Introduction

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This issue’s cover shows the Great Bed of Ware, an enormous and luxurious four-poster bedstead with intricately carved pillars and rich canopy and hangings that was constructed in the late sixteenth-century and is now housed in the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A) in London. The bed measures 267 cm in height with a width of 326 cm and a depth of 338 cm, and could hold up to four couples at a time (if perhaps not quite the “fantastick Travailers and their Wives ... feete to feet in the great Bed of Ware, sometimes by dozens”, as claimed in 1638). Its provenance remains mysterious: while the V&A suggests that the bed was commissioned as an expensive advertisement for an inn, given Ware’s reputation as a haven for travellers, lechers, and others seeking a comfortable bed for the night, other traditions claim it to have been a royal bed commissioned for Edward IV; a property of Ware Park, owned by Richard, Earl of Warwick (“The Kingmaker”); or even a movable from the Grey Friars Priory, which had been a gift from Henry VIII to Thomas Birch, his yeoman, in 1544. Whatever the Great Bed’s origins, sources agree that, once in the town of Ware, the bed travelled from inn to inn, presiding in at least five different taverns before being sold to a private collector in 1870 and then to the V&A in 1931 from the dealer Frank Partridge and Sons. Literary references to the bed support the V&A’s contention that the bed served as a publicity gimmick. Most references (ably catalogued online by Graham Watson on his Lottery-Funded Heritage site and by P. K. Thornton for the V&A) emphasize the bed’s bawdy associations. The

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potential for same-sex or polyamorous coupling seems to have provided particular titillation.\(^6\) Thomas Dekker and John Webster's *Northward Hoe!*, for example, wraps up the play with the two men agreeing: "This night lets banquet freely: come, weele dare, / Our wifes to combate ith' greate bed in Ware" (5.1), and in Ben Jonson's *Epicoene* the gentlemen Daw and La-Foole reminisce about "tasting" the joys of "Vellet Petticoates, and wrought Smocks" when they had "beene ... In the great Bed at Ware together in [their] time" (5.1).\(^7\) In Richard Brome's *Sparagus Garden* the young wife Rebecca, who is trying to get pregnant, confides, "One of my longings is to have a couple of lusty able bodied men, to take me up, one before and another behind, as the new fashion is, and carry mee in a Man-litter into the great bed at Ware" (2.2).\(^8\) Edward Ward, writing at the turn of the seventeenth century, confirms the bed's association with sexual license by documenting (or perhaps inventing) an elaborate ritual in which "all new Comers" to the bedroom must swear a "Comical, and withal very Antient" oath and kiss a giant pair of horns, the notorious symbol of cuckoldry.\(^9\)

The few non-sexualized references to the Great Bed, however, reveal fear as well as titillation. Some accounts deploy the imagined act of "lodg[ing] ... a childe of two dayes old in the great bed of Ware" as a figure for folly, and the bed's "miscellan[eous]" crowding, its bodies ranged anonymously side-by-side, as a sign of horrific social breakdown, as in this broadside account of the chaos wreaked on Londoners by the Great Fire of London:

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But then (alas!) men had no time to talk,
No more but so, *Take up your Bed and walk,*
Into the Fields on that bleak dew-dropt Grass,
Where the Earth Bed, and Heaven its Teaster was.
Infants and aged quarter'd row by row,
Never more *Quarters* had *More-fields* then now.
The Miscellany made in every square,
The Counterfeit of the *Great Bed of Ware*.\(^10\)
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"Take up your Bed and walk" quotes with deep irony the Biblical Gospel of John (5:8), in which Jesus miraculously heals a sick man at the pool of Bethesda. The anonymous broadside author contrasts the damp grass with the dry feathers of a warm mattress, the open sky to the rich canopy ("Teaster") of a gentleman's four-poster, and (in a metalepsis) the outdoor bedchamber of newly homeless and vulnerable Londoners (infants and the elderly) to an army barracks that

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\(^6\) Gordon Williams' *Shakespeare's Sexual Language* includes a page of references to the Bed of Ware and the town of Ware as notorious sexual destinations, under the heading "ass's ears". See Gordon Williams, *Shakespeare's Sexual Language*, London, Arden, 2001, p. 44-45.


itself mocks or parodies the unexpected or incongruous sleeping partners put into proximity in the Great Bed of Ware.

