EARLY MODERN LITERARY STUDIES

‘A Simple Honest Dunce’: Humphrey King and the Unlearned Poet in Late-Elizabethan Literary Culture

Peter K. Andersson
Örebro University
peter.andersson@oru.se

The literature of the Elizabethan and Jacobean period is sprinkled with recurring names dropped in passing, recalling individuals who were well known in certain circles at the time, but whose lives and personalities are lost forever. We know hardly anything, for instance, about Peter Shakerley, the gallant of St Paul’s Churchyard mentioned in writings by Gabriel Harvey and Francis Meres, or Monarcho, the mad Italian who thought he was the king of the world, mentioned twice by Shakespeare and eulogised by Thomas Churchyard.[1] But there are a few characters on the periphery of Renaissance print culture whose personalities might be pieced together from scattered references, and who even set their words to print, allowing us a brief insight into the minds and perspectives of those less erudite and ambitious than the average writers of the time. One such person was Humphrey King, the man who was dubbed ‘the king of tobacconists’ by several illustrious authors around the turn of the seventeenth century, and who published a pamphlet of his own, often dismissed as an inferior work of literature. However, the many allusions to King indicate that he was a key figure within a core of London pamphleteers and poets during the late Elizabethan era. The fact that his name has been considered a pseudonym of none other than Shakespeare might be seen as an incentive as good as any to make him the object of a more systematic and detailed study, but his ambivalent status and significance to influential writers such as Thomas Nashe serves to complicate the picture of literary culture at the turn of the seventeenth century, contesting crude binaries between

[1] On these, cf. Charles Nicholl, *The Reckoning: The Murder of Christopher Marlowe* (London: Vintage, 2002), pp. 74-6; William Shakespeare, *Love’s Labour’s Lost*, ed. by Richard David (London: Arden Shakespeare 1990), p. 67; Peter K. Andersson, ‘Absolute Monarcho: A Megalomaniac Jester at the Court of Queen Bess’, *TLS*, 23 April 2021.

literacy and illiteracy, academic and non-academic, oral and written, gallant and intellectual.

I will in this article partly analyse the references to King in works by other authors, especially the dedications addressed to him in several notable pamphlets, and partly look more closely at the single full work attributed to King himself in order to investigate the public persona of King and the role he played in the literary circles of turn-of-the-century London. The tantalising allusions to King might allow us to extract observations on the conditions of the world on the margins of literary culture in a time when insights into such corners are rare. The references together make out the sketch of a man who was perceived in a certain way, and who belonged to a certain category of people of which he is a valuable representative. The tracking of King thus inevitably leads to something more wide-ranging – the study of a subculture of gallantry and of conflicts between academic and non-academic culture in early-modern London. This conflict lurks in the background of many themes of this era, not least the reactions to the success of Shakespeare and, as we shall see, it was not a conflict with two opposing flanks – it was a conflict internal to many of the key players of the current literary scene.

In her wide-ranging survey of Elizabethan pamphleteers of 1983, Sandra Clark devotes a few lines to the 'hack writers of the crudest kind' who mingled with the more erudite and acculturated authors of the pamphlet world. Among these, she briefly mentions Humphrey King alongside Anthony Nixon, Richard Johnson and pseudonyms such as Adam Fouleweather and Simon Smel-knave.[2] These early forerunners of the later seventeenth-century world of Grub Street make up a motley assembly but, on closer inspection, King sits uneasily in this company. He was not a pamphleteer in the manner of Johnson, Nixon or Thomas Dekker, but rather an 'uneducated lover of poetry', an amateur who wrote verses because he loved to write in spite of a lack of education or talent. We should not dwell on him, therefore, as an exponent of the world of pamphlet 'hacks', but of those few poets who barely made it into print and who in their meagre output exemplified highly distinctive voices. Such authors have been partly examined by Matteo Pangallo in his *Playwriting Playgoers in Shakespeare's Theater* (2017), although his interest is chiefly in understanding how members of the audience saw and understood the theatre and the playmaking process.[3] Some work on the vogue for epigrams from the late-sixteenth century onwards touches upon such marginal characters as Henry Parrot

[2] Sandra Clark, *The Elizabethan Pamphleteers: Popular Moralistic Pamphlets 1580-1640* (London: Athlone Press, 1983), p. 29.

[3] Matteo A. Pangallo, *Playwriting Playgoers in Shakespeare's Theater* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017).

and Richard Niccols, and serves to reflect on the ambitions of poets who wished to parody and subvert the high style of sonnets, at the same time as they struggled to distinguish their output from strictly popular forms such as ballads.[4] But the status of unlearned or infrequent authors in this period has received scant attention, not least concerning their relation to established writers and the 'University Wits'. As Humphrey King allegedly had a close connection to Thomas Nashe, prominent University Wit and staunch critic of alleged hacks, his case is well worth exploring within this context.

