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Thinking through Community: Navigating Precarity in the Sixteenth-century Print Trade

Matt Ryan [1,*]

[1]School of English Literature, Language and Linguistics, Newcastle University, Newcastle, UK

*Correspondence to, m.ryan2@newcastle.ac.uk

ABSTRACT

In the cutthroat world of the late sixteenth-century print trade, reputations and livelihoods were precarious. Shaped by an increasingly restrictive regulatory system, the trade's most lucrative social and economic capital was left in the hands of the period's most powerful print agents. This left those on the outside discontented and the privileged few with a desperate fight to defend their interests. Consequently, whether seeking to gain or maintain capital, all those connected to the print trade were involved in the same financial and reputational struggles. As England's book marketplace was driven by interdependent groups of printers, publishers, booksellers, and writers, these struggles were felt communally, and evidence from the period often finds the men and women of the book trade navigating these struggles through the language of community. The texts I explore here redraw community boundaries in response to social and economic precarities sharpened by restrictive regulatory practices. Examining how these texts respond to and construct these boundaries, this essay will argue that sixteenth-century print agents and writers constructed communities as a tactic to support their precarious livelihoods and shifting positions in the book trade. In following this line of enquiry, I will establish that as the trade's economic and social obstacles grew steadily more daunting across the last half of the century, community construction became increasingly important for navigating the reputational and financial uncertainties of early modern book production.

PAPER WARRES

> Judicio: Not an Ale-house in England nor any so base a Maypole on a country greene, but sets forth some poets petternels or demilances to the paper warres in Paules Church-yard.[1]

[1] Anon., *The Returne from Pernassus* (London: John Eld for John Wright, 1606), sig. B1r.

Today, the northeast corner of St Paul's churchyard is peculiarly quiet. Tourists file into the cathedral, office workers spend their lunch hour scattered across the grass, pigeons totter. Standing here, it is easy to forget that you are only yards from Cannon Street, one of London's busiest thoroughfares. At the end of the sixteenth century, visiting this spot would have been a very different experience.

Stuffed with most of the city's bookstalls, this corner of the churchyard marked the epicentre of the book trade in early modern England. The calls of apprentices ('See a new Book new come forth, sir: buy a new Book sir') would have mixed with the chatter of crowds there to buy, sell, and be seen. It was inside the bookshops of St Paul's – as well as in and around the cathedral – that booksellers, publishers, printers, and writers formed alliances, stoked rivalries, and took sides in the 'paper warres' which characterized the early modern print trade.

These relationships were shaped by the interdependent structures of the trade. Book production needed capital from a publisher, who would acquire a manuscript from a writer and employ a printer to turn it into a book. Printers were reliant on papermakers and ink producers, and booksellers depended on all these protagonists to stock their stalls.[2] To secure a livelihood and build a reputation in this densely networked 'bookscape', participants had both to work with and compete against their peers.[3]

In his epistle to *Gerileon of England, The Second Part* (1592), Henry Chettle offers a first-hand glimpse into the competitive–collaborative dynamics of these print communities. Chettle's paratext is presented as a letter to Anthony Munday, *Gerileon*'s translator; in it he warns his friend about an oncoming occupational hazard:

> In your late employment about her Majesties affaires, having left the Translation of *Gerileon* unfinished, I chaunst to heare of a newe parte fully ended, by an excellent Scholler […]. Let this bee enough of a warning to beseech you to procede as you have begun in that delectable Hystorie which is much desired for the delightfulness thereof.[4]

Both Munday and Chettle worked as printers and writers, carving out for themselves the kind of 'transprofessional' careers common among their peers.[5] Chettle's position at the intersection of different book trades adds authority to the persona he constructs for himself here: he is Munday's man on the inside offering intelligence from the frontline. With an ear to the grapevine, Chettle reveals that, in his friend's absence, another 'Scholler' has translated and is about to print the next section of *Gerileon.* Warning Munday that he is in danger of being beaten to the punch, Chettle urges him to return home from his mysterious 'employment' and 'procede […] in that delectable Hystorie'.

In the cutthroat world of the sixteenth-century print trade, reputations and livelihoods were precarious. Much of this precarity was rooted in the uncertainties of textual ownership. Even in the case of translations, once a manuscript had been licensed, its contents belonged to the licensee. After this point, another printer was not permitted to produce a text with the same or similar plot. So, if Munday wasted his chance to sanction the next part of *Gerileon*, he would miss a valuable opportunity to improve his financial and reputational standing.

[2] Jaime Goodrich, *Faithful Translators: Authorship, Gender, and Religion in Early Modern England* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2014), p. 13.

[3] See John Jowett, 'Henry Chettle: "Your Old Compositor"', *Text*, 15 (2003), 141–61; Louise Wilson, 'I Maruel who the Diuell is his Printer', in *The Book Trade in Early Modern England: Practices, Perceptions, Connections*, ed. by John Hinks and Victoria Gardner (Newcastle: Oak Knoll Press/The British Library, 2014), pp. 1–19.

[4] Etienne de Masionneufve, *Gerileon of England. The Second Part*, trans. Anthony Munday (London: [Thomas Scarlet?] for Cuthbert Burby, 1592), sig. A2r.

[5] Jowett, 'Henry Chettle,' p. 145.

While Chettle's anonymous scholar belonged to the same collaborative ecosystem as Munday, they were also competitors: in this context, staying ahead of your peers was key to maintaining or advancing your position. All those connected to the print trade were involved with this same scramble for social and economic capital, and these competitive dynamics were central to its interlocking communities.

