“Nashe and the Poetics of Obscenity: The Choise of Valentines.”

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NASH AND THE POETICS OF OBSCENITY:
THE CHOISE OF VALENTINES

M. L. STAPLETON

IN THE SECOND BOOK of The Scholemaster (1570), 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. 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 a trewer judgement, than any other exercise that can be used." In its broadest sense, imitatio "is a facultie to express 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 "follow for learning of tongues and sciences the best authors" (7), especially Seneca and Cicero. The third, related to the second, suggests that a writer knows which author to emulate, he

know perfitelie, and which way to folow, that one, in what place; by what name and order; by what tooles and instrumentes ye shall do it; by what skill and judgement ye shall trewlie discerne whether ye folow rightlie or no.

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,


be no more but common prentes, cryyers, and bringeres 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 bestowe not them selves withlent 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 schole" literary structure. One can find no better way
to learn than this method, usefully instructive because of its flexibility: "This
imitation is dis similis materiæ similis tractatio; and, also similis materiæ
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 retyneth
such much of the matter" of his precursor, "This and that he leaeth 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 properety of words, in forme of sentence, in substance of the matter,
or to one or other constant 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 gleaned his own mode of writing and learning
from his master, Sir John Cheke. One assumes that Aristotleian mimesis lurks
beneath all of this, something Ascham probably learned about from his reading
of the Poetica with Cheke and Thomas Watson at Cambridge (23). Sidney's
definition serves as the Elizabethan standard: "a representing, counterfeiting,
or figuring forth." 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
when he champions Cicero (and, presumably, Demosthenes).

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
nor could they even if they avoided rhyming altogether, Like many Renaissance
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 schole" 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, serves as a veritable example of
imitation, 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 tongs." In The Anatomy of Abusurdities, Nashe makes his admiration
quite explicit, urging his readers to study Ascham:

"I will referre you to his works, and more especially to his Scholemaster,
where he hath most learndly 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 best the path to that perfection which our best Poetes haue aspired
too since his departure; wherefor he did assent by comparing the Italian with
the English, as Tulli did Graecu cum Latinu."

He does not use the word imitation, 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 imitation in The Scholemaster, Cicero (and, presumably, Demosthenes).

Nashe appears to have been somewhat embarrassed by

Gascoigne's "the vaine which I haue" is of my owne

engender his poem any more conclusively than one can

prove, without qualms, which sources provided the impetus for Shakespeare's

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 hate...is of my owne
begetting, and no man father in Engild but my selfe." Of course, such


Works, 1: 68.


Singularity D/110moS Nashe


Strange Newes, in Works, 1: 319.

Stage Works, 1: 158.


Works, 1: 68.


Singularity D/110moS Nashe


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a vein does not engender itself ex nihilo, and Nashe knows it. He adds and diminishes, orders and alters as 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, something for which Harvey criticized him mercilessly: "Cannot an Italian ribald vomit out the infectious poison of the world but an English horseflesh and verse must fick it vp for a restoration?"

Another departure from Ascham concerns that rude and bawdly 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 Choice owes its greatest debts to Ovid, not Aretino, as Nashe clearly states in his epilogue:

"...Honor brooke's no such impertie; Yet Ouid's wanton Muse did not offend.
He is the fountain whence my streallies doe flowe.

(3-5)

And now 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 Amaores, expressing lively, if not perfectly, their example.

I will not here decipher thy vapored packet of bawdy, and filthy Rhymes in the nastiest kind."

(11)

An unsolicited critical comment from Gabriel Harvey

"In endeavoring to demonstrate the debt of Valentine to the works of Aretino, Frantz (above, note 10) stresses Nashe's admiration of his Italian predecessor in Nashe's Othe lover: "of all stiles I must affect & strike to imitate Aretino" (Works, 3: 152). However, Frantz never makes any detailed or defined connections between the two, except that both authors can be pornographic. He fails to mention, for example, that a dildo episode in both the Dialogue and the Choice. David C. McPherson reminds us that in Aretino's own lifetime, he was best known for bis "olemic 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 Amaores and the latter's references to the work of the two writers (Works, 5: 159)."

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11 Pierce's Supererogation, in Elizabethan Critical Essays, 2: 239.

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17 Aretino and the Harvey-Nashe Quand, in Elizabethan Critical Essays, 2: 239.