King became renowned in a period that scholars have identified as an age of increasing personal focus in pamphlets and plays. The 'new emphasis on the personal' in literary works around this time, as identified by Douglas Bruster, is claimed to have instigated a 'nascent public sphere' where authors became a new bridge between readers and worlds beyond the readers' scope. In this process, Bruster stresses 'the textual celebrity of characters who seemed to exist outside their works'.[5] Although Bruster's grand claims are somewhat weakened by his narrow focus, other scholars have identified an increasing fluidity between real persons and fictional characters which makes it notoriously difficult to discern between them in the literature of this period.[6] The process is often viewed in connection to the public role of the author, but Samuel Fallon has recently extended this perspective to the importance of so called 'personae', fictional or semi-fictional characters that reappear in various works from the period. The purpose of creating such figures were, according to Fallon, to distinguish the small coterie of authors and their readers from the greater mass of print and popular readership.[7] The notion of the persona, as both a semi-fictional version of the author and as a semi-fictional character that the author writes about, might serve as a background for our investigation into Humphrey King, both as author and as character in other authors' works. But King was a real person after all, and Fallon's perspective on this is too limited to encompass the complexity of King's role in literary culture at this time. I thus hope to demonstrate in the following how a focus on more marginal and obscure figures might broaden the discussion of

[4] Lawrence Manley, 'Proverbs, Epigrams, and Urbanity in Renaissance London', *English Literary Renaissance*, 15.3 (1985), 247-76; James Doelman, 'Epigrams and Political Satire in Early Stuart England', *Huntington Library Quarterly*, 69.1 (2006), 31-46.

[5] Douglas Bruster, 'The Structural Transformation of Print in Late Elizabethan England' in *Print Manuscript Performance: The Changing Relations of the Media in Early Modern England*, ed. by Arthur F. Marotti, Michael D. Bristol (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2000), pp. 49-89.

[6] Kate de Rycker, 'Commodifying the Author: The Mediation of Aretino's Fame in the Harvey-Nashe Pamphlet War', *English Literary Renaissance*, 49.2 (2019), 147-71.

[7] Samuel Fallon, *Paper Monsters: Persona and Literary Culture in Elizabethan England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019).

Elizabethan and Jacobean literature and take into account social dimensions seldom acknowledged.

This article is divided into three parts. The first one traces the references to King in various works of literature from the 1590s and 1600s in order to construct an image of what identity and status he had within literary culture at the time. The second part makes a close study of his own main work, *The Hermites Tale* (c. 1595), in order to compare the perceptions of King with how he presents himself to the public. The final part places the public persona of King within the wider context of late-Elizabethan public interaction and self-fashioning and makes some final observations on the culture of gallantry and performativity in this period.

No date of birth or death for Humphrey King has been ascertained.[8] It is almost as if his lifespan is bookended by the first and the last reference to him in print. The earliest allusion is found in Anthony Chute's tract *Tabacco*, published posthumously in 1595. This is the first known English text on the subject of tobacco, and it is interesting that this should contain the first allusion to the man who was known as 'the king of tobacconists'. While some early commentators took this to be an indication that King was a purveyor of tobacco, Robert Kane pointed out that, to the Elizabethans, 'tobacconist' was more likely to denote a *user* of tobacco rather than a tobacconist in the modern sense.[9] Chute was a minor poet whose career seems to have been helped by his acquaintance with the more famous Gabriel Harvey, whom he supported in his rivalry with Thomas Nashe. The tobacco pamphlet offers one of the earliest defenses of the plant's medicinal qualities and begins with the dedication 'To the Heroicall minded Gentleman, Maister Humphrey King', whose experience of 'this diuine hearbe, al men do know, and acknowledge you to bee, *The Souereigne of Tabacco*, and for such they do honor you'.[10] Kane muses that the dedicatee must have 'occupied an exalted position in what seems to have been a burlesque order of smokers'. This speculation is a vague suggestion that Chute and King considered themselves members of an unofficial society devoted to tobacco-smoking, and Kane refers to Nashe's tract of the following year, *Have With You to Saffron Walden*, which was a contribution to his ongoing feud with Harvey. Here, in his extensive criticism

[8] The little amount of biographical data that can be ascertained is summed up in his *ODNB* entry: A.H. Bullen, rev. by Elizabeth Haresnape, 'King, Humphrey', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford (2004).

[9] Robert J. Kane, 'Anthony Chute, Thomas Nashe, and the first English work on tobacco', *Review of English Studies*, 7.26 (1931), 151-9.

[10] Anthony Chute, *'Tabacco'* (London, 1595). The title page is missing, but the work is generally known by this title.

of Harvey, Nashe makes mention of Chute by referring to his book on tobacco and his dealings with 'the smoakie Societie'.[11]

While Chute's dedication firmly establishes King as a characteristic presence in the literary circles of 1590s London, it is the dedication of Thomas Nashe's *Lenten Stuffe* four years later that embellishes the sketchy notion that we obtain from Chute's reference. Here King emerges as a key figure of a world of revelry and fashionable smoking. Nashe's dedication begins:

> To his worthie good patron, Lus*tie Humfrey, according as the towns*men doo christen him, Little Numps, as the Nobilitie and Courtiers do name him, and Honest *Humfrey, as all his friendes and acquaintance esteeme* him, King of the Tobacconists *hic & ubique*, and a singu*lar Mecaenas to the Pipe and the Tabour (as his patient* liuery attendant can witnesse), his bounden Orator T.N. most prostrately offers vp this tribute of inke and paper.[12]

