

To “wake to virtue” from “wanton slumber”: James Shirley’s moral-reformation bed-tricks

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The invisible dramatist

For such a prolific, popular, and successful dramatist, James Shirley (1596-1666) remains remarkably little-known. In his contribution to a recent volume of Shirley criticism, Jeremy Lopez describes him as “the invisible man of the early modern dramatic canon” and goes on to suggest that “the time for Shirley seems to have passed” (17). However, Shirley has not disappeared entirely, and the eventual publication of the Oxford University Press edition of his complete works, in preparation since 2009, may inspire a renewal of critical attention to, and perhaps even performance of, his plays. In anticipation of such a revival, this paper examines one aspect of Shirley’s drama – his use of the dramatic convention of the English Renaissance stage known as the “bed-trick” – that has not yet received sufficient critical attention and, in the case of one play in particular, has been puzzlingly neglected in studies of the bed-trick itself.

The bed-trick canon

Writing in 1994, Marliiss C. Desens made the case for a re-examination of the bed-trick, in a study that extended earlier work done by William R. Bowden to catalogue and analyse it in considerable detail. Bowden counted 42

instances of the bed-trick between 1603 and 1642,¹ although his analysis named only 32, whereas Desens argued that the convention appears in at least 44 plays, between 1594? and 1641. Bowden's article called for "a major study of the bed trick throughout the history of literature" (121), and this call was answered in 2000 by Wendy Doniger's extensive discussion of the bed-trick as a plot element in a wide variety of texts ranging from ancient Hindu scriptures to Hollywood screenplays, including a number of English Renaissance plays. Doniger dealt with 16 of the plays listed by Desens. In addition, Bowden and Doniger both cite William Rider's lost *The Twins* (1635), and Bowden refers to Jasper Mayne's *The Amorous War* (printed in 1648). With these additions, the canon of the English Renaissance dramatic bed-trick seems to have been firmly established.

Shirley's four bed-tricks

Although not yet the subject of a dedicated study, such as that provided for Shakespeare by Julia Briggs, Shirley's place in this canon also seems to be well-documented. Desens and Bowden both deal with bed-tricks in four of his plays: *The Arcadia*, *The Gamester*, *The Lady of Pleasure*, and *The Wedding*. Doniger also addresses *The Lady of Pleasure*, but goes further by including *Love Tricks* (1625) in her study, dealt with as an example of what Doniger classifies as a "double-cross-dress" elaborated from the play's source, Barnabe Riche's tale of Phylotus and Emilia. *The Arcadia* (1640), dealt with in some detail by Bowden, also depends on its source material, Sidney's *The Countess of Pembroke's Arcadia*.

The tricks in the three other commonly-cited plays are arguably more interesting. They appear in contemporary urban comedy rather than pastoral

¹ His analysis also mentions a pre-1603 play later dealt with by Desens, the anonymous *Alphonsus, Emperor of Germany* (1594?) in a footnote.

or quasi-pastoral settings. The bed-trick in *The Wedding* (1626) has already taken place before the action of the play begins. Its revelation serves to set the union of Beauford and Gratiana back on its intended path, but its happy secondary consequence is to awaken Marwood’s moral sense (“I never had a conscience till now”, he admits), leading to his marriage to Lucibel. However, this was not the primary purpose of the trick, which was to enable Lucibel’s mother Cardona both to benefit financially and (she hoped) to advance her family through the means of Marwood’s lust, and using her own “black oratory” to “woo” her daughter’s participation (V.ii, 447).²

This is a bed-trick with a post hoc moral outcome, as is that in *The Lady of Pleasure* (1635), which Lady Aretina Bornwell arranges in order to have sex with Alexander Kickshaw in secret. Aretina’s means are as dubious as her end. Kickshaw is invited, bribed with a jewel, escorted with menaces, blindfolded, and offered money to sleep with the bawd Decoy, who is disguised as an old woman and who claims that she will become young and beautiful when in his arms in the dark. Kickshaw believes that she is a devil – but he ends up sleeping with Aretina. The result is an unexpected moral lesson, learnt not by the victim of the trick but by its perpetrator. Kickshaw recounts his adventure to Aretina in terms that exaggerate its fantastic qualities³ – in his account, the old woman was brought to him “by two

² As the OUP edition of *The Complete Works of James Shirley* is still in preparation, act/scene and page references in this paper are to the Gifford/Dyce edition of 1833.

