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## 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 Goddess 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 contextually 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 abhomyne- able aduyltrye” 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 convoid.” 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 convoid.” 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.<sup>1</sup> 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 keepses 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 polyptoton—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

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

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