Here we encounter a man who is nothing less than a celebrity, known to both townsmen, nobility and courtiers, and who has a different nickname for each context. But the tone of these phrases is ambiguous. Are we to assume that the said Humfrey really is as famous and esteemed as Nashe says, or is Nashe here being sarcastic? After all, *Lenten Stuffe* is a pamphlet devoted to the praise of the red herring, and although, as Henry Turner remarks, the red herring had at this point 'not quite become proverbial', the text is nonetheless a 'mock encomium', making fun of literary conventions.[13] Considering that Nashe recently decried King's friend Gabriel Harvey so harshly, it is strange to think that he is only a few years later dedicating a work to King. But as one reads on, further dimensions of Nashe's intimacy with King come across. The dedication, when making mention of King, refers either to his lack of learning or to his 'good fellowshippe' in his companionship with Nashe. Continuing the rather obvious line of punning that seems to have haunted King wherever he turned, Nashe announces: 'A King thou art by name, and a King of good fellowshippe by nature'. He goes on to speak of King's 'capering humour' and 'honourable courtesie' and how he stands ready with a 'Kanne of strong ale', toast, sugar and nutmeg 'euerie time I come by your lodging'.[14] Referring to King's lodgings suggests a closer friendship than one had expected, and Nashe reiterates how King is in

[11] Thomas Nashe in *Works* vol. III, ed. by Ronald B. McKerrow (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1958), p. 107.

[12] Nashe, *Works*, III, p. 147.

[13] Henry S. Turner, 'Nashe's Red Herring. Epistemologies of the Commodity in *Lenten Stuffe* (1599)', *ELH*, 68.3 (2001), 529-61.

[14] Toast browned at the fire, dipped in wine and seasoned with sugar and nutmeg, was a common snack.

the habit of lavishing him with 'the best mornings draught of merry-go-downe in your quarters'.[15]

The King described here is more than a distant acquaintance even though the degree of seriousness in Nashe's tone is never easy to assess. If the work is seen, as mentioned, as a parody of textual convention, then this dedication is also a parody, but it can be a parody even if, or perhaps especially if, Nashe bases it on his carousing fraternity with King rather than on a fawning homage to some person of nobility.[16] Could there also be an underlying intention of dedicating this work to King as a way of underlining its derision of literature *per se*? Alongside his praise of King's good fellowship, Nashe calls King an 'unlearned louer of Poetry' and establishes him as a counterweight to the extravagant but shallow men of the day, who offer empty promises in return for dedications.[17] As Nashe continues to commend King, stating that 'thou art neuer wel but when thou art amongst the retinue of the Muses', one becomes unsure of whether he actually admires him or whether the irony is deeper than at first suspected. A rather unorthodox interpretation of this has been made by Penny McCarthy, who seems to believe that Humphrey King is a pseudonym of Shakespeare, even claiming that *The Hermites Tale* is a work Shakespeare wrote 'disguised' as an inferior poet.[18] Whatever the truth is, it is difficult to fully believe that Nashe should be sarcastic the whole way through this dedication, especially when he is speaking of King's lodgings and the cans of ale he offers.

Nashe concludes his dedication by referring to King's own work, *The Hermites Tale*, announcing that it 'will restore the golden age amongst vs'. Critics have a difficult time believing that Nashe is perfectly serious in this estimate, considering the rather poor quality of the poetry in the version of *The Hermites Tale* that has been preserved. But it is also possible that Nashe is not referring to the literary quality of King's work but to the nostalgia inherent to the story told in King's poem. Some scholars have perceived Nashe's reference to King as a 'Mecaenas to the Pipe and Tabour' to mean that King was an enthusiast of Morris dancing.[19] Nashe was reputedly also acquainted with that most

[15] 'Merry-go-down' = strong ale (oed.com).

[16] On the sarcasm of *Lenten Stuffe*, see Jennifer Andersen, 'Blame-in-Praise Irony in *Lenten Stuffe*', in *The Age of Thomas Nashe. Text, Bodies and Trespasses of Authorship in Early Modern England*, ed. by Stephen Guy-Bray, Joan Pong Linton, Steve Mentz (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013), pp. 45-62. Andersen says nothing about the dedication to King, however.

[17] See Donald J. McGinn, *Thomas Nashe* (London: Twayne, 1981), p. 152.

[18] Penny McCarthy, *Pseudonymous Shakespeare. Rioting Language in the Sidney Circle* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), pp. 41-2, 154-63.

[19] Francois Laroque, *Shakespeare's Festive World. Elizabethan Seasonal Entertainment and the Professional Stage* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 40.

prolific morris dancer of the age, Will Kemp.[20] This together with the sentimental content of King's poem – containing references to old folk heroes the likes of Skelton and Robin Hood – suggests an interesting dimension to which we shall return in the next section.

