimilation).

*To the Right Honourable Lord Henry Wriothlesley  
Earl of Southampton and Baron Titchfield.*

*Ingenuous honourable Lord, I know not what blind custom methodical antiquity has thrust upon us, to dedicate such books as we publish to one great man or another. In which respect (lest any man should challenge these, my papers, as goods uncustomed [unwanted] and so extend upon them as forfeit to contempt) to the seal of your excellent censure, lo, here I present them to be seen and allowed. Prize them as high or as low as you list [wish]: if you set any price on them, I hold my labour well satisfied.*

*Long have I desired to approve my wit unto you. My reverent dutiful thoughts (even from their infancy) have been retainers to your glory. Now at last I have enforced an opportunity to plead my devoted mind. All that is in this fantastical Treatise, I can promise, is some reasonable conveyance of history & variety of mirth. By diverse of my good friends have I been dealt with to employ my dull pen in this kind, it being a clean different vein from other my former courses of writing. How well or ill I have done in it I am ignorant (the eye that sees round about itself sees not into itself); only your Honour's applauding encouragement has power to make me arrogant.*

*Incomprehensible is the height of your spirit both in heroical resolution and matters of conceit. Unretrievably perishes that book whatsoever to wastepaper, which on the diamond rock of your judgement disasterly [disastrously] chanced to be shipwrecked. A dear lover and cherisher you are, as well of the lovers of Poets, as of Poets themselves. Amongst their sacred number I dare not ascribe myself, though now and then I speak English: that small brain I have to no further use I convert, save to be kind to my friends and fatal to my enemies. A new brain, a new wit, a new style, a new soul will I get me, to canonize your name to posterity, if in this my first attempt I be not taxed of presumption.*

*Of your gracious favour I despair not, for I am not altogether Fame's outcast. This handful of leaves I offer to your view: to the leaves on trees I compare, which as they cannot grow of themselves except they have some branches or boughs to cleave to, & with*

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<sup>2</sup> By one, Richard Stonley, in his diary, now preserved at the Folger Shakespeare Library, Washington

<sup>3</sup> The circumstances are recorded in a letter from Carey to his wife, written in November 1593 and discovered by Professor Duncan-Jones. Nashe had been jailed for comments offensive to the London authorities in his work *Christe's Teares Over Jerusalem*.

*whose juice and sap they be evermore recreated & nourished, so except these unpolished leaves of mine have some branch of Nobility whereon to depend and cleave, and with the vigorous nutriment of whose authorized commendation they may be continually fostered and refreshed, never will they grow to the world's good liking, but forthwith fade and die on the first hour of their birth.*

*Your Lordship is the large spreading branch of renown, from whence these my idle leaves seek to derive their whole nourishing: it rests you either scornfully shake them off, as worm-eaten and worthless, or in pity preserve them and cherish them for some little summer fruit you hope to find amongst them.*

*Your Honour's in all humble service:  
Thos Nashe.*

The dedication smacks of exaggerated servility and thinly concealed disdain for Southampton. Also, on comparing it to the *Venus* dedication, just published, it looks - as many have noted - like a deliberate parody of that script. Shakespeare's "unpolished lines" become Nashe's "unpolished leaves". His fear of offending corresponds to Nashe's concern that he "be taxed of presumption". The "first heir of invention", "idle hours" and "bad harvest" become respectively Nashe's "first attempt", producing "idle leaves" and "little summer fruit". Shakespeare's "strong prop" becomes Nashe's "large spreading branch of renown". Shakespeare's vow to work hard in order to honour with a graver labour becomes Nashe's intent to get a new brain, a new style and a new soul, suggesting that this is what Nashe believed Shakespeare to require, rather than hard work. And so on: insults, sarcasm and/or irony are discernible in almost every sentence.<sup>4</sup>

The first edition of *Traveller* was followed in 1594 by a second edition that excluded any dedication to Southampton: a circumstance open to more than one interpretation, but certainly the strong possibility that the original was offensive.

