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Louie Alexandris

College of the Holy Cross, ljalex24@g.holycross.edu

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Enigmatic Nashe And The Subversion Of Romance

Louie Alexandris

College of the Holy Cross

The process of defining a term or concept, within itself, is an exclusionary process due to the inherent nature of categorization. This makes defining terms, like Romance, especially difficult, because pieces of literature do not neatly fit into a heuristic box. For example, Thomas Nashe's famous Picaresque novel, *The Unfortunate Traveller*, is an enigmatic piece that embodies certain elements of the Romance genre, mainly the plot's focus on "continual questing" (Fuchs, 2004, P.G. 67). On the other hand, the novel has a fascination with the grotesque and the comedic, which are not typical aspects of the "strategy" (Fuchs, 2004, P.G. 67). In terms of wider literary criticism, Nashe's novel is regarded by many literary scholars as an incoherent and seemingly purposeless story, in part due to its disjointed plot and lack of overall themes. By understanding Nashe's artistic intentions, though, one may gain a better understanding of the inner coherence of the story and its purpose. One helpful methodical approach to Nashe's work is Barbara Fuchs's definition of Romance as a strategy, or rather a collection of literary devices like endless questing or extreme virtuosity. (Fuchs, 2004, P.G. 67) This methodical approach is useful because Nashe imitates certain elements of the Romance strategy, but breaks away from these traditional norms by focusing on the "grotesque and the humorous." Nashe's imitation of Romance acts as a stepping stone to his true goal of creating a "new style," centered around the grotesque and comedic. He takes these elements from Romance, but uses these tactics to a different effect to show the brutal reality of this world, and how man may cope with this reality through the joy of storytelling.

Nashe begins his story with an address to two different groups within Medieval society; the aristocracy and the pages. The address to the aristocracy exemplifies Nashe's preoccupation with imitating aspects of the "Romance Strategy," while maintaining an irreverent tone to create this new medium. Specifically, in Jack Wilton's dedication to Lord Henry Wriothesly, he writes in jest to his lord, "Long have I desired to approve my wit unto you...My reverent, dutiful thought, even from their infancy, have been to your glory...A new brain, a new wit, a new style, a new soul will I get me, to canonize your name to posterity."(207) In these lines, Jack Wilton is making an obligatory dedication to his Lord. Still, he is preoccupied with clarifying the conventions of his story as a new form or "style." This formal dedication to a lord is a common trope within Renaissance literature, especially the "Romance Strategy," due to these writers' need for patronage. (Leggatt, 1974, P.G. 31) Wilton imitates this formula as he offers up his work to the aristocrat for the lord's name to be immortalized in "posterity," only by approving his "wit." Subtly, though Wilton mocks these dutiful dedications as he jestfully implies that, since birth, he has strived for the glorification of

his lord. Similarly, he seeks approval from his donor for a “new style,” showing how Wilton, and by extension Nashe, is pursuing a new form. These beginning lines from Wilton act as a meta-thesis in which Nashe, through Wilton, outlines his ability to imitate elements of the typical style, mainly the “Romance Strategy,” and then transform it into a new medium. Wilton’s subtle joke about constant service to a lord for the pursuit of glory highlights an underlying tone of irreverence in Nashe’s writing. According to Louise Simon, a source of “artistic coherence” in Nashe’s writing is the underlying tone of comedic irreverence that he directs to the seriousness of life (Simons, 1988, P.G 17). As Wilton exclaims about the need for his approval, “Prize them as high or as low as you list...whatsoever to waste paper which on the diamond rock of your judgment disasterly chanceth to be shipwrecked” (207), Nashe’s dramatization of failure to gain approval, embodied in the metaphor of the piece of writing getting shipwrecked, is set against the subtle joke about using it for “waste paper.” This level of irreverence mixed with the traditional aspects of the “Romance Strategy,” underpin Nashe’s “new style,” in the sense of imitation to create a new medium based on humor. In this dedication alone, Nashe outlines his meta-thesis, in terms of imitating the popular style to transcend beyond the serious bounds of Romance to incorporate irreverent comedy.

