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
University of Lynchburg

In Renaissance England, a symbolic overlap with death was purposefully invoked in the observation of marriage – the second of the three major rites of passage in the early modern lifecycle. Indeed, the wedding ceremony as set out in the 1559 Protestant Book of Common Prayer encouraged couples to contemplate and embrace the transience of life in their new roles as husbands and wives, just as all people were called to do every day. This essay considers the use of the prop bed in the 1647 folio text of John Fletcher’s The Woman’s Prize, or The Tamer Tamed (1610),¹ and the manner in which the object functions as an emblem of female marital control within the play. Informing this reading is an examination of the seemingly antithetical embrace of marriage and death in early modern culture. It argues that the particular employment of the prop in the first scene of the final act exploits this moment of intersection between these two rites of passage humourously but subversively, and it is the manipulation of these nodes of experience that becomes the means by which the character Livia assumes control of her marital destiny. The space in which she does so, from her supposed sickbed, is highly symbolic, and contributes significantly to the play’s subversive quality.

The majority of Fletcher’s domestic comedy focuses on the new marriage between Maria and the famous shrew-tamer, Petrucio. Determined not to be broken like “the shrew” Kate (Petruchio’s deceased first wife), Maria refuses to consummate the marriage, and locks herself away until Petrucio agrees to change his domineering and abusive ways. Her sister Livia has been promised by their father to the elderly gentleman Moroso. Taking matters into

¹ The 1647 folio text is distinct from the undated Lambarde manuscript (Folger MS J.b.3), which utilises a chair in the scene instead of a bed. The composition date of this play is according to Martin Wiggins in association with Catherine Richardson, British Drama 1533–1642: A Catalogue, Vol. VI: 1609–1616, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2015, p. 54, entry #1609,.
her own hands, Livia feigns illness, and from the platform of her sickbed, secretly arranges marriage to her lover Roland by having her father, Moroso, and Roland sign what they believe to be an apology letter from Livia for her rebellious behaviour earlier in the play, but which is in fact a marriage contract. The play ends with Petruchio transformed from a shrew tamer to the one tamed, and with no one able to annul Livia and Roland’s marriage, which they have hastily consummated. Thus, both sisters succeed in controlling their own marital destinies. Yet in contrast to her sister Maria’s success at achieving her desires through active force in the main plot by banning Petruchio from their bedchamber, by way of a sex strike that spreads among all the women in the play, Livia’s seeming passivity in the subplot excludes her from the “shrew” category. The means by which she negotiates the fate of her marriage bed, literally onstage through its use as a prop, however, becomes equally if not more subversive to a Jacobean audience than her sister’s more obviously forcible manipulations. To fully appreciate Livia’s actions and the implications of the play’s outcome, it is helpful to discuss the role of marriage in this period, and the bed’s relationship to the observation of this key moment in the lifecycle, as well as the religious ideals and cultural realities attending this ritual process.

Like other rites of passage, marriage was a transformation: a cultural, spiritual, and social one, which resulted in extensive alterations to an individual’s identity. David Cressy notes that the transformation carried with it a number of implications, regardless of financial position:

Marriage assigned new privileges, advantages, and obligations…redefined social and sexual roles, rearranged patriarchal obligations, and conferred new duties of status, authority, and dependency … Marriage for a man meant autonomy, mastery, responsibility, and the prospect of fathering a lineage. Marriage for a woman was, perhaps, the major defining moment of her life, determining her social, domestic, and reproductive future.2

The marriage ceremony echoed this wider transformation for the two individuals. The couple, arriving at the church as bachelor and maid, received new titles as a result of the nuptial service, departing as husband and wife. Dying to the single selves of their previous lives, they were born afresh to their new identity in marriage. While the newly joined man and woman stood hand-in-hand in the presence of their families and the wider community, the minister blessed them and stated, “that you may so live together in this life, that in the world to come, you may have life everlasting”.3 “Life” takes on a new meaning in this sentence, transforming with the couple, and becoming not only temporal, or that which they will live and do, but also eternal, or that which they will have or possess. This transformation, then, was a reminder of the finite nature of the couple’s lives in this world and, consequently, of their fallen state, highlighting the need for spiritual preparation for their ultimate heavenly home.

