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Harry Maddux  
*Tennessee State University*

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The Virtuoso and Puritanism in 1676

The Restoration has always appeared an obvious signpost of the effective end of Puritan influence in English society at large, and especially of that portion that guided the royal court. In a strictly positive sense, this assessment is accurate enough; in a negative and broader one, though, it is not. Albeit that no Puritan faction posed a coherent alternative to Stuart policies during the reign of Charles II, the crown nevertheless remained keenly aware that a highly organized and deeply layered opposition had fought against it in the Civil Wars, and knew that such opposition had neither been immediately or entirely silenced by the ceremony of Restoration itself.

Thomas Shadwell's 1676 comedy, The Virtuoso, is noteworthy for this reason. Otherwise a conventional period play of masking and misidentification, The Virtuoso depends for its plot's advancement upon detailed descriptions and obviously anticipated audience recognition of the virtuoso himself, Sir Nicholas Gimcrack, and his rhetorical mouthpiece, Sir Formal Trifle. These two are more than mere caricatures of members of the Royal Society; together they represent identifiable modes of Puritan intellection. Specifically, they characterize that species of scholastic discourse conveniently called Ramism, as it had developed by the mid-seventeenth century, and which had been appropriated and defended most fiercely of all by the Puritans of Cambridge and East Anglia, as well as those in the colony at Massachusetts Bay, during the turbulent decade of conflict between King and Parliament.

Fifteen years after the return of the Stuarts, the laughter is still thus forced, and thus pointed: designed to lampoon the language of Puritan academicians as it existed in

the late 1600s, The Virtuoso signals in the process how current Puritan ideology yet was at the time and what a threat it continued to pose. Charles II, after all, had only to turn his head from Whitehall to see political trouble left over in New England.<sup>1</sup> The leadership at Harvard might not have been very threatening to the crown, but it was obviously misguided and The Virtuoso is a part of the attempted cultural correction. So, as Gimcrack learned to regret his failure to study “Mankind instead of Spiders and Insects,” the Puritans in New England and their like throughout crown lands were expected to admit that their own dependence upon a distant monarchy was evidence of nature’s design and not that of some contrived art of categorization (Shadwell 3:180; act 5). Of course, this selfsame measure indicates the final failure of Stuart policy. If we scorn most what we cannot comprehend, The Virtuoso shows how disconnected Charles was from many of his subjects and how far he was from recognizing the manners of

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<sup>1</sup> This is the point made most fully by Stephen Saunders Webb in 1676: The End of American Independence. Webb argues (221-44) that Charles II was endeavoring particularly at this time to regain control over the colonies, after the events of Bacon’s Rebellion in Virginia, “King Philip’s” War in New England, and French-inspired Iroquois incursions into New York. I want to show briefly how this concern at court took a particular cultural and dramatic shape.

thought that would eventually abet another, this time bloodless and “glorious,” revolution.

Criticism of The Virtuoso has tended similarly to restrict itself. At least since 1928, when Albert Borgman noted the resemblance of certain of Gimcrack’s speeches to the published accounts of the Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society and of Robert Hooke’s Micrographia, the leading comic figures of The Virtuoso have been taken as satirical portrayals of prevailing scientific attitudes of the day (Borgman 169).<sup>2</sup> Thus, although “The Virtuoso was the probably the first play that featured a scientist,” it also established a pattern in which scientists are imaged as having “too great a faith in rational discussion and rational persuasion” (Brouwer 234). The play in essence “raises the question of the aim of science—that of knowledge for knowledge’s sake, versus knowledge for the benefit of humanity, as suggested by Galileo in Berthold Brecht’s The

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<sup>2</sup> Shadwell unfortunately continues to receive little critical attention, despite whole journal issues devoted to his work. The three book-length studies used here are Michael W. Alssid, Thomas Shadwell, Albert S. Borgman, Thomas Shadwell: His Life and Comedies, and Christopher J. Wheatley, Without God or Reason: The Plays of Thomas Shadwell and Secular Ethics in the Restoration. Borgman was the first modern critic to note the resemblance of many of the virtuoso’s claims to those made among members of the Royal Society in the seventeenth century.

Life of Galileo. The Virtuoso leaves one with the impression that Shadwell would side with Brecht in this case” (236).