Set against this backdrop, Chettle's letter does more than offer insight into these conditions: it contributes to them. While almost certainly fictional, the seductive narrative of a race between two warring print agents presents the reader with a tantalizing impression of the book trade. Rather than a straightforward dispatch to a friend, this tale of rumour and rivalry serves primarily to promote the book in which it appears, invoking a competitive network of print agents to advance reputational and economic interests. This essay will argue that sixteenth-century print agents and writers constructed communities on the page as a tactic to support their precarious livelihoods and shifting positions in the book trade. In following this line of enquiry, I will establish that the trade's economic and social obstacles grew steadily more daunting across the last half of the century, and that, in line with this shift, community construction became increasingly important for navigating these reputational and financial uncertainties.

My argument revolves around three short case studies, each of which allows us access to sixteenth-century print communities and the increasingly unstable socioeconomic conditions which shaped them. First, I will examine how the satirist Thomas Nashe constructs communities-on-the-page in *Strange Newes* (1593) and *Have with you to Saffron Walden* (1596). These imagined groups of peers, I contend, support Nashe in his defence of the emergent and precariously defined reputation of professional authorship. Next, I examine a petition addressed to the Secretary of State by Christopher Barker, the Queen's printer and Upper Warden of the Stationers' Company. Written in 1582, amid a fierce, decade-long dispute about the Company's regulatory systems, I argue that Barker's text erects print trade boundaries to protect the value of his own textual property and strengthen his position in the book trade. Finally, I focus on the preface of printer-writer William Baldwin's kaleidoscopic prose pamphlet, *Beware the Cat* (c. 1553). While not printed until 1570, Baldwin's text was composed nearly two decades before, and his epistle grapples with the ethics of authorship at the dawn of a new age of English print. I argue that Baldwin's text advances a collaborative definition of textual production, presenting us with an early group of print agents uneasy with the reputational and financial concerns of the individual.

Taken together, these texts uncover shifts which occurred in the construction of early modern print networks. They reveal that, in the late sixteenth century, 'community' was understood as a group of interdependent agents bound by shared interests. These interests, and the communities they shaped, shifted in response to socioeconomic restraints imposed more forcefully toward the end of the century. Before engaging with my source texts, we must first examine the restrictive reputational and financial context which necessitated these shifts.

LEGAL LIMITATIONS: CROWN AND COMPANY RESTRICTIONS

The increasingly uncertain socioeconomic conditions of the sixteenth-century print trade were shaped by the gradual tightening of its regulatory system. This process is best viewed through the lens of the institution responsible for managing this system: the Stationers' Company. A London trade guild responsible for training printers, supervising press output,

and enforcing legislation, the Company included printers, booksellers, compositors, book and paper importers, and bookbinders.

From its earliest days, the Stationers had their own licensing procedures.[6] After the Company's incorporation in 1557, these procedures significantly expanded. The Company charter stipulated that anyone wishing to publish a book in England had to pay to obtain a licence, which approved a publisher's proprietary rights in a text or 'Copy'.[7] For a further fee, a licensee then had the option of entering the title of their book into the Stationers' Register. Entry in the Register prevented others from printing the same text and provided grounds for redress if these rights were violated. Licences could be granted to any freeman of the Company, but they soon began to accumulate in the hands of a small group of men.[8] Understood as a statement of property ownership, licences and copies were synonymous with capital in the trade, and the Company's regulatory interventions ensured that the most valuable capital remained in the hands of its senior members.[9] This meant that, by the 1580s, a group of well-connected Stationers 'came to "own" almost all books that were printed and published in London'.[10]

The government's own, separate, licensing system further tightened these restrictions. The Crown's licensing mechanisms had their beginnings in a decree issued by Henry VIII which stated that all new books must be approved by the Privy Council.[11] Designed to stifle texts which 'slanderously and maliciously' criticized the King's governance, enforcing this edict was delegated to various officials across church and state.[12] Punishments ranged from confiscation and fines to seizing equipment, imprisonment, mutilation, and death.[13] While unchanged by Edward VI and Mary I, these measures were significantly strengthened under Elizabeth I, whose government felt that control of the press was key to maintaining church governance.[14] Pursuing this aim, in 1559 and 1566, the Queen issued a series of statutes which bolstered the state's licensing system and enlisted the support of 'the Wardens of the company of Stationers' in rooting out 'scandalous, malicious, schismatical and heretical' books.[15]

This legislation allowed the Crown to more effectively police the book trade's products, but also suited Company interests. Government statutes restricted access to the means of book production, which narrowed entry to the trade. Allowing the state some measure of control over the book business, these restrictions also protected the position of those at the top of its hierarchies.[16] Certain sections of the market could be relied upon for a steady reprint rate; acquiring licences for texts in these areas allowed print agents to increase both

[6] Peter W. M. Blayney, *The Stationers' Company and the Printers of London, 1501–1557* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), p. 14.

[7] Ian Gadd, 'Being like a Field: Corporate Identity in the Stationers' Company', PhD thesis (Oxford University, 1999), p. 42.

[8] Maureen Bell, 'Women in the English Book Trades 1557-1700', *Leipziger Jahrbuch zur Buchgeschichte*, 6 (1996), 13–45 (p. 20).

[9] Robin Myers, *The Stationers' Company Archive 1554-1984* (Winchester: St Paul's Bibliographies, 1990), p. xviii.

[10] John Feather, 'Book Trade Networks and Community Contexts', in *Historical Networks in the Book Trade*, ed. by Catherine Feely and John Hinks (London: Routledge, 2016), pp. 83–101 (p. 89).