An example of this attitude is illustrated in The Judde Memorial portrait, dated 1560, which functions as a visual demonstration of this transformation, and illustrates the importance of religious instruction and daily devotion.4 The unattributed portrait was


The Judde Memorial, c. 1560, oil on panel, Dulwich Picture Gallery, London, accession number DPG345.
probably commissioned to commemorate the marriage of its two subjects, and includes the skull as a common memento mori symbol, which sits atop a table and serves to unite the new husband and wife as they each place a hand on the object. Above this triangular grouping appears the text, “Behold our end”, and immediately below, “The word of God hath knit us twain and death shall us divide again”. Below this latter text is a shroud-draped corpse, laid out on a bier, over which the couple stand and at which their other hands point. Though not an actual structure upon which people slept at night, the bier becomes an unmistakable reference to a bed, evoking what the new couple will shortly occupy, and reminding them of their transience as they consummate their marriage. The words in all capitals “LIVE TO DIE AND DIE TO LIVE ETERNALLY” are also inscribed below. Thus, what might appear by today’s standards to be an inappropriate intermingling of subject matter – marriage and death – serves to reinforce the common late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century conflation of life and death, referred to by Nigel Llewellyn as “a single cultural process”.

The physical bed also embodied these seemingly antithetical themes for Puritan clergymen such as Arthur Dent and Richard Rogers. In his work, The Plain Man’s Pathway to Heaven, first printed in 1601, Dent expounds, “our life ought to be a continual meditation of death. We should always live as if we should die, or that our bed should be our grave”. Rogers’s 1610 treatise A Garden of Spiritual Flowers likewise includes a specific section addressing “how to live and die well”, with particular instructions on preparation for bed; like Dent’s work, it associates these two spaces stating, “I go to bed as to my grave”. Dent and Rogers consider the bed not only as an object, but also as an actual space, crucial to the enacting of ritual. In doing so, they transform the bed into both a symbolic and literal location for corporeal and spiritual preparation for the life to come. Consequently, even during the marriage ritual the spectre of death was ever-present, and the bed served as a visible reminder of this eventual end.

**Manipulating marriage rituals**

While appealing to these cultural and religious attitudes, The Woman’s Prize concurrently puts pressure on the ideals and standard practices of marriage as it existed in the early seventeenth century. In his introduction to the play, Gary Taylor states, “In seventeenth-century England … the authority of fathers and husbands could not be disentangled from the authority of Church and State”. Livia and Maria’s behaviour, however, directly defies this hierarchical assumption. Though female roles throughout the entire marital process, from courtship to consummation, were “ideally” generally more passive than those of husbands, Fletcher’s domestic comedy depicts a male-female struggle in which control ultimately lands with the wives, each of whom manipulate consummation to achieve their own marital desires.

---

Both sisters’ marital schemes, therefore, echo the dissident action of the other, bridging the two plots, and their challenge to patriarchal authority reinforces the play’s subversive quality. Livia employs consummation in order to secure her marriage. Maria appropriates it by abstaining from it. Yet while the audience witnesses Maria’s occupation of the marriage bed through her banishment of Petruchio from both her body and his bedchamber, her rebellion is really only ever conveyed rhetorically. Petruchio appeals to Maria from the ground below as she looks out from the house in which she has shut herself, which was probably some upper stage area in the theatre. He pleads, “come down and tender me / all the delights due to a marriage bed” (I.iii.238–9), with the audience never actually witnessing the empty bed. In contrast, Fletcher boldly stages Livia’s rebellion for the audience in Act five, scene one. The physical space in which she undertakes her marriage bed manoeuvring is highly symbolic, and the image created in performance would have been striking, as well as humorous, to a contemporary audience. Sitting upon her supposed sickbed, which in the early seventeenth century might quickly have become her deathbed, Livia usurps male authority in negotiating her choice of husband, but also does so from the very space that may later host the consummation of her marriage. While Maria’s banishment of her husband is culturally outrageous, and partially what creates comedy within the wider play, Fletcher’s placement of Livia in the bed amplifies the boldness of the younger sister’s actions, and heightens the irony of the scene. Thus, as her scheme proceeds as planned, she waits upon the sickbed of her virginity, and once the necessary signatures have been collected the space becomes the deathbed of her “maidenhead”, making way for the birth of her new life as a wife. In so doing, Livia draws together all three major rites of passage – birth, marriage, and death – into one moment, exploiting their conflation to secure her desired future. As the audience knows, however, she is not actually unwell, and the dramatic irony of her seeming humility and contrition, as well as her manipulation of the bed, become evidence of the extent to which it is she who is in control of her marriage, and not the men.

