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Coda

The *mise-en-scène* of modern marriage

What do you think of our twin bedsteads?' asks Mrs Challoner, as she proudly shows her visitors into the best bedroom in her newly refurbished house, furnished by Heal's (Figure 19). What indeed? When Mrs Poole-Bennett (described as a 'Philistine') and George Browne (an 'artist') see the Challoners' Jacobean-style English walnut twin beds, with their twisted uprights and chintz covers, the beds intimately contiguous, set in the large, bright room with its quaint slanting floor, its picturesque exposed beams, its big bay window with leaded lights, with the paired blue-and-white china jugs and basins on the washstand echoing the paired beds on the near side of the room, what might they have thought of the Challoners' choice of twin beds rather than a double? (*The Evolution of 'Fouracres'* 1911: 32. Heal's archive, AAD/1978/2/287).

Mrs Challoner's question is a confident one, designed to elicit murmurs of approval from her guests, but now, from the perspective of the early twenty-first century, the question warrants more careful consideration. How might twin beds have been understood during the years they became fashionable? In what ways did they contribute to a distinctly modern *mise-en-scène* for middle-class couples of the new century? Throughout her guided tour, Mrs Challoner presents her home not only as a repository of good taste, but also as a carefully constructed environment for the lives that were to be lived in it, a setting redolent not only of the Challoners' aesthetics but also of their histories, values, affections and aspirations. This was not just a backdrop against which they would continue to be the selves they already were. Rather, insofar as it was a place generated by and displaying those histories and values, the home represented the materialization, improvement and augmentation of those selves.

FIGURE 19 *From the Heal's 1911 booklet The Evolution of 'Fouracres'.*

By 1911, when the story of the Challoners appeared in *The Evolution of 'Fouracres'* – a Heal's publicity booklet and advice manual in the form of a short story – twin beds had won their place in the household not as signifiers of hygiene, as they had earlier in domestic sanitarian discourse, but of modernity. They were now manifestly modern in design, in their more modest and simpler forms, and in the contexts in which they were displayed, invoked, produced and consumed. But this is to identify twin beds with modernity only by association, because of the company they kept. By this account they bask only in the reflected glow of modernity – whether the modernity of the Arts and Craft movement, of the Heal's bedroom interiors shown at the Paris exhibitions of 1900, 1925 and 1937, of Betty Joel's fashionable Knightsbridge premises, of the International Style interiors of Wells Coates's Lawn Road flats or of the Hollywood films in which they featured. Might it not also be the case, however, that twin beds are legible within the discourses of modernity in their own right? Might not their form speak quite directly to something in an emerging modern sensibility? Are they reproduced within self-consciously

innovative art and design contexts because their individuated forms, their simultaneous insistence on singularity and doubleness, materialize something specific about a sense of what it meant to be 'modern'? If so, then this is to be located not in the design credentials of the bedsteads themselves, for twin bedsteads were not exclusive to these contexts. While they were to be found in the pages of the *Magazine of Art* and *The Studio*, they were also to be found in the cheaper, decidedly non-avant-garde pages of the Maples and Myer's catalogues. There is, therefore, no paradigmatic or archetypal 'modern' set of twin bedsteads. The Challoners' Jacobean walnut twins have little in common visually with Heal's dual-purpose twin divans or the 'regal elegance' of Oetzmann's top-of-the-range Windsor beds, with their blue lacquer finish, carving and gold-leaf decoration (Figures 20 and 21). But despite their visual differences, all paid their dues to modernity.

Nonetheless, despite differences in price, finish, materials and design, and their varying allegiances to tradition and the contemporary, twin bedsteads, no matter how modest or opulent, always have one thing in common: their disposition of the couple settling for the night into these two discrete, demarcated, one-person apparatuses. Twin beds structurally announce their ambiguous presentation of the couple whose bodies they are organizing. These two sleepers are distinct and separate, with a space or a boundary between them. But they are also a pair, related formally, structurally and spatially, rather than just adjacent to each other. How should we read twin

FIGURE 20 Heal's dual-purpose twin divans.

FIGURE 21 *Oetzmann's Windsor beds.*

beds' placement of the couple in two one-person beds rather than one two-person bed? How does this recalibrate the composition of the couple? How do twin bedsteads configure the space in between? Is it a gap, a chasm to be traversed? Is it a boundary or border to be observed, respected, policed and enforced? Or is it a suture, a refusal of separateness, an insistent bridging or binding together of the two elements? Moreover, how might we read the negotiation of this space in relation to existing and emerging ideas of 'the modern'?