19 J. B. Saint provides a brief sexual history of the poet in The Unfortunates Traveller and Other Works (New York: Penguin, 1972). McKerrow (Works, 3: 197-402) discusses the three extant manuscripts in some detail: Ms. (B), in the Bodleian Library (Raw!. MS. F., 236, Fol. 96-106 and Fol. 94), "somewhat carelessly written in a hand of the early part of the seventeenth century"; Ms. (G), the "Dyne 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 Ms. (G). This is followed in F. P. Wilson's updated version of the Works, which contains useful supplementary notes on the poem in volume 4, pages 419-426. This essay follows the Wilson edition.

20 Saint (above, note 16) 34, 1.

21 There are several studies of sixteenth-century erotic verse, a recent one of note is Barbara P. J. Moncrieff, "The Vale of Lilies and the Floure of Bises: Sub-cult Pornography in Elizabethan Poetry," JPC 19.4 (1980): 3-16. There are many modern views and definitions of pornography, none of them inalienable. For example, Susan Brownmiller, Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape (New York: Vintage, 1975), 339-346: "Pornography is not a celebration of sexual freedom; it is a cynical exploitation of female sexuality 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 so free personality from humiliation or parental inhibition. Pornography is the undefined essence of anti-female propaganda."
Small wonder, then, that one cannot find a single article devoted solely to
the Choice in the MLA Bibliography between 1948 and 1986. Various studies
devoted to Nashe’s writings discount it as poetry. Others fault it for predictable
reasons: “the poem, like much pornography, mechanizes sex and denatures
women.”18 Some essays treat it as part of a larger idea about erotic verse.
One critic in particular simply lays out huge swathes of the poem that he
intends to speak for themselves, as if they were unworthy of serious analysis.19
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 lecture 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 Choice? 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.
Steane, one of the few to discuss the poem even in passing:

...the author’s own justification was to be found in his success not as an apothecary
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 circumspect praise for the poem that dare not speak
its name? Perhaps, and perhaps not: Steane is understandably cautious, and
its name? Perhaps, and perhaps not: Steane is understandably cautious, and

especially “Of a light humor,” and “Of a word in Welsh miswritten in English.”
23 See the “Treatises and Commentaries” section of Keith Walker’s handsome recent edition
especially “Sigris: Dido,” pages 75-76.
24 Dorothy Poet, “An Example of Anti-Petrarchan Satire in Nashe’s The Unfortunate Traveller,”
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few things create more amusement among men in any age than another man
who cannot “perform.” Also, the Choice contains a variety of wit more subtle
than its detractors generally assume—superior to some of the recently unearthed
Sir John Harington,20 and surely no worse than the Rochester that never makes
it into the anthologies.21 Nashe never resorts to his successors’ fondness for
four-letter words, and seems glibly unaware that future readers would take
offense at him, or that he would have any readers at all:

Amores

Regarde not Dames, what Cupids Poete writes.
I pennd 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 poem, a disingenuous “apology for his book”
to the ladies. However, the most conventionally comic aspect of the Choice
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.23 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, parodily, 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 “thrmers” 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, “trewe Imitation is rightlie wrought without in any tinge” (9). Literary
“Humanism” involves much more than a rigid adherence to Classical rules,
themselves far from rigid. Nashe breaks many such rules, and expands
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.”’ On the contrary, the Chaucer 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: *dictioni materiae similis trunci*. 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 John and Joan come marching apace in arms
Even on the hallowes of that blessed Saint,
That dooth true lovers with those loyes 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 England to Caunterbury they wende,
The hooly blisful martir for to seke,
That hem hath Iiolpen whan that they were seeke.
(CV 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.”’ Nashe’s satire of one of the most hallowed passages of *Greekes* in *Rhyming* than *the Waste Land*.

Ascham, of course, is wary of Chaucer: “surely to follow rather the Goethes in Rhyming than the Greekes in versifying were ever to este acknowled with swyne, when we may freely rate 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 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 friezy consonantal clusters preclude sustained vocalic cadences. Thus, writers as diverse as the Gawain poet, Alexander Pope, Emily Dickinson, and Ezra Pound depend entirely 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:

Withale a while thin John the clerk up leep,
And on this good wyf he leith on sone.
So myre a feie na bade he the nat ful yore;
He priketh harede and depe as he were mad.
This joly lyf haue thre tyeles keed
To thot the muckle cob began to synge.
(The *Reeve’s Tale*, 4228-4233)

And then he flote on hire as he were wood,
And on his bretche did shuck, and fynke a good,
He rode, and prickt, and pót his hat to the hooves,
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,” 36 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. Ultimately, he dismisses those who would criticize his native language and literature: “every mechanical mate abhorreth the English he was borne too.” Thus, Nashe can follow Ascham and subvert his principles; he can parody Chaucer and pay homage to him.