In our own century, former Poet Laureate Andrew Motion commemorates the Great Bed alongside the recreated Norfolk House Music Room, Jacobean “silver-shot gloves” exchanged as “amorous” tokens, and the “Crystal Palace” whose Great Exhibition inspired the formation of the original Museum of Manufactures that later developed into the V&A. Motion’s poem “The British Galleries” celebrates the opening of these galleries at the V&A in 2001 and contrasts the permanence, solidity, and tranquility of the Great Bed and the other objects in the galleries to the acts of violence or terror that jeopardize public safety and give us sleepless nights in the world outside.

Motion’s poem begins with the bed itself:

Take the Great Bed of Ware
this never fell
through a thousand feet
of blistered air,
shaking its sleepers out like a
leaf-squall.
That’s why it’s here.

Unlike hijacked airliners, autumn leaves, Icarus, kingdoms, Adam and Eve, or Milton’s Satan, this bed “never fell”; the enjambed stanza of imagined plummeting concludes with an endstopped, complete, expletive sentence of monosyllables, rather than the dwindling cadence that formal critics call a “falling line.” In Motion’s verse the Great Bed allows us to imagine a prelapsarian world in which (as Motion writes of King James’s gloves) “the heart’s harm / is all in the weave”. The cloistered, intricate, and preserved objects in the British Galleries, he concludes (echoing the final lines of Philip Larkin’s “An Arundel Tomb”) “prove / What is true”.

In this way we can connect the literary and theatrical history of beds to complex attitudes towards beds and bedchambers in the early modern era and, indeed, now; we can see how beds and bedchambers evoke fantasies of warm communion on the one hand and of cold-hearted violence (whether averted or expressed) on the other. Ruth Goodman’s excellent and practical How To Be a Tudor reminds us that, in an era where few couples could enjoy private chambers dedicated solely for their own use, a curtained and canopied bed replaced our modern bedroom as the locus of sleep, sex, and secrecy, a rare haven of quiet amidst what might be a busy thoroughfare of household activity.

Goodman also reminds us that the very idea of a raised platform on which to sleep – what we call a bed in the modern, developed world – is a material invention made necessary because of another new technology: the early medieval architectural innovation of the chimney. The chimney helpfully drew smoke from the hearth out of the house and allowed builders to construct upper storeys in buildings, but less helpfully created up-draughts on the floor as

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smoke, and the cooler air at floor level, was sucked up the flue, making chilly sleepers – at least, those who could afford it – prefer a raised bed to a mat or pallet on the floor.14 “Busy people in warm rooms developed new social attitudes”, observes LeRoy Dresbeck of the invention of the chimney; moreover, Dresbeck argues, “the employment of new heating technology, providing new sources of warmth, greatly increased the move towards privacy” in the later medieval and Tudor periods. Lynn White, writing independently, likewise identifies “the chimney [to be] as important as any other single factor in the shift from medieval to modern Occidental attitudes”, but adds, ominously, “technology assessment becomes an enterprise of almost terrifying immediacy when we realize that our most intimate psychic structures may at times be influenced by seemingly minor external innovations”.15 White notes the jeremiads of William of Langland and other medieval writers who lament the lord’s and lady’s retirement away from their liegemen and servants in the Great Hall, beside the communal hearth, up to the private chamber.

The existence and publicity of the Great Bed of Ware thus dramatizes the trade-off between conformity and individualism, community and privacy that adheres to the bedstead itself and to the room that enshrines it. It is worth noting that the very first extant account of the Great Bed, from the diary of Prince Ludwig of Anhalt-Köhten, in 1596, praises the bed’s size because it permits the couples lodged therein to enjoy a modicum of bodily space, “without touching each other to abide”.16 The German word is even stronger: an sich schmiegen usually means “to cuddle”, “to snuggle up with”, or “to wrap oneself around another”, so the Bed of Ware relieved travellers of forced intimate contact with others’ bodies. Lovers and bedspace literally become public property, at least in some fantasies surrounding the bed, but when the curtains are drawn and the sheets pulled up within what is, again literally, a public house or inn, a restricted and occult space for the performance of life’s mysteries (sex, birth, illness, death) appears.

