Postgraduate English

Performing "in the likeness of a petticoat": Playing Helen of Troy and Medea in the Drama of James Shirley

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James Shirley's *Poems & c.,* published in 1646, inspired commendatory verses from many admirers and colleagues. One such admirer, George Bucke, draws attention to Shirley's use of classical mythology (particularly the story of Echo and Narcissus), and declares

> Let Ovid boast their story; but their names
> Will take eternity from thee, dear James.[1]

Such praise is obviously hyperbolic, and it would be foolhardy to claim today that Shirley's retelling of the myth (in *Narcissus, or The Self-Lover*) has become more popular than Ovid's rendering in the *Metamorphoses.* Nevertheless, Bucke's admiring lines do draw attention to Shirley's use of mythology (and specifically of Ovidian mythology and themes). The appropriation of classical myth for literary effect was nothing new, but in Shirley's work it is possible to discern something more original: a cavalier attitude to the stories and characters of myth that is memorable, because different and (often) irreverent. In this essay, I will examine Shirley's rewriting of two of the best-known classical stories, those of Helen and Paris and Medea and Jason, with specific reference to his use (and misuse) of the two notorious classical women. Specifically, Shirley has his characters, both male and female, masquerade as Helen and as Medea, and such deception or deceptive self-representation has implications for the characters as well as for his audience, well-versed as they would have been in classical myth and legend.

Both women, and both stories, were familiar to seventeenth-century readers and audiences. As Bucke's lines suggest, the influence of Ovid in the seventeenth century remained considerable, from the school-room onward. His *Metamorphoses*, *Heroides, Ars Amatoria* and *Tristia* supplied details of both the women's stories, and the enduring interest in specifically Ovidian models is attested by the frequent sixteenth-century reprintings of George Turberville's *Heroides* and Arthur Golding's *Metamorphoses* (both English translations appeared in 1567); by the English *Heroides* of Wye Saltonstall and John Sherburne (1636 and 1639)[2] and by George Sandys' 1626 translation of the *Metamorphoses*. Moreover, for the classical Helen the early seventeenth-century writer would have had access to Jean de Sponde's Latin rendering of the *Iliad* (1606) as well as the English translation of George Chapman (published in its entirety in 1611). For Medea's story, too, Ovid was not the only classical authority: John Studley's 1566 translation of Seneca's *Medea* was followed by Thomas Hobbes' (1602),[3] and by Edward Sherburne's (1648), and Euripides' *Medea* had been translated into Latin by George Buchanan in 1544. Equally important, perhaps, were the repeated fourteenth- and fifteenth-century English renderings of both legends, by writers including Chaucer, Gower, Lydgate and Caxton (all four writers return to both women, either briefly or at length, several times over the course of their literary careers). Indeed, the long narratives of the Trojan War produced by John Lydgate (the *Troy Book*) and by John Clerk (the alliterative*History of the Destruction of Troy*) are particularly significant. Following their source, Guido de Columnis' thirteenth-century *Historia DestructionisTroiae*, they recount both Medea's story and Helen's (since Jason's quest for the Fleece directly preceded the first sack of Troy), and in so doing set the precedent for English authors' inclusion of both women in more original works.

As this sustained English interest in mythology in the Middle Ages and Renaissance would suggest, Shirley was by no means the first writer either to include Helen and Medea's stories in an original piece (rather than a translation),

or to dramatise them. Translators aside, Elizabethan authors including George Pettie, George Gascoigne, Richard Robinson, George Whetstone, and John Ogle had recognised the didactic and pathetic potential of their stories. Nor is Shirley's dramatic interest in either woman groundbreaking: Helen had been brought to the English stage by Shakespeare in *Troilus and Cressida*, and Medea appears in a dumbshow in Thomas Norton and Thomas Sackville's *Gorboduc* (1571), is referenced in Henry Chettle's gory revenge tragedy *Hoffman* (1631), and appears as a character in Robert Greene's *The Comical History of Alphonsus, King of Aragon* (1599).[4]More significantly, Shirley's contemporary Heywood had written both women for the stage in his sequence of mythological plays: Medea and Jason's story is included in *The Brazen Age*, while Helen is an important part of *The Iron Age*, Parts One and Two. Even in his comic use of myth, Shirley cannot be said to be entirely original: in the *Triumph of Beautie*, his obvious debt to Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* for the shepherds' abortive attempt to stage serious drama underscores the fact that he was not the first playwright to appropriate tragic classical models in this way. Where I would argue Shirley innovates, however, is in his comic and subversive appropriation of these specific myths, of Helen and Medea. Both the adulterous and seductive Helen and the magical and bloodthirsty Medea were seen as peculiarly threatening to the male establishment from antiquity onwards, and Shirley recognises and exploits their reputations in challenging and memorable ways in his dramatic works. Specifically, his interest in making his characters, male and female, masquerade as these notorious figures speaks to the early modern interest in the reappropriation and rewriting of myth, and in woman's place both on the seventeenth-century stage, and in the male-oriented worlds Shirley creates.