[11] P .L. Hughes and J. F. Larkin (eds.), *Tudor Royal Proclamations, Volume 1* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1964), p. 270 [hereafter Hughes and Larkin].

[12] Hughes and Larkin, 1.270.

[13] Ronan Deazley, 'Commentary on Henrician Proclamation 1538', in *Primary Sources on Copyright (1450-1900)*, ed. by L. Bently and M. Kretschmer (2008), www.copyrighthistory.org [Accessed 5 February 2024]; W. W. Greg, *Some Aspects and Problems of London Publishing Between 1550 and 1650* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956), p. 7.

[14] Feather, *A History of British Publishing*, 2nd ed (London: Routledge, 2005), p. 45; Cyprien Blagden, *The Stationers' Company: A History 1403-1959* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960), p. 41.

[15] Edward Arber (ed.), *A Transcript of the Registers of the Company of Stationers 1554-1640 AD* (London: privately printed, 1875–94), I.28–32. See also Cyndia Susan Clegg, *Press Censorship in Elizabethan England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 36–54; Greg, *London Publishing*, pp. 5–6.

[16] Feather, *History of British Publishing*, p. 46.

their finances and their reputations in the trade. Breaking into these areas was difficult unless you were on the inside. Often connected to powerful contacts in the world of book production, those who did have access to this inside track could source and licence potentially lucrative manuscripts before anyone else.[17] Accumulating further licences strengthened the position of those who belonged to this coterie, and even after their death, practices of bequest and exchange ensured that copies stayed within kinship circles or professional networks.[18] This closed process ensured that entry into the upper echelons of the book trade remained well-guarded, and deepened the reputational struggles of those on the outside.

Those on the outside also struggled to sustain their profits. This financial precarity was made more acute by the Crown's patent system. Royal patents or 'privileges' gave individuals not just the right to print specific titles, but often whole classes of books, allowing patentees to lay claim to significant terrain in the book market. These agreements had been gradually accumulating since the latter half of Henry VII's reign; and by the end of the sixteenth century, many of the most profitable areas of the publishing trade were cordoned off.[19] The strictures of the licensing system meant that the profits of the trade were already weighted in favour of a small group of well-connected stationers; this was exacerbated by the uneven distribution of patents. The number of print agents grew steadily across the last half of the century, yet few new patents emerged.[20] Seeking to find ways to navigate this perilous socioeconomic landscape, several took matters into their own hands and began to print privileged copies they did not own, but for which they knew there was an easy market.[21] Viewed by patent-holders as an attack on their property, those responsible were routinely tried by the Stationers' Court, and spats over patent ownership rumbled on for several years before they exploded into a series of fierce disputes in the 1580s.

By the end of the sixteenth century, the print trade's regulatory systems were at their most restrictive since the incorporation of the Company. Through this intricate regulatory framework, a group of well-connected individuals was able to control the social and financial capital of the trade. This meant that most had to struggle to build a reputation or make any significant profits. Given the densely networked structure of the trade, these struggles were felt by all involved in the book trade, and mitigating tactics employed by printers, publishers, booksellers, and writers were rooted in the concept of community.

Many of the prose pamphlets produced in the 1590s were haunted by the precarities faced by London's freelance writers. The self-appointed chronicler of these precarities was Thomas Nashe. In the next section of this essay, I will demonstrate how Nashe's work uses communities-on-the-page to steady the uncertain reputation of professional authorship and establish his own bankable print persona.

PAPER PUBLICS: THOMAS NASHE AND HIS COMMUNITIES OF THE PAGE

While *The Anatomy of Absurdity* (1589) is Nashe's first work in print, he erupted into notoriety three years later with *Pierce Penniless* (1592). From the outset, the eponymous Pierce, a

[17] Alan B. Farmer and Zachary Lesser, 'What is Print Popularity? A Map of the Elizabethan Book Trade', in *Elizabethan Top Ten: Defining Print Popularity in Early Modern England*, ed. Andy Kesson and Emma Smith (Farnham: Ashgate, 2016), pp. 27–50 (p. 47).

[18] Bell, 'Women in the English Book Trades', p. 20.

[19] R. C. Simmons, 'ABCs: Almanacs, Ballads, Chapbooks, Popular Piety and Textbooks', in *The Cambridge History of the Book in Britain. Volume IV. 1557–1695*, ed. by John Barnard and D. F. McKenzie (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 504–13 (p. 509).

[20] Alexandra Hill, *Lost Books and Printing in London, 1557-1640: An Analysis of the Stationers' Company Register* (Leiden: Brill, 2018), p. 23.

[21] Halasz, *Marketplace*, p. 25.

scholar and poet, establishes himself as a keen observer of the shifting dynamics of professional authorship. Bewailing the uncertainties of his life as a writer, he seeks to understand his situation: 'I tost my imagination a thousand wayes to see if I coulde finde anie meanes to revive my estate: But all my thoughts consorted to this conclusion, that the world was uncharitable and I ordained to be miserable'.[22] Pierce understands that his 'estate' is shaped by specific socioeconomic conditions. Potential patrons 'are enamoured of their owne wits' and reluctant to share their wealth, while London's bookstalls are crammed with the work of 'everie grosse brained idiot […] suffered to come into print' (sig. B2r).

