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"The *Fair Maid of the Exchange*: Scrutinizing Disability in the Early Modern Literature Classroom"

by Kelly Neil

The *Fair Maid of the Exchange* is a play about how disability intersects with categories of identity such as sexuality and socio-economic status. First published in 1607 and undergoing three editions over the 30 years that followed, the play has been speculatively attributed to Thomas Heywood (definitive authorship remains questionable because no performance record has been found). The play's subtitle, "with the Pleasant Humors of the Cripple of Fanchurch," alerts readers to the physical impairment of a main character simply named Cripple. The plot and subplot center on finding a suitable husband for Phillis Flower and Moll Berry, daughters of a merchant and a usurer, respectively. Throughout the play, both women must negotiate the dangerous public space of the London Exchange, a space which amplifies their status as objects of male desire. Meanwhile, their parents and male guardians attempt to secure good matches for the women. Eventually, they are betrothed to men their parents approve of, but such betrothals are almost thwarted because both women are in love with Cripple, a figure whom no one, besides the women themselves, views as an appropriate suitor. Despite the women's flirtatious advances, Cripple refuses them. He

instead helps Frank, one of three brothers in love with Phillis, to woo her successfully. Cripple counsels Frank to intercept love letters from Phillis's other suitors and to send letters of his own instead, letters that the witty Cripple has written himself (or, at least, collected and preserved until needed). To seal the deal with Phillis, Cripple prods Frank into wearing his clothing and assuming his lame shape; it is in such disguise that Phillis is tricked into agreeing to marry Frank.

The *Fair Maid of the Exchange* would work make a useful and provocative addition to the syllabus in a range of courses, from a survey course of early modern literature to a special topic, upper-level course focusing on disability in literature. Because the play also invites audiences and readers to scrutinize female agency, the marriage market, sites of economic exchange, and usury, the *Fair Maid* may be particularly appealing in special topics courses relating to early modern gender and sexuality or early modern economics. Disability can provoke questions regarding how perceptions about the body facilitate or preclude a person's access to forms of agency and power embedded in the ideals of, for instance, heterosexuality, masculine virtue, and burgeoning capitalist markets.

Pedagogical interest regarding disability in the undergraduate classroom continues to increase.[1] Instructors are thinking more deeply about the ways in which disability studies can bolster students' critical thinking skills, impel them to link "real world" pragmatics to literary texts, and urge them to probe the dichotomy between

able-bodied and disabled just as they probe the dichotomies of male/female, self/Other, normative/non-normative. If we wish to make students aware of the dynamics of power underpinning issues of gender, ethnicity, and sexuality, then we have much to gain by calling their attention to such dynamics characterizing disability, dynamics that are still, in some forms, operating today. Joy Cypher and Deb Martin argue that "disability studies is itself a critical engagement with a dominant ideology of bodily normalcy, value, access and power" (para 2). The *Fair Maid* is not only conducive to such discussions of dominant ideologies but also draws readers' attention to them by asking what it means, for both the able-bodied and the disabled, to engage with disability.

The play is most easily accessible online, available for free, at the website *Internet Archive*, and is an imprint of an 1846 London edition by Barron Field. Though this edition lacks line numbers, spelling is modernized.[2] Alternatively, images of the seventeenth century editions are available on *Early English Books Online* (*EEBO*). Though they contain original spellings and early modern orthography, the benefit of the *EEBO* edition is that the text can be downloaded and printed off in a course reader to invite students' annotations on the page. Karl E. Snyder published a critical edition of the play in 1980 (New York, Garland), but it is out of print and used copies are hard to find. Perhaps because access to the play is limited, the play has received little critical attention. However, one notable article is Juana Green's "The Sempster's Wares: Merchandising and Marrying in the *Fair Maid of the Exchange* (1607)," published in a

2000 issue of *Renaissance Quarterly*. Green suggests that despite the commodification of women's honor in the marketplace, Moll and Phillis attempt to assert agency and articulate their erotic desires. But ultimately, Green claims, such attempts fail as the play disciplines female acts of independence when the women are finally betrothed not to men of their own choosing but to the men that others have chosen for them.

