

# Detobel's Collected Essays

## PART III – CHAPTER IV – THOMAS NASHE'S TESTIMONY: A CERTAIN KNIGHT

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“Save for a **passing** [authors' emphasis] reference to a certain knight whom we cannot identify, but who may possibly be Sir Fulke Greville, as 'our Patron', we have no evidence that Nashe was at this time or later in receipt of any assistance from the great, and no knowledge at all how he was living.”<sup>1</sup> But Nashe's patron was perhaps no knight. Nashe might just have chosen the title “knight” to insert some misdirection, sufficient to camouflage the identity of the person of whom he was speaking, but insufficient for genuine concealment. McKerrow himself concedes this possibility in the context of the authorship of the anonymous anti-Marprelate tracts. “It may be argued that if the writers of the pamphlets wished to conceal their identity, any apparent indications of authorship which they contain may, with the exception of such involuntary ones as are inherent in the style itself, be mere **blinds** inserted with the deliberate intention of misleading **a too curious inquirer**... [authors' emphases] So when he apparently identifies himself with Oxford, it may be to prevent readers from searching for him among Cambridge men... It may be so: the objection is in a sense unanswerable.”<sup>2</sup>

To speak of the Earl of Oxford as a “knight” would be to cast only a thin veil over his identity. Did not Puttenham in *The Art of English Poesie* call the Earl of Oxford “that noble Gentleman”? “Gentleman” was not used exclusively to designate a position between yeoman and esquire in the nomenclature of titles, which was, it should be remembered, not the only criterion of social status. Behavior was another major factor in the attribution of social rank. A gentleman was a man of refined culture, of “honest” behavior, of “civil conversation”. In a

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<sup>1</sup> Nashe, *Complete Works*, V.28.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, V.51.

similar way, a knight was one obliged to the chivalric ideal. Philip Sidney, for example, was without doubt a “knight” in 1578, the year to which Nashe refers, though not in a technical sense already knighted; in this sense Oxford, though an earl, was a knight in 1578. In January 1581 Sidney and Oxford were jousting side by side as the Blue Knight and the Knight of the Tree of the Sun respectively.

McKerrow did not prove himself “a too curious inquirer” and was “blinded” to such a degree as to call Nashe’s reference “passing” and to contemplate the possibility that Fulke Greville would have patronized Nashe, Fulke Greville who, though a courtier, was neither a knight in 1578 nor possibly even in 1596, the year Nashe was writing, but was a professed enemy of the public stage. Nor does his curiosity extend to examining whether Nashe’s other specification of the situation of the “knight”, to be in disgrace at court, applied to Fulke Greville. A sedulous inquiry would have led him at least to contemplate the possibility that Nashe’s “knight-patron” was the same as the dedicatee of *Strange News*, Apis lapis, Master William Beeston. This dedication closes with a salute: “However I write merrily, I love and admire thy pleasant witty humour, which no care or cross can make conversable. Still be constant to thy content, love poetry, hate pedantism.”<sup>3</sup> The “knight” is said to have “repurified Poetry from Art’s pedantism.”

But Nashe is more outspoken on the identity of the “knight”. On pages 75-77 of *Have With You to Safron Walden* he reports on Gabriel Harvey’s behavior during the Queen’s visit at Audley End in July 1578. There, Gabriel Harvey addressed Latin orations to the Queen, Lord Burghley, the Earl of Leicester, speeches which he published as books I, II and III of his *Gratulationes Valdinenses* soon afterwards. Book IV contains his other speeches on the same occasion, to the Earl of Oxford, Sir Christopher Hatton and Philip Sidney. He lauded Oxford and Sidney as highly talented poets and most promising courtiers. But Harvey never could slough off his patronizing hide. In a sequel to his eulogy on Sidney, he somewhat insolently

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<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, I. 258.

proclaims himself the fourth in a line of preceptors of courtly manners: Castiglione (*Book of the Courtier*), Giovanni della Casa (*Galateo*), Stefano Guazzo (*La Civil Conversatione*), and Harvey (he possibly meant his *Gratulationes Valdinenses*). He urges Oxford “to throw away the pen” and to take to a more active life. It is to these events at Audley End in 1578 and this behavior that Nashe refers, using a phrase, “to take the wall of”, borrowed from Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*. Nashe writes that Harvey “would make no bones to take the wall of Sir *Philip Sidney* and another honourable knight (his companion) about Court yet attending...” Sidney’s only companion-poet at Audley End addressed by Harvey was Edward de Vere.

“Passing reference”, McKerrow notes. Passing?? Would we not have expected Nashe, who must have known and admired Shakespeare but never names him — have we nothing to wonder at here? — would we not have expected Nashe to refer to Shakespeare as “our first Orpheus” and “the quintessence of invention”? It is in these terms Nashe eulogizes another, the Earl of Oxford. It is not the praise of an obsequious dedication to a socially superior patron, but another greeting, rather stealthily whispered, devoutly offered during a pious rest along the road of a sneering and jeering report about his pedantic adversary Gabriel Harvey, exempt from the gaudy ornaments and windy clamour of a public laudation, free of fulsome stereotypes, a salute, an exhortation, an incantation that this “knight” might become owner of his own invention. Here is Nashe’s prayer, which is also a prayer for our intellectual salvation, our redemption from buzzing maybe’s and must-be’s, for the conversion of ululating self-complacency into silent piety, in this our time a prayer for a miracle, but one, it is to hope, still within the compass of human cognition and volition, a triumph Time should no longer stave off, to steer free from from pedantism:

“... to take the wall of *Sir Philip Sidney* and another honourable Knight (his companion) about Court yet attending; to whom I wish no better fortune than the forelocks of Fortune he had hold of in his youth, & no higher fame than he hath

purchased himself by his pen; being the first (in our language) I have encountered, that repurified Poetry from Art's pedantism, & that instructed it to speak courtly. Our Patron, our *Phæbus*, our first *Orpheus* or quintessence of invention he is; wherefore, either let us jointly invent some worthy subject to eternize him, or let war call back barbarism from the *Danes*, *Picts*, and *Saxons*, to suppress our frolick spirits, and the least spark of more elevated sense amongst us finally be quenched and die, ere we can set up brazen pillars for our names and sciences, to preserve them from the deluge of ignorance."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Nashe, III.77.