Playing Dangerous Games: Shirley's Helen in *The Constant Maid*.
The Constant Maid was published in 1640,[5] and in it, Shirley appropriates Helen and Paris' story for his subplot, the young gallant Playfair'sdetermined pursuit of the rich old Hornet's beautiful niece. Despite the potential parallels between the two stories, however, Shirley elects to recycle not the commonly

retold story of the Trojan prince Paris' abduction of the willing Helen from her husband Menelaus, that notorious catalyst for the Trojan War, but instead the less popular episode of the pair's wedding in Troy. Helped by his uncle Sir Clement, the ironically-named Playfair stages a representation first of Paris' judgement of Venus, Juno and Minerva, and then, immediately following, of his marriage to Helen – here Hornet's disguised niece. This play-within-a-play device was as popular on the seventeenth-century stage as it had been on the sixteenth, often because of the opportunities it afforded for deception, subversion and rule-breaking. Hornet believes he is merely watching a show, but Playfair and the niece take the opportunity to become legally married (as the niece makes clear in her thanks to Sir Clement in 5.3). Apparently, then, Shirley's appropriation of the myth is simply a clever way of realising that staple of seventeenth-century comedy: the unification of the happy couple, and the thwarting of the girl's tyrannical father figure through trickery. Indeed, Shirley's debt to this comic model seems the more apparent as, having realised the deception, Hornet good-naturedly accepts the marriage and the loss of his niece's fortune, and the play ends happily. I would suggest, however, that Shirley has chosen his mythology carefully, and that his use of Paris and Helen's story suggests more than first appears.

Typically, classical accounts of Paris and Helen's relationship focus either on their initial flirtation (Ovid's *Heroides*) or on the terrible aftermath of their adulterous love (Homer's *Iliad*, Euripides' *Troades* and *Orestes*, Seneca's *Troades*). For a (brief) account of the pair's triumphant entrance into Troy, and their marriage, Shirley could have looked to the superbly disapproving account of Dares the Phrygian, his *De Excidio Troiae Historia*,[6] or to the medieval accounts it influenced, the *Roman de Troie* of Benoît de Sainte-Maure, the *Historia* of Guido or the English renderings of John Lydgate or John Clerk. All these accounts, though, record not only the marriage, but the amoral beginnings of the love affair, and its tragic consequences. Thus, though it may well have sprung to Shirley's mind, and appealed, as one of the most famous stories of subversive

desire and female transgression, the story of Helen and Paris is, in anyone's book, a peculiarly inauspicious model for a marriage that apparently constitutes one of the play's happy endings. For the most part, of course, this is because any reference to Helen and Paris' love (or even Helen's beauty) inescapably evokes the catastrophic events that followed their elopement. Shirley makes no attempt to render the disapproving Hornet sympathetic (he is prepared to kill his niece rather than see her married), but his choice of mythical lovers seems to be intended to undermine Playfair's relationship with his beloved. In supplying Paris and Helen's story as a model (and indeed as a means) for the marriage, he appears to cast doubts both on the morality of the match, and its possible repercussions, and complicates the pair's apparently light-hearted deception of Hornet even as he represents it.

The way in which Shirley most obviously destabilises and questions what might seem to be a successful and dramatically satisfying deception is, of course, through his choice of the classical parts his characters will play, and through the burdensome reputations he thereby bestows upon them. Walter Cohen points out that, when pre-Revolutionary tragicomedies end in marriage, "the condition of even this ambiguous accomplishment is almost always the preservation of virginity, an internalized norm of virtuous characters, male and female, and virtuous dramatist alike".[7] This statement can be applied with equal validity to comedies and tragedies, as can his point that this insistence on virginity "functions mainly to guarantee the control by men – fathers, brothers, husbands, suitors, and sons – of the sexuality of women".[8] Helen is, of course, a singularly poor model for such a virginal bride. Not only has she abandoned her first husband, but Dares, and following him Benoît, Joseph of Exeter, Guido and the authors of the English Troy-narratives, makes clear that Helen and Paris sleep together on the voyage back to Troy. Marliss C. Desens considers sixteenth- and seventeenth-century literary use of the traditional bed-trick, the substitution of one sexual partner for another, and also points to what she calls "two related conventions of partner substitution", which she terms "the boy bride" and "the exchanged beloved".[9]