In Nashe’s address to the pages, he continues to imitate the “Romance Strategy” through the usage of the medium itself, while incorporating aspects of the grotesque into it. As Wilton exclaims to the pages of the world, “hath bequeathed for waste paper here amongst you certain pages of his misfortunes...Merry, the tavern is honorable...Every man of you take your places and hear Jack Wilton tell his tale”(208-209). Wilton again seeks the approval of the reader for his story, but rather than focus on aspects of glory, he emphasizes these base or common pleasures like the joy of the “tale” itself or companionship. The distinction between the nobleman and Pages’ dedication, comes down to the purpose of the story. Here, the nobleman values the glory of being immortalized in “posterity,” while the common people value the regular pleasures of the story itself (Stephanson, 2017, 573). Wilton’s usage of the medium of dedication is emblematic of the “Romance Strategy,” due to the prevalent glorification of the aristocracy. But instead of addressing just the nobility and their glory, Wilton provides an alternative view of tales and literature itself, as something a person can derive pleasure from. In the process, Wilton emphasizes common or baser passions like the joys of the tavern or the fun of gathering around to tell a story. The point being, Nashe detaches from the traditional uses of dedication, to display a humbled version, in which the purpose is derived from the joy of the story itself and the pleasure of human connection. In essence, Nashe’s superficial usage of the Romance strategy only serves to promote his “new style,” which is based on the grotesque reality of the world. In the end, Wilton’s dedications show how Nashe’s superficial usage of the Romance strategy serves his “new style” or medium of literature.

Later on, during the slaughter of the Anabaptist in Munster, Nashe’s depiction of the event demonstrates his grotesque fascination with violence, in which he frames

the vain idealism of Romance against the abrupt reality of our world. In this scene, Wilton specifically describes John Leyden's army as, "falling prostrate on their faces, and fervently given over to prayer, determined never to cease or leave soliciting of God... Whereupon, assuring themselves of victory...Pitiful and lamentable was their unpitied and well performed slaughter" (234-235). In these lines, Wilton mocks the Anabaptists for their overly confident demeanor concerning their presumption of God's help for their fight (Sulfridge, 1980, P.G 6). This mocking tone embodies a level of sardonic humor as, Nashe seems to push against idealism because of its delusional effect on people. The Anabaptist "solicitation" is a delusion in Wilton's eyes because God is not intervening to assist with heresy. This only goes to show how Nashe uses humor and his mocking tone to push back against the seriousness and delusional idealism of the "Romance Strategy." As Nashe proceeds to describe the slaughter as, "Yet all their weapons so slaying, empyring, knocking down, shooting through, overthrowing, dis-soul joined" (236). Nashe's wordplay focuses on the physicality of violence in terms of the raw brutality of combat like swords "shooting through " people. This scene especially demonstrates Nashe's "new style" embodied in his fascination with the brutality of the natural world, while still maintaining a level of comedic undertones. On top of a display of his "new style," Nashe seems to subvert the tropes of the "Romance Strategy" by portraying its most frequent aspect, idealism, as a fault of overconfidence. Nashe uses violence to display the reality of the world, rather than the delusional idealism of the perfected world which is embodied in Romance. He consciously chooses to describe, in great detail, the reality of the world. This in a sense, subverts the traditional elements of the "Romance Strategy." In the end, this scene exemplifies Nashe's "new style" of grotesque realism, which is intermixed with bouts of witty wordplay and sardonic humor.

