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“A New Source for Thomas Nashe’s The Choise of Valentines.”

M. L. Stapleton, Indiana University - Purdue University Fort Wayne

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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, it is customary to ignore this 516-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. Through 1992, the MLA Bibliography lists only one article devoted solely to it. 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.

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,
"mistis Francis" (CV 64). After he describes her body in a prelude to the act (109-20), 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 dildó, senseless, counterfeit” (246 ff.) that has cruelly supplanté 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 the basis for the subsection title (205-46). 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 dildó, senseless, counterfeit” (246 ff.) that has cruelly supplanté him.

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.7 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 dildó” (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).8 Yet the Italian Renaissance editor Pomponius Gauricus attributed the elegies to Gallus in his vita preceding his editio princeps, Corneli Galli fragmenta (Venice, 1501).9 In spite of a 1573 edition of Catullus with a supplemental Maximianus liber, qui falsa hac senem sub nomine C. C. Galli editus est (the book of Maximianus which was previously unpublished 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 Bechrens (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.

Michael L. Stapleton

NOTES


8 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).