With this clandestine arrangement, therefore, Livia sidesteps her father’s authority, but also circumvents the authority of the church by failing to wait for the three customary Sunday services at which the banns were published in the weeks preceding the wedding. Additionally, she bypasses the cultural tradition of the wider courtship and marriage process, which included gift giving, betrothal, and the wedding ceremony. Finally, Livia’s actions exclude her intended husband, as Roland plays no part in this negotiation, nor is he aware of its existence; and as a result, such manipulation of the bed in which Roland ends up achieves a kind of bed-trick. While there is no mistaking these actions as subversive in a seventeenth-century context, however, they are not entirely outside the ideal. Indeed, her scheme crucially makes reference to, and resembles traditional components of, the wider marriage ritual,

---

9 All references to the play are taken from Lucy Munro, ed., The Tamer Tamed, London, Methuen Drama, 2010.
10 Diana O’Hara addresses the lengthy ritual and varying traditions of the marriage process in Courtship and Constraint: Rethinking the Making of Marriage in Tudor England, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2000. Likewise, Cressy’s Birth, Marriage, and Death highlights the importance of the reading of the banns for the couple as well as the community as a whole (p. 305); Cummings, Book of Common Prayer, p. 157.
which ultimately serves to ensure the validity of the match once it is discovered by the other characters.

In an ideal context, these important elements allowed the family as well as the wider community to participate in, and witness, this fundamental transformation in the status of both husband and wife. As Michael Neill has argued regarding the marriage of Desdemona and Othello in Shakespeare's tragedy, the absence of the observation of any kind of public wedding ritual contributes to the problematic nature of the union for the wider community in the world of the play. In contrast, Livia's very communal, semi-public negotiations incorporate elements of this important process. Though her father does not realise what he is doing, Petronius actually does, in a technical sense, give his daughter consent to marry by signing the contract. This not only enables but also facilitates her union with Roland. Thus, while the characters onstage are unaware of what they look upon, friends and family are present and are witnesses to this event. Indeed, it is these witnesses who eventually attest to the irreversible outcome of the union.

Additionally, from her position on the bed, Livia performs a kind of bedding ceremony. Though this important ritual stood outside the formal religious service, the event was nevertheless a crucial cultural custom for the community, and functioned as the climax of the marriage ritual, thus serving to complete the rite of passage. While by no means standardised, the bedding ceremony often commenced with the wedding party and family escorting the bride to meet the groom, who was already in bed. The chamber, and in particular the physical bed, traditionally was decorated with strewn flowers or ribbons. The bride was then placed in bed together with the groom, where the wedding party may have witnessed the couple consume sack posset from a cup, or “throw the stocking”, a custom in which the bride and groom’s hose were flung by the wedding party. As one of the final customs of the ceremony, the couple were sometimes sewn into their wedding sheets before being tucked in and kissed by family and friends. The bed curtains would then be drawn closed, and the couple left to consummate the marriage. Rowdy wedding parties often lingered outside the chamber, regaling the couple by singing bawdy ballads long into the night. This was intended to spur on the new husband and wife in their marital duty, which helped bring about the regeneration that was so crucial to the perpetuation of the family.

Just as Livia reverses the roles in negotiating the marriage, she, like the groom, is already in bed, while Roland, like the bride, is brought to her. Though we never see the couple occupy the space together, these elements make reference to the ideals of the wider ritual process. Livia’s transposition of the spousal roles serves to punctuate her part in the wider rebellion against male authority depicted throughout the play.