Michelle Perrot’s engaging The Bedroom: An Intimate History expresses itself more lyrically:

A number of issues crop up around the bedroom, whether it be of canvas or of stone; vault, cradle, gallery, or cave; through its associations with rest, with sleep, nocturnal or eternal; with transport; with death. In each case it is linked to limits, to enclosure, to safety, even secrecy; it exists to protect young girls and women, the upper classes, and the deceased.17


The essays in this issue of *Arrêt sur scène/Scene Focus* likewise foreground beds and bedchambers as scenes for the transitional rites and mysteries of human life, made sacred through this combination of outward display and inward joy or heartbreak. Thus Jonson’s Volpone histrionically receives visitors from his purported sickbed in Sarah Mayo’s and Dominic Sevieri’s essays, or John Fletcher’s Livia tricks the wife-taming Petruchio, only to be tricked by him again, in Elizabeth Sharrett’s. Thus Amy Acker’s Beatrice (*in* Joss Whedon’s 2013 film of *Much Ado About Nothing*, in Christy Desmet’s contribution) awakens to an empty bedchamber after a night of love, her Benedick having fled, or Thomas Heywood’s Lucrece and Thomas Middleton’s Beatrice-Joanna encounter violent desecration, in Janice Valls-Russell’s and Nathalie Vienne-Guerrin’s essays respectively.

The issue opens with Pierre Degott’s essay, “When Eros meets Thanatos: The bedchamber scenes in Congreve/Eccles’s and Handel/Hamilton’s *Semele(s)*”. Degott’s contribution foregrounds the histrionicism of the bed itself through theatre history, especially the tensions between opera and oratorio; the bed itself becomes almost a miniature stage within the musical theatre. Degott traces the bedchamber’s expanding roles across William Congreve’s 1707 libretto *Semele* and Handel’s rather operatic oratorio version of 1744, wherein the language of fire characterizes both the excessive ardour of Semele and Jupiter as well as the destructive, godly force that literalizes Semele’s passionate burning. The bedchamber is a consuming space, one in which consummation quickly becomes consumption, and Semele’s passion is both stoked and smothered by a greater force. So too, Degott suggests, is the operatic genre that the contemporary theatrical market demands Handel sacrifice in favour of the English oratorio.

Dominic Sevieri’s contribution to this issue, “Menacing objects: Non-human agency in Volpone’s bedchamber”, takes us from the bed as a site of erotic destruction to the other objects within Volpone’s chamber that are materially implicated in broader social and economic networks that, Sevieri argues, Volpone largely overlooks or defies. Each object – a pillow, a plate, a coin – has played other parts and transformed itself within these networks prior to their reaching Volpone’s grasp, and whatever agency he exerts over these objects, these items still retain within themselves latent, minatory actions. At any moment, as Sevieri argues, these objects threaten Volpone’s control over deceit by working in another capacity: the amassed coin in the chamber that represents Volpone’s successful plot could always “mutiny” by returning to its function as currency.

Christy Desmet’s essay, “The Bedchamber as Contested Space: *Much Ado about Nothing* in Film and Social Media”, navigates the constructions of privacy in the bedchamber in twentieth- and twenty-first-century appropriations of *Much Ado About Nothing*, where Hero’s bedchamber facilitates voyeurism of different kinds. Perrott dates the rise of the “daughter’s room” or *chambre de demoiselle* to the late eighteenth century, although Eleanor Hubbard argues convincingly of England in the early seventeenth century that young, well-to-do women fortunate enough to have bedchambers of their own in a large household could court their wooers privately “in a room that could become the site of women’s nocturnal youth culture”.18 Even as some women could use their bedrooms as places of freedom from surveillance,

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however, Perrot writes, “the young lady’s room haunted the literary imagination to the point of fantasy”, an idealized metaphor for the young lady’s chastity, delicacy, and enclosure itself.  