Barbara Benedict, in her book-length study of early modern inquiry, offers a more nuanced perspective, but generally agrees. The seventeenth-century scientist who is so obsessed with knowledge that he forgets the importance of traditional social forms violates established “courtly principles of political relationships.” Such a “transgression of social rank and bold redefinition of art hints at rebellion and private ambition” (46). In fact, the virtuosi oppose themselves to humanists and humanistic interpretations of the world, a dichotomy established at the very beginning of Shadwell’s play when Bruce, one of the play’s wits, is presented reading Lucretius. Bruce admires the classical writer for his “fidelity to nature, and the reconciliation of ‘Poetry and Good Sense’” (48). This attitude contrasts starkly with the stance of Gimcrack who boasts “I seldom bring anything to use” (Shadwell 3:127, act 2). Benedict concludes that such an opposition serves a Foucaultian function (Benedict 9), because Gimcrack embodies “the early modern charge against curious men: their pursuit of monstrosities and curiosities has made them monsters or curiosities themselves” (50).

The comedic value of Gimcrack and Trifle, though, resides not so much in the *objects* of their investigations, as in their peculiar *method* of inquiry. That this method was associated not just with avid collectors of *curiosa*, but particularly with radical Puritan scholars is shown in a different context by Quentin Skinner. In Reason and Rhetoric in the Philosophy of Hobbes, Skinner demonstrates that beginning in the 1640s, Thomas Hobbes initiated a concerted and extended attack on the parties who had (in his

mind) fomented rebellion. Hobbes especially mocks the greater allegiance of the rebels to the tenets of scholasticism than to their covenant with their God and King by using the scholars' own rhetorical devices against them. As a consequence, Leviathan does more than respond to the anti-royalists: it also parodies and exemplifies their gross intellectual errors (390-403).

The progenitor of these errors has long been recognized as Peter Ramus or Pierre de la Ramée (1515-1572), a controversial professor of rhetoric and philosophy who ultimately became a victim of the St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre in Paris. Ramus's ideas, though, were always arcane at best, and therefore some cursory acquaintance with them is necessary in order to consider how his arguments were later changed and adapted to countervailing ideologies, the results of which Shadwell would satirize in The Virtuoso. What is first of all obvious to anyone who encounters Ramus's work is that he was so ambitious in his thought, and so determinedly scholastic in his assumptions, that he could easily be another character in Shadwell's comedy. Secondly, it is important to recall that Ramus as an educator clearly enjoyed something of the same status that Calvin did as a theologian in certain parts of England. The title of the first English translation of Ramus's 1543 Dialecticae Partitiones proves the esteem in which Ramus was held. In 1574 Roland MacIlmaine boasted that he was providing a "liberall arte in the vulgar tongue" when he published The Logike of the Moste Excellent Philosopher P. Ramus Martyr (MacIlmaine 8). Such veneration is, it hardly needs be said, already ripe ground for satire, but two discrete aspects of Ramus's reform of learning are pointedly targeted in Trifle and Gimgrack: Sir Formal Trifle represents Ramism's characteristic manner of

inventing an argument; Sir Nicholas Gimcrack caricatures the fixed Ramist belief that to know the structure of a science or art was to grasp that part of the world in its very essence.

Ramus had begun his work by intending to revise the way in which university students of the sixteenth century developed rhetorical argument. Called “dialectic” in the classical tradition, this aspect of rhetoric was distinct from the study of logic, which treated of necessity as opposed to probability. The latter, usually expressed as a syllogistic argument, or enthymeme, was the sole purview of rhetoric for all good Aristotelians. Ramus was thereby no proto-pragmatist, though some of his most ardent admirers have made the mistake of implying that he was.<sup>3</sup> He appears rather to have simply but radically revised the “place” logics already in use in medieval universities for the instruction of rhetoric (Ong 104). Ramus is for this reason more accurately construed as an entrenched scholastic rhetorician, living in a highly controversial age, than as a prophet of enlightened liberalism.

Ramus’s reform of accepted approaches to teaching amounted reducing the demands on his students, who were required as twelve- or thirteen-year olds to present regular impromptu disputations in school Latin. Ramus hoped that if he systematized the

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<sup>3</sup> See, for instance, Frank Pierrepont Graves, Peter Ramus and the Educational Reformation of the Sixteenth Century (118-19).

