



# This Rough Magic

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*The Fair Maid of the Exchange*, Thomas Heywood, 1607.

Author(s): Paul Menzer

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*"The Fair Maid of the Exchange, Thomas Heywood, 1607."*

by Paul Menzer

If a teacher wishes to introduce to students the richness of the textual culture and the ruthlessness of the physical culture of the early modern period, Thomas Heywood's *The Fair Maid of the Exchange* provides an ample platform upon which to build. The discursive subtitle of the play's 1607 quarto advertises "the pleasaunt Humours of the *Cripple of Fanchurch*" (A1r) and therefore indicates that the play's hero is, indeed, a disabled young man identified throughout in stage directions, speech prefixes, and personal address as "The Cripple." Though physically courageous, the Cripple's true strength lies in his ingenuity, however, which is displayed at one point in the assistance he lends a suitor named Franklin in the composition of a letter. Queried by Franklin on his expertise, the Cripple reveals how he came by his literary facility. He once knew a "bitter-tonged" poet who, upon his death, bequeathed to the Cripple his library, which the Cripple "pater-noster-like" has conned, and out of which he has fashioned an "extemporal" wit. The Cripple expands upon this theme and goes on to boast of his abilities. In so doing, the passage provides a revelatory glimpse of the richness of early modern London's literary market place:

Crip. I could doe more, for I could make enquirie  
Where the best witted Gallants use to dine,  
Follow them to the taverne, and there sit  
In the next rowme with a calves head and brimstone,  
And over-heare their talke, observe their humors,  
Collect their jeasts, put them into a play,  
And tire them too with payment to behold  
What I have filcht from them....  
(f3v)

Heywood here characterizes the early modern theatre as a linguistic clearing house, an important locus for the circulation and commodification of textual materials. First, the cripple talks about oral culture and writing. He will “over hear” the talk of Gallants. He will, then, presumably, “collect their jests,” write them down, and “put them in a play.” Then he will make those same Gallants who originated the jests (or more likely, the passage implies, stole them in the first place) pay at the playhouse for the pleasure of attending their onstage publication. Then, of course, that play might get published, a Gallant might buy it, and then read the jests that he heard at the play that the playwright stole from him to start with. Indeed, since *The Fair Maide of the Exchange* itself reached print in 1607 and, therefore, anyone might just as well read it in print as hear it from the stage, this passage achieves a sort of apotheosis of publication that reflects back upon its own process of transmission. The passage both represents and presents the mediatization of language across various platforms and represents the kind of total market saturation any writer dreams of. The passage is therefore an excellent exemplar of the richness and variety of early modern modes of “publication.”

Ultimately, this compacted exchange provides an efficient introduction to a class on early modern textual culture and demonstrates the ways that various modes of articulation – oral, written, printed – jostled with one another for preeminence within the early modern market (or “exchange”) for language.