George Chapman's all fools

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George Chapman’s ALL FOOLS

George Chapman is known primarily for the first English translation of Homer and for his dark tragedies, such as Bussy D’Ambois. In his own time, however, he was considered one of the premier writers of comedy for the English stage. Indeed, Chapman is one of only two dramatists named by Francis Meres in Palladis Tamia, Wits Treasury (1598) as both “our best for tragedie” and among “the best poets for comedy” (qtd. in Chambers 246); the other is William Shakespeare. Chapman’s comedies were also a huge financial success for the Rose Theatre’s resident company, the Admiral’s Men. Their production of The Blind Beggar of Alexandria was the top box-office draw for 1596, while the brilliant An Humorous Day’s Mirth held the same honors for 1597 (Foakes 34–37, 47–48, 54–60).

The last extant play Chapman wrote for the Admiral’s Men, before he left the Rose Theatre and started work with the Children of the Chapel at the newly reopened Blackfriars Theatre, was the comedy All Fools. Like all of Chapman’s comedies, it is filled with wordplay, some of it quite mysterious and difficult to grasp. In a very funny sequence, a group of gallants convince a would-be courtier, Cornelio, that one of their number, Dariotto, is cuckolding him. Soon after the insanely jealous Cornelio draws his sword and runs off in search of Dariotto, the supposed culprit enters, and the others warn him of the impending danger. The trickster Rinaldo tells Dariotto that Cornelio “swears withal that wheresoe’er he meets you / He’ll mark you for a marker of men’s wives” (3.1.316–17; see Manley).

No modern editor of the play offers any comment on this line, apparently assuming that it is sufficient to understand what Rinaldo is saying in general terms. If we take matters only that far, however, there is a danger of missing some clever punning. The phrase “mark you” presents no real problem: Cornelio will mark Dariotto with a scar. Chapman uses “mark” in this precise way in the fifth book of his Iliad, as the goddess Athena, siding with the Greeks, encourages Diomed to make a fresh assault on Troy. This should be done even if Aphrodite, whom Athena blames for starting the war, takes arms on behalf of the Trojans: “But if that Goddesse be so bold (since she first stird this warre) / Assault and marke her from the rest with some infamous scarre” (2.136–37; see Nicoll).

Yet “marker of men’s wives” is a rather curious expression. A search through Early English Books Online (admittedly not totally comprehensive) shows that, most frequently in early modern literature, marker means “close observer,” for example, quoting the Old Testament warning against false divination in the Geneva Bible: “Let none be founde among you that maketh his sonne or his daughter to goe thorough the fire, or that useth witchcraft, or a regarder of times, or a marker of the flying of foules, or a sorcerer” (Deut. 18.10). Alternatively, we may also accept a general definition of someone
who makes a mark, in the sense of an identifying stain, on the
character of the women he seduces. This would also be contextu-
ally appropriate, as a common penalty for adultery, administered by
the church courts, was for the offender to stand in front of the
congregation wearing a white sheet and bearing placards “with great
letters of abhominable adultrye” written on them (Cambridgeshire
1570 court record, qtd. in Greaves 234).

Both of these definitions suit the situation, but if we allow for
Chapman’s love of obscure locutions, another very rare definition of
marker, used metaphorically, presents an intriguing possibility. In the
underworld argot of the time, Dariotto is a “pilferer” or “shoplifter” of
men’s wives.

Some of the most delightful of Elizabethan prose works are the
“conny-catching” pamphlets of Robert Greene, wherein the practices
of thieves, cardsharpers, and other swindlers are vividly described. The
Second Part of Conny-Catching (1591) by Greene provides a manual
for shoplifters titled “The Discovery of the Lifting Law,” where we learn
that this particular art requires a team of three: “the lift, the marker,
and the santar.” First, the lift, “attired in the forme of a civell country
gentleman, comes with the marker into some mercers shop,
haberdashers, goldsmiths, or any such place where any particular
parcels of worth are to be convaid.” He asks to see what the
shopkeeper has to offer and, while inspecting the goods, “he begins to
resolve he calles the goods stolne) may be most easily convaid.”
Having expressed dissatisfaction with what he has seen so far, he asks
to see more samples, and while the shopkeeper has his back turned,
the lift “commits his garbage to the marker, for note, the lift is without
his cloke, in his dublet & hose, to avoide the more suspicion.” At that
point the santar walks by the shop, and the marker calls out to him,
under the pretense of having an important message for him. He
leaves the shop, hands over the message (i.e., the “garbage”), and
the santar walks away with it. Finally, “these lifts have their speciall
receivers of their stolne goods,” either “some notorious bawdes in
whose houses they lye . . . or else they be brokers, a kind of idle sort of
livers as pernicious as the lift” (Grosart 118, 119, 121).

Citing only this passage from Greene, the Oxford English
Dictionary defines marker as a “receiver of stolen goods” (n. 6), what
most today would call a fence—but that is completely incorrect.¹ As we
have seen, Greene’s name for those who receive the goods from the
shoplifters is simply “speciall receivers,” while the marker is clearly one
of the thieves. Thomas Dekker also uses receiver in this sense in
several of his plays, for example, The Honest Whore, Part 2 (see
Bowers), where a constable accuses Candido, a linen draper, of selling
stolen goods. When Candido protests that he bought them “of the
gentleman / That keepes the house,” the constable replies, “So he’s the
thiefe, you the receiver” (4.3.168–69, 171).

The Early English Books database contains no example of marker
as “thief” in texts of this period, other than those in Greene’s Second
Part of Conny-Catching, Dekker’s Bellman of London (1608), a
verbatim copying of Greene, and Chapman’s All Fools. Interestingly,
Shakespeare includes some thieves’ cant in a similar use of
polypteton—a pun that repeats the stem of a word but with different
endings—in Troilus and Cressida. When Pandarus tells Cressida that
Troilus is “very young and yet will he within three pound lift as much
as his brother Hector,” Cressida’s reply alludes to both Troilus’s strength and his apparent experience in (sexual) thievery: “Is he so young a man and so old a lifter?” (Dawson, *Troilus and Cressida* 1.2.101–103).

We cannot be certain whether Chapman intended to pun on *mark* and *marker* as I have described, but it is in the very nature of punning, as we find it in countless early modern plays, that an expression carries with it several meanings at the same time. Given that *marker* as “shoplifter” fits the dramatic context so well, along with Chapman’s frequently demonstrated penchant for rare usage, it is reasonable to assume that this was what he had

**Note**

1 According to the *OED*, *fence* did not come into use until 1699.

**Works Cited**