This proliferation of books was good news for the city's publishers and booksellers, but not for a wannabe writer in search of an audience. For Pierce, the road to any meaningful financial gain in the Elizabethan cultural sector was full of obstacles. Refused access to the kind of success he craves, however, Pierce, like several of Nashe's personae, finds strength in marginality. These characters challenge from afar the power structures which restrict them. Yet, as Cathy Shrank has noted, they are also often driven by a paradoxical sense of themselves as outsiders and insiders, both finding fault and empathizing with contemporary society.[23] For our purposes here, I would like to examine how Nashe's work is shot through with nostalgia for a life on the inside, and the support offered by a community of peers in the face of reputational precarity.

Nashe was fleetingly connected to several communities across his life and career: as a student at Cambridge, contributor to London's blossoming theatre scene, and writer in residence at several elite households.[24] His work also offers glimpses of the print networks with which he engaged. In *Have with you*, for instance, another letter purportedly from our friend Henry Chettle places Nashe in the middle of such a community. Referring to printing house practices throughout, Chettle identifies himself as 'your old Compositer' and promises to swiftly 'square & set' the pages of Nashe's book.[25] Alongside the letter's primary aim of defending Nashe's reputation, these references suggest that both he and Chettle worked together on *Have with you*. If so, they likely belonged, at least temporarily, to the community of print agents attached to John Danter's print shop.[26]

While scattered throughout his works, these print communities-on-the-page are closely associated with the most (in)famous episode of Nashe's career. In the mid-1590s, he and fellow writer Gabriel Harvey were involved in a fiery war of words which burned through a series of pamphlets from both men. In Nashe's contributions, he frequently imagines himself as part of a group, the boundaries of which exclude his nemesis-in-print. To examine how Nashe uses these paper communities to reclaim ownership of his reputation, I will focus on parallel excerpts from *Have with you* and *Strange Newes*.

The Harvey-Nashe feud had its roots in both men's university days and dragged several of their peers into the crossfire.[27] In fact, Nashe was not, at first, the central target of Harvey's ire. Irked by a slight directed at his family in *A Quip for an Upstart Courtier* (1592) by Robert Greene – playwright, pamphleteer, and friend of Nashe – Harvey protests that he is unwillingly brought into the fray to set the record straight. *Foure Letters*, published in the

[22] Thomas Nashe, *Pierce Penilesse his Suplication to the Divell* (London: J. Busby, 1592), sig. B2v.

[23] Cathy Shrank, 'Experimental Forms', *The Precarious World of Thomas Nashe*, podcast (2023). https://tinyurl.com/2em8uny4 [Accessed 21st November 2023].

[24] We know that Nashe lived and worked in the houses of well-connected friends at various points in his career. For his relationships with Archbishop John Whitgift and the Carey family, see Andrew Hadfield, *Thomas Nashe and Late Elizabethan Writing* (London: Reaktion Books, 2023), pp. 33, 38.

[25] Thomas Nashe, *Have with you to Saffron-walden* (London: John Danter, 1596), sig. V3v.

[26] Jowett, 'Henry Chettle', p. 143.

[27] Eric D. Vivier, 'Gabriel Harvey Against Satire', *English Literary Renaissance*, 49:2, (2019), 172–200 (p.175).

same year, is Harvey's attempt to do just that. Pulling no punches, Harvey sets about dismantling Greene's reputation.

Since the posthumous appearance of *Greene's Groatsworth of Wit* (1592), a text famous primarily for pouring scorn on a young William Shakespeare, Greene's colourful life and recent death were, in the early 1590s, already the subject of gossip. *Groatsworth*, however, is also part of the wider tussle of community politics. Discredited as an 'upstart crow', Shakespeare is positioned as part of a literary out-group of blustering 'rude groomes' whose work, while bombastic, will ultimately fail, according to the voice of Greene, to live up to that produced by those 'rare wits' with whom he identifies.[28] In *Foure Letters*, Harvey enacts his own boundary skirmish, this time taking aim at Greene himself.

Just as *Groatsworth* smeared Shakespeare and his peers, Harvey's text identifies Greene as the symbol of widespread cultural decay. Here, he argues that Greene, and writers who align themselves with him, threaten to become 'odious & intollerable to all good Learning and Civill Government'.[29] Separating its author from these 'Libellers', Harvey's *Foure Letters*, like Barker's report to Burghley, is part of an ongoing civil war within the print trade. Just as Barker looks to distinguish between 'right' and 'wrong' kinds of print community, Harvey distances himself from fellow writers who, in his view, fail to show a sense of civic responsibility.

Drawing a line between the 'exactly laboured' cultural products he admires and those 'dogged Fables, Slanders and Lies' produced by the 'riming and scribbling crew', Harvey is unafraid to name those he sees as responsible for this plague against decency (*Foure Letters*, sig. G2v). Nashe is among this number, and so too is William Elderton, a popular ballad writer and 'notorious mates' with Greene. *Strange Newes*, Nashe's response to *Foure Letters*, picks up on this slight on Elderton. Rallying the balladeers of St Paul's, Nashe calls on them to unite in response: 'Thomas Delone[y], Philip Stub[b]s, Robert Armin, &c. Your father Elderton is abus'd. Revenge, revenge on course paper and want of matter, that hath most sacriligiously contaminated the divine spirit & quintessence of a penny a quart'.[30] Elsewhere in his work, Nashe is, like Harvey, quick to distance himself from 'babbling ballads' consumed by 'every ignorant ale-knight'.[31] But here, he and London's ballad-makers share a common purpose. Elderton, as with Greene, was no longer around to defend himself, so Nashe joins forces with this 'congregation' of balladeers, urging them into a battle ('revenge, revenge') fought on 'course paper' and hawked around the city. Despite teasing references to ballad makers' 'want of matter' and inspiration taken in 'licour', this moment sees Nashe recognize a wider community of textual producers, calling on them to join him in defending both their recently departed peer and the 'institution of the professional writer'.[32] Nashe, then, presents us in *Strange Newes* with a print community responding to confrontation in the most effective way open to them: collective creative production.

