

‘Playing the Dolt in Print’: The Glossing of Nashe’s *Pierce Penilesse*

This paper will consider the marginal glosses to Thomas Nashe’s *Pierce Penilesse his Supplication to the Divell* (1592) as a self-consciously playful adaptation of the glossing conventions that emerged in the early decades of print in England. Recording a series of apparently improvisatory asides that switch freely from English to Latin and from the first to the third person, Nashe’s glosses confound expectations raised by the increasingly frequent use of sober, instructive glosses in printed texts of the sixteenth century. Far from guiding the reader, they record the moment when the writer responds to his own words as if he were encountering them for the first time; they are the visible manifestation of Nashe’s interest in the processes of reading and writing for their own sake, rather than as means of informing or instructing.

While Nashe’s use of such ostentatiously extemporizing glosses has generally been attributed to the influence of the Marprelate tracts of 1589-90, this paper will argue that it should be viewed as part of a wider phenomenon. Where printers had a vested interest in proclaiming both the stability and the educational value of their productions, in early editions of the works of authors as diverse as Skelton, Baldwin, and Spenser, the use of incongruously informal glosses compels the reader to question the reliability of the printed word. Like Nashe’s, such glosses imply that reading is not a passive, but an engaged, ethical process. While this view is consonant with contemporary humanist theories of reading, it is grounded in an intensely practical consideration of the way print alters the meaning of a work. ‘Playing the dolt’ in the margins proves to be both sheer sprezzatura and part of a serious renegotiation of author-reader relations in the context of new conditions of transmission.

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