During the challenge scene in Florence where Wilton's master fights for the honor of his love, Nashe continues this subversion of the "Romance Strategy" by imitating the style, while also mocking its trope of endless questing and long-winded descriptions (Fuchs, 2004, P.G. 67). As Wilton describes his master's uniform in excruciating detail, "His armor was all intermixed with lilies and roses, and the bases thereof bordered with nettles and weeds, signifying stings, crosses, and overgrowing encumbrances in his love" (262). The description of his master's "armor" imitates the verbose language of the "Romance Strategy" in a similar fashion to other authors like Edmund Spenser and Geoffrey Chaucer. This imitation centers on symbols, like nature with "flowers" or religious images like the "cross." These extensive descriptions often have a specific purpose or representational value in Romance (Lee, 2014, 290). However, the master's uniform is superficial, as these representational images and symbols serve no purpose in the story outside of being there. Nashe proceeds to describe several knights in insane detail with no real purpose or representational value. At several points throughout his description, Nashe even jokes with the audience, "It was here too tedious to manifest all the discontented or amorous devices that were used in that tournament...I will rehearse no more...What would you have more?" (266). The comedy lies in the extensive descriptions of the tourney and how Nashe, continually in a self-aware manner, describes their uniforms when there is no need nor real purpose to

it.

This scene especially embodies Nashe's meta-thesis, as he imitates the "Romance Strategy" through extensive descriptions, accompanied by flowery idealistic language and an inherent seeming purpose to it. Nashe departs from this traditional way of description, because these symbols mean nothing outside of being superficial representations of something. Rather, Nashe uses this opportunity to mock this style of writing for its long-winded depictions and superficial representations. On top of that, the reader does not spend a lot of time in this mode of Romance, as immediately after describing this tourney, Wilton departs from his master, leaving him in Florence to fight for his love forever. The master's endless quest is a frequent trope within the "Romance Strategy," in which the protagonist embarks on a journey of endless questing to prove themselves. Wilton, though, departs from his master, indicating that Nashe is not interested in this mode of writing. This scene demonstrates not just Nashe's ability to mimic the strategy, but in some sense to subvert it by pointing out its typical features. By departing from his master, Nashe turns away from the romantic and, instead, directs the story back to traveling around Europe. This endless traveling mirrors the unending questing of Romance, but for different purposes, as Romance seeks to test the protagonist's virtue for "moral instruction" (Fuchs, 2004, P.G. 67). Nashe is more interested in the pleasure of literature itself, in terms of the power of storytelling and how it can bring people together. In this scene specifically, the descriptions serve to illustrate Nashe's ability to imitate. Ultimately, Nashe's mimesis e focuses on mocking the style for its long-windedness. Nashe is interested in the pleasure of literature itself, and this preoccupation with the comedic and the grotesque forces him to leave this plotline to the Romantics.

Later on, during the rape of Heraclide, Nashe employs his "new style" again, except with an intense focus on the grotesque, which he uses to illustrate the harsh reality of our world. In this scene, Heraclide is raped by Bartol, and she ends up taking her own life due to the shame of having her virtue forcefully taken from her. The brutality is apparent when Wilton remarks, "Therewith he flew upon her...Backwards he dragged her...Her eyes were dim, her cheeks bloodless...Up she rose after she was deflowered...She spied her husband's body lying under her head" (278-279). In this scene, Heraclide discovers that she has been raped on top of her dead husband, adding to the tragedy of the scene. This rape on top of the body adds a grotesque element to the story, in which the character is driven to madness by these two factors. The repeated descriptions of force, along with the effects on her body, only serve to further exemplify the grotesque nature of the scene. Although, the over-the-top brutality in some respects works against the seriousness of the scene, as it is somewhat comical that the two would have intercourse on top of a corpse. In essence, this scene is a strange blend of the grotesque horror of having no control, and moments of comedy embodied in the over-the-top absurdism of the tragedy itself. This mixture of two conflicting aspects is emblematic of Nashe's "new style," in that tragedy is often accompanied by an underlying level of humor, whether it be rustic heretics being slaughtered by an army, or a woman being raped on top of her dead husband. In

essence, this scene is the purest form of Nashe's style, in that he focuses on the grotesque aspects of human immorality while incorporating his brand of irreverent humor. This scene is the strangest synthesis of his style, where there is a balance between the most horrifying acts of man and the absurdism of these evil acts themselves.