Kate De Rycker has recently recognized that this episode from *Strange Newes* sees Nashe create a 'virtual community of freelance writers staking out their territory in the book trade' through 'the language of vengeance and honour'.[33] Crucially, this extended community of

[28] Henry Chettle and Robert Greene, *Greenes Groats-worth* of *Witte* (London: Henry and Moses Bell, 1592), sigs F2r, F2v.

[29] Gabriel Harvey, *Foure Letters, and Certaine Sonnets Especially Touching Obert Greene, and other Parties, by him Abused* (London: John Wolfe, 1592), sig. B1v.

[30] Thomas Nashe, *Strange Newes, of the Intercepting Certaine Letters* (London: John Danter, 1592), sig. D4v.

[31] Thomas Nashe, *The Anatomie of Absurdity* (London: Thomas Hacket, 1589), sig. B4r.

[32] Kenneth Friedenreich, 'Nashe's *Strange Newes* and the Case for Professional Writers', *Studies in Philology*, 71 (1974), 451–72 (p. 466).

[33] Kate De Rycker, 'Thomas Nashe and the Virtual Community of English Writers', in *Thomas Nashe and Literary Performances: Writing Publics*, ed. by Chloe Preedy and Rachel Willie (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2024), 127–46 (pp. 142–44).

professional writers is drawn together by the need to reclaim the integrity of their collective reputation. This same community interest is mirrored in an early episode from *Have with you*, Nashe's next and final known entry in his feud with Harvey. Designed as a book-length takedown of his arch-rival, *Have with you* begins, after two typically acerbic paratexts, with a discussion between friends about the damaged reputation of their mutual acquaintance.

This community's central concern is with the lasting impression that Harvey's attacks might leave on their friend's legacy:

> To be a villaine in print […] is an attainder that will sticke by thee for ever. A blot of ignomie it is, which though this age, or, at the utmost, such in this age as have converst or are aquainted with thee, hold light and ridiculous […] yet there is an age to come, which, knowing neither thee nor him, but by your severall workes judging either, will authorise all hee hath belched forth in thy reproach for sound Gospell […] thou holding thy peace, and not confuting him, seemes to confesse and confirme all whereof hee hath accused thee, and the innocent, unheard, doo perish as guilty. (sig. E1v)

Here, *Have with you*'s community-on-the-page warns Nashe's persona Piers that in 'an age to come' Harvey's distorted vision of him may become truth. Their solution is for Piers to be less 'careles with his credit' and restore his reputation by responding to the insults directed his way. Nashe highlights here a central anxiety for late-sixteenth-century writers. With the continued growth of print, more writers could, by the late 1590s, 'justifiably think of their writing being read not only by their immediate contemporaries, but also by later generations'.[34] Without the help of a book's original context, authors lose control over how they are read by future readers. Again, these anxieties are intimately connected to the reputational precarity of the print trade and permeate both *Strange Newes* and *Have with you*.

With the survival rate of early modern ballads so low, we may never know if Deloney, Stubbes, or Armin responded to Nashe's rallying cry in *Strange Newes*. In *Have with you*, however, we see a community response firsthand. Like the epistle to Baldwin's *Beware the Cat*, the second section of *Have with you* asks us to imagine that the book itself is yet to be printed. In the reality of Nashe's framing narrative, he (or Piers) is still working on the text, but carries with him some draft 'papers'. Having shaken off his friends' reputational concerns, Piers begins by reading from his manuscript. Before long, he is interrupted. Urged by his audience to 'leave this big thunder of words' and 'come to the point', he changes his approach (sigs F4v-G1r).

Instead of continuing to narrate his tale, Nashe's persona encourages audience participation: 'Tell mee, have you a minde to anie thing in the Doctors Booke? speake the word and I will helpe you to it upon the naile' (sig. G1v). Piers and his peers then spend several pages poking fun at Harvey together. Unpicking a mishmash of real sentences from *Pierces Supererogation*, Harvey's latest contribution to the feud, they struggle with his coinages ('"Tropologicall!" O embotched and truculent') and gawp at the overstuffed prose. They oppose, moderate, and respond to one another, generating one-liners at Harvey's expense as they go.[35] Aside from an almost endless stream of gags, striking here is Nashe's vivid sketch of a community brought together by the social pitfalls of the print marketplace. While ever-present, the immediate danger here is not Nashe's empty pockets, but the looming threat of

[34] Kate De Rycker, 'Commodifying the Author: The Mediation of Aretino's Fame in the Harvey-Nashe Pamphlet War', *English Literary Renaissance*, 49.2 (2019), 145–71 (p. 147).

[35] Jennifer Richards, *Voices and Books in the English Renaissance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), p. 280.

reputational damage catalysed by the ubiquity of print. As Steve Mentz has demonstrated, writers' names were often used as 'brands' to sell their books, revealing the connection between reputational and literal currency.[36] Elsewhere in *Have with you*, Nashe reveals that he is more than aware of this link.