Such mockery may seem odd, given that many modern commentaries include Nashe in the list of authors to whom the Earl acted as patron. However, on closer inspection, it transpires that there is little to sustain the notion that Nashe was ever properly supported or rewarded by Southampton.

For reasons which will emerge more fully below, it is likely that an undated, unprinted pornographic poem in manuscript, *The Choice of Valentines*, respectfully dedicated by Nashe to an unidentified "Lord S" was addressed to Southampton<sup>5</sup>. There is a strong hint of this in the opening verse to the addressee, which hails him (with similarity to the "Rose" connotations which permeate Shakespeare's Sonnets) as a "sweet flower" and "fairest bud the red rose ever bare". However, the poem describes how its hero suffers from a mouthful of pubic hair and premature ejaculation (twice) in an exciting encounter with his lady-turned-prostitute, whereupon she is obliged to resort to the use of a dildo to obtain satisfaction. Moving stuff and very entertaining to the right audience, but hardly the sort of material with which a peer of the realm - however debauched - would wish to be associated. There is no evidence that this dedication was ever accepted.

More pertinently, in his concluding after-address to the reader in *Pierce Penniless*, first published around August 1592, Nashe rails at length against an unidentified patron, a Courtier who is avoiding him and who, he implies with a Latin maxim, has failed to deliver on promises of payment<sup>6</sup>. "Easy" says Nashe "for a goodly tall fellow that shines in his silks, to come and outface a poor simple pedant in his threadbare cloak, and tell him his book is pretty, but at this time he is not provided for him". He urges friends to be more careful in their dedications and "not cast away so many months' labour on a clown that knows not how to use a scholar: for what reason have I to bestow any wit on him, that will bestow none of his wealth on me".

The after-word continues in this vein, moving into generalities which angrily bemoan the poor treatment of authors by patrons and the baseness of some vainglorious peacocks of the aristocracy: "buckram giants",

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<sup>4</sup> Barnaby Barnes' *Parthenophil & Parthenophe* was also registered in May 1593, although it is unclear when it was published. In a supplicatory sonnet to Southampton, Barnes refers to "these worthless leaves ... sprung from a rude and un-manured land" and he respectfully seeks the earl's blessing. It may be that Nashe had seen this address and was mocking both it and the *Venus* dedication. However, in his parody there are no other correspondences with the Barnes sonnet and it is clear that the prime model for his mockery is the *Venus* address.

<sup>5</sup> Other commentators support Ferdinando Stanley, Lord Strange, who became the fifth Earl of Derby in 1593, though his standing (as a married man of rectitude and a serious potential claimant to the succession) is at odds with the poem's theme.

<sup>6</sup> The text may be read or downloaded free at the Internet Archive: [www.archive.org/stream/piercepenniless00nashgoog](http://www.archive.org/stream/piercepenniless00nashgoog)

whom he contrasts with their more generous peers. Then the fulminations return to the subject of Nashe's private experience (as he puts it). Now, says he, “ [let me], with a tongue unworthy to name a name of such worthiness, affectionately emblazon to the eyes that wonder, the matchless image of Honor, and magnificent rewarder of virtue, *Jove's Eagle-borne Ganymede*, thrice noble *Amyntas*”.

Both Ganymede (a beautiful youth seduced and cosseted by the god, Jove) and Amyntas (a beautiful youth, who, in Virgil's *Eclogues*, was lusted after by the shepherd, Corydon, and gave himself to the herdsman, Menalcas), had associations with homo-eroticism. The title, "Ganymede", was, in Nashe's time, employed as a compliment only by a man who found boys or young men sexually attractive. It was both synonym and root of the contemporary word, "catamite", and would have been unwelcome as a public address by anyone of standing<sup>7</sup>. The effeminate-looking, youthful Southampton was, in a derisive sense, “thrice noble”, having three titles of aristocratic address: Lord, Earl and Baron (subsequently used, perhaps pointedly, by Nashe in his address of the *Traveller* dedication, above). He was also by then a Courtier.