Twin beds' nineteenth-century origins and the design contexts of their twentieth-century proliferation have in common a belief in and commitment to progress. Benjamin Ward Richardson's hygienist programme had been a utopian one – implicitly so in his household advice articles, and explicitly so in *Hygeia: A City of Health* (1876), his narrative blueprint which imagined a city built entirely on domestic sanitarian principles. Hygienic homes, in a rational, planned hygienic city, would not only result in a healthier populace, but also in a morally improved and happier one. Hygiene was not an end in itself but part of an optimistic and progressive drive for human perfectibility.

Richardson shared this dual focus on the practical and the utopian with William Morris, progenitor and leading light of the Arts and Crafts movement.

As well as being a working architect and designer, he was the author of the literary utopia *News from Nowhere* (1890). Unlike Richardson, for whom the past was little more than a dystopian sink of ignorance and filth, Morris's socialist utopianism had a nostalgic dimension, lamenting the current condition of alienated labour and shoddy machine-made goods via a romantic view of the lost world of medieval crafts: small scale, based in workshops, working for and responsible to their communities. But for both men the possibility of perfectibility and progress to which their versions of modernity subscribed existed somewhere between the co-ordinates of the practical (domestic sanitationism for Richardson, furniture-making for Morris) and the explicitly utopian. The genesis of twin beds in the domestic sanitation movement of the 1880s, and their later appearance in the Arts-and-Crafts-related work of Ambrose Heal, Mackintosh and Liberty, makes them players in the visionary as well as in the practical programmes of the hygienists and designers. The utopian dimensions of separated sleep can be seen not only in Richardson's promise of improved health and longevity for those who follow his sanitarian programme but also in the twin-bedded forms appearing at the turn of the century.

The beds designed by Ambrose Heal and exhibited at the 1900 Paris exhibition ('Paris Exhibition, 1900'. Heal's archive, AAD/1978/2/274; Figure 22) are clearly visually identifiable as Arts-and-Crafts-inspired artefacts, and as such they declare a stake in a particular politics. They embody a rejection of the paucity of design and shoddiness of construction of mass-produced goods; an adherence to William Morris's often-reiterated dictum urging people to 'have nothing in your homes that you do not know to be useful and believe to be beautiful'; and an ethics of labour that rejected the alienation of the modern conditions of factory production and argued instead for the humane scale of workshop production. Although in practice the movement's politics vis-à-vis production meant that its democratizing ideals of consumption could not be realized, as the cost of individually designed and workshop-produced furniture put it beyond the reach of most people, it is nonetheless the case that the design agenda was explicitly progressive. Human beings not only deserved better, but could take control of their environments in such a way that they improved at work and at home, both materially and spiritually. Morris's social vision refused the injustices and impoverishment of contemporary 'modern' life, and both imagined and worked towards an ameliorated and reformed modernity.

The twin bedsteads designed by Ambrose Heal for the Paris Exhibition of 1900, together with the hangings at the heads of the beds by Godfrey Blount, give a sense of the special contribution of twin beds to the semiotics of modern co-sleeping. In contrast to the dominant aesthetic of the 1900 exhibition (the lush and sinuous organic forms of Art Nouveau), and in contrast

FIGURE 22 *Twin bedsteads by Heal's at the Paris Exhibition, 1900.*

too to the bedsteads appearing in the Heal's catalogue that year, the style of Ambrose Heal's bedsteads conforms to the design ideals of the Arts and Crafts movement. The pillar-and-panel form of the French bedsteads was simple, even austere. Their claim to beauty was largely dependent on the immanent beauty of the wood from which they were made and on the congruity of design and material: wood panelling at the end, for example, rather than the wooden rods or bars that were shortly to be rejected by Hermann Muthesius as belonging properly only to the metal bed (Muthesius 1979: 227). And while the bedsteads were not without decoration, they refused extraneous and gratuitous ornament.