³ The bed-trick scene itself (IV.i) is full of images of hell and damnation – “devilish dark”, “midnight”, “spirits”, “prison”, “reeks”, “ache with fear”, “I cannot pray”, “the devil”, “familiar to a witch”, “gunpowder”, “an incubus”, “heat”, “a furnace”, “dull of soul”, “cloven foot”, “light is banish’d my chamber”, “she is a devil”, “within his own dominions”, “torn a-pieces”, “succubi”, “out the candle”, “a cat”, “Hecate”, “fire” – and Kickshaw’s verbal re-enactment of it in V.i continues the theme: “an old witch, a strange ill-favour’d hag”, “spirits”, “the devil”, “a she-devil”, “goblins”, “a hell-cat”, “familiars”. This is a vast elaboration on the association between seduction and supernatural entrapment that the bed-trick represents that was hinted at in the

goblins, / More hooded than a hawk" (V.i, 91) – and that hint at excitement mingled with a frisson of fear, either real or dissembled: "I do sweat / To think upon her name". Kickshaw will go back for more in the expectation of further financial reward, and in the absence of asides, it is up to the performing actor to nuance the degree of satisfaction that flavours his reports of the voracity of his "most insatiate" partner: "I did the best to please her; but as sure / As you live, 'twas a hell-cat" (V.i, 92). Aretina, though, is given an aside, and following Kickshaw's exit, a two-line soliloquy, that ensure that Shirley leaves the audience in no doubt as to the effect that the "black impudence" of her lover's description of her as a "she-devil" has had on her evaluation of herself and her actions; looking at herself in a mirror, she exclaims: "'Tis a false glass: sure I am more deformed. What have I done? My soul is miserable" (V.i, 92). For Bowden, the fact that, despite the shame that accompanies it, Aretina's affair with Kickshaw is never exposed makes *The Lady of Pleasure* close to an exception to the rule that he sees as applying to Renaissance drama bed-tricks in general, which denies "ultimate success and happiness to the person who attempts to use the bed trick merely for his own pleasure" (118). It might be argued, of course, that moral reformation is one way to success and happiness. For Desens, too, the play must be seen in a wider context in which "the bed-trick is an important manifestation of male fantasies concerning female chastity, sexual power over other men, and the fulfilment of illicit sexual desires":

Shirley implies in this play that female fantasises of illicit sexual satisfaction are ineffective for women not because of the social consequences ... but because society has instilled in women an inner sense of guilt that will not allow them to enjoy such activities. (114)

"dark oratory" practiced by Marwood in *The Wedding*.

The moral bed-trick: Shirley’s *The Gamester*

The bed-tricks in *The Wedding* and *The Lady of Pleasure* both have moral consequences, then: reformation in the moral outlook and, it must be assumed, subsequent behaviour of one of their participants. However, this was not the explicit goal of either trick. In *The Wedding*, Marwood’s aim was sexual satisfaction; Cardona’s was financial and social advancement/security. In *The Lady of Pleasure*, Aretina’s aim was sexual satisfaction; Kickshaw’s both financial and sexual. In contrast, Shirley’s most thoroughly-examined bed-trick – that which forms the basis for the reformation of Wilding in *The Gamester* (1633) – has an explicitly moral goal from the outset and is located within a didactic framework which is ultimately fairly straightforward; but Shirley extends its consequences on the stage to maximise its dramatic impact. The preliminaries are straightforward. Wilding wishes to sleep with his ward Penelope, rather than with his wife, but Penelope – as befits her name – refuses to accede to his demands, establishing herself as a moral exemplar from the outset with a series of moralising speeches. Mistress Wilding learns of her husband’s desire, and the two women conspire that Penelope will react favourably to Wilding’s advances, so that his wife can formulate a plan, in the form of a bed-trick, to win him back. As we – and an audience well used to such details – might expect, Wilding is enjoined to silence during the encounter, which will take place in complete darkness:

The devil shall not see us
With his saucer eyes; and if he stumble in
The dark, there shall not be a stone i’the chamber,
To strike out fire with’s horns: all things shall be
So close, no lightning shall peep in upon us. (III.i, 224)