Desmet’s essay considers the modern bedroom on screen as both the literary-historical site of forced female display, and as the remediated, contemporary home of chosen female community. The feature-film productions of Kenneth Branagh (1993) and Joss Whedon (2013), Desmet argues, offer visions of surveillance as the bedchamber is either placed at a remove from the play’s male protagonists, who both can and cannot see the sexual dalliance happening within it, or proffered for close inspection as its own kind of material or moral evidence of Hero’s alleged infidelity. Desmet concludes that two teen web video series of 2014 restore the bedchamber’s privacy by disinviting readings for other kinds of significations within it; as a space inhabited, cultivated, and displayed by its female characters and primary narrators, these digitally exposed bedrooms do not ask us or other characters in the production to search beyond the threshold for secrets.

Sarah Mayo’s contribution takes us from the privacy of the twenty-first-century teenager’s bedroom to the seventeenth-century public and private spaces of illness. The sickroom derives, Perrot narrates, from the Roman “grabat (pallet) on which the bedridden lay [and that] referred to a soldier’s camp bed or a bed for the poor, for slaves, or for Stoic philosophers”.  

“Performing Power and the Power of Performance in the Bed-Space of Jonson’s Volpone (1606)”, Sarah Mayo’s essay, in contrast to Sevieri’s, frames the bed itself as the crucial and powerful object on stage. In Mayo’s reading, Volpone’s couch itself becomes the stage, the “performatic” (as distinct from “performative”) space in which Volpone as character deploys stage-properties (such as his cap and gown) meta-theatrically, performatically, and uses stage-gestures and sounds (a cough, a sigh) to adopt what she calls (following twenty-first-century theorists) “disability drag”. In light of the early modern discourses surrounding “mountebanks” (unlicensed seventeenth-century itinerant performing healers) and the ars moriendi or art of the “good death”, Mayo suggests, aspects of Volpone’s performed and, by the play’s conclusion, actual powerlessness lose some of their force on a modernized stage and in a present-day context, despite the play’s attraction for performers and directors today.

Fletcher’s The Woman’s Prize uses the bed or couch to mark three of our rites of passage: marriage, illness, and death. In “Marriage bed manoeuvrings: Sociopolitical functions of the bed in the 1647 Folio text of John Fletcher’s The Woman’s Prize, Or The Tamer Tamed”, Elizabeth Sharrett sees the bedchamber as a platform of gendered control: in The Woman’s Prize, Or The Tamer Tamed, this sphere of control is domestic rather than political. As one daughter, Maria, defies her marital contract by barring Petruchio from her bed, the other, Livia, achieves negotiating power in a future marital contract by, like Volpone, making her bed masquerade as a sick-bed. Sharrett concludes, however, that even through this masquerade, Livia pays some obeisance to marriage rituals so that the sick-bed can become the marriage bed without fracturing her existing familial and social networks or reducing her marriage to an illegitimate act of theatricality – a bed-trick.

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Like Sharrett’s essay, Lori Leigh’s contribution reads the bedroom as a battlefield between men and women who struggle for power. “‘Take up her bed’: Cleopatra’s bed in *Antony and Cleopatra*” recuperates Cleopatra’s bed not only as the appropriate alternative to productions of *Antony and Cleopatra* that place her death upon a throne, but as a kind of throne itself, from which Cleopatra creates a form of conquering and rulership operating at the slow pace of seduction, in contrast to the swift motions and manipulations of Roman men. Leigh argues that as Cleopatra dies upon her bed at the end of the play, staging herself as her own royal effigy, she monumentalizes herself as a queen and monumentalizes as well her version of queenship, embodied in the bed as an erotic, combative, and political space.

Leigh’s essay figures death, as Cleopatra herself does, as the great queen’s final scene. Perrot writes, again elegantly, of the inherent theatricality of the deathbed:

> The terrestrial ending to human life, the solemn entrance into the world to come, whose existence was not in question, is as much the concern of the group, of the community, as the individual. This explains the public nature of death [with] [t]he ‘deathbed’...its central (and only) scene.

The bed thus becomes a shifting threshold between life and death, private and public. Nathalie Oziol’s “Death sentences in Shakespearean deathbed scenes” focuses on the bed’s liminal role in the physical and spiritual transformation from life into death, a transition preceded by verbal and communal preparatory rituals like Katherine’s blessed vision and interpretation in *Henry VIII*. Cardinal Beaufort’s death in *Henry VI Part 2*, in contrast, shows a failed performance of dying caused by unresolved guilt and a selfish attempt to bribe death for painlessness, an attempt that signifies his corruption to onlookers. The bedchamber is thus part of personal negotiations of faith and heavenly aspiration as well as an exemplary performance for the to-be-bereaved, a self-memorialization that precedes and aesthetically echoes the epitaph.