Tracing forms of exchange, such as the bodily exchanges taking place in marriage rituals, provides one way to organize discussions of disability in the play. The play provocatively draws Cripple close to but ultimately excludes him from the sexual and erotic encounters facilitated by the marriage economy. The play tempts readers to imagine the possibility that Cripple may participate in the marriage market when he alludes to his virility in the opening scene. Cripple stumbles upon Phillis and her female servant as two sexual predators, Bobbington and Scarlet, assault them. Cripple, preparing to defend the women, says to himself, "Now stir thee, Cripple; and of thy four legs / Make use of one to do a virgin good" (1.1.91-92). One of his crutches becomes, then, both prosthesis and phallus. Cripple's successfully fends off the attackers, but when they stage a second assault against the women, Cripple is unable to beat them away again. The able-bodied Frank, the man destined to become Phillis's husband, intervenes and rescues the women. The scene provokes students to ask if Frank's intervention at the moment when Cripple fails ties Cripple's physical weakness to sexual impotency.

Cripple assists the ambitious Frank's pursuit of Phillis but never participates in the process of wooing as a suitor. After Frank's heroics in the opening scene, Cripple considers himself indebted to Frank. Cripple fulfills his debt by conceiving of a plan to trick Phillis into agreeing to marry Frank. Even though Cripple enables the sexual exchanges contingent on the marriage of Phillis to Frank, he remains outside those exchanges. Appropriately, then, Cripple is employed as a "drawer," the play tells us, a term not only used to describe one who makes patterns for such accoutrements as ruffs and stomachers (the significance of which I discuss below) but also, according to the *OED*, "one who draws a draft or bill of exchange" ("drawer"). Asking students to trace the etymology of "drawer" and draw conclusions about the extent of Cripple's agency (is he a playwright, managing the action? Or is he merely following Frank's command?) may prove a productive exercise.

Though Cripple can manage the hetero-normative exchanges taking place on the stage, other characters' efforts to valorize the reproductive and pleasure-producing able-body suggest that Cripple cannot engage in the exchanges himself. After learning that another one of Phillis's suitors is the able-bodied Ferdinand, Phillis's father, Flower, says contentedly that he will make a jointure of a hundred pounds a year for his daughter if she marries Ferdinand, stating, "the worthy / portion betters my conceit, which, being good, in conceiving / well of the gentleman's good parts, the proffered jointure adds to my conceit, and betters it" (4.1.15-18). Flower's word play on "worthy

portion" means not only the hefty dowry he is willing to pay but also Ferdinand's virile, ideal body with its "good parts" that add to and betters Flower's (and Phillis's) conceiving. The "proffered jointure" is both the dowry and the joints of Ferdinand's body, a body that is "worthy," strong, and capable of reproduction. Such an idealization of able-bodiedness, in turn, suggests that Flower would view Cripple's lame joints as a hindrance to successful marriage.

But Cripple is the object of Phillis's and Moll's sexual yearning. Phillis desires Cripple's deformed body, stating, "Nor is it gold that I so much esteem. / Dust is the richest treasure that we have, / Nor is the beauty of the fairest one / Of higher price or value unto me, / Than is a lump of poor deformity" (5.1.231-235). The play offers up the possibility, then, that if he wanted to, Cripple could very well participate in the sexual and marital exchanges underpinning the plot. But even though Cripple discovers both Phillis and Moll love him, Cripple exclaims against marriage, stating that his "unworthy self" is "too foul for such a beauty" (4.2.25-26). However, he earlier tells the audience that his reason for abstaining from marriage is not his "unworthy self," but the likelihood that "a young man's never marr'd, / Till he by marriage from all joy be barr'd" (2.2.266-267). Cripple's line activates other meanings of "marr'd" besides physical impairment, meanings that hinge on the suppression of bodily pleasure rather than bodily deformity. Green briefly discusses the relationship between sexuality and deformity in the play, arguing that Cripple lacks erotic desire because he transforms

sexual energy into economic energy (1105). But other moments in the play invite the possibility of seeing Cripple's sexual desire not as absent but as present in non-normative forms. For instance, when Frank pleads for Cripple's help in wooing Phillis, Cripple willingly agrees: "My love is yours, my life to do you good" (3.2.54). Cripple thus refuses to engage in any kind of emotional or erotic exchange with women but willingly participates in such exchanges with Frank. This, in turn, raises questions about the play's attempt to intertwine non-normative sexualities with "abnormal" bodies.