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34. Sleane (above, note 16) 34.
35. Hibbard (above, note 19) 58.
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 prefer praise Master Spencer, the miracle of wit, to bundle line by line for my life in the honour of England, against Spaine, France, Italy, and all the world.9

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 Valences 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 spouche declare,
Ouette induced by variety.

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 never shall expire,
Shall to you purchas with her thankles paine.

38 Ne blame my verse of loose unchastitie. For painting forth the things that hidden are, Since all men acte what I in spouche declare, Onuette induced by variety. (Amoret 27.9-12)

Ironically, one of the frankest writers in our language justifies his portrayal of philosophy 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 & divine kind of Philosophy, enwrapped in blinde Fables and darke stories.”10

39 That Steane and others would note the absence of Ovid in Nashe’s little fabliau seems most puzzling. 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 indelicate poet. That the lines in the concluding sonnet of the Choice 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 author above most other writers. In The Anatomy of Abuses, for example, he quotes with relish the first two lines of the Ars Amatoria:


Yet, carefully, Nashe qualifies such enthusiasm several pages later: “I would not have any man imagine that in praising of Poetry, I endeavor to approve...Ovid obscene.”11 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 epicope 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.”12 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 Anatomy, Nashe warm prospects for imitators of Ovid:

That Steane (above, note 16, 376) notes Jack Wilson’s three-page recommendation for Aretino in The Unfortunate Traveller. Again, with McPherson, I would note that Jack-Nashe praises him for his natural abilities, not his pornographic ones. I would also point out that the narrator makes a strange confusion between Aretino and, evidently, Ovid: “if lascivious he were, he may aswell with Ovid. His caceren (puss cat) may as well run out of the door as mine out of my verse.” My lyre is chasl thought: wanlofl clear my verses. If ever Ovid is taken for me it may serve him as a guide. My style is fast thought warmed by my verse. Tell me, who is travelling in tristam, what good poet is, or man was there, who was not build a little space of wantonise in his days? Even Boys themselves by your loose, Arrive, as long as the world lastes, shall thus the lines (The Unfortunate Traveller), in Works, 2: 500. For another with lineage see, Summer, Last Will and Testament, lines 1398-1400 (Works, 1: 277).

10 McPherson (Works, 5: 153) highlights the influence of Ovid in Nashe’s work: “If classical authors Ovid is by far the most frequently used, there being from him about a hundred quotations, this distributed: Amoret 27; Metamorphs 23; Tristam 18; Hercules 15; Ars Amatoria 11; Remnos

11 Id., 376.

12 Anatomie, in Works, 1: 25

13 In Works, 1: 10.

14 Ibid., 29:30.

15 Id., 30.
Here Nashe may be partially echoing Ascham’s advice to those who would imitate others: “discovering knowledge” approximates that “skill and judgment” mentioned in The Scholemaster by which one “shall noticeably discern whether ye follow a particular author ‘rightlie or no’” (8). He imitates the Imaginator in his advice about imitatio. If the Chose is in evidence, Nashe thinks himself superbly qualified to pick knowledge out of Ovid, seeking and selecting it from filthy fables, approving of obscenity much more than he so dogmatically claims.

Nonetheless, some commentators relegate the poem to “a whole body of literature which cannot be categorized satisfactorily as...Ovidian” 44. 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” 41:

A prettie cysting womb without a weame,
That shine as bright as any silue, streame,
Resembling much a duskie net of wyres.
At whose decline a fountaine dwelleth still,
That hath his mouth beset with uglie bryers,
And bare out lyke the bending of an hill.

Yet Nashe must have seen that Ovid also pays considerable attention to such land marks 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 Chose 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 veneration into one white-hot episode. He “diminishes” various aspects of Ovid as well, especially the tone. Nashe’s narrator, no desider 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 suficientiam retin 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 Chose 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 hard-boiled:

Mons Bonu doctur sansibus post erga esteritis
et Pudor et castitas quidquid Amoris obest. (Am. 1.2; 31-32)

He simply has none of this clout. 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...
She refers not only to her passion, but to its source, the narrator’s tumescence:

And take away this passion sudden cause.