She notes that usage of these latter two declined as the more sexually-charged bed-trick became popular into Jacobean and Caroline writing, but suggests "When they do appear in the later drama, playwrights have usually introduced modifications that give them an ironic emphasis" (53). Here, Shirley is employing the device of the "exchanged beloved", but his ironic modification is the hint he gives Hornet, his employment of perhaps the most famous deceptive and transgressive love affair in western literature. He seems to imply that Playfair and Sir Clement, as male characters with a vested interest in the match, would do well to consider the equation of Helen and the niece, the consequences implied by making even the most apparently virtuous woman enact such a role in order to deceive. The headstrong young gallant Playfair compares well to the impetuous prince of Troy. However, in making the niece act the part of Helen (both figuratively and, of course, literally), Shirley appears to cast doubt on her virtue, and concurrently on the control that the male characters have enjoyed over her both before and after Playfair and Clement's deceptive production. Elizabethan authors including George Gascoigne and George Turberville had already portrayed male lovers who appear ridiculous due to their comparison of their ladies with Helen. In the 1573 edition of Gascoigne's *The Adventures of Master F. J.*, for example, the enthusiastic lover's naming of his lady as Helen of Troy foreshadows (and perhaps even encourages) her infidelity. Shirley does not represent the consequences of the men making the niece play Helen of Troy in the same way, but at the very least he hints that such a role may have unforeseen repercussions for feminine virtue.

This said, in staging Helen, Shirley has no interest in imitating famous Elizabethan representations of the character, such as the witty and flirtatious Helen of Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida,*[10] or the angry, desirous, regretful, but always verbose Helen of *The Iron Age*.[11] The niece (who is noticeably unnamed) scarcely speaks in the play, and when she does the issue of male control is inescapably and deliberately apparent, despite Julie Sanders' assertion that often, "it is women who are Shirley's plain speakers".[12] She

feigns madness in order to deceive Hornet (who recognises her when she plays Helen, but believes it cannot be her, as she has been confined on doctor's orders). The niece's words are determinedly irreverent, and she seems to take the opportunity afforded by her "madness" to attack him, exclaiming "Uncle, you are not merry; I pray laugh / A little: imagine you had undone a widow, / Or turn'd an orphan begging; ha! ha! ha!" (2.2). This seems subversive, but the niece is of course merely playing her role in a plot concocted by men. She does not speak again, except to assure her uncle that she is safely shut away, and in her final pert exclamation, in response to Hornet's frustrated demand "you shall go with me; have I found you?" (5.3). His niece replies "How, uncle, / A reveller? You'll lead me a coranto" (5.3). This retort, perhaps deliberately reminiscent of Shakespeare's Beatrice and her frequently barbed retorts in *Much Ado About Nothing*, might seem subversive. Indeed, Simon Shepherd notes that "even Shirley"[13] can on occasion put witty retorts in the mouths of his female characters. However, he argues that in the comedies of Chapman, Beaumont, Fletcher and others, including Shirley, what he terms the "witty woman mode" (167)

> […] doesn't closely criticise the assumptions of the male world nor celebrate the woman's choice and sexual desires. What it ends up doing is to provide an image of the scornful or capricious woman who is subjected to knockabout farce in order to tame her. (167)

Here, indeed, the niece's final retort seems more like Shirley's attempt to align her with Frances (the play's far more assertive woman) and to neatly wrap up the action by showing that she is no longer accountable to her uncle, than it does an attempt to render her a witty character in her own right. This evidence of the niece's independence is further undermined, I would argue, not only by her previous silence, but specifically by Shirley's use of Helen as a model to deceive. The niece is aligned not with the assertive and articulate Helen of the *Heroides* or of the *Iron Age*, nor even with the silently threatening Helen of Marlowe's *Dr Faustus*, but with the silenced and objectified Helen of the medieval Troy-narratives, whose speech is rarely recorded. These medieval Helens, like

Shirley's, seems merely part of some larger, homosocially oriented plan (in the classical tradition, the Trojans have sent Paris to abduct a woman who can be exchanged for his aunt Hesione).