Because disabled bodies are often assumed to be incapable of or inappropriate for sexual activity, these scenes make legible representations that link disability to errant sexuality. Recent critical work focusing on disabled bodies as de-sexualized or hyper-sexualized may prove useful in this discussion. In her introduction to the collection *Feminist Disability Studies*, Kim Hall argues that "the assumption that disabled people cannot be sexual beings is a feature of disability oppression" (4). Does the play accord with this persistent view of disabled bodies as desexualized? Does the play enable the oppression Hall identifies in her introduction, or does it negotiate alternative modes of desire that circumvent the sexual restrictions placed on the disabled body while critiquing hetero-normative sexuality and the institution of marriage? In "As Good as it Gets: Queer Theory and Critical Disability," Robert McRuer draws attention to the overlapping of heterosexuality and able-bodiedness as "invisible" forms of identity, forms so pervasive that they are seen as "natural" (79). Consequently, non-

normative sexualities and disability are linked as unnatural identities. The questions raised by the play and these critical texts urge students to engage in debates about whether and to what extent the play tolerates or censors Cripple's desires.

The drama not only queries Cripple's participation in the marriage market but in the economic market as well. Because the play's action occurs mostly in the Exchange, a center for economic activity in early modern London, the ways in which Cripple intervenes in or is excluded from this economy invite students to analyze assumptions about disabled people's inability to work. The *Fair Maid* plays with these assumptions, first leading the audience to believe Cripple cannot work and then undermining those assumptions to reveal that he does, in fact, work quite strenuously. Cripple has been barred from the space of economic activity due to his lack of mobility; he reminisces about walking in the Exchange with his companion, Bowdler, "before the visitation of my legs" (2.2.61). The "legs" to which Cripple refers are prosthetic ones: the crutches he must now rely upon for mobility. Other characters suggest that Cripple taxes the local community because he is not economically productive. Berry, the father of Moll and a perhaps a usurer, counts Cripple among men whom Berry calls "A crew of unthrifts, careless dissolutes, [and] Licentious prodigals," (3.3.136-137). Cripple angrily suggests that Berry is a miser who greedily hoards his money, operating under a "show of charity" (2.2.148). Ironically, after this heated conversation, Cripple announces that he must go to work. Later in the play, after speaking with Frank at length, Cripple says, "I

can no longer stand / To talk with you. I have some work in hand" (3.2.143-144). The moment of enjambment points to the play's undermining of assumptions about the disabled body's inability to work; "I can no longer stand," as a phrase by itself, suggests that the Cripple's impaired body is physically exhausted. The line invites audiences and readers to imagine Cripple leaning wearily on his crutches. However, the enjambment that links that line to the next reveals that Cripple is weary of speaking to Frank, not of standing. "I have some work at hand" shows that Cripple wants Frank to leave not because he is tired but because he has work to do. In the play, the disabled body is a working one, and the play provokes questions about associations between the disabled body and physical stamina.

These moments draw upon wider early modern debates about whether disabled people could or should support themselves financially. To help students contextualize the question of disabled people's impact on local economies, an instructor may incorporate into the curriculum excerpts from the 1601 Poor Law, the first law regulating poor relief in England that not only stipulated how funds would be collected in each local community but also that such funds were to assist the "lame, impotent, old and blind."[3] Also useful is Thomas Harman's *Caveat for Common Cursitors* (1567), a text that can introduce students to the pervasive assumption that a disabled person is particularly helpless and dependent on charity (as well as ubiquitous suspicions that one had to be on guard to recognize a beggar who feigned disability in order to steal

charity).[4] For instance, Chapter XVII, "A Baudy Basket," describes an able-bodied narrator's encounter with "a very miserable man...lame of one of his legges that he went with a crouche." Seeing the disabled beggar at this gate, the man "seeing some cause of charity" asked the beggar to stay and "have meat and drink" This tale reveals early modern perceptions about the inability of a disabled person to care for him or herself, perceptions that the play challenges.