Reflecting on how he and Harvey are limited by the same pressures of professional authorship, Nashe complains that neither their readers, nor the print agents of St Paul's, care 'how they set Harvey and mee on fire one against another, or whet us on to consume ourselves'. Representatives of different subgroups within the same community, 'Harvey and I (a couple of beggers)' are forced to continually 'take upon us to bandie factions and contend like the Ursini and Coloni in Rome' (sig. C3r). Here, Nashe recognizes the dilemma both he and Harvey share: in the perilous world of professional authorship, their reputations and livelihoods depend on the success of their output. And, like it or not, scandal sells. Consequently, they are locked in an antagonistic community of two: whenever one denounces the other in print, they must respond until they consume each other, or themselves.

Without total ownership of their brand identity, but reliant on this identity to keep themselves afloat, writers like Nashe and Harvey sought to reclaim some sense of control through their work. In *Have with you* and *Strange Newes*, Nashe constructs paper communities to help him wrestle back ownership of his reputation and re-establish the credit of professional authorship. Connected to the world of print, the imagined members of this paper community understand the precarity of profit and status. As such, when under pressure, they come into their own, offering a sense of shared understanding and support in the face of looming threats to their livelihoods.

As we have seen, the precarities of profit and status were deeply rooted in the late sixteenth-century book trade. In this next section, I will widen my focus to examine how such precarities were felt by London's printers. Here I will argue that, like Nashe, printer and Stationer Christopher Barker's 1582 petition to Lord Burghley constructs communities on the page to protect both his reputational and financial interests.

CURATING A COMMUNITY: CHRISTOPHER BARKER'S REPORT

With the trade's most profitable work either patented or licensed, print agents began to call for change, and in the 1580s, several groups petitioned the government. Most of these texts were written on behalf of London's printers and often point to the fact that many of the most lucrative patents were owned by individuals who had little to do with the printing house. These petitions primarily voice the concern that the profits of London's printers were damaged by the patent system. Yet, also present is the lurking fear that those outside of this craft community owned too much of the trade's social territory, threatening the reputational primacy of printers. Issued in 1582, Christopher Barker's petition to Lord Burghley suggests that greater institutional support for a wider, but closely guarded, community of printers might counter the uncertainties he and his peers faced. I will argue here that this text sees a prominent print agent consciously re-draw the community boundaries of London's network of printers to isolate those who threatened his own profits and position in the trade.

The primary aim of Barker's report is to demonstrate how the patent system was damaging the livelihoods of London's printers. Addressing his words to the Secretary of State, Barker is clear that the economic precarities attached to a career in the print house were, in

[36] Steve Mentz, 'Forming Greene: Theorising the Early Modern Author in the *Groatsworth of Wit*', in *Writing Robert Greene: Essays on England's First Notorious Professional Writer*, ed. by Kirk Melnikoff and Edward Gieskes (London: Ashgate, 2008), pp. 115–33 (p. 130).

part, the result of institutional failure. He is, however, careful not to lay the blame with the current government. Pointing to the language of the Company charter, issued under Mary I, Barker argues that the absence of the term 'Printer-Stacioners' has created a situation in which 'bookesellers, bookebinders, Joyners, Chaundlers and other Freemen' are all able to operate print houses.[37] This means, Barker argues, that printers' profits have been diluted by competition. Consequently, many cannot afford the quality labour and materials required 'for the execution of any good work' and are forced instead to print 'books, pamphlettes and other trifles' which damage the 'the arte' of the printer and the state of 'the common wealth' (Arber, p. 1.144). Barker constructs a craft community of printers to support what is ultimately an economic argument. Other stationers threaten the financial stability of the city's printers, and as one of the more prominent members of this community, Barker speaks on their behalf.

It is clear, though, that he does not speak on everyone's behalf, aligning himself instead with an in-group of well-established printers whose 'good behaviour was well knowne' (p. 1.144). Unlike other petitions issued in the 1580s, Barker's text does not call for the abolition of patents. As the owner of several himself, this would make little sense. Instead, he suggests that more printers should be supported than the state then allowed, but that this support should extend only far enough to ensure 'some *fewe* … be well mayntayned' (emphasis mine). While gesturing toward a collective craft community, Barker draws clear internal boundary lines. Arguing that London has too many printing houses, he separates himself and his peers from an out-group of 'disordered' journeymen who have 'taken to themselves too many apprentizes'. In Barker's account, these negligent few, left to their own devices, have let a wave of rogues into their number. It is these 'idle, undiscrete and unthriftie persons' who are responsible for troubling the Secretary of State with their petitions, and fishmonger-turned printer John Wolfe stands at their head (p. 1.114).

Wolfe was a central figure in the patent struggles of the 1580s. Named as the ringleader of a group who rejected the Crown's patent system, Barker accuses him of stirring up the 'whole Citie, saying that their auncient liberties were thereby infringed' (p. 1.144). With Barker's economic aims in mind, it is in his interest to separate Wolfe's community of disenfranchized printers from his own. They, like the blurred line between stationers, threaten his profits. But, while Barker's concerns are primarily financial, his description of Wolfe's print community is also coloured by the fear that Burghley might associate Wolfe and his disreputable peers with all printers. Motivated by this concern, Barker employs language resonant with secrecy and suspicion to distance himself from Wolfe and his number. Employing a term usually reserved for non-conforming religious or political groups, Barker describes how these 'diverse Conventicles' met both in private ('his howse') and in public ('churches') to underline the threat posed by this cell of disgruntled printers. Wolfe himself is pictured 'seducing and perswading as manye as he could allure' to 'contemne her majesties grauntes'. Framed in this way, this dangerous splinter cell of printers poses a threat not just to the financial, but also the reputational structures of the trade.