(CV 215-220)

The lack of enjambment is just right. Francis remonstrates with her lover’s manner for a lack of “staying power,” desperate to receive whatever it can provide, whether it be sixty minutes, thirty, or fifteen, passing to strengthen her plea. This diminution in time parallels the young man’s sexual inconstancy. 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 *Choice*, 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 his own mind for a good part of the *Choice*, 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 his own performance—his audience in the way that his Ovidian narrator does:

*In fact, 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 reader that hung slack when it counted now ironically stands at attention when it has nothing to do. Nashe imitates this confessional impulse throughout the *Choice*, nowhere more successfully than when his speaker admits his own inconstancy. Like his Ovidian model, Nashe intends the effect upon the reader to be spontaneous and immediate. His narrator, like Ovid’s, excises detail, 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 his own performance—his audience in the way that his Ovidian narrator does:*

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the amores are filled with "confessions" such as: "Non ego mendiosus accru turde defectare morem" (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 ece Corinna sinu:" but tells us in the next poem, much to his surprise, that she has aborted his child (2.13), which damps 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 con for gane, therefore give 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 kis, I clap, I feite, I view at will, Yet dead he lyes not thinking good or ill. (CV 129-130)

Such failure obviously undercuts the previous material; the crestfallen amant 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 intrenched wound” (254) does nothing to rescue the reputation of the humiliated lover:

I am not as was Hercules the stout, 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 “Englished.” 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 sir in 1.4 and her soldier lover in book 3, Nashe’s “Good Justice Daulphin-haft and crabtree face” (CV 21) are practically cartoon

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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: “unique alas doce pusilla amans est” (Am. 2.90.26), 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 vulgo tempore laedit, 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 facta” (Am. 2.3.34), as unfair as the more mercenary aspects of male-female relations may seem: “altera cur illam vendit at alter emat?” (Am. 1.10.34).

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

Oh, I am unwitt’n, void the chamber straight, For, I must need’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 epigrams, 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 abstain so long? I own, I own. (CV 98-99)

As the prescrib’d, so kept we cooch-tine, And every stroke in order byke a syrme. (CV 187-188)

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Curse Eunuke dilldo, senceless, counterfet,

As she prescrib’d, so kept we crotchet-time,

Who sooth male fill, but neuer can beget!.

That to the seauenth iournie could houJd out.

Oh, I am unawit'n, voide the chamber straight, I euerie stroake in ordre Iyke a chyme.

As she prescrib'd, so kept we crotchet-time,

That to the seveneth journie could hold out. (CV 301-302)

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

Curse Faukse dillido, senseless, counterfet,

Who toth male fill, but newer can begget. (CV 263-264)

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Such previshness, as Ovid deconstruates, is the last refuge of a fool: “vicimus et donum pedibuscalcamus 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

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The worldly-wise old lady who advises Corinna about the best techniques for manipulating a suitor (Amores, 1.8) shows up in Nashe as the jaded procuress, "a foggie three-chinned dame," who has a similar view of the sexes and their politics (CV 291). 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 Choice: "Saint Denis shield me from such female sprites" (295), gaups 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 unchaste, like Corinna (Am. 1.5, passion).

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
His purite to no man doeth denye.
So faire and so fair, is his recluse,
Such lyte makes she darts at every glance,
As might ennurse the icic limines of age.

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 held that devotion to one beautiful woman leads to the contemplation of divine beauty- -or in Petrarch's case, to the contemplation of the Blessed Virgin. I would add that it seems Corsina 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[s] lines." Nashe indicates his debt to his Latin master by his use of an Ovidian commonplace, the myth of Danae:

Heal wyde thy lap, my buxelle Danace,
And entertain the golden shoure so free.
But this fleeting falls 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 Art will reveal that the Danae story dramatizes the dynamic of Ovid's poetry.60 The image also works well for the Choice.

60 Jones (above, note 27) 51-52

61 Hibbard (above, note 19) 51.

62 For references to this myth in the erotic poetry, see Amores 2.18.27-28, 3.4.21, 3.8.30, 3.12.33; Art Amororum 3.4.15, 631, 632.

especially in an ironic way. Nashe usefully intertwines male lust, gender politics, and money. Far from recalcitrant, Francis's eager suitor makes for unconventional comedy. The surreal imagery that this puny Zeus attaches to his passionate Danae speaks volumes about his angers 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 imitation, as Ascham suggests. Again, one can work change upon an author either in property of words, in form of sentence, in substance of the matter, or in one or other convenient circumstance of the authors present purpose.

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 prolix 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 Choice. 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 (similia materiis dissimilis trataunt). 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 is his customer takes himself much less seriously, criticizes himself for his impotence, his narrator something of a naif, a slightly smutty Dick Whittington. Thus Nashe and Ovid treat similar phenomena in their own distinctive fashions (similia materiis dissimilis trataunt). 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 Dido. He does not know quite what to make of it all, and confines 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 Aretenian leanings he has, especially the Arétino of the first book of the Dialogues, where Nunna 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 Chaise 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 imitation, Nashe follows the Schoolmaster as rightly as he can. Thus "Together let our equal motions stir" (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 Chaise 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.