The last remaining pamphlet that contains a dedication to King is Nicholas Breton's *Pasquils Mistresse*, published in 1600. Breton wrote several satirical verse books under the name of 'Pasquil' which comment on and list various phenomena and types of people. The *Mistresse* book contains descriptions of various types of women, some who would make good wives and others who would make bad wives. The dedication to King is occasioned by the fact that he is contemplating marriage, and the book is meant to help him choose a wife. The heading reads: 'The best merriest wit in true honest kindnesse, not king Humfrey, but Humfrey King, God and a good wife make a happie man in this world'. Breton then begins his epistle dedicatory with a familiar phrase: 'Lustie Humfrey, honest wagge, hearing, of late, of your determination, to enter into the honourable course of kindnesse (which, after many mad Roundes, will be the best daunce to continue with) hopeing that you are olde enough to knowe what is good for your selfe, and yet not so wilful in conceipt, but you will take aduisement of your good friends'.[21]

Here is again a vague reference to dancing as well as reiterations of the two adjectives used to describe King: 'lustie' and 'honest'. But what this dedication perhaps most of all contributes to our picture of King is its clear suggestions that he is quite a young man. One gets the notion of a young and innocent man of promise who has come to London and is wavering between living the good life and developing his potential as a poet, and who has therefore been taken under the wings of several of London's literary men to guide him or simply to enjoy the freshness and invigorating unworldliness of his company. One can understand why McCarthy's thoughts went to Shakespeare, but there is hardly any substantial evidence to equate the one with the other. The combination of a young man with a taste for tradition and rustic culture also might explain why he fell into favour with Nashe. Nashe had a well-documented disdain for swaggering young poets prone to overblown rhetoric, describing in his preface to Robert Greene's *Menaphon* (1589) how they 'thinke to out-brave better pennes with the swelling bumbast of bragging blanke verse'. He also expressed a nostalgia for country life, not least in *Lenten Stuffe*, even though it was seldom as straightforward as in other writers.[22]

[20] Cf. David Wiles, *Shakespeare's Clown. Actor and Text in the Elizabethan Playhouse* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 33.

[21] *Pasquils Mistresse: Or The Worthie and Vnworthie Woman* (London, 1600).

[22] Harriet Phillips, *Nostalgia in Print and Performance, 1510-1613. Merry Worlds* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), pp. 81-4.

So what sort of character emerges in these brief references? The best way to piece them together into a concrete picture is to look more closely at some of the words used to describe King. The numerous nicknames bestowed upon him tell us different, if somewhat arbitrary, things about his character. Firstly, they are an indication that he was a sociable and public persona in certain circles, who was in such a position that his acquaintances lavished him with nicknames. Both Breton and Nashe use the sobriquet 'Lustie Humfrey'. 'Lustie', or 'lusty', could mean many things to the Elizabethans. The most common meaning was cheerful and merry, but it could also be used to describe a person's appearance, particularly in reference to clothes. A 'lustie' item of clothing was something gay and brightly coloured. It could of course also refer to sexual desire. Towards the end of the sixteenth century, 'lusty' was used in a number of popular phrases. 'Lusty Laurence' was a euphemism for a womanizer, the phrase becoming popular after the publication of a ballad of that name in 1594. The term is used in works by both Marston, Fletcher and Dekker. The equally common 'Lusty Juventus' was used in the same manner.

An equally frequent adjective is the apparently contradictory 'honest', which is used both connected to the name – 'Honest Humfrey' – and in the same breath, as in Breton's talk of 'true honest kindnesse' and referring to King as an 'honest wagge'. Here the word is probably used in the sense of 'honourable', but coupled with the noun 'wagge', used elsewhere by Breton to denote a mischievous person or joker, the initial contradiction is undermined by the picture of a man who is always game for a laugh. We now begin to make out the contours of a rabble-rouser and party animal who is invoked in these texts mainly to signal fun and frivolity, and perhaps to underline the spirit of jest and parody in which the works were written. The nickname mentioned by Nashe – 'Little Numps' – is more unusual and the word 'numps' refers, according to the *OED*, to 'a silly or stupid person', citing its use by Ben Jonson in *Bartholomew Fair*, in which the character Wasp, a servant, is frequently referred to by this appellation. The editor of the *OED* introduces the hypothesis that the word originated as a pet form of the name Humphrey, as its earliest uses are applied to men of that name. Wasp's first name is Humphrey.[23] The word has a slightly derogatory implication which might be made more apparent by speculating on its possible etymological affinity with the later 'numbskull'.

Humphrey King was consequently not a man that people in his surroundings took very seriously. He was associated with good fellowship, drinking and tobacco smoking, and

[23] *OED* also cites Francis Beaumont's 1607 play *The Knight of the Burning Pestle*, in which the character Humphrey is called Nump.

when his name was invoked, it was used as a symbol of merriment and shenanigans. Breton's reference to 'many mad roundes' also suggests a carousing fellow who is now settling down to a quiet life. But are we to interpret these descriptions as reports of King's lifestyle or do they merely reflect the frivolous philosophy that he promoted? Surely there was nothing very unusual in these circles about drinking beer and enjoying each other's company? It is the fact that the character of King becomes something more in these descriptions than just the man. He is used in a fashion similar to that of the personae identified by Fallon, who emphasises the fluid borders between various types of literary figures, including the disguised author, stock characters and objects of satire.[24] But Fallon does not reflect on the type of figure exemplified by King, the local character known to the author and to all who read him. By invoking such local celebrities, the author creates a community with his readers, but by accommodating someone whom he assumes everyone knows, thus incorporating a social dimension.

The things that make King stand out are partly his attachment to tobacco, which was not unheard of at the time but was still able to single a person out from the crowd, but particularly his apparent well-known status among many different groups of people, as noted by Nashe, which would undermine any attempt to distinguish the literary coterie from other groups.[25] It is quite possible that King enjoyed a prominent status outside of literary circles, but within the literary circle, he was turned into a character or a symbol that brought him shoulder to shoulder with other legendary figures – Skelton, Tarlton, Robin Hood etc. – that were invoked in contemporary literature to stir up nostalgia. Consequently, when it came time for him to take up the pen himself, he found himself in a delicate situation. How to write about yourself when other writers have already turned you into a character?