Comparing Shirley to Ford, Sandra A. Burner argues that "Both dramatists, perhaps responding to the growing female segment in the audience, portray women similarly, often assigning major roles to them".[14] Moreover, she finds that "Shirley, like Ford, confronts women with choices between love and honour" (49). Hornet's niece obviously does not enjoy a major role in the play (though hers is an important one). Moreover, in figuring her as a classical woman whose transgression was so notorious, Shirley very obviously refuses to allow the niece the kind of choice Burner points to. In the judgement of Paris as it is recounted by Paris in the *Heroides* (and indeed by Heywood in *The Iron Age*), Venus promises Paris the most beautiful woman in the world, and the account of the abduction (and Helen's eager desire for Paris) follows. Here, Shirley deliberately elides the abduction, but also the suggestion of female desire, and of a woman's control over her romantic destiny, that Ovid subtly creates in the *Heroides*. Venus brings out Hornet's silent niece as Paris' prize, which Paris/Playfair claims with the bare minimum of effort. Figured as Helen, then, Hornet's niece represents on one level the archetypally transgressive woman, determined to pursue her own desires through deceit, and Hornet appears ridiculous as a result of his failure to correctly read her subversion of his control, even as it is enacted in front of him. Shirley's writing of the niece as Helen works on more levels than this, however, and has consequences for the niece as well as for the men. Shirley deliberately subdues any real personality in Hornet's objectified niece. The implication seems to be that, in playing along with male fantasy and taking such a dangerously weighted role, the niece runs the risk of finding herself the silent, unhappy and guilt-ridden Helen of the *Iliad*, rather than the self-satisfied Shakespearean Helen of *Troilus and Cressida*, or thedesirous Ovidian Helen of the *Heroides*.

Like so many of his fourteenth-, fifteenth- and sixteenth-century predecessors, Shirley seems to have found certain myths so compelling that he judged them

worthy of repetition. Both Helen's and Medea's stories fall into this category, referenced repeatedly (though not repetitively) by Shirley over the course of his dramatic career. In his masque *The Triumph of Beautie*, Paris' judgement of the goddesses recurs (in a noticeably expanded form), though here Helen (in any incarnation) is conspicuous only by her absence. Indeed, the story of Paris (and here he is the classical Paris, rewritten for the Caroline stage, rather than a seventeenth-century gallant playing at the Trojan) becomes a kind of framing device for the masque's more memorable episode. This is the shepherds' apparently abortive attempt to stage "The Tragedy of the Golden Fleece" in an effort to shake Paris from his despondent mood at being banished from Troy. Once again, Shirley's source may be Ovid (Hecuba's dream that she is pregnant with a firebrand that will destroy the city, and the infant Paris' subsequent banishment from Troy, are both mentioned in the *Heroides*). As he does in *The Constant Maid*, though, here Shirley finds comic potential in his characters' interaction with the figures of classical mythology. Once again, his characters enact the roles of famous classical characters, and once again comedy and dramatic tension arise from the characters' failure to appreciate the implications of the legendary roles they play.

The Triumph of Beautie focuses much of its attention on Paris' gloomy reflections as he wanders outside Troy, and on Bottle's efforts to comfort him. Though the action of the masque is set before he has abducted Helen, Bottle's interaction with him is shot through with allusions to Paris' classical reputation and to his future actions. Indeed, though by this point Paris has not judged the goddesses or encountered Helen, through Bottle Shirley slyly references his future reputation as a philanderer. Paris asks to be left alone, and the shepherd exclaims "I would loth to be unmannerly, and hinder a princely recreation; but I see no temptations, nothing in the likeness of a petticoat. What would you be private for?" (327). When Paris pleads with him to keep the other shepherds away, Bottle retorts "Do you think, sir, I have so little honesty, to be sir Pandarus to your melancholy?" (327), and here the reference to the Pandarus of Chaucer and/or Shakespeare, the

notorious go-between who is himself embroiled in the story of the war, is obvious. Bottle may seem to be Paris' contemporary (if not his peer), but he also seems well-versed in the history and literature of the Trojan War, in events that have not occurred by this point in the myth.

Thus Shirley twice rewrites the myth of Paris and Helen, in *The Triumph of Beautie* and *The Constant Maid*, both times recognising the seldom-exploited comic potential of such a famous story. In *The Constant Maid*, moreover, as we have seen, Shirley subtly explores the alarming implications of characters lightly taking on the identities of two of the most famous (and notorious) figures of classical myth. In *The Triumph of Beautie*, the classical figures whose identities are usurped (though here for the purpose of entertainment rather than personal gain) are even more notorious and alarming. Here, Shirley (and his shepherds) comically rewrite the story of Jason and Medea's love affair, and Jason's quest for the Golden Fleece. Shirley had medieval precedents for entwining the Paris/Helen and Jason/Medea stories as he did, and Shakespearean precedents for the comic use of the play-within-a-play device. He even had precedents for a comic treatment of Medea, the child-killing sorceress who was typically regarded as one of classical literature's most bloodthirsty and ruthless characters. Sanders notes that Ben Jonson was "an important influence" on Shirley,[15] and the elder playwright seems to have found Medea particularly arresting (she is referenced in *Volpone*, *Epicene* and *The Masque of Queens*). In *The Alchemist*, meanwhile, her story, the assistance she gives Jason because of her passionate love for him, becomes comic in the mouth of the ridiculous Sir Epicure Mammon, who confides to Surly:

> I have a piece of Jason's fleece, too,
>
> Which was no other than a book of alchemy,
>
> Writ in large sheepskin, a good fat ram-vellum.
>
> Such was Pythagoras' thigh, Pandora's tub,
>
> And all that fable of Medea's charms,
>
> The manner of our work: the bulls, our furnace,

> Still breathing fire; our argent-vive, the dragon;
>
> The dragon's teeth, mercury sublimate,
>
> That keeps the whiteness, hardness, and the biting;
>
> And they are gathered into Jason's helm
>
> (Th'alembic) and then saved in Mars his field,
>
> And thence sublimed so often, till they are fixed. (2.1.89-100)[16]

Like Jonson, Shirley references Medea's story, and makes light of it, without actually introducing her onstage. I would argue, though, that Shirley's comic appropriation of Medea's story in *The Triumph of Beautie* is more daring than Jonson's, and more daring, indeed, than Shakespeare's rewriting of Pyramus and Thisbe in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. There, Shakespeare takes a well-known and tragic Ovidian tale of misunderstanding and filial disobedience, and renders it comic through the mechanicals' unwittingly crude and reductive rereading of it, and their unconvincing masquerading as classical characters. The tragic tale Shirley elects to make comic, however, like the tale of Paris and Helen's misguided love, has far more alarming and subversive connotations than the one Shakespeare chooses. Medieval authors, following Benoît and Guido, often gloss over or elide altogether Medea's killing of her young brother, of Jason's uncle Pelias, of Jason's new wife Creusa and his father-in-law Creon, and finally, and most notoriously, of her two children by Jason. By contrast, Ovid recounts Medea's murder of her brother in the *Heroides* and *Tristia*, and her killing of Jason's uncle and (very briefly) of Creusa, Creon and the children in the *Metamorphoses*. Meanwhile, the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries' interest in the Medeas of Seneca and Euripides, and Medea's frequent appearances in Jacobean tracts discussing witchcraft and/or the wickedness of women, meant that (as Jonson's brief references to her story would seem to suggest) Shirley's audience would be fully aware of Medea's transgressive and terrifying nature, and the bloody consequences of the assistance she gives Jason in his quest.

Having implanted these consequences in his audience's mind through his reference to the story of Jason and Medea (which is, as Bottle points out, a

"Tragedy"), Shirley then deliberately and self-consciously sets out to squash any references to Medea's threat, or her autonomy (as he has attempted to downplay Helen's troubling autonomy in *The Constant Maid*). He does so by having the shepherds gravely discuss how they may effectively assume the identities of these famous classical figures, in order to stage their story convincingly. At first, like so many male retellers of this story before him, Bottle utterly ignores Medea's role, telling his fellow shepherds "You all remember the story of Jason, that sailed to Colchos, with Hercules,and a company of blades, where he killed the brazen-footed bulls, and the fiery dragons" (322). Later, she is credited with enchanting the dragon, and indeed Bottle then ridicules Jason's heroic reputation, reassuring Crab that though he must face the dragon and fire-breathing bulls, "they must all be fast asleep when you kill 'em" (323). More often, though, female power is acknowledged, but is seen as a strange (and misogynist) blend of the comical and alarming: Toad volunteers to play Medea, "for a witch I am right by my mother's side" (322), and when the role of the dragon comes up, Scrip asks "What do you think of my wife? She'll do't. She does the dragon at home; 'twould do a man's heart good to be out of the house; nobody is able to endure her; she is a flying dragon, and will fit you rarely" (323).

If the *Triumph* is compared with *A Midsummer Night's Dream* here, Shirley's representation of gender becomes particularly interesting. There are, of course, no female mechanicals in Bottom's production, and the men's earnest attempts to ape femininity in order to stage their tragedy appear reductive and ridiculous (Bottom eagerly demonstrates how he can speak in "a monstrous little voice",[17] Flute anxiously argues that his beard means he cannot play Thisbe). These comical touches survive into Shirley's masque: the shepherds squabble childishly over who will have to wear a dress to play "the lady Medea" (322). Arguably, though, by the time Shirley came to compose the *Triumph* (and certainly by the time it was published) the comic potential of men dressing as women had been confused (and perhaps diffused) by the appearance of the first actresses in England: certainly, Sophie Tomlinson finds that by the 1630s, "drama was beginning to

register and respond to the topic of female acting in England".[18] Important, too, was that Jacobean anxiety over witchcraft continued to inform writing after 1625, and thus in the shepherds' abortive production, women are not just characterised by their high voices and lack of beards, but by their association (in the eyes of men) with monsters, and their troubling affinity for enchantment.