With all these facts we are put on alert that Nashe's passage is now probably dripping with sarcasm and that, if so, the only realistic candidate for the target of his attack is Southampton<sup>8</sup>.

Reading on, we might initially think this notion mistaken, for Nashe says of his Amyntas: “In whose high spirit, such a Deity of wisdom appeareth, that if *Homer* were to write his *Odyssey* new (where under the person of *Ulysses* he describeth a singular man of perfection, in whom all ornaments both of peace and war are assembled in the height of their excellence) he need no other instance to augment his conceit, than the rare carriage of his honourable mind”. However, on closer inspection, we can see a double edge in the words “high” and “rare” which can be rendered respectively as “haughty” and “infrequent”. Thereby appears a derogatory implication: that the perfection of the hero, Ulysses, can be exemplified merely by contrasting him to the character of Nashe's arrogant Amyntas (in whom wisdom and honour are rarely conveyed)<sup>9</sup>.

Nashe goes on to remark that many authors praise their patrons and benefactors. However, if he were ever to contemplate such an exercise he would excoriate those who had been undeservedly beautified with the “periwigs” of poets' praises. With this phrasing, Nashe candidly shows that he is not here praising a patron or benefactor: rather, he is concerned to lash one or those who have previously received undeserved tributes. He continues by saying he would wish to ensure that all received their just deserts and reputation, and to restore “stolen titles to their true owners”, so that “None but thou, most curteous<sup>10</sup> Amyntas, be the second mystical argument of the knight of the Red-cross”.

Here he is clearly referring to Spencer's recent part-completed and celebrated work, *The Faerie Queene*. In this poem of allegories one of its heroes, the Red Cross Knight, meets with a series of challenges. In the first he kills the monster, Error, who hates the light of truth. In his second confrontation (the “second mystical argument”) Red-Cross fights and kills a renegade knight by the name of *Sansfoy* (meaning Faithless). In effect,

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<sup>7</sup> A modern English reader may question how these adverse interpretations are consistent with Nashe's use of the word “affectionately”. These days, this adverb invariably evokes a sense of warm regard or love. However, in his time it also carried older senses of undue affection or bias (as can be verified with a visit to the Oxford English Dictionary). Although the current sense was also by then established, the other meanings remained in parlance long after Nashe. For him, therefore, it was a word very amenable to double-entendre.

<sup>8</sup> This is not an opinion I have seen shared. Other commentators dissociate this passage from the earlier one which complains of a niggardly patron. Rather than sarcasm, they see a eulogy. Sidney Lee believed this to be addressed to Southampton. However, others see praise of some different, beloved patron, commonly guessed to be Ferdinando Stanley, Sir John Hawkins or Lord Henry Compton. The current leader of choice, supported by Malone, is Lord Strange, though the justification is flimsy, being based primarily on a mooted representation of the latter as a recently deceased Amyntas by the poet, Spencer, in a later-dated amendment of his work, *Colin Clouts Come Home Againe*. More persuasive interpretations of the latter point instead to Thomas Watson, composer of works on Amyntas, which had won for him that shepherd-name (used, for example, in the poem, *Narcissus*, by Thomas Edwards).

<sup>9</sup> Nashe subsequently uses similar associations (with height of spirit, measurement of heroism and conceit) in the third paragraph of the *Traveller* dedication, shown earlier, where he says to Southampton “*Incomprehensible is the height of your spirit both in heroic resolution and in matters of conceit*”. The unusual echo suggests a linkage which Nashe wished to flaunt. in that dedication.

<sup>10</sup> Though spelling was then variable, this form may well have been selected here to invoke curtness. Variants of “courtesy” included “courtesie”, “cortisie” and “curtesie”.

then, Nashe is insulting his addressee, Amyntas, by suggesting that the latter should be regarded as the true personification of faithlessness<sup>11</sup>.