For Barker, abolishing the patent system would endanger the trade's social hierarchies, controlled as they were by a privileged minority. Instead, Barker argues that redistributing patents to include a slightly wider group of printers will ensure them healthier returns and maintain the status quo. With access to power and profit in the hands of fewer and fewer print agents, the 1580s were a uniquely turbulent time for many. The two communities sketched in Barker's report grow out of this turbulence. One, he suggests, reinforces the Company's hierarchies, while the other represents the threatening spectre of collective

[37] Arber, I.144.

ownership. For Barker, this group imperils the socioeconomic fabric of the print trade. Ultimately, of course, Barker's aim is self-preservation. As Upper Warden of the Company and the Queen's Printer, he had ascended to the top of the trade. Well-versed in the cut-and-thrust of print trade politics, the men and women who made it to this vantage point were often 'the most ambitious, imaginative, and ruthless in the business'.[38] Seen against this context, Barker's petition can be read as an imaginative attempt to smuggle his own interests in under the banner of community concern. Aware of the safety in numbers, Barker invokes the voice of a community to support his own aims at a moment of financial and reputational peril.

In the 1550s, these perils were just beginning to take shape, and in the final section of this essay, I will return to the years before the Company's incorporation. Composed around 1553, Baldwin's preface to *Beware the Cat* stages a group of sixteenth-century creatives caught at the uneasy intersection between individual and collective interests. As such, it provides us with an insight into how an earlier generation of print agents engaged with the burgeoning threat of reputational and financial precarity and explores how ideas of 'community' were used to help navigate this perilous socio-economic terrain.

SAFETY IN NUMBERS: WILLIAM BALDWIN AND THE IDEAL OF COMMUNITY AUTHORSHIP

Early modern scholarship has long recognized that textual production in the period was informed by collaborative practices. These practices involved a range of people and occurred at every stage of the journey from manuscript to bookstall. Whether focused on authorial interventions made in the print shop or playhouse, the textual control exerted by publishers, or the impact of booksellers, scholarship on early modern authorship has demonstrated how all printed material was the product of a 'web of sustained bonds' between a broad and shifting cast of writers and print agents.[39] A member of the Stationers' Company at its incorporation in 1557, printer-writer Baldwin was entangled in this web, and his work often examines the relationship between authorial voice and collaborative processes.[40]

The preface of *Beware the Cat* catapults readers headlong into the centre of these collaborative processes. We are immediately placed as eavesdroppers to an epistolary exchange between our narrator G.B. (Guillermo Baldwin?) and the text's dedicatee, the real-life Elizabethan courtier John Young, in which we are told that we are about to read G.B.'s transcription of a tale 'tolde last Christmas' by one 'maister Streamer'.[41] According to G.B., his manuscript is on its way to Streamer via Young, their mutual acquaintance. Young himself has heard Streamer's story, but from another source, George Ferrers – courtier, poet, later favourite of Elizabeth I, and no stranger to the practices of collaborative authorship.[42] To further complicate this already confusing whirl of people, we discover that if Streamer is happy with the manuscript version of his narrative, G.B. will ready it for printing. Then, we imagine that yet more agents will enter the picture, with at least a compositor and two pressmen required to set the type and print the pages of G.B.'s proposed book.

[38] Maria Wakely, 'Printing and Double-Dealing in Jacobean England: Robert Barker, John Bill, and Bonham Norton', *The Library*, 8.2 (2007), 119–153 (p. 119).

[39] Kirk Melnikoff, *Elizabethan Publishing and the Makings of Literary Culture* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2018), p. 32.

[40] W. F. Trench, 'William Baldwin', *Modern Quarterly of Language and Literature*, 1.4 (1899), 259–67 (p. 261); Baldwin is listed in the original list of Stationers after the guild's incorporation, see The London Book Trades wiki: http://lbt.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/mediawiki/index.php/LBT/06860 [Accessed 23 November 2023].

[41] William Baldwin, *A marvelous history intitulede, beware the cat* (London: William Griffith, 1570), sigs. A2r-A3v.

[42] Ferrers collaborated with Baldwin and others to compile *The Mirrour of Magistrates* (1559), a miscellany of Tudor verse.

Amidst this maelstrom of interconnected agents, Baldwin asks two central questions: who 'owns' this text and what role did each of the agents involved play in its creation? Caught at a crossroads between Streamer (taleteller), Ferrers (re-teller-reviser), and G.B. (transcriber-editor-printer), *Beware the Cat* directly engages with these questions of ownership. Concerned that the tale's original teller might query the accuracy of the printed version, G. B. assures him that he has stuck so closely to the 'order and words of him that spake them' that he 'shal doubt whether he speaketh or readeth' (sig. A2v). Yet, these ownership anxieties seem out of place here. With each agent assigned a part to play in the creation, transcription, and revision of Streamer's tale, this community clearly understands textual production in plural terms. Given this context, models of individual and collective authorship snag against one another. Baldwin was listed as a freeman of the Stationer's Company at its incorporation, so we might usefully read these tensions alongside emergent models of individualized ownership in the print trade.[43]

Worried whether Streamer 'wil be contended that other men plowe with his oxen', G.B. voices early anxieties about profits and reputation in the print trade (sig. A3v). As the original taleteller, Streamer may well want to print his narrative himself and 'have, as hee deserveth, the glory' (sig. A4r). While these fears hover threateningly in the distance, however, they are ultimately supplanted by an ideal of community ownership. At the end of the preface, we are asked to imagine Young, clutching Baldwin's manuscript, disappearing to get Streamer's blessing for the transformation of his words into print. As such, the very existence of Baldwin's book depends on a community agreeing to shared, rather than individual, ownership of the tale. In the self-contained temporality of Baldwin's framing narrative, the future of *Beware the Cat* hangs in the balance. Holding the printed text in our hands, however, we can assume that this transaction was a success. Crucially for our purposes, this success suggests that the idealized community Baldwin constructs is one which resists the push of individual interests in the print trade. Here, Streamer is positioned as an authorial figure, but the authorship of the tale is shared.