A third category of exchanges, that of swapping clothes and identities, presses students to evaluate the relationship between the disabled body and the mind. When Cripple conspires to trick Phillis into marrying Frank, he asks Frank to put on his "crooked habit" (4.2.31) and court her for himself while disguised. "Assume this shape of mine," (4.2.35) says Cripple to Frank, suggesting Frank should not only wear Cripple's clothes but feign his limp, too. As Frank ponders his plan to win Phillis through deception, he says, "Am I not like myself in this disguise? / Crooked in shape, and crooked in my thoughts! / Then I am a Cripple right" (4.2.53-55). Pointedly recalling the infamously wicked, hunchbacked Richard III, Frank feigns his body's appearance and asserts that such appearance reflects his "crooked" mind. But Frank isn't really disabled; his exemplary body still lingers underneath the crooked habit. What does Frank's disguise purport about the relationship, then, between identity and the body? Another moment in the play that points to how clothing functions in the body's relationship to identity occurs when another young suitor, Gardiner, compliments

Phillis's dress as a "garment" that strategically hides any physical deformity she may have:

> A garment made by cunning arts – men's skill
> Hides all defects that Nature's swerving hand
> Hath done amiss, and makes the shape seem pure;
> If then it grace such lame deformity,
> It adds a greater grace to purity. (3.1.81-85)

Clothing's ability to hide and even negate the "defects" lurking beneath the woman's dress by bolstering her "purity" make legible the ways in which clothing can constitute identity as much as or even more so than perceived physical impairment. Significantly, it is Cripple, a "drawer," whose "cunning arts" and "skill" create those very garments that disguise a body's deformity and recuperate a body's virtue. Cripple is not merely a representative figure of disability but also one who re-presents others' disabled bodies. As a cripple, he is an object to be scrutinized, but as a "drawer" he is an actor who manipulates our gaze.

In these examples, clothing may help a character negotiate identity and locate disability in something socially produced (a garment, a habit, etc.) rather than in the physically impaired body. Consequently, an instructor may introduce students to larger theoretical questions about body and identity by having them read excerpts from such critical texts as Judith Butler's 1993 *Bodies that Matter* and the collection of essays titled *The Body and Physical Difference*, edited by disability scholars David T. Mitchell and

Sharon L. Snyder. This collection seeks to interrogate what the editors term the "ideology of the physical" that "lure[s] the reader/viewer into the mystery of whether discernible defects reveal the presence of an equally defective moral and civil character" (13).

The *Fair Maid of the Exchange* compels readers to confront assumptions about the extent to which and how disabled people participate in exchanges with others based on sexual desire, money, and dress. Rosemarie Garland-Thomas's claim that "disability is a culturally fabricated narrative of the body, similar to what we understand as the fictions of race and gender" (77) takes on particular resonance in a play about a cripple whose very name suggests that the disabled body is firmly entrenched in identity but who takes part in a scheme with Frank that divorces the body from identity. Thus, the play invites readers to consider how "the ability/disability system...is ideological rather than biological" (77). The *Fair Maid* has much to add to undergraduate curriculums that generally lack engagement with disability by urging students to scrutinize the ableist/disabled dichotomies characterizing not just the early modern period but also our own.

Endnotes

[1] See, for instance, the collection *Disability Studies: Enabling the Humanities*, eds. Sharon L. Snyder, Brenda Jo Brueggemann, and Rosemarie Garland-Thomson (New York:

Modern Language Association, 2002) and the 2008 *Disability Studies Quarterly* special issue (Vol. 28, No 4) titled "Disability Studies in the Undergraduate Classroom" (available at <http://dsq-sds.org/issue/view/7>).

[2] A direct link to this edition of the *Fair Maid* is: <http://archive.org/details/fairmaidexchang01rowlgoog>. All quotes from the play come from this edition.

[3] A direct link to the full text of the 1601 Poor Law is: <http://www.workhouses.org.uk/poorlaws/1601intro.shtml>.

[4] Harman's text is easily accessible online at Project Gutenberg (<http://www.gutenberg.org/files/38850/38850-h/38850-h.htm>), through the online database *Early English Books Online* (*EEBO*), as a free ebook through Google books (an 1814 reprint of the 1573 edition), or in Arthur Kinney's *Rogues, Vagabonds and Sturdy Beggars*, (Amherst, 1990).

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