Nashe proceeds to exclaim: “*Ob decus atque aeni gloria summa tu?*”, before embarking on a mock-reproach of Spencer for not praising that patron. The Latin phrase can be rendered as “O ornament and greatest glory of your age”. Its evocation of useless beauty and the attendant hyperbole mirror the sarcasms of his opening address of “Ganymede/Amyntas”. As for Spencer, the latter had appended to *The Faerie Queene* a commendatory sonnet of accomplishments addressed to each of some twenty grandees of the land, including the Earls of Essex, Northumberland, Oxenford and Cumberland – but excluding the Earl of Southampton (and Lord Strange). Nashe twits him that he could “let so special a pillar of nobility pass unsaluted”. The word “pillar” then had a secondary connotation of a parasite who feeds rapaciously on society<sup>12</sup>.

Spencer is, however, excused. With sarcastic praise of Amyntas, Nashe goes on to speculate that the very thought of the latter's far-derived (far-fetched<sup>13</sup>) descent and extraordinary parts, which had attracted all kinds of lover, must have driven the poet's creative muse to a renewed frenzy for the impending continuation of *The Faerie Queene*. He suggests that Spencer has refrained from mention of Amyntas in the first part of his work so that he might give the latter all the praise he deserves in the second. Whereupon Nashe offers his own sonnet, “wholly intended to the reverence of this renowned Lord (to whom I owe all the utmost<sup>14</sup> powers of my love and duty)”. The sonnet starts by referring to Spencer's commendations, which excluded Amyntas, and concludes with these lines:

*I read them all, and revered their worth,  
Yet wondered be left out thy memory.  
But therefore guessed I be suppressed thy name,  
Because few words might not comprise thy fame*

The last line has a sarcastic parallel meaning: it is saying your deeds are too small for even a few words on the subject to be found by Spencer.

Nashe continues with a suggestion of how hard it has been, in such a short passage, to give most readers a common knowledge of Amyntas's “invaluable” (valueless) virtues and to show himself thankful in some part (perhaps his little toe) for benefits received. He concludes his word games with Latin quotations from Ovid's Love Poems. These, taken in isolation, suggest an offer of duty and fidelity by an honest servant and his low expectations. The first excerpt, from Amores 1.3, translates along the lines of “Take one who would serve you through long years, one who knows how to love with a pure heart”. The second, from Amores 1.10, suggests: “The bountiful earth affords fruit to Alcinous [a proverbially fortunate king]; the poor man reckons only duties and obligations”.

In each case, however, the quotation comes from a passage that brings wider meaning. The first excerpt leads into an implied rebuke of an addressee who perceives the supplicator to be of too low a status for preferment. The second is preceded by an observation that it is perfectly appropriate to seek gifts from rich men, since they can afford to pay. Both of these wider scenarios fit the picture earlier painted by Nashe of his encounter with the niggardly patron.

This encounter is touched on elsewhere - in Nashe's subsequent exchanges with his great literary enemy, Gabriel Harvey. The latter, another target of Nashe's wit in *Pierce Pennilessse*, responded with his pamphlet, *Four Letters and Certain Sonnets*, registered on 4 December 1592. Within the fourth letter he accuses Nashe, and the recently deceased Greene, of being “good for nothing... but to cast away themselves, to spoil their adherents, to prey upon their favourers, to dishonour their patrons, to infect the air where they breathe”. Harvey was clearly not of the view that the passage on *Amyntas* had constituted homage by Nashe to his patron.

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<sup>11</sup> There is an echo here of the opening section of *Pierce Pennilessse*, where the eponymous hero, a poverty-stricken scholar, complains of “promise-breach”, the stingy “Mydas-ears” and “men of great calling” who “scarce him give thanks” for works dedicated.

<sup>12</sup> As reported under “caterpillar” in *A Dictionary of Sexual Language and Imagery in Shakespearean and Stuart Literature* by Gordon Williams

<sup>13</sup> The uncle of Southampton's grandfather (the first Earl of his line) had changed the family name from Writh to the grander sounding Wriothesley, based on a tenuous or wishful association with a personage of that name in the time of King John.