The darkness is wholly conventional – pretty much a necessary condition for a successful bed-trick – and the association between the devil and illicit sex

will be elaborated, as we have seen, in *The Lady of Pleasure*, but the reference to horns is a nicely ironic touch, given later developments. Mistress Wilding's explanation that her plan is intended to "deceive / My husband into kindness" (III.i, 225) and her advice that her marriage to Wilding provides a negative example that Penelope would do well to avoid, explicitly locate the trick in moral-didactic territory. Much of the interest here is generated by Wilding's extravagant expressions of glee at his forthcoming pleasure, rather than from any genuine emotional investment in the predicament of his idealised wife. However, Shirley's next move is to complicate the plot by effectively doubling the bed-trick. Unable to tear himself away from the prospect of an easy gambling win, torn between "covetousness" and "letchery" (III.iv, 242), Wilding sends the gamester of the play's title, Will Hazard, to sleep with Penelope in his place. The audience is therefore primed to expect Wilding's imminent cuckoldry, and it does not have long to wait, as the next scene jumps forward to the following day, with Hazard regaling Wilding with the details of his night's work. The comic effect is carefully achieved, with Wilding's regret at having missed out increasing as Hazard's recollections grow more fulsome, Wilding having to resort to taking comfort from the thought that, at least, Hazard's performance will be attributed by Penelope to himself! After an interjectory passage, Shirley allows himself one last stab at this scene before bringing the events to their logical conclusion, by bringing in Mistress Wilding, who can "contain no longer" (IV.i, 249). She questions Wilding about his activities of the previous night, and he is able to answer truthfully, but her revelation of the bed-trick forces him to abandon this position as, at the same time, it brings him to a realisation of his cuckoldry: "fitted with a pair of horns / Of my own making" (IV.i, 250). Mistress Wilding is given the opportunity to make an indignant speech threatening to "publish to the world / How I am wrong'd" which forces Wilding to put on a conciliatory appearance, and then retreat to muse on his humiliation. His

wife's emphasis on social shame seems to hit the supposed cuckold where it hurts and indeed, at this point, the play does appear to have meted out a kind of ironic justice to the man who had previously boasted that "'Tis my ambition to make a cuckold" (III.i, 225). However, this apparent resolution leaves far too many questions unanswered to be final, in the quasi-tragic form of a wife who is simultaneously an adulterer and a rape victim, without being aware of either of these things.

For the time being, though, Shirley maintains the ostensible outcome of the bed-trick and, indeed, exploits it further in the final act of the play, which begins with Wilding himself admitting to the operation of a diabolical justice in his cuckoldry. The effect of these events on his character is, however, rather less than reformatory, as he now determines to make some capital out of his situation by acting against the agent of his apparent humiliation, Hazard, by marrying him off to Penelope – minus a suitable part of her "portion" – in order to maintain her silence. Unfortunately for Wilding, and comically for the audience, the ensuing conversation is also a prolongation of his "torment", as Hazard at first rejects Penelope as rather less than a virgin when he slept with her: salt in the wounds of a man who believes himself to be a cuckold. When Hazard eventually agrees to marry Penelope, Shirley allows himself to suggest for the first time that more may be going on than meets the audience's eyes, with a cryptic hint from Hazard about the "project" and Wilding's "ignorance" (V.i, 264). This is as much as Shirley is prepared to reveal at this stage, and V.ii sees a return to the exploitation of the comic possibilities of Wilding's cuckoldry, in a long speech dwelling on his realisation that his marriage plan actually creates as many problems as it solves, and concluding that "I am grown ridiculous to myself" (V.ii, 272). This and the by-play that follows it concerning the "alteration" in his forehead, display two aspects of the comical exploitation available to Shirley from his basic situation; but this seems to be an exploitation largely divorced from

serious social or moral consequences. Only in the final twist of the bed-trick is an attempt made to reconcile this division. The revelation, begun by Hazard and confirmed by Mistress Wilding, that there was in fact no sexual encounter, and therefore no adultery or cuckoldry, but a conspiracy between the supposed lovers that took in even the play's audience, returns us to the moral-didactic tone of Mistress Wilding's early speeches, with its emphasis on "light", "honesty", "chaste simplicity" and finally, "love and repentance" (V.ii, 277). Mistress Wilding presents here a rather different summary of her intentions than we were told of before the event; and by this device the whole uncomfortable issue of a potential female adultery is neatly sidestepped – in fact, removed from the play's didactic agenda altogether, as if it had never existed. In its place, and in the place of any real engagement with Mistress Wilding's dilemma, is an almost instantaneous conversion: as soon as Wilding's fear of cuckoldry is removed, his tendency towards adultery seems to disappear too, and he is left making the kind of speech we are more used to hearing from his wife:

I am asham'd; pray give me all forgiveness.