The utopian dimension of the bedsteads is apparent not only in their design allegiance to the Arts and Crafts agenda, but also, and even more immediately, in the origins of the hangings at the heads of the beds. These were designed by Godfrey Blount, one of the founders of the Haslemere Peasant Arts movement, an Arts-and-Crafts-inspired artisanal community established in the mid-1890s. There, Blount and his wife Ethel founded the Peasant Tapestry Industry, whose primary aim was not to make a profit but to employ women from the local community and teach them artisanal skills.¹

The idealism of the hangings' genesis is also apparent in their symbolism. One hung at the head of each bed, each bordered with a frieze of large, stylized flower heads, below which flies a pair of birds. The birds too are conventionalized, perhaps composite. While their back-swept wing-shapes are reminiscent of the swallows on the hanging by Blount in the Victoria and Albert museum, they do not have those birds' deeply forked tails. Rather, the heads and wedge-shaped tails are closer in form to the twinned birds that adorn the ornate half-tester on the Heal's bed exhibited at the 1862 International Exhibition – the 'two cooing doves enjoying each other's caresses' (see Figure 3, p. 89). The turtle doves here seem to be blessed with the wings of swallows, their legendary devotion to each other now enhanced by their dexterity and swiftness in flight. The disposition of each of the paired bodies echoes the other, as do their outspread wings. One bird forges upwards, towards the centre point of the hanging, the other, relaxed, glides down towards the first. The effect is striking, the design constituted by the two bodies held in dynamic and harmonious tension as the birds' movements take account, but remain independent, of each other. The pairing of the birds is doubled by the pairing of the hangings, each similar to, but not quite identical with, the other. Each sleeper is not only paired with their fellow, a pairing echoing through the twinned beds, the matching hangings and the paired birds, but each sleeper is crowned by a pair of birds identified uniquely with him or her, one of whom strains upwards and outwards while the other coasts back towards its mate. The sleeping couple is evoked not only by the paired beds and the matching hangings, but also by the pair of birds silently soaring overhead. The birds, like the beds, are manifestly and forever both together and apart.

The ensemble comprises a series of pairings: the bedsteads, the hangings, the pairs of birds reproduced between the two hangings but also within each one. Just as the matrimonial bed shown by Heal's at the 1862 International Exhibition had featured the 'two cooing doves enjoying each other's caresses', so these beds also figure an idealized pair, if anything still more insistently. Despite these being twin bedsteads, formally introducing a boundary between fellow sleepers, they nonetheless reiterate their investment in the couple, at the same time as they rewrite that couple's meaning. No longer do the twinned birds simply and conventionally assert the union and devotion of the married couple. Instead, the iconography of the hangings suggests that each of the sleepers is now also more than one half of a couple. If each component within a pair is structurally positioned as incomplete without the other, here each bedstead is endowed with its own pair of asymmetrical but complementary birds – the one who aspires, and the one who returns. Each sleeper participates in a pair, but is not limited by it. Neither is now rendered complete only by association with their fellow, but instead the singularity of each is revealed as comprising its own complex doubleness,

through the duality of contrary impulses animating his or her own paired birds. The harmonious unity of the pair is a familiar trope, but a simultaneous acknowledgement of the contrary impulses within each half of the pair is strikingly different. The utopian associations of both the Heal's bedsteads and their hangings are legible not only in the Arts and Crafts origins of both, but also in their continuing celebration of the symbolism of the pair, and in their refusal to interpret the dissolution of the united double into disaggregated twins as a threat to the status of that couple. The bedsteads and hangings announce their continuing allegiance to each other loud and clear.

Is there, however, something overly insistent about the proliferation of the pair in these twin bedsteads? Do they assert too loudly the special capacity of the twin bedsteads to both recognize the complex individuality of each sleeper and also safeguard and celebrate disparity within the pair? Placed in close adjacency to each other – just as twin bedsteads were in most marketing materials in the early twentieth century – do they deny the formal boundary they introduce between the two? Is that boundary legible as politically progressive in its refusal to merge the two sleepers by subsuming them within the undifferentiated space of the double, insisting instead on preserving their separate identities within their paired one? Or is the gap or boundary better read through less consoling narratives of modernity – as the materialization of the anti-Enlightenment recognition in the emerging discourses of sociology and psychoanalysis of the hollowness of progress, the limits of rationality, the fundamental and inevitable opacity of the other and the self? Perhaps the gap between the beds is a defensive retreat from the utopian project of marital relations, introduced in the recasting of spouse as stranger, or at least in recognition of the irreducible core of strangeness, unknowability, in that relation.

The iconography of the twin bedsteads raises many such questions. But only when attention is paid to those who slept in them, thought of sleeping in them, were imagined as sleeping in them or refused to sleep in them does it become possible to answer them. Design records, advertisements, marketing materials, exhibits, magazines and household advice books have established the modern credentials of twin bedsteads, but to catch the nuances of their contributions to the dramas of twentieth-century marriage it is necessary to turn to a different set of texts, and in particular the marital advice books people consulted and the novels they read. It is here that, finally, we might find out what Mrs Poole-Bennett really thought of the Challoners' new twin beds.