The full title of the pamphlet bearing King's name is *An halfe-penny-worth of wit, in a pennyworth of paper, or, The hermites tale*, and the only preserved copy is of the third impression dated 1613.[26] Its original edition has been dated to around 1599.[27] Its printers and publishers were Edward Blount and Thomas Thorpe, two of the most illustrious booksellers in London at the time, which places King and his poem at the heart of literary culture, making his identity and status all the more complex. The plot of *The Hermites Tale* is simple enough. It consists of a dialogue between the narrator, who is walking in a forest, and a hermit that he encounters already in the second line of the poem. The

[24] Fallon, pp. 7-11.

[25] Cf. Fallon, pp. 90, and 113-18.

[26] *An halfe-penny-worth of wit, in a pennyworth of paper, or, The hermites tale* (London: Edward Blount, 1613), third impression.

[27] Clark, p. 29.

wanderer assumes the hermit to be ‘a happy man’ having left the world, ‘too full of woes’, behind him and turned his back on war and religious strife. The hermit replies (somewhat predictably) that the woes of the world are just deserves for the sins of man, but concedes that the people who dwell in his wood ‘liue secure, and free from any strife, / And thinke Content to be the sweetest life’. The hermit then proceeds by telling of Herpilus and Phillida, a fable of unknown mythological origin which leads to a moralist discussion criticising the showiness and superficiality of the day.[28] The wanderer answers by telling his own tale, of a young man who comes to an inn and upon encountering the gay company of guests starts dancing. He is swiftly rebuked, however, by the landlord who demands that he repents for his sin by praying. The guest is invited to have supper and the next morning he exacts his revenge on the pious dullards by explaining his behaviour the previous night. He introduces himself as none other than ‘lusty Humphrey’ and explains that he believes in the old order, where the frivolity of the tavern was accompanied by comradeship, and he begins a lengthy homage to the stable and fraternal ways of yore, ‘when house-keeping was in prime’ and ‘silly harmelesse folkes’ found delight in simple honest pleasures.

The picture painted is a familiar and romantic one of how the gentry of old gladly received the poor and the wounded as house guests, when neighbours met each other with hospitality, and when ‘men of ancient calling / Loued no pride for feare of falling’. Soon we are treated with a list of past heroes, from Robin Hood and Skelton to ‘merry Tarlton’, and ‘of May-game Lords, and Sommer Queenes, / With Milke-maides, dancing o’re the Greenes’. The oration ends in a rebuke of ‘wise and learned men’ who, to the dismay of the ploughman and the milkmaid, ‘with countenance grim, and many a frowne / Cries, Maisters, plucke the May-pole downe’. He explains his stance by calling attention to his youth:

> You see it stands not with my youth from pleasure to be tide,
> I loue to sit and laugh, not to offend the wise,
> I care not for their company that honest mirth despise.

The wanderer requests the hermit to say what he thinks of this tale, which evidently expresses the author’s own opinion, and, unsurprisingly, the story pleases him and the poem ends in a long lyrical reiteration of the message that is already quite apparent. The hermit realises that his time has passed and uttering a last criticism of poets who ‘please the time, / With fictions, tales, and idle rime’ he reclines and dies.

[28] The only other references to these names that I have been able to trace is in the eclogues of the Italian humanist poet Jacopo Sannazaro (1458-1530).

Several themes are invoked in the poem to convey the basic point concerning the pride and shallowness of the age. The heart of the poem is undoubtedly the wanderer's own tale of the joyless inn, where the author himself is introduced as a character in what a few centuries later would have been praised as an ingenious postmodern metafictional twist. At some places in the juxtaposition of old-time fraternity and the current lack of hospitality, the poem has echoes of Feste's song in *Twelfth Night* that laments the passing of a bygone era when 'a foolish thing was but a toy', whereas now ''gainst knaves and thieves men shut their gate'.[29] The phenomena that the author reserves his most acerbic comments for include flamboyance, particularly that associated with courtiers ('pampring vp their filthy flesh which is a slave to time'), flashy poetry, and 'wit', especially such that is connected to learning. The 'learned men' that pluck down the May-pole are but dullards and spoilsports, and one of the poem's final stanzas proclaim: 'Oxford and Cambridge was erected / For Vertue, not for vice protected'. Some of these statements place the poem within the context of the current criticism of the 'University Wits', the group of authors that flaunted their background as Oxford or Cambridge students. Nashe was one of them, but his relationship to this group, whose main antagonist was the uneducated Shakespeare, was ambivalent, and he often criticised men of learning, perhaps most explicitly in the 'Pride of the Learned' passage in his *Pierce Pennilesse*. But King's condemnation of wit goes beyond mere anti-intellectualism.