‘invention’ and ‘arrangement’ of arguments, his students would rapidly acquire a facility in argument. So, they might better succeed in the only measure of education then existing in the West: extemporaneous oral defense of some assigned proposition. In making his case so broadly and defending it so strongly that he became a victim of the religious zeal of the time, however, Ramus also insured his long if not lasting fame. His ideas did, it is true, show themselves to have the virtue of broad applicability, in part because they were so general. Eventually, Ramus would assert (or be led to assert) that all arguments and not just probabilistic ones were composed of two elements: invention or discovery, and arrangement or disposition.<sup>4</sup>

Invention or discovery was the initial identification of a subject by its topical places (loci or topoi), both common and general. These categories were derived from Aristotle, and expressed either the definitive essence of a thing, or its “accidental”—but still universal—aspects, such as the quality or quantity of an object (Howell 19). In addition to these categorical inventions, an argument could (and often did) begin with human or divine testimonies, which allowed a singular status to revelation, but which in fact was presumptively logical in form. The art (ars) of dialectic or logic consequently became a kind of neo-platonic ideal for Ramists, underwriting all of existence. As Thomas Sloane shows, such incantatory belief in the formality of truth helped Milton

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<sup>4</sup> As an example, see MacIlmaine (10).

achieve his prophetic voice (209-10). The same assumption, though, also contributed to the degradation of political discourse during the Civil Wars (33).

In the same way that invention or discovery was seen as emerging from either the topics or from testimony, arrangement or disposition was disjoined into axiomatic and deductive elements. An axiom, or proposition, was (in general) a statement to be affirmed or denied, and was either an assertion of quantity or quality. A deduction was a categorical or conditional syllogism. Added to this typical peripatetic view of deduction in the Dialecticae was Ramus's sole original idea: the natural "method" of an argument. Method became one of the most broadly applied of Ramist concepts. Yet, because it was always a blunt instrument at best, it was never much functional outside of select circles.

Method was another term for what Ramus had elsewhere called the "three laws" of learning. In the words of MacIlmaine's version of the Dialecticae, the first law or "rule" of method is that "in setting forthe of an arte we gather only together that which dothe appartayne to the Arte which we intreate of" (4). Second, "all the rules and precepts of . . . [the studied] arte [must] be of necessitie [i.e., logically] tru" (5). The third law was that an argument "continually procedethe from the generall to the speciall and singular" (6). The third law, in fact, was epitomized in the discussion of dialectic following these measures of validity (6). Happily, the art of constructing an argument was the art of reason was the art of teaching rhetoric.

Any first-year student of logic has probably already observed the repetitions and circularities in the above summary of the Dialecticae, as indeed did many of Ramus's contemporaries. Still, these flaws did not prevent the rapid spread of Ramism and its

ready assimilation into other systems of thought. Here as elsewhere during the late European renaissance, religion played a large part in the development and dissemination of contending ideas. As soon as Ramism was imported into Germany, for example, university instructors there began to moderate the French “dialectical” Calvinist method of Ramus by incorporating it into the more firmly scholastic “method” of Lutheran Philip Melanchthon. Melanchthon, a contemporary of Ramus, had also outlined a reform of learning, but the elder German was not as radical, or as confident, as the younger Frenchman (Howell 282). Yet when Melanchthon in his revision of pedagogy replaced the Ciceronian rhetorical concept of arrangement or “disposition” with the more properly logical (dialectical) notion of judgment, he provided a ready receptacle for Ramist reasoning (92). Both Melanchthon and Ramus had agreed that the act of communication, whether rhetorical or not, was in need of a *formal* rigor that only logic could supply, and so there was as much similarity between them as there was any lasting difference. Germans of the sixteenth century were quick to recognize this affinity and capitalize on it, often for plain political reasons.