<sup>14</sup> “Utmost”, which derives from “outmost”, carries a parallel meaning of “most distant”.

Nashe's reply came within his *Strange News*, entered in the Stationers Register on 12 January 1593. Here he rebuts the accusation, saying of Harvey, "He enviously endeavours, since he cannot revenge himself, to incense men of high calling against me, and would enforce it into their opinions that whatsoever is spoken in *Pierce Pennilesse* concerning peasants, clowns & hypocritical hotspurs, Midases, buckram giants & the mighty prince of darkness, is meant of them; let him prove it, or bring the man to my face to whom I ever made any undutiful exposition of it". Nashe goes on to claim that everything in *Pierce Pennilesse* had its precedent in foreign writings and that he made not "the least allusion to any man set above me in degree".

Now, this seems inconsistent with his after-word to the reader of *Pierce Pennilesse*, in which there is no doubt that Nashe is speaking for himself, and where he bitingly castigates certain men set above him in degree of social standing. Why would he seek to deny this?<sup>15</sup> The answer must lie in the form of his challenge to Harvey: "prove it". Harvey is thereby put in the uncomfortable, potentially dangerous position of being required to out an aristocrat whom he believes is the Amyntas and dishonourable catamite of Nashe's discourse.

Thus forced into playing Nashe's game, Harvey nevertheless responds with some skill within his rejoinder, the voluminous *Pierce's Supererogation*, which carries a prefatory address date of 16 July 1593 and was printed the following October<sup>16</sup>. Here he repeats his accusation, saying of Nashe: he had "no reverence to his patrons, no respect to his superiors"<sup>17</sup> and (later on in the pamphlet) that he "shamefully and odiously misuseth every friend or acquaintance, as he hath served some of his favourablist patrons (whom, for certain respects, I am not to name)"<sup>18</sup>. In this last clause, Harvey acknowledges that he is in a tricky position with regard to disclosure. However, elsewhere in the pamphlet he provides enough clues that Nashe (and anyone else in the know) will be left in no doubt that he has the ammunition to support his statements.

Within one of many sarcastic and verbose descriptions of Nashe are the following remarks: "Art did but spring in such as Sir John Cheeke and M. Ascham, and wit bud in such as Sir Phillip Sydney and M. Spencer; which were but the violets of March, or the primroses of May: till the one began to sprout in M. Robert Greene, as in a sweating Imp of the ever-green laurel; the other to blossom in M. Pierce Pennilesse<sup>19</sup>, as in the rich garden of poor Adonis: both to grow to perfection in M. Thomas Nashe; whose prime is a harvest, whose Art a mystery, whose wit a miracle, whose style the only life of the press, and the very heart-blood of the Grape."<sup>20</sup> With his phrase "the rich garden of poor Adonis", Harvey is, I suggest, mocking Nashe's predicament of a rich patron with no cash to spare for his *Pierce Pennilesse*. Southampton was, by July 1593, synonymous with Adonis (being the dedicatee and thinly disguised hero of the recently published *Venus & Adonis*).

Harvey goes further. Later in his tract, he says he could "here dismask such a rich mummer and record such a hundred wise tales of memorable note with such a smart moral as would undoubtedly make this pamphlet the vendablest book in London and the register one of the famousest authors in England. But I am none of those that utter all their learning at once. And the close man.... may per-case have some secret friends or respective acquaintance that in regard of his calling or some private consideration would be loathe to have his coat blazed or his satchel ransacked."<sup>21</sup> In other words, Harvey is saying, "I have lots of scandalous information concerning a rich actor and a high-ranking person (with a heraldic coat of arms), which would make this pamphlet a best-seller and me famous – but I am too discreet and too loyal to tattle".