I see my follies; heaven invites me gently

To thy chaste bed: be thou again my dearest,

Thy virtue shall instruct me. (V.ii, 277)

As Desens points out (71), the movement in Wilding is from one extreme to another: from a would-be adulterer who calls his wife a "whore" and wants to divorce her, to a repentant ideal husband. As a moral development it is unconvincing, with little real sense of the personal and social forces that have gone into its achievement. Instead, Shirley's success in this plot of *The Gamester* is a technical one, in the creation and prolonged manipulation of a clever and amusing comic situation that relies, most appropriately, on

“hazard”, an accidental change of plans, for its resolution.⁴

Shirley’s neglected bed-trick: *The Witty Fair One*

That Shirley was capable of doing more to synthesize the technical, dramatic impact of the bed-trick with a fully-realised thematic development, would become evident two years later, in *The Lady of Pleasure*. However, earlier in his career, he was able skilfully to demonstrate the full potential of the device in a play that seems, inexplicably, to have escaped the attention of critics writing on the bed-trick: Bowden, Desens, and Doniger all fail to mention it. The play is *The Witty Fair One* (1628). Its chaste heroine, also an appropriately-named Penelope, resorts to the trick when all of her previous attempts to resist the advances of the “*wild young gentleman*” Fowler have failed to dissuade him from pursuing her vigorously. These attempts have been wholly verbal, to this point, beginning with a series of witty exchanges, resembling a sparring match in which Fowler’s attempts at disingenuous smoothness are repulsed – overwhelmed, even – by Penelope’s debunking retorts:

Fow. Shall I swear I love you as I am a gentleman?

Pen. As you are a gentleman, I know you can swear anything, ’tis a fashion you are most constant in, to be religiously wicked; and oath in your mouth, and a reservation in your heart, is a common courtship! Do not swear as you are a gentleman.

Fow. As I am an honest man?

Pen. Out upon’t! that’s a worse; my tailor cozen’d me t’other day with

⁴ Bowden describes this variation of the bed-trick, which finds “X and Y conspiring to deceive A and B, with the result that the two stratagems meet head-on and at least one engineer is hoist with his own petard” as one that is “not so common a situation as one might expect” but one that is “a highly satisfying one from the point of view of the audience, in that it contains a built-in poetic justice” (113).

the same oath. (I.iii, 285)

Penelope's method modulates between satirical observation and verbal dexterity, and forces Fowler to change his tactics more than once: to an extravagant lover's hyperbole (I.iii, 287); and eventually to a speech which, in its brutally stated rejection of "flattery", suggests his true intentions towards her:

... come, remember you are imperfect creatures without a man; be not you a goddess; I know you are mortal, and had rather make you my companion than my idol: this is no flattery, now. (I.iii, 288)

Later in the same scene, talking to Claremont but not inconceivably still in the hearing of Penelope, Fowler discourses on his intentions and philosophy in terms which tend to equate the attributes of a genteel, fashionable, town-dwelling Caroline "gallant" with those we might think of as more proper to the "rake" of later comedy:

There is no discourse so becoming your gallants now, as a horse-race, or Hyde-park, - what ladies lips are softest, what fashion is most terse and courtly, what news abroad, which is the best vaulting-house, where shall we drink canary and be drunk to night? talk of morality! - here be ladies still, you shall hear me court one of them; I hope you will not report among my friends that I love her; it is but the love of mounting into her maidenhood, I vow, Jack, and nothing else. (I.iii, 290)

A further exchange with Penelope, explicitly bawdy on Fowler's part, follows immediately after this, before he follows her from the scene. The tone is set in this encounter for further meetings between Fowler and Penelope; but when they next see each other, in II.ii, Penelope is brought to a more serious, direct engagement with the issues raised by Fowler's determined pursuit of her, questioning the nature of his professed "love" and rejecting it as "coarse", while an aside establishes her desire to pursue the relationship, but on her own terms:

Fow. You do not doubt my sufficiency, do you?

Pen. Now you are immodest; I only ask if you love me.

Fow. And have not I told you? Pray teach me a better way to express it. Does a wise man love a fools’ fortune, and a nobleman another beside my lady? Does the devil love an usurer, a great man his flatterer, the lawyer a full term, or the physician a dead time to thrive in?

Pen. Spare yourself; this is but coarse love.

Fow. I’ll spin it finer and finer every day, sweet: to be plain with thee, what dost thou think of me for a husband? I love thee that way.