**Patriarchal negotiations**

In reality, marriage negotiations sometimes involved only fathers and prospective suitors, excluding women altogether, and the man who ended up in a woman’s bed might have

---


arrived there as the result of an exclusively male decision. Petronius echoes this custom with an assertion of his patriarchal right, declaring, “She’s [Livia] mine now as I please to settle her, / At my command, and where I please to plant her” (v.i.48–9). The outrageousness of Livia’s action in arranging her own marriage, then, is further heightened when staged in an actual bed. For, indeed, she has chosen where to “plant” herself.

The behaviour of Petronius and Moroso, however, was not necessarily synonymous with religious teaching and cultural ideals. While Taylor identifies that male authority was closely linked to Church and state, the relationship between these institutions was often problematic and contradictory. Though there may have been numerous instances in which men negotiated matches to the exclusion of the women involved, such as seen in The Woman’s Prize, reformed Protestant teaching placed great importance on the need for marriages to be entered into with the mutual consent of husband and wife. William Perkins, drawing on 1 Corinthians 7:3, speaks of “due benevolence [which] must be showed with a singular and entire affection one towards another”. 14 He elaborates on this ideal, explaining “The communion of man & wife, is that duty, whereby they do mutually and willingly communicate, both their persons, & goods each to other, for their mutual help, necessity and comfort”. Robert Cleaver addresses the importance of this in his treatise on Godly household government, and warns that it is an “unnatural and cruel part, for parents to sell their children for gain and lucre, and to marry them when they list, and to whom they list, without the good liking of their children…there must and ought to be a knitting of hearts before striking of hands”. 15 Fletcher’s depiction of Petronius and Moroso’s marriage negotiations is explicitly contrary to such teaching, and serves to highlight the extent to which their actions are just as problematic, if not more so, as the women’s within the play. Therefore, though Livia’s taking complete control of her marriage was by no means in accordance with the ideal, she is perhaps no more outside of this than her father and her almost-husband.

While marriage in early modern England entailed a social and religious alteration for both sexes, it was a more extensive cultural transformation for women, and, at least officially, an institution over which men exercised primary control. The marital transformations that occur in The Woman’s Prize, however, impact men but are driven exclusively by women. Maria tames Petruchio, and Livia determines and arranges a marriage to the man of her choice. Thus, it is the women who control the “marriage bed”, and the men who undergo the greater transformation. Moreover, Livia’s arrangement of her marital destiny from a physical bed is significant. Though it ostensibly appears as a “sickbed”, her dramatic employment of the object’s association with marriage and death ironically becomes the comic means by which she ensures happiness in her marriage bed. Furthermore, her adherence to and observance of a number of important elements of the wider marriage ritual process, including the signing of a contract, the bedding ceremony, and the hasty consummation, all work to legitimise the

14 Perkins, Christian oeconomie..., London, Felix Kyngston, 1609, sig. H7v. The scripture is quoted directly from Perkins’s text.
15 Robert Cleaver, A Godlie form of householde government..., London, Felix Kingston for Thomas Man, 1598, sig. V5v. Dent elaborates further, “if parents shall force and compel their children to marry contrary to their mind and liking, then the sorrowful children may not say they have married them, but for ever they have marred and undone them ... And therefore to the end that marriages may be perpetual, loving, and delightful betwixt the parties".
match. The community, also a crucial component, eventually embraces the marriage, as the pseudo ceremony attending it possesses the necessary cultural accompaniments, however unofficial. As this essay has argued, the comic outrageousness of this scene for Jacobean audiences relied not only on an understanding of the ideal roles of women and men in marriage, but also on a wider appreciation of the bed’s function in the ritual, and the deliberate overlap invoked between the second rite of passage and death. It is, therefore, the interplay between the spoken text and the action taking place in the presence of the prop bed, which together contribute significantly to the play’s subversive quality.

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**

*Judd Memorial*, c. 1560, Dulwich Picture Gallery, London, accession number DPG345.

BEAUMONT, Francis and John Fletcher, *Comedies and Tragedies written by Francis Beavmont and John Fletcher Gentlemen...*, London, Humphrey Robinson for Humphrey Moseley, 1647.


PERKINS, William, *Christian oeconomie : or a short syrvey of the right manner of erecting and ordering a familie, according to the Scriptures...*, London, Felix Kyngston, 1609.