Elsewhere in *Beware the Cat*, Baldwin examines shared social and financial benefits a writer might draw from such a print community. As G.B. begins the tale proper, Baldwin, Ferrers, and Streamer are all imagined as part of a temporary creative community brought together to plan the King's Christmas celebrations. Together in one room, they fall into conversation before bed. Streamer then begins a story set in a room 'hard by' the Aldersgate workshop of printer John Day. The author of a Greek ABC, an early modern schoolbook, Streamer reveals that he lodged with Day 'while my Greeke Alphabets were in printing, to see that it might be truly corrected' (sig. B1r). Just as he is involved with the community responsible for the King's revels, Streamer is again positioned here as part of the creative team behind a specific cultural product. As corrector, he would be responsible for checking printed sheets as they came off the press, amending them in collaboration with Day's workmen before they were reprinted.[44] Involved in the collaborative processes of the print house, Streamer is part of a narrative of collective production.

Early modern creative communities were brought together in the interests of a shared project. Whether formed around institutional celebrations or book production, these arrangements were common in the period and, as part of a temporary community, its agents could be paid and provided with resources, a place to stay, and the social support of a peer group.[45] These communities represented valuable short-term lifelines for those involved and

[43] Arber, I.25.

[44] Philip Gaskell, *A New Introduction to Bibliography* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972) pp. 111, 172. See also Colin Burrow, 'Fictions of Collaboration: Authors and Editors in the Sixteenth Century', *SPELL*, 25 (2011), 175–99 (p. 190).

[45] Helen Smith, 'The Publishing Trade in Shakespeare's Time', in *A Concise Companion to Shakespeare and the Text*, ed. by Andrew Murphy (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2007), pp. 19–32 (p. 25).

were designed in part to keep reputational or financial precarity at arm's length. Such groups formed, dissolved, and reformed throughout the 1500s, and in Baldwin's preface, these affiliations are presented as a source of strength.

Yet, in G.B.'s anxieties, we hear the unsettling whisper of individual ownership. As we have seen, with the socioeconomic landscape of the print trade becoming increasingly volatile toward the end of the century, these whispers grew louder. As such, the concept of 'community' was forced to take on more weight, invoked in the 1580s and 90s to help protect rather than defend against individual interests in the trade.

CONCLUSION: FLEXIBLE COMMUNITIES

These case studies, situated at different points across the later sixteenth century, demonstrate shifting approaches to 'community' in response to the increased reputational and economic pressures of the print trade. From Baldwin's ideal of communal ownership to communities invoked to bolster profits and reclaim reputations, this shift might be read as one which supports a transitional model of the period. According to this approach, the Elizabethan era saw a move toward societies dominated by limited relationships and predicated on self-interest.[46] Influentially characterized by Ferdinand Tönnies as the shift between *Gemeinschaft* (community) and *Gesellschaft* (society), this paradigm entered English historical discourse primarily through the work of Max Weber and R. H. Tawney.[47]

However, the communities constructed by Baldwin, Barker, Chettle, and Nashe do not represent a neat journey from the 'neighbourly conduct' of the 'old village community' to the 'increasingly individualistic behaviour' of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.[48] Instead, they reveal how print agents and writers responded to specific shifts in their socioeconomic contexts. Faced with increasingly precarious livelihoods and steepening reputational obstacles, each of these print trade practitioners sought survival tactics through the construction of communities. Yet, the shape of these communities, how they were understood, and the purposes they served changed in response to the turbulent conditions of the trade.

Driven by a shifting cast of interdependent agents, early modern book production was shaped by an ecosystem of fleeting communities. These groups came together for publishing syndicates, printing partnerships, and specific print projects, before drifting apart and reforming again with similar personnel drawn from the same pool. While Baldwin's ideal of collective cultural production no doubt held weight in the period, the scarcity of lucrative licences and patents, alongside the ever-increasing difficulty of building a reputation, meant that such a model was not always sustainable. These reputational and economic pressures meant that print agents had to be flexible, and so did the communities to which they belonged. Texts written by Barker, Chettle, and Nashe demonstrate this flexibility by constructing communities which support their own interests, while recognizing the importance of the groups to which they belong. As such, these texts demonstrate how print agents and writers responded to precarities by redrawing the socioeco-

[46] See Robert Scribner, 'Communities and the Nature of Power' in, *Germany: A New Social and Economic History, vol. 1: 1450-1600*, ed. by Robert Scribner (London: Arnold, 1996), pp. 285–300; Richard M. Smith, '"Modernisation" and the Corporate Medieval Village Community in England: Some Sceptical Reflections', in *Explorations in Historical Geography*, ed. by Alan R. H. Baker and Derek Gregory (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), pp. 105–29.

[47] Ferdinand Tönnies, *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche BuchGesellschaft, 1979); Max Weber, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretative Sociology* ed. by Gunther Roth and Claus Wittich (Berkley, CA: University of California Press, 1978); R. H. Tawney, *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism: A Historical Study* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1990).

[48] Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic: Studies in Popular Belief in Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-century England* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991), p. 672.

nomic contours of their communities and rethinking the individual's place in the shifting landscape of the book trade.

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