One of the main criticisms directed at this poem is its blending of various metres and its rather haphazard handling of them. This is surely something that makes it asymmetrical in form and somewhat ungainly for the reader, but upon closer reading it is difficult to think that this rhapsodical character is unintentional. Indeed, the combination of the poem's clumsy rhythm, flat truisms and sentimental allusions suggests the construction of a text that promotes simplicity and innocence both by way of its contents and its outward form. Every page reeks with contempt for flamboyance, affectation and hypocrisy to such an extent that had it been worded in too elegant and 'bragging' a way then the style would have undermined the message. We cannot say if this was the author's conscious intention or whether it is simply the way it comes across to the reader. It is unlikely that the author is a great stylist hiding his talent, even if McCarthy's Shakespeare hypothesis is an attractive one, but if it was the work of an inexperienced writer who did his best while admitting his incapacity in the preface then it might well have been met with approval from writers who praised simplicity, especially if they were personal friends of the author.

[29] William Shakespeare, *Twelfth Night*, ed. by Keir Elam (London: Bloomsbury, Arden Shakespeare, 2008), p. 353.

The most interesting aspect of the work from our point of view, however, is found not in the text of the poem itself but in the way the author presents himself in the preface and dedication. Here King repeatedly mentions his lack of education and even implies that he can barely spell his own name. When first he alludes to his illiteracy, his elucidation is allowed to take up some space:

> I say I am no Scholler, if that be a lie I referre me to the iudgement of the learned, who if they but pose me in the petigree of a Noune and Pronoune, I straight crosse and blesse my selfe, & thinke they begin to coniure. Againe, I affirme that thus being no Scholler, but a simple honest Dunce, as I am, that canot say B to a Battledore, it is very presumptuously done of me, to offer to hey-passe and repasse it in Print so, when my Ancestors scarce euer heard of a Pen & Inke-horne, & much more presumptuously, it being such a course homespun linsey woolsey webbe of wit as it is, to shroude it under the protection of so high a personage, who are more worthy to patronize the deuine Muse of Apollo, or the thundring spirit of Homer, then this Countrey dance of the worlds end, or harsh Lancashire Horne-pipe.

The work is dedicated to the Countess of Sussex, who at this time was Bridget Radcliffe, recipient of numerous other literary dedications. King is overstating his case here, to say the least, claiming that if confronted with grammatical terms he would mistake them for sorcery and cross himself, and he excuses himself for presuming to print such a simple rhyme as this. He furthermore claims to come from a simple and unlearned family who almost never heard of pens and inkhorns, and refers, as in the main poem, to country dances and hornpipes as if to emphasise his links with the provincial world. At the same time, he revels in various extended rephrasings of the nature of his poetry and his illiteracy, as in the phrases ‘linsey woolsey webbe of wit’ and ‘a simple honest Dunce, as I am, that canot say B to a Battledore’. He may not be a genius, but he is hardly a stranger to writing, and the sense that King’s endeavour has a hidden agenda grows stronger when we learn a few lines down that he has no high regard for the majority of scribblers that get published:

> I see my inferiours in the gifts of learning, wisedome, & vnderstanding, torment the Print daily with lighter trifles and liggalorums, then my russet Hermit is, which hath made me the bolder to shoulder in amongst them. They clap a paire of French spurres on the heeles of Vice to rowell ope (sic) the wombe of that resty Iade Iniquity, & let all the loath-some guts & garbidge of his panch issue out to putrifie and infect the fresh aire of Pauls Church-yard.

Is he offering his own hermit poem as a critique of the outpouring of mediocre verse that he sees around him? The way he expresses his attitude is reminiscent of some contemporary publications that were connected to the current inclination in some quarters towards nostalgia and tradition. In the pamphlet recounting his marathon morris dance from London to Norwich in 1600, *Kemps nine daies wonder*, the Shakespearean clown Will Kemp expresses an unfamiliarity with language that borders on suspicion in a vein similar to that of King. Relating how he refuses an offer of drink since it 'stands not with the congruity of my health', he ruminates:

> Congruitie said I? how came that strange language in my mouth? I thinke scarcely that it is any Christen worde, and yet it may be a good worde for ought I knowe, though I neuer made it, nor doe verye well understand it; yet I am sure I have bought it at the word-mongers, at as deare a rate, as I could haue had a whole 100. of Bauines at the wood-mongers.[30]

Kemp and other stage clowns of the period before clowning became unfashionable after 1600 were adept at performing this type of semi-mock-illiteracy that was supposed to be a stock trait of their on-stage characters. But the layers of self-consciousness and jesting are numerous, and a writer who claims to be hardly literate at the beginning of a book and then goes on to write the rest of it is evidently striking a pose. At the same time neither Kemp nor King were prolific authors, these being their only pamphlets. In a man like Kemp it was a part of his job and public persona to feign a lack of learning, but what about King?[31] Had his literary associates praised his innocence to such an extent that he felt a need to live up to it? The ironical undercurrent of much of the references to King certainly also imply a jocular dimension to all of this. His uneducated status was probably appreciated as a breath of fresh air, but his status as a cultivator of mirth, a beer-drinker and a 'tobacconist' also made his publication of *The Hermites Tale* part of a game. As noted by Harriet Phillips, the 'merry world of the past' was heavily associated with 'ordinary speech' in the literature that evoked it, allowing authors to express nostalgia implicitly 'in forms which reflect[ed] the oral world of everyday culture'.[32] King expresses it both implicitly, in the form, and explicitly. Considering the role he had been cast in by other authors it is perhaps natural that when it was his turn to speak he ran the risk of overacting.