Pen. [*Aside*] Would you did else! (II.ii, 302-03)

Penelope’s language registers a progression from the exercise of the skills of witty banter, to a greater engagement, rejecting Fowler’s indulgent usage as “immodest”, and requiring a more honest approach from her suitor whilst remaining sceptical that it is attainable: “Sir, if your meaning be no stranger to your language, although I cannot promise myself, you bind me to be thankful for it ... But pardon me if I suspect you still” (II.ii, 303). Fowler’s interpolated aside (“She nibbles already”) indicates the commencement of a divergence of agenda between his intentions and those of Penelope; one that takes concrete form in III.iv when Fowler, far from according “meaning” to “language”, abandons frankness in favour of “counterfeit” by pretending to be sick, so that Penelope will take pity on him and visit him. This action represents a marked change of direction in their relationship, which will now be conducted in terms of pursuit and evasion, trick and counter-trick, rather than verbal negotiation as before. So, when Penelope does come to see the supposedly sick Fowler she comes not as herself but “disguised”, in a move which not only suggests something of a social reality – the potential vulnerability of the woman who visits a man in his rooms – but also gestures towards a new register of action, an awareness of new rules as recognised even by Penelope herself. Penelope is, of course, never in serious danger of

being fooled by Fowler's rather fumbling attempts to make the most of this situation:

Fow. I know you love me. I have a great mind, an 'twere but for two or three minutes, to have a maid warm my bed—

Pen. That may be done.

Fow. With her body – else 'twill do me no good, the doctor says – to put life in some of my limbs, a little virgin warmth would do it. (III.iv, 321)

And, moreover, she chooses this scene to put her own subterfuge into action, in a delightfully ironic speech which is cleverly calculated to draw Fowler in, and seize the initiative:

Pen. To show how much I value, sir, your life,
For I believe you do not mock, soon as
Your strength will give you leave to visit me
At my father's house, where I can command
An opportunity, my true love shall
Present you with your wishes; my maid only
Shall be of counsel to admit you; but
You'll make me satisfaction by marriage?

Fow. At a minute's warning.

Pen. One thing more; ere I give up my honour, I will have your oath no other woman hath enjoy'd your person.

Fow. Willingly; alas! I could ne'er be tempted, and but there is a kind of necessity—

Pen. Be confident of my best love. (III.iv, 322-23)

Penelope's two provisos seem almost designed to allow Fowler to reply as glibly and insincerely as possible (in notable contrast to a completely different treatment of a similar condition, in *The Ball* a few years later); and he is left supremely confident and apparently victorious.

This, then, is the situation at the beginning of the scene preceding the

bed-trick, which Fowler is allowed to set in motion, with a speech which almost drools in its anticipation of “the desire of unlawful flesh” (IV.iii, 334). As soon as some perfunctory business with a couple of, respectively, chaste and wanton songs has been dispensed with (so quickly does the wanton song follow the chaste one that they seem calculated to confirm Fowler in his purposes rather than discourage him), Penelope’s maid Winnifride enters and begins to establish the circumstances of the following rendezvous in terms – Winnifride’s cold, and the darkened chamber – that must have alerted an audience well used to such devices, to the imminence of a bed-trick scene. Shirley, however, relies on his audience’s expectations of such a scene to produce something rather different. A precise understanding of the dramatic effect of the following scene necessitates a perhaps-speculative construction of its actual stage mechanics,⁵ but the overall outcome of the action – and hence a large part of its didactic impact – is clear to any possible constructed audience of 1628; and also to the modern reader.⁶ Fowler’s repeated references to the darkness in which the scene takes place serve to locate its action imaginatively, and also act as a vehicle for the introduction of specifically moral-didactic references (hell and sin particularly); references

⁵ It is tempting to assume that the use of an indoor theatre, with its greater scope for the creation of darkness and variation of lighting effects, must have contributed to Shirley’s decision to put the bed-trick itself on stage in *The Witty Fair One*; and *The Lady of Pleasure* also makes much of the darkness of the preamble to its trick. But just because it could be done, does not mean that it had to be done: the tricks in *The Gamester* and *The Arcadia* (the trick in *The Wedding* takes place before the action of the play begins) – both also Cockpit plays – take place off-stage.

⁶ *The Witty Fair One* is rarely performed. A staged reading of the play, directed by Peter Benedict, was performed at the Globe Education Centre in London, on 20 October 1996; a more recent reading took place at the Shakespeare Institute on 16 June 2015, as part of a marathon reading of Shirley’s complete dramatic canon organized by Martin Wiggins. This sparse performance history is not unusual: as the website of *The James Shirley Project* notes, “modern performances of Shirley’s works are exceedingly rare” (“Performances”).

which are, strikingly, translated from flippancy to outrage on Fowler's part as Penelope (disguised as Winnifride) stuns him by demanding a sexual "fee" for her services. Fowler's growing unease is amusingly caught:

Pen. There is another fee belongs to us.