Our three final essays explicitly connect the bed’s theatrical potential as a signifier of both *la petite mort* and *la grande mort*, as it were. In “The ‘bed’s scandal’ in Thomas Middleton and William Rowley’s *The Changeling*”, Nathalie Vienne-Guerrin examines the bedchamber “unsences” of *The Changeling* made “scenes” again in performance, from Beatrice-Joanna and Deflores’s first disturbing affair and Alsemero and Diaphanta’s imagined consummation to the final removal of Beatrice-Joanna and Deflores to the closet, an unseen stage where they must rehearse the deeds of the bedchamber, which encompass, as in Handel’s *Semele*, both death and sex. Vienne-Guerrin suggests that the chaste marital bed can never be brought into view, receding further from imagination as both Beatrice-Joanna and Alsemero fail in their consummation and Diaphanta’s lust alights both Alsemero’s bed and, through Deflores’s fire-setting in her bedchamber, her own.

Janice Valls-Russell’s “Ravishing the bride from the classical page to the early modern stage: Thomas Heywood’s *The Rape of Lucrece*” connects Livy, Ovid, Shakespeare, and Heywood through their depictions of the repeated violation of Lucrece’s privacy. The trajectory of domestic intrusion that chases Lucrece from hall to bedchamber in Thomas Heywood’s *The Rape of Lucrece* follows her husband’s verbal violation of privacy to Tarquin’s militaristic invasion, the two of which, Valls-Russell argues, are materially linked by the presentation of Collatine’s ring as the token that grants Tarquin access to the house. The play uses material staging and physical space to give immediacy to Ovid and Shakespeare’s emotional

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21 Ibid., p. 217.
resonances, and Heywood's Lucrece resists Tarquin's control by making her bedchamber, where he promises privacy and secrecy before his rape, the very place from which she publishes it to her husband and father. No longer private or secure, the bedchamber, Valls-Russell concludes, becomes a declarative space with effects that push further outward, to Rome itself.

Alban Déléris's contribution, "Lits d'amour, lits de mort: « scènes » de chambre dans des tragédies françaises et anglaises au début du XVIIe siècle", offers us some welcome French context to the bedchamber and the bed on stage. Considering French plays by François du Souhait, Nicolas Chrestien des Croix, Pierre Troterel, Jean-Gilbert Durval, and Alexandre Hardy, and English ones by John Ford, Cyril Tourneur, and William Shakespeare, Déléris connects the bedchamber's paradoxical and liminal status as the site of both joy and dread, life and death, with the emergence of a new theatrical genre: tragicomedy or romance. Scenes with dead bodies (or bodies thought to be dead) function, he suggests, as dramatic pivots or hinges, episodes that evoke what he calls the tragic grotesque. Such beds, he concludes, are clad in not the pristine linen of the wedding-night but the winding-sheets of the dead.

The bedchamber today repeats the paradoxes of the early modern and Enlightenment eras. Smartphones in our bedrooms serve as portals to corporate or political spies but also as entryways to friends and lovers. These digital windows in our beds and bedrooms can offer comfort and what sociologist Julia Obermayr calls “cultural kinship” for members of marginalized communities, but also threaten the constant “pressure to perform” to other bodies, other minds, others' expectations.22 Writing a decade ago, Perrot predicted the rise of the so-called bedroom broadcast on YouTube, but, rather than repeat recent jeremiads about the intrusion of social media into private life, we conclude with her note of careful counsel and optimism:

In a society that is ever more locked down and controlled, the bedroom retains its absolute right to secrecy. It represents the possibility of escaping the world, even more so as communication technologies improve to the point of putting the world on the computer screen. Connected in this way, the bedroom of the future will have infinite means of exploring the world. The door opens to desire, to other people, to the world; it invites us to discover them, to go outside. 23

The curtained bed and the enclosed bedchamber offer the greatest solace and space for rest and recreation when we return to them after a day "outside", a day's adventure in a world that we discover, uncover, and recover for our own, perhaps from within the bedchamber itself.