Could Harvey here be referring to Shakespeare as the "mummer"? His hints are intriguingly consistent with the story implied by the Sonnets of an adulterous actor and his dark mistress, both intimately involved with an

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<sup>15</sup> Nashe is possibly still playing with words and presenting only the appearance of such denial. The words "set above me in degree" are ambiguous, in that their meaning depends on the attribute or quality whose degree is in mind – such as honour, which Nashe believed Amyntas to lack. However, this possibility does not change the argument which follows.

<sup>16</sup> The text may be read or downloaded free at the Internet Archive: <http://www.archive.org/details/piercessupererog00harvrich>

<sup>17</sup> Page 175 of the Internet Archive edition

<sup>18</sup> Page 209 of the Internet Archive edition

<sup>19</sup> Here Harvey is clearly referring to Nashe as the author of *Pierce Pennilesse*. In his third of the *Four Letters* he had spoken of "M. Greene... most woefully faded... and his sworn brother, M. Pierce Pennilesse...his inwardest companion". In the fourth letter, as a preamble to the remark on dishonouring patrons, he refers to the "woeful Greene and beggarly Pierce Pennilesse, (as it were a grasshopper and a cricket, two pretty musicians, but silly creatures)". In *Pierce's Supererogation* he refers to "the young darling of *S. Fame*, Thomas Nash, alias Pierce Penniless"

<sup>20</sup> Page 33 of the Internet Archive edition

<sup>21</sup> Page 202 of the Internet Archive edition

aristocratic young man. The prosperity of actors relative to that of scholars was a matter deplored by the latter in a number of writings of the time. To them “rich mummer” would be an apt, if derogatory, description. And, of course, Shakespeare was also then strongly associated with *Adonis*, for whose characterisation he could be assumed to have been richly rewarded – a point which Harvey would enjoy making to Nashe.

I suggest that Harvey goes on to cement all these associations and to mock Nashe, as he signs off his lengthy discourse with the following, otherwise strange and disconnected, statement: “I write only at idle hours, that I dedicate only to *Idle Hours*; or would not have made so unreasonably bold, in no needfuller discourse, than *the praise or Supererogation of an Ass*”<sup>22</sup>. With these pointed echoes of Shakespeare’s *Venus* dedication to Southampton and his second, italic emphasis of “Idle Hours”, Harvey puts the finishing touches to a necessarily convoluted series of messages to Nashe, which we can now summarise and paraphrase as follows. “I know, and you know, and he knows that in *Pierce Penniless* you were insulting Southampton, whom you depicted as a niggardly ganymede of a patron. And, by the way, not only did you fail to extract money from the young Adonis, but you were beaten to his riches by a lewd actor and part-time author – ha, ha!”

This evidence gleaned from Harvey is circumstantial. Nevertheless, my interpretations explain perfectly why he harks, as he does, on a “rich mummer”, his reluctance to name Nashe’s misused patron and his allusions to “poor Adonis” and “idle hours”: oddities which otherwise remain unresolved<sup>23</sup>.

Turning back to Nashe’s *Penniless* after-word on Amyntas, anyone who (unlike the contemporary Harvey) continues to regard this passage as eulogistic rather than sarcastic, must ask themselves why, in these circumstances, would the postulated benefactor be kept anonymous? The length of passage and singularity of theme are at odds with the usual context for witty or fashionable pseudonyms (often then employed as passing references to respected personalities). If indeed aimed at a beloved patron, there would have been no advantage – and considerable disadvantage – in disguising the object of adulation. Moreover, when Nashe genuinely has thanks and praise for a patron there is neither anonymity nor scope for double-meaning.

This can be seen clearly in his treatises *Christ’s Tears* and *The Terrors of the Night*, augmented or completed over the winter of 1593/4, when he was given shelter in the Isle of Wight by its self-styled Governor, Sir George Carey. He dedicates these works with unambiguous, heartfelt praise to Carey’s wife and daughter respectively and, within *Terrors*, shows great esteem of, and thanks to Carey and his family.