Fow. Another fee belongs to us! What is that? I must kiss her: – [*kisses her.*] – thou hast a down lip, and dost twang it handsomely; now to the business.

Pen. This is not all I look for.

Fow. [*Aside*] She will not tempt me to come aloft, will she? (IV.iv, 337)

Fowler's shock, as this unease is confirmed, is conveyed ostensibly by the content of a series of spluttering speeches lamenting the sins he had previously espoused so enthusiastically, but more tellingly by the damage to his self-confidence and assurance that they betray. Winnifride's sexual appetite is shocking and her lowly social status is a humiliating affront to Fowler's gallant pride – he describes her as a "goat" who is "a degree above the kitchen" (IV.iv, 338) – but his emphasis on the element of compulsion that her demand represents is more significant. Fowler has been effectively denied his accustomed independence, and his control over events, in two very tangible, interconnected ways: the supposed maid's ability to betray his intentions and scheming actions to his mistress, is linked to her control over the physical circumstances of their meeting, as represented by the traditional stage darkness of the bed-trick scene:⁷

Fow. ... Would I could see the way out again!

⁷ This may, of course, have been something approximating to real darkness. Martin White postulates a Blackfriars staging of Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi* with a stage entirely unlit either by candles or by daylight from outside at one key moment; whilst sounding a cautionary note about extrapolating such readings to other plays: "we must be ... wary of assuming that even at the same playhouse, each and every play, of all genres, would be lit in similar fashion" (122).

Pen. I can betray, and will.

Fow. She'll betray us, she has voice enough for such a mischief. [*aside.*] – Dost hear? Do but conclude she is thy mistress, there's some reason she should be preferred.

Pen. I'll hear none.

Fow. She'll hear no reason! ... Dost hear! Wilt have the truth on't? 'twas a condition between us, and I swore no woman should enjoy me before her; there's conscience I should be honest to her; prithee be kind to a young sinner: I will deserve thee hereafter in the height of dalliance. (IV. iv, 339)

Fowler is caught in a clever trap, by which a refusal of Winnifride's demands will deny him the desired access to her mistress – or even, subsequently, outright rejection by her should the secret of his trick with the counterfeited illness (which he had inadvertently revealed earlier in the scene) be betrayed to Penelope. Moreover, if he agrees to the maid's demand for sex, he risks infringing on his promise of chastity, so lightly assumed at their last meeting. Faced with this unappetising choice, and after a period of considerable amusement for the audience generated by the prolonged spectacle of a professed rake squirming in an attempt to resist a sexual overture made to, rather than by him, Fowler eventually decides that "I must go through her to her mistress" and, after a last-ditch attempt to delay the inevitable, prepares to act, with a show of bravado which attempts to re-establish his control over the situation: "I'll do my endeavour; I am untrussing as fast as I can; nay, an I be provoked, I'm a tyrant; have at your bacon" (IV.iv, 340). At this point, lights are brought on, Fowler is perhaps quite literally exposed, and Penelope reveals herself. She immediately launches into a series of high-flown, rhetorical speeches rebuking Fowler for his behaviour (speeches of a kind that we have not heard from her before, but which are familiar in the mouths of the chaste heroines of other Shirley comedies), but the didactic impact of

the scene is here dramatic, ironic, and visual; the light, for example, is brought on so that Fowler “should see [his] shame”. Penelope uses religious language (“pray”, “sin”, “polluted soul”) to express her hopes of Fowler’s reformation; but combines it with a more pragmatic threat: “this act / Publish’d, will make thee appear so black / And horrid, that even beasts will be ashamed / Of thy society” (IV.iv, 340). However, as if herself suspecting the efficacy of the censure of Caroline society as a power to reform a gallant caught *in flagrante*, Penelope continues her scheme with a renewed deception (telling Fowler that he looks seriously ill), rather than with an open and unsupported sermon or moral challenge. Fowler is left rather baffled by Penelope’s reports of his imminent demise, but her choice of the subtleties of subterfuge over blatant instruction seems at least partially justified by his determination not to be won over, as expressed in characteristically rakish terms at the close of the scene:

Was ever poor gentleman brought into such a foolish paradise! Prepared for a race, and mounting into the saddle, – I must go home and die! Well, if I live I’ll quit your cunning, and for the more certainty my revenge may prosper, I will not say my prayers till it take effect. (IV.iv, 341-42)