As these darker elements would suggest, despite Bottle's determined avowal that the play will entertain Paris, and that "if he do not laugh at every man of us, I'll lose my part of the next posset, neighbour" (322), Shirley was aware that his audience would expect some allusions to the murderous Medea their reading of Ovid and Seneca would have led them to anticipate. However, he attempts to deal with this threat by rendering her violence as comic. Though the shepherds' attempts to entertain Paris seem doomed to failure, Shirley, like Shakespeare, entertains his audience with their earnest attempts to assume her identity, and to render their knowledge of her grisly classical story faithfully. Hob worries he is too tall to play Medea'sluckless brother Absyrtus, but Bottle earnestly assures him that his height is irrelevant, since "You must be cut a pieces, and have your limbs thrown about the waves" (323).

This crime, alarming evidence of Medea's lack of regard for both the survival of her father's kingdom, and the accepted norms of feminine behaviour, has been referenced already by Shirley in *The School of Complement*.[19] Here again, however, horrifying behaviour (and, specifically, horrifying feminine behaviour) is sanitised somehow by being rendered comic. In the classical tradition, Medea deceives her father by helping Jason to win the Golden Fleece, and having betrayed him, kills her young brother and throws him out of the Argo in an attempt to delay the king. Here, the despairing Infortunio tears up a letter that the object of his desire, Selina, has written to her future husband Rufaldo, and exclaims

> This is *Medias* brother torne in pieces,
> And this the way where she with *Iason* flies,

> *Tom Colchos,* come not neere 'em, see, looke,
>
> That's an arme rent off. (2.1)

Infortunio scatters the pieces of the letter, still describing them as body parts, while Gorgon tries frantically to gather them, reassuring Infortunio "So I have all his quarters, Ile presently, sir, get poles for 'em, and hang 'em vpon the Gates in their postures for you" (2.1). Here, female transgression (bothMedea's murder of Absyrtus and her deception of her father) is rewritten as a maddened (male) lover's petulant response to rejection.

If Shirley cannot present a man figuring himself as Medea seriously in *The School of Complement*, he is equally unwilling to do so in *The Triumph of Beautie*. The shepherds' discussion of their play predictably degenerates into comical squabbling, in which their total failure to understand their source myth is revealed (encountering the problem of who gets to play the Fleece, they make various nonsensical suggestions including cutting Jason's role entirely, and having Medea and the dragon enacted by the same person). Crucially, once they have left, the action switches back to Paris, and Bottle's unsuccessful attempts to comfort him. As it does so, Shirley's audience is reminded not just that the shepherds' production is part of the larger drama of the masque, but also that the story of Jason and Medea is (through the *Heroides* but also through the medieval Troy-narratives) vitally linked to that of Helen and Paris.[20] If, in *The Constant Maid*, Helen and Paris' story seems a strange one for two lovers to re-enact, the story of Jason and Medea seems unlikely to entertain anyone, and specifically, perhaps, an unfortunate choice to entertain Paris. If mention of Medea's and Jason's love (and specifically of her assistance in the tasks) irresistibly evokes memories of that love's tragic end, then the tragic end of their story inevitably foreshadows the bloodshed of Paris' involvement with Helen.[21]

Though he uses his mythology (and specifically the idea of mythological disguise) comically, I would argue that Shirley uses it, also, in a very calculated manner. It is surely significant, for example, that as the *Triumph of Beautie* ends on an

apparently celebratory note, Shirley's audience are left anticipating not one but two love stories that ended tragically, thanks in part to the shepherds' adoption of such contentious dramatic roles. Just as Shirley evokes (but refuses to dramatise) Medea's threat, in both *The Constant Maid* and *The Triumph of Beautie* he hints at but does not enact the tragic consequences of the love of Paris and Helen, one of the western world's most enduring and evocative myths. Indeed, his decision to deviate from his Shakespearean model, to leave the shepherds' play unperformed, becomes significant in itself, a hint at tragedy as well as a step away from boisterous comedy. Shirley's Paris can know Jason and Medea's story (the Ovidian Paris shows he knows it in the *Heroides*), but here, as there, he cannot understand its significance: like Hornet, he is not allowed to appreciate the true import of the carefully-chosen myth that has been prepared for him. Indeed, Paris, like the audience of the *Triumph*, is not even given the opportunity to watch this comic but cautionary tale. Shirley's audience, however, as well-versed in their Ovid as Bottle is (but far more attuned to the ironic interplay between the two myths) can see the tragic warning about the consequences of illicit and deceptive passion even as it goes unstaged, and even as Paris leaves in triumph to claim Helen.