Here he also writes that there is no greater misery on earth than “long depending hope frivolously defeated”, and explains that he knows this from a personal experience, which was only alleviated on obtaining Carey’s kindness, hardly consistent with any previous successful patronage.

The weight of all this evidence, emerging with coherence from a wide range of sources, substantiates the premise that Southampton was the Amyntas and niggardly patron, who had “frivolously defeated” Nashe’s hopes. As we may now see, it is this history that properly explains the derogatory dedication of *Traveller*.

Many commentators have regarded that dedication as a speculative and clumsy piece of writing, in which Nashe attempted to copy Shakespeare’s approach because he believed that this had been successful in securing tangible rewards. Others have suggested that he was merely trying too hard to appear the independent, witty man of letters. Such assessments do no justice to Nashe’s writing skills; nor do they reflect the wider detail of his history, described above.

With the above background and context let us now focus on these words in the middle of Nashe’s *Traveller* address to Southampton: “*A dear lover and cherisher you are, as well of the lovers of Poets, as of Poets themselves. Amongst their sacred number I dare not ascribe myself, though now and then I speak English.*”. It is now clear that the first sentence is intended as mockery. Nashe must, therefore, have believed his statement to be both true and unflattering. In turn, this suggests that (in months prior to July 1593) the Earl had been involved in a potentially scandalous affair with at least one poet and that poet’s lover. Remarkably, this extraordinary, probably unique, scenario –

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<sup>22</sup> Page 214 of the Internet Archive edition

<sup>23</sup> It seems, too, that Shakespeare may have taken note and joined in the fun. In *Love’s Labours Lost* he appears to caricature Harvey and Nashe as a comically unlikely couple, the pompous Armado and his page, the imp-like Moth. The evidence is adduced by Charles Nicholls in Chapter 14 of *A Cup of News*.

of an aristocrat's triangular affair with his poet and that poet's lover – is exactly mirrored in Shakespeare's Sonnets (whose accounts of the Fair Youth and his poet can be perfectly matched to the histories of Southampton and Shakespeare, consistent with the Nashe chronology<sup>24</sup>).

Of course, the poet(s) invoked by Nashe could have been someone like the recently deceased Marlowe (reportedly having a fondness for boys, and another Cambridge man who overlapped with Southampton) – though Nashe is highly unlikely to have disparaged his English. However, apart from what might be gleaned from the Sonnets, there is no evidence that Southampton cherished any poet before 1603, except Shakespeare, whose consecutive and exclusive dedications of *Venus* and *Lucrece* (the latter in remarkably warm terms) do suggest such a relationship. The poets, Barnabe Barnes and Gervase Markham made dedications to Southampton, in 1593 and 1595 respectively, but, in each case, he was just one of several dedicatees and far down in the pecking order. Nor was there any repeat dedication, suggesting that the first and only dedication to Southampton in each case was merely speculative. The reality – as Nashe found out – was that Southampton could not at that time afford to reward a string of poets.

In these circumstances, and with his lampooning of the *Venus* dedication, it becomes highly probable that the jibe on poets and their lovers related to Shakespeare, particularly if Nashe thought him mounted on “the stage of arrogance” and untutored in the skills of English.

There is an interesting postscript to these suggestions of disaffection between Nashe on the one hand and Southampton and Shakespeare on the other. An in-house play, *The Returne from Parnassus* (Part 1) was produced c.1600 by an anonymous writer and acted by students at Nashe's old college, St John's.

This play, the second part of a trilogy, is a satire on the trials and tribulations of University men as they make their way in the wider world. The first play introduced a character, *Ingenioso*, depicted as a clever but impoverished university alumnus, who, with allusions to phrases in works of Nashe, was clearly intended to represent the latter (or at least to embody his circumstances).

In the *Returne*, *Ingenioso*, a literary man, has a niggardly patron by the name of *Gullio*, portrayed as a pompous, gullible popinjay of a Courtier who has an inflated opinion of his abilities as a soldier, lover and man of the arts. Their interaction is presented in three instalments: in Scene 1 of Acts III, IV and V.