Here, it seems that the bed-trick has ended – and Fowler at least now seems to believe that he can seize the initiative; but the events of the next scene to deal with this plot (V.i) make it clear that Penelope has plotted her deception with considerable thoroughness. Fowler’s soliloquy at his next entrance conveys for a few moments the potential seriousness of the sexual manoeuvres that have been taking place between them, in terms of social realism that have a greater ring of conviction about them than Penelope’s conventional moral-religious rhetoric of the previous scene:

... what if I report abroad she’s dishonest? I cannot do them a worse turn than to say so: some of our gallants take a pride to belie poor gentlewomen in that fashion, and think the discourse an honour to them;

confidently boast the fruition of this or that lady, whose hand they never kissed with the glove off: and why may not I make it my revenge, to blur their fames a little for abusing me? (V.i, 347-48)

As if in an immediate response to this speech, two gentlemen enter and begin to talk about Fowler as if he were dead, apparently failing to see him, to his increasing discomfort and, it seems likely, to the growing amusement of the audience. The scene is tending towards the farcical (Fowler resorting to striking the insensible gentleman) when Worthy enters to confirm the reports of Fowler's death with plans for his impending funeral. Fowler is left alone to muse on his condition in a long speech, crammed with satirical detail, that is of interest not so much for its intrinsic content (the social panorama seems rather self-indulgent and out of place here) as for its exhibition of a determined, if perhaps a little desperate, libertine pragmatism on Fowler's part: "if I be dead, I am in a world very much like the other; I will get me a female spirit to converse withal, and kiss, and be merry, and imagine myself alive again" (V.i, 350).

Coming so soon after his expressed determination to take revenge on Penelope by ruining her reputation in the eyes of the world, Fowler's apparent "death" – even beginning to cause him to question his own existence – seems like an analogous example of the powerful role played by public, social opinion in constructing the identity of an individual: Penelope's sequel to her bed-trick (a "coffin-trick" perhaps?) relies on the operation of similar forces, in a sort of pre-emptive response-in-kind, which receives its full, emblematic embodiment in the next scene to deal with this plot, V.iii. The scene takes place in the appropriate and already carefully specified setting of the room which would have seen the death of Penelope's honour – "This is the room I sickened in, and by report died in," says Fowler (V.iii, 354) – and it is in these surroundings that Fowler will witness Penelope's pious exhortations for his soul, and meditations on mortality, eliciting responses from their

addressee that are simultaneously comic – “I am worms’ meat” – and pathetic: “This is my funeral sermon.” A frank assessment of his life as “an inconstant young man” by one of the gentlemen present provokes him to intervene, in a couple of speeches which, under cover of an appeal for sympathy for “our dear brother departed” contain Fowler’s first intimations of regret, and the potential for reclamation:

You loved him, lady; to say truth, you had little cause, a wild young man, yet an he were alive again, as that is in vain to wish, you know, he may perchance be more sensible, and reward you with better service, so you would not proclaim his weakness. (V.iii, 356)

Fowler’s emphasis on “proclamation” – on the maintenance of his public, social identity – is another measure of the suitability of the methods of exposure used by Penelope to bring him to this point. However, the poems that he is presented with, especially in their reference to “*Too self-lov’d Narcissus*” indicate that Fowler’s reformation is not yet complete: one final play remains on the idea of him being “dead to virtue” before he is able to accept her didactic admonishments, and reply to them in the exalted idiom that Penelope has adopted since she began to put her bed-trick into operation. In marked contrast to his earliest seduction speeches, though, Fowler is now able genuinely and publicly to match his “meaning” to his “language”:

Witness my death to vanity, quitting all
Unchaste desires; – revive me in thy thoughts.
And I will love as thou hast taught me, nobly,
And like a husband, by this kiss, the seal
That I do shake my wanton slumber off,
And wake to virtue. (V.iv, 358)

Penelope’s reciprocation of his language in her reply – “now you begin to live” – marks simultaneously her acceptance of his reformation, the end of the plot and counter-plot negotiation of their courtship, and a resolution of their plot in

romance terms; but a resolution that has been achieved through a process that is as much tactical and socially pragmatic as morally absolute and didactic.