---

[30] Will Kemp, *Kemps nine daies wonder. Performed in a daunce from London to Norwich* (London, 1600), A3v.

[31] Cf. Fallon, p. 8.

[32] Phillips, p. 24.

Sandra Clark's assessment that Thomas Nashe 'was a man proud of his learning' who 'scorned pamphleteers, moralists, ballad-mongers, and news-writers' needs adjustment. In the words of Steve Mentz, 'Nashe mixed claims for academic status with the street wisdom of St. Paul's'.[33] His contempt was saved for the grubbiness of cheap print and the churning out of inferior works rather than the uneducated writer. A man like King might have stood for something purer in his mind, an autodidact whose love was for poetry and idealism rather than posing or making money. He would have had a natural position alongside Nashe in the Marprelate Controversy several years earlier. It would be a mistake to speak of King as an innocent young man considering the world of taverns, bawdy-houses and card games that Nashe refers to in his dedicatory epistle. This text, which is the best, albeit flawed, source of information on King's personality, evokes a young man – Nashe uses the word 'Donsell' about him, denoting a young squire – of some means who travels to London 'to reuell it and haue two playes in one night, inuite all the Poets and Musitions to his chamber the next morning, where against theyr coming, a whole heape of money shall bee bespread vppon the boord and all his trunkes opened to shewe his rich sutes'. This carousing socialising spirit makes him a natural focal point for the literate circles of London, and at the same time something like a muse, a man who inspired writers praising sincerity with his unaffected ways and lack of learning. But he was no Gertrude Stein or Lord Alfred Douglas. The key to his appeal seems to have been his lack of affectation.

And yet, not even Humphrey King was beyond that ubiquitous renaissance practice that Stephen Greenblatt termed 'self-fashioning', for when it came time for King to actually publish his great poem, he could not help but preface it with a text that extensively attempts to reinforce and reiterate the image of 'Lustie Humfrey' that previous writers had established. Not even King was impervious to a praise that repeatedly told him what was so good about him. Using Greenblatt's contention, his self-fashioning was dictated both by himself and by his surroundings.[34]

The poem about Lustie Humfrey's encounter with the hermit was to become King's only published work, unless other works have been lost to us. A short poem signed 'H. King' under the heading of 'H. King to a King' was found by Thomas Corser in the nineteenth

[33] Steve Mentz, 'Day Labor: Thomas Nashe and the Practice of Prose in Early Modern England', in *Early Modern Prose Fiction: The Cultural Politics of Reading*, ed. by Naomi Conn Liebler (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007), pp. 18-32 (p. 30).

[34] Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), p. 256.

century in a commonplace book from 'the time of Charles I'. It is a brief satirical work evidently addressed to James I, imploring him to remedy the corruptions of society that the previous monarch had caused.[35] A more substantial addition to King's oeuvre was suggested by Katherine Duncan-Jones in a 1996 article presenting a newly discovered set of epitaphs on Thomas Nashe found in a manuscript at Berkeley Castle. Since one of the poems is attributed to Ben Jonson, this is the one that receives the most attention, but Duncan-Jones also devotes a few paragraphs to King, who has signed his name under the last of the poems. The work reinforces some of the semblance of King that we have received from other references. He calls himself both an 'unlearned poet' and an 'unknown poet', and in the final stanzas he even alludes to his own main work:

> A Hermites tale here my devotion bringes
> & offers yt to your acceptiue hand
> may thys excuse him where he rudely singes.
> hee n'ere had tast of any other land.
> Pied affectation never made him rome
> his stile is like his garments spun at home.[36]

Thereby he confirms that the Hermit's Tale was the full extent of his production, while again forcefully stressing the rude and 'homespun' nature of his 'stile'. In a footnote Duncan-Jones, ever the diligent archival researcher, offers a possible date of death for King, as she claims to have found a 'Humphrey Kinge a maried man gent' in the burial records of St. Gregory by St. Paul's on 24 May 1602.[37] This would mean that the extant edition of King's great poem is posthumous, and possibly it circulated in manuscript form among the fellow writers who mentioned it earlier. Further archival research might reveal more about King's life, but for the purpose of this article, the relation between the dedications to him and his own writings reveals several aspects of literary life in London at a pivotal moment in history.

The attribute that perhaps defines Humphrey King the most is his penchant for tobacco. This connects him with the contemporary and much derided figure of the gallant, or coxcomb, the Jacobean equivalent of the modern dandy or eighteenth-century fop. Both Thomas Dekker and Barnabe Rich made fun of the fashionable practice of smoking

---

[35] Thomas Corser, *Collectanea Anglo-Poetica: or, A bibliographical and descriptive catalogue of a portion of a collection of early English poetry, with occasional extracts and remarks biographical and critical*, part 8, vol 102 (Manchester, 1860), p. 339.

[36] Katherine Duncan-Jones, '"They say a made a good end": Ben Jonson's Epitaph on Thomas Nashe', *Ben Jonson Journal*, 3.1 (1996), 1-19.