These Philippo-Ramists never made a major inroad into English culture, but they did contribute to a native strain of an even more centrist variety, which found especially favorable conditions in the fairly peripatetic grounds of Oxford. The “Mixt” Ramist writings, such as Thomas Blundeville’s Art of Logike (1575), might follow Melanchthon in minor matters, but they typically gave the lion’s share of their attention to the text of their own peer, Thomas Wilson in the Rule of Reason. Blundeville hews true to this general pattern except, importantly, when he turns to a discussion of method. Blundeville

is then not only compelled to admit the extent of Ramus's influence, he also employs the reputation of Ramus as a launching point for a lengthy commentary on the value of natural or "divisive" method (Howell 289). Thus, the "Mixt" Ramists in one manner or another tended to employ some major component of Ramus's logic within an identifiable scholastic framework. They favored the vaulting effects which could be achieved with rhetoric, but frequently structured their orations using one or more procedures recommended by Ramus.

In a related manner, the Systematics (again a mainly German phenomenon) applied the Ramist method of particular to general organization in a multitude of ways. Systematics such as Keckermann, Piscator, and William Ames, the principal English instance, put the natural method to work in countless fields, including medicine, every single book of the Bible, the Hebrew alphabet, the bubonic plague, history, law, and politics. The Systematics generally muted Ramus's exclusive preference for disjunction as a rule of invention, but they enthusiastically embraced the central teleological implication of his reform: that nature revealed its own internal structure as a "logic" or an "art" (ars). The manifold pursuit of knowledge upon which the Systematics were engaged was in this way everywhere "sustained by the Ramist's conviction that there is a 'natural' or topical approach to anything through some readily available art or science." Each was firmly "based on the persuasion that the organization of Ramist dialectic is a satisfactory model for the treatment of any subject whatsoever" (Ong 299-300).

Finally, if Ong's observation is accurate that English universities did not possess the wherewithal to develop much along Systematic lines (303), it is no less true that

circumstances there encouraged the transmission and popularization of all of these strands in other ways. Among other things, the availability of print technology meant that English academics did not really need to generate their own “anatomies” of knowledge; they could simply import the desired texts and translate them when necessary. Even Ong recognizes that some type of Ramism was at work in Oxford as well as Cambridge during the seventeenth century (302), but one of the best indications of how widely and deeply Ramism extended in English culture is found in the titular character of The Virtuoso, Sir Nicholas Gimcrack, and his rhetorical “shadow,” Sir Formal Trifle (Shadwell 3:111; act 1).

That Gimcrack and Trifle fulfill a parodic function dependent upon caricatures of Ramist method is only underscored by Shadwell’s corollary identification of these figures as knighted but not noble gentry, which puts them in the middle estate of English society. Their social status gives that much more credence to the satire on their pseudo-educated sensibilities, and helps make them suitable foils for the exercise of Bruce and Longvil’s contrary “witcraft.” Gimcrack’s place in society also means that his nieces possess *only* a pecuniary value on the marriage market. This point alone would have made the virtuoso and his intellectual cousin an appropriate subject of Stuart comedy, but what Shadwell chooses consistently to do with his characters, rather than satirize their position on the social scale, is to exaggerate their Ramist elements in such a way as to highlight their fashionable shortcomings. The social standing of Gimcrack and Trifle cannot and should not be ignored; what is as significant is how these farcical characters reflect their Ramist

leanings by means of their curious epistemological conflation of art with nature, and as a result of their indiscriminately applied argumentative procedures.

Sir Formal Trifle's greater stage presence in proportion to the appearances of his self-admitted superior serves lastly to suggest that Shadwell saw the comic value of his characters to reside in their Ramism as much as their rank. At the very least, those scenes in which both Trifle and Gimcrack are the focus of activity are also those that are most plainly written in broad conceptual strokes. These moments (set strategically in the center of the play in acts two and three) concentrate on the intersection of Bruce and Longvil's courtly manners with the unsophisticated arts of Gimcrack and Trifle. Like straight men throughout history, the Ramist foibles of the latter are always designed to cause their failure in any exchange (even, especially, a marriage one), and are always intended thereby to cause undisguised laughter on the part of the audience.

Trifle, who announces himself with his "florid" language well before we are privileged with a glimpse of the putative virtuoso (3: 110; act 1), at the same moment begins dropping intimations of his philosophical character. Avowedly a rhetorician, Trifle is substantially more "Formal" in the scholastic than in the Ramist sense. Every time he gets the opportunity to begin a peroration, he develops it in topical, not Ramist fashion. For this reason, when he makes suit with Clarinda, he also extemporaneously arranges the subject of human mortality along three