Shirley's comic appropriation of myth is a feature of much of his drama. Speaking of *The Contention of Ajax and Ulysses for the Armour of Achilles*, Dyce finds that "he is not only greatly indebted to Ovid, but also owes considerable obligations to Heywood, who had treated the same subject in the First Part of *The Iron Age*" (liii). This is undeniable, but Shirley treats his mythical inheritance with markedly less reverence than Heywood: Heywood's dark and bitterly comic Thersites is become Shirley's hapless Thersander, who falls asleep throughout the debate, and cannot apparently tell the difference between Ajax and Ulysses. I would argue, though, that Shirley's subversion of Ajax and Ulysses' story is somewhat akin to Shakespeare's rewriting of Pyramus and Thisbe: both are straightforwardly tragic tales, surprisingly easily turned to comedy through bathos and deliberate misunderstanding. Shirley's comic rewritings of Helen and Medea are more

interesting, because more problematic. They are more problematic due to the troublesome power wielded by both Helen and Medea in their classical incarnations: sexual power, magical power, power to bring down kingdoms and tear their immediate and extended families apart. Jerome de Groot points to the male dramatists' paradoxical reaction to women's participation in Caroline drama, arguing that

> The newly empowered performative woman […] was something to celebrate yet simultaneously a source of anxiety that needed to be silenced, marginalized and controlled.[22]

I would argue that these contradictory impulses, to stage and to suppress, can be seen not only in Shirley's representation of female characters or his use of female performers, but specifically in his dramatic representation of mythical females (who are, of course, doubly "performative", compelled to enact not only the parts written for them by Shirley, but those written by Ovid and his predecessors so many centuries before). The most striking and original aspect of Shirley's use of Helen and Medea is his willingness to exploit their stories for comedy: in the ridiculous squabbling of the mechanics, the satisfying deception of the pompous Hornet, the anguished, overblown rhetoric of Infortunio. As all these examples would suggest, however, men remain at the centre of these works, just as they continue to control the transmission and dissemination of classical myth in the seventeenth century. Thus, his evocation of both myths, of both dangerous and troublesome women, constitutes a warning to men, about the danger of transgressive desire (both male and female) and its consequences for masculine community. At the same time, the intensely male-dominated narratives of *The Constant Maid*, *The Triumph of Beautie* and *The School of Complement* mean that Shirley is very often at pains to comically and originally play down the threats represented by Medea and Helen, even as he paradoxically (and deliberately) suggests these threats, in his calculated rewriting of both myths. In the classical tradition, both women were alarming in part because of their willingness to deceive – Helen leaves her husband for Paris, Medea betrays her father and his

kingdom for Jason. These classical reputations for deceit colour the stories that are represented in *The Constant Maid* and *The TriumphOf Beautie*, and at the same time Shirley explores the implications of having his characters deceive by enacting such roles. The niece's playing at Helen in*The Constant Maid* undermines the control over her that the men of the play seem to enjoy, and hints that she will not be the passive and submissive wife the play seems to suggest. In *The Triumph of Beautie*, meanwhile, the shepherds' reductive efforts to stage Medea poke fun at her myth, at the idea of a powerful female character, and also at the very issue of reappropriating or reinterpreting classical legend. Shirley's appropriation of Helen andMedea is original and striking, one of the most interesting features certainly of the *Triumph* and *The Constant Maid*. To the characters of the plays, their stories provide a means to deceive, either seriously or for entertainment. For Shirley's seventeenth-century audience in particular though, steeped in these classical stories from their earliest schooling, the choice of such tales and figures may seem contentious and troubling, and the deceptions that the plays enact may become endowed with very different, more serious meanings.

Endnotes

[1] In James Shirley, *The Dramatic Works and Poems of James Shirley, Now First Collected*, ed. William Gifford and Alexander Dyce, 6 vols (London: John Murray, 1833) 1.xcv. All quotations from Shirley's works are also from this edition, which does not provide line numbers.

[2] Both noted by Garth Tissol in Stuart Gillespie and David Hopkins, eds, *The Oxford History of Literary Translation in English*, Vol. 3, 5 vols (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2005) 205.