[37] Duncan-Jones, n. 40.

tobacco, the former especially in his well-known *The Gull's Horn-Book* (1609), which frequently refers to tobacco and smoking in a sarcastic manner.[38] The early 1600s saw the publication of several works of literature that derided fashionable men-about-town who had recently come into some wealth by inheritance or otherwise. Epigrammatists such as John Cooke and Henry Parrot were especially fond of this object of ridicule. Cooke, who was later to devote an entire play to it in his *Greene's Tu Quoque, or The City Gallant*, speaks of the gallant 'attir'd all in blacke' whose 'father's lately dead and he is heire, / Of large possessions and reuenues faire', and who could spend several years running from his creditors until he finally ended up in debtor's prison.[39] Parrot contributes numerous similar portraits of men who were once 'wont to swagger and carowse' but who are now hiding from creditors.[40] Another distinguishing habit associated with the gallant was his tendency to be seen walking in St. Paul's Cathedral and Churchyard, especially in the aisle known, incidentally, as Duke Humfrey's Walk. King himself refers in his book to the 'fresh air of Paul's Church-yard', where booksellers traditionally peddled their wares, and which has been putrefied by writers inferior even to him. Thus he distances himself from a world to which he appears to have been connected, and indeed, the familiarity with the walks of St. Paul's expressed by numerous writers in the same breath as they voice their disdain for it suggests that the culture of gallantry was a construction used to label others, never oneself, even by those who matched the description.

This ambivalence can also be translated to the conflict between the educated and uneducated writer. This conflict is usually connected to some writings around 1590 criticising actors that turn to playwriting, competing with the superior poets of university-educated men. Nashe's preface to *Menaphon* and the assumed attack on Shakespeare in the 1592 pamphlet *Greenes Groats-Worth of Witte* are the most famous cases. This conflict was revived a decade later, when the so-called *Parnassus* plays emerged out of a Cambridge student coterie, parodying non-university-trained playwrights.[41] But the associations between educated and uneducated writers were often intimate, and the inclination towards merry-making spurned by Puritans such as Gabriel Harvey was greater in men like Harvey's nemesis Thomas Nashe. The conflict between a disdain for

[38] Thomas Dekker, *The Gull's Horn-Book* (London, 1609); Barnabe Rich, *My Ladies Looking-Glasse* (London, 1616), p. 22. See also Elizabeth Moran, 'Invention's Mint: The Currency of Fashion and Fake News in Early Modern London', *Parergon*, 37.1 (2020), 167-204.

[39] I. C., *Epigrames. Serued out in 52. seuerall Dishes for euery man to tast without surfeting* (London, 1604), nos. 8 & 9.

[40] *The Mous-Trap* (London, 1606), no. 63.

[41] Zachary Lesser and Peter Stallybrass, 'The First Literary *Hamlet* and the Commonplacing of Professional Plays', *Shakespeare Quarterly* 59.4 (2008) 371-420.

the uneducated and camaraderie with unlearned men was a question of a discrepancy between the public author persona and private socialising.[42] When King made the transition from being a figure written about by others to a published writer himself, his move perhaps inadvertently drew attention to this unstable discrepancy. Considering Nashe's by all accounts untroubled attitude to this instability, illustrated time and again in his irony and ambiguity, he might well have applauded this. But it turned King into something unique in Elizabethan literary culture – a figure straddling the border between author-styled persona and amateur poet, between 'gentle amateur' and university-educated writer.[43] His own authorship obliged him to carry out a piece of self-fashioning in order to live up to the role he had been cast in by others. This is an aspect seldom addressed in discussions of late-Elizabethan literary rivalry, but it might open up new avenues of research that situate the writers of the time in a wider social and cultural context. By looking closer at neglected marginal (for want of a better term) writers and poets in this period, we can see how there was a social affinity among writers with types of people often decried in print. The use of irony and humour might have been intended to disguise the fraternity, but the occasional level of detail found in references to King, particularly in Nashe's dedication, exposes the culture of male fellowship and urban revelry that was an ever-present dimension in the lives of the London literati.

There are less concrete conclusions to be drawn about the persona of Humphrey King himself, but if there is anything that his great poem communicates it is just that praise of camaraderie and merrymaking that his friends associated him with. Unlike many other evocations of nostalgia in Elizabethan literature, however, it was coupled with a culture of contemporary urban carousing. And perhaps it is this quality that kept King from authoring more works. A sympathetic depiction of taverns, drinking and debauchery probably rooted in experience is found in the works of many prominent authors at the time, but here we have a man who was an embodiment of it, at least in his youth. What happened later we do not know, but his humble oeuvre perhaps speaks for itself. Unlike, for instance, Shakespeare's, who when invited to go out drinking would excuse himself with a sick note.[44]

---

[42] Cf. P. B. Roberts, 'Underemployed Elizabethans: Gabriel Harvey and Thomas Nashe in the *Parnassus* Plays', *Early Theatre* 21.2 (2018), 49-70; Sarah Knight, '"It was not mine intent to prostitute my Muse in English": Academic Publication in Early Modern England', in *Print and Power in France and England, 1500-1800*, ed. by David Adams, Adrian Armstrong (Aldershot: Ashgate 2006), pp. 39-52.

[43] This division of the literary field, ultimately inspired by Bourdieu, comes from Edward Gieskes, '"Honesty and Vulgar Praise": The Poet's War and the Literary Field', *Medieval and Renaissance Drama in England* 18 (2005), 75-103 (p. 78).

[44] At least according to John Aubrey; see E.A.J. Honigmann, 'Tiger Shakespeare and Gentle Shakespeare', *Modern Language Review*, 107.3 (2012), 699-711.