*Gullio*, it transpires, has been involved in several military campaigns, associated respectively with Cals (Cadiz), a Portugal voyage and, “very lately”, Ireland. He is a frequenter of playhouses, proud of his “becoming” hair and has a foray to Paris on the agenda. All of the objective part of this portrait fits the Southampton profile of late 1599 or 1600. It certainly does not fit Ferdinando Stanley, who had died in 1594, some years earlier<sup>25</sup>.

*Ingenioso* is contemptuous of *Gullio* and makes a number of asides to the audience, dismissing the fop's honour, talents and tastes. However, because of his poverty, he is forced to kowtow to the wealthy patron.

*Gullio* needs some verse from *Ingenioso* in order to woo a woman who has caught his eye. He rejects all attempts other than those which are Shakespearean in style. He declaims, using lines recognizable in *Venus & Adonis* and *Romeo & Juliet*, and he extols Shakespeare cloyingly, including the line: “O sweet Master Shakespeare! I'll have his picture in my study at the court!”

When *Ingenioso* produces lines in the preferred manner *Gullio* approves: “Marry, sir, these have some life in them! Let this duncified world esteem of Spencer and Chaucer: I'll worship sweet Master Shakespeare and to honour him will lay his Venus and Adonis under my pillow!”

Unfortunately for *Ingenioso*, his Shakespearean-style contribution (accompanied by a letter and some mangled Latin from *Gullio*) fails to overcome the lady's antipathy and he is summarily dismissed by his ungrateful patron, to whom he bids good riddance with eloquent vilification.

Let me now recap with a summary of key events:

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<sup>24</sup> As brought out in my book, *Shakespeare: a hidden life sung in a hidden song*.

<sup>25</sup> That *Gullio* is a caricature of Southampton was noted by the Shakespearean scholar, Dr Gregor Sarrazin, in 1895.

- In 1585-7 Nashe becomes acquainted with his fellow St John's student, Southampton, then an effeminate boy in his early teens.
- In 1589, in *Menaphon*, Nashe bitinglly disparages playwrights who were not educated at university and who dare to write in blank verse.
- In 1592 Nashe completes *Pierce Pennilesse*. He is disappointed by an aristocratic patron who does not pay him for his efforts. Nashe's enemy, Gabriel Harvey, subsequently mocks these efforts “in the rich garden of poor Adonis”. The anonymous patron is castigated at length by Nashe and described in sarcastic terms suggesting that he is a foppish, dishonourable, under-achieving catamite.
- In late 1592 Nashe is accused by associates of being behind an attack on “Shake-scene”, an unqualified actor-author, in terms similar to those he had expressed in *Menaphon*.
- Around May 1593 Shakespeare publishes his dedication to Southampton of *Venus & Adonis*. Shortly after, Nashe produces an offensive parody in his own address to Southampton in *The Unfortunate Traveller*. In this parody Nashe mocks Southampton's participation in a triangular relationship involving a poet with an over-rated command of English, and that poet's lover. Harvey, in a contemporaneous tract aimed at Nashe and carrying its own echoes of Shakespeare's dedication, hints at scandalous knowledge of an actor and a person of high rank.
- Several years later an anonymous satirist at St John's portrays Nashe and Southampton in a *Parnassus* play. Nashe is depicted as a talented but impoverished writer and Southampton as his despised, niggardly and dishonourable patron, who has a derisible hero-worship of Shakespeare.
- In 1609 are published Shakespeare's *Sonnets*, whose Fair Youth and persona of poet exactly fit the profiles of Southampton and Shakespeare, from around 1592/3. Here the poet complains of betrayal by his lover, the Youth, who has been seduced by the poet's other (female) love.

Taking all of this into account, it becomes highly probable that Shakespeare was the poet in the Southampton love triangle evoked by Nashe, and that the latter was here referring to real events, independently portrayed in Shakespeare's *Sonnets*.