Before her suicide, though, Heraclide gives a heartwrenching speech about the folly of this world. This speech is a departure from Nashe's traditional style of the grotesque or the humorous, as it is a moment of genuine true sadness which laments the inherent evil of this world. As Heraclide, in a kind of Shakespearean soliloquy, relays to the audience: "Had filthy pleasure no pillow to lean upon but his spread limbs...Cursed be the time that ever I was begotten... Husband, I'll be thy wife in heaven; let not thy pure deceasing spirit despise me when we meet" (280), this exasperated soliloquy before death, is a sole moment of utter seriousness without the underlying tone of comedic mockery or absurdism. Throughout this story, there is very little introspection, if any. At this moment, though, there is a soliloquy lamenting the folly of this sinful world. The emphasis on "pleasure" as filthy highlights the faulty nature of the material world, in that the material world is tainted with sin. The separation between the flesh and "spirit" adds another layer of shame to Heraclide's character, as she worries about her judgment in the afterlife from God and from her husband. This focus on sin in the context of the division between the flesh and spirit dramatizes the fallibility of this brutal world, in that Nashe often depicts a world of natural chaos defined by an undercurrent of inherent violence. For Nashe, there is no perfection on earth, whether in an aesthetic sense or moral one, as pure goodness is reserved for heaven. This lack of perfection within Nashe's writing is another subversion of the "Romance Strategy," because the idealism of Romance is done away with for the reality of this world. Overall, this genuine moment of reprieve from the comedic and the grotesque professes a lack of idealism for the human spirit due to original sin.

At the end of the novel, Wilton returns to the place where he began, at the king's side in a war. The recursive nature of the plot again speaks to a broader aspect of Nashe's style as he imitates the endless questing narrative formulation of Romance, but also uses it to different effect. At the end of the story, Wilton remarks to the audience, "And so as my story began with the King at Turney and Turwin, I think meet here to end it with the King at Ardes and Guinas" (308). The circular structure of the plot directly imitates the recursive elements of the "Romance Strategy" in that the story returns to its starting point. The difference, fundamentally, is that Nashe's endpoint is meaningless, as there is no real change in the characters or the overarching plot or world. The journey is ultimately meaningless, as the reader ends up in the same place where she started. There is no growth within the characters, nor does the world change for better or worse. The stagnant nature of the ending only goes to show Nashe's preoccupation with the brutal reality of this world and the lack of idealism within his writing style. Nashe's usage of the recursive strategy demonstrates his meta-thesis as he is able to imitate this convention, but only for pleasure. In the grand scheme, the

endpoint of the story for Nashe is not everything. Rather, the purpose is the joy which is elicited from the stories themselves, and the power that these tales hold in bringing people together. Nashe's purposeless subversion of the Romance trope only serves to dramatize his artistic ambitions. He seeks to craft a narrative centered on the joy of these stories from the synthesis of these two aspects; mainly the grotesque and the humorous.

The incoherent nature of Nashe's narrative mainly relates to his artistic ambitions as he attempts to synthesize these two conflicting aspects of the grotesque and the humorous. Nashe's "new style," embodied in his meta-thesis, follows this predictable pattern of imitating tropes within the "Romance Strategy," but subverting these aspects through his focus on certain outlandish elements which stand in opposition to the predefined standards of the strategy. The grotesque realism of Nashe's style depicts a world in chaos defined by immorality. This realism serves to show the unending brutality of the natural world, rather than the idealistic tropes of Romance. Underscoring even the most brutal scenes, though, are these continuous comedic undertones, which focus the reader on the unending absurdity of life and its many hardships. Nashe's synthesis of both the grotesque and the comedic dramatizes the ability of man to cope with this unending barrage of tragedy through the shared human experience of living and laughing at their struggles. This is embodied in Nashe's artistic ambitions, which focus on storytelling for the purpose of eliciting joy and prompting the sharing of collective human experiences. This is best exemplified in his declaration to the pages, when Wilton proclaims, "Every man of you take your places and hear Jack Wilton tell his tale" (209). In the collective airing of struggles and enjoyment of stories, man can cope with the unending chaos of his life. Through Nashe's formulation of his meta-thesis, he does not simply subvert traditional strategies within the mode of Romance, but he creates a "new style." In the end, Nashe's artistic ambition is to depict the brutal reality of our world, and how man can cope with this hardship through the collective experience of storytelling.

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