***The Witty Fair One* : a qualified bed-trick**

It is worth asking, then, why *The Witty Fair One* has not featured in surveys of the English Renaissance drama bed-trick. One reason may be the lack of sex involved. Desens defines the device as an action in which:

a sexual encounter occurs in which at least one partner is unaware of the other partner’s true identity. The deceived person had expected someone else and, because the couple meet in the dark, he or she fails to detect the substitution. (11)

In contrast to *The Wedding*, *The Lady of Pleasure*, and *The Arcadia*, neither in *The Gamester* nor in *The Witty Fair One* is the encounter actually consummated;⁸ it is never more than an “encounter”, although it appears to be so for a time in *The Gamester*. Bowden, though, seems to suggest that this does not matter. His definition of a bed-trick is that it:

involves the bedding of two people, at least one of whom is mistaken about the identity of his bedfellow ... but that the failure of a trick to result in consummation will not disqualify it (in other words, it is possible to have an unsuccessful bed trick. (122)

In *The Witty Fair One*, only one of the two people involved is actually contemplating a “bedding” and that person does not get further than kissing and “untrussing”. As far as he is concerned, the encounter is not a success,

⁸ In his account of *The Witty Fair One*, Shirley’s biographer makes no mention of either sex or substitution: Penelope simply “consents to a meeting in her chamber” (Nason 186). Forsythe’s extensive analysis of Shirley’s analogies and sources indicates that this scene recalls Massinger’s *The Parliament of Love* but does not explicitly label it a bed-trick.

but this surely does not mean that the trick is a failure, or any less of a trick. On these grounds, at least, *The Witty Fair One* qualifies. A more pertinent reason may be the sexual intentions involved. In the vast majority of bed-tricks listed by Desens, sex does take place; and again, in the vast majority, it is the intention of the perpetrator of the trick that it should.⁹ However, this is not the case in either *The Gamester* or *The Witty Fair One*. In the former, Mistress Wilding never intended to have sex with Wilding or his substitute; in the latter, the pre-coital exposure of Fowler is merely the first stage of Penelope's plan. The subterfuge here and in *The Gamester* is practiced not by a character aiming solely to enjoy a night of pleasure in the arms of an unknowing partner (like Aretina) or a reluctant one, nor by a character wishing simply to avoid such an encounter (like Pyrocles), but by someone wishing to deflect the encounter towards a specifically exemplary, moral-didactic exposure of the would-be lover. The ultimate aim of the action is reformation or restoration. Sex is not a goal: in fact, it is something to be avoided. Bowden lists four possible ends of this kind of "moral" bed-trick: "to preserve the chastity of a virtuous person, to bring about the fulfilment of marriage vows, and to frustrate adulterous intentions" as well as "the exposure and humiliation of the unchaste" person. The earlier Penelope is certainly aiming at the first and last of these; on the basis of intention, again, there seems little reason to exclude *The Witty Fair One*.

Both of Shirley's moral-reformation bed-tricks achieve their purpose – indeed one, by a fortunate accident, is successful in a way in which its protagonists could not originally have anticipated – but the on-stage emphases are strikingly different; and this, rather than the specifically sexual aspects of

⁹ One exception listed by Desens is *Cymbeline*, in which Imogen awakes next to the headless body of Cloten, which she believes to be that of her husband Posthumus because the corpse is dressed in his clothes. This seems to be much less of a bed-trick than that in *The Witty Fair One*.

the trick, may be the reason that *The Witty Fair One* has slipped through the critical net. As noted above, the bed-trick in *The Gamester* takes place off-stage, in a passage of time falling between III.iv and IV.i, but its fall-out lasts, and dominates the action of the play, until just a few lines before the end. Bowden argues that “the bed trick is most effective dramatically as a peak, not as a plane” (120). *The Gamester* would appear to be an exception to this; until we recall the perfunctory nature of Wilding’s conversion to virtue. The plane of humiliation works better than the peak of moral reformation here. The trick in *The Witty Fair One*, which occurs a little later (IV.iv) in its play, may be more open to criticism under Bowden’s criterion. The sexual discomforting of Fowler is certainly a bed-trick – Fowler expects to sleep with Penelope, but has to be prepared to pay the price of sleeping first with Winnifride, who is actually Penelope herself – but it is no more of a dramatic climax than it is a sexual one. The trick itself – exploiting as it does Fowler’s “wanton slumber” – is both merely stage one of a two-stage process of didactic reformation that reaches its peak in the “death to vanity”/ “wake to virtue” symbolism of the mock-death and funeral of the final act;¹⁰ and a significant turning-point in the battle of wits between Penelope and Fowler, whose relationship makes them a prototype for couples that would take centre-stage in Shirley’s later comedies, *The Ball*, *Hyde Park*, and *The Lady of Pleasure*.

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¹⁰ Both Lopez (26) and Hasler, who cites *The Witty Fair One* as an example of “Shirley’s interest in temporary death as triggering moral reformation” (42), focus on stage two, and the bed-trick gets missed in the process.

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