[3] Noted in James Orchard Halliwell-Phillips, *A Dictionary of Old English Plays, Existing Either in Print or in Manuscript, From the Earliest Times to the Close of the Seventeenth Century. Including Also Notices of Latin Plays Written by English Authors, in the Same Period* (London: John Russell Smith, 1860) 167. He also

notes a third, anonymous translation from Seneca that "Differs from Sherburne's version, but […] was probably made in the same period" (167).

[4] Dates refer to year of publication, and the plays were often performed considerably earlier: for example, *Hoffman* was first performed in 1603. See Henry Chettle, *The Tragedy of Hoffman, 1631*, ed. Harold Jenkins and Charles Sisson (London: Malone Society, 1951).

[5] However, Gerald Eades Bentley suggests it was written considerably earlier (he posits it could be the product of the years between 1627-29, since there is no record of anything of Shirley's being licensed in this period, despite the steady appearance of plays before and after. Gerald Eades Bentley, *The Jacobean and Caroline Stage*, 7vols (Oxford: Clarendon, 1941-68) 1.227.

[6] Dating from late antiquity, but still believed by the seventeenth century to be an eye-witness account of the Trojan War, this was frequently bound alongside the *Iliad*and other Troy stories in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and was rendered faithfully into English (from Mathurin Heret's French) by Thomas Paynell in 1553.

[7] Walter Cohen, "Pre-Revolutionary Drama", in Gordon McMullan and Jonathan Hope, eds, *The Politics of Tragicomedy: Shakespeare and After* (Routledge: London, 1992): 122-150, 129.

[8] *Ibid.*

[9] Marliss C. Desens, *The Bed-Trick in English Renaissance Drama: Explorations in Gender, Sexuality, and Power* (Newark: U of Delaware P, 1994) 11, 51.

[10] Shakespeare's Helen tickles Pandarus, and plays on his flattering words, archly telling him "to make a sweet lady sad is a sour offence" (3.1.67). All Shakespearean quotations are from Stephen Greenblatt et al, eds, *The Norton Shakespeare* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1997).

[11] Heywood's Helen first proudly outlines her own beauty and sexual allure, and later mourns the bloodshed she feels responsible for. In both parts of *The Iron Age*, she is a compelling and eloquent speaker, and is only occasionally silenced in her frequent stage appearances.

[12] Julie Sanders, *Caroline Drama: The Plays of Massinger, Ford, Shirley and Brome* (Plymouth: Northcote House in Association with the British Council, 1999) 14.

[13] Simon Shepherd, *Amazons and Warrior Women: Varieties of Feminism in Seventeenth-Century Drama* (Brighton: Harvester, 1981) 167.

[14] Sandra A. Burner, *James Shirley: A Study of Literary Coteries and Patronage in Seventeenth-Century England* (Lanham: UP of America, 1988) 49.

[15] Sanders, *Caroline Drama*, 10.

[16] Ben Jonson, *'The Alchemist' and Other Plays: 'Volpone, or The Fox', 'Epicene, or The Silent Woman', 'The Alchemist', 'Bartholomew Fair'*, ed. Gordon Campbell (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1995). For Jonson's source, see Supriya Chaudhuri, "Jason's Fleece: The Source of Sir Epicure Mammon's Allegory" *RES*, New Series, 35.137 (1984): 71-3.

[17] William Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, 1.2.44.

[18] Sophie Tomlinson, "She That Plays the King: Henrietta Maria and the Threat of the Actress in Caroline Culture", in McMullan and Hope, eds, *The Politics of Tragicomedy*, 189-207, 197.

[19] Which Bentley identifies as "the first of Shirley's plays to be produced, though not necessarily the first he wrote" (5.1146).

[20] In many of the medieval Troy stories, Jason wins the Fleece and then goes to sack Troy with Hercules, in revenge for Laomedon's earlier insult to the Greeks. Priam then rebuilds the city, which is of course fated to fall once again in the wake of a transgressive passion.

[21] It is possible that Shirley's reading of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and specifically Shakespeare's inclusion of Theseus, confirmed in his mind the connection between Helen's story and Medea's: as Plutarch's *Life of Theseus* makes clear, he constitutes a link between the two women, due to his abduction of Helen and Medea's attempt to poison him.

[22] Jerome de Groot, "Coteries, Complications and the Question of Female Agency" in Ian Atherton and Julie Sanders, eds, *The 1630s: Interdisciplinary Essays on Culture and Politics in the Caroline Era* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 2006) 189-209, 200.

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First Response

This is a stimulating piece on a fascinating and long-neglected author. Given that the complete edition of Shirley is in progress, this essay will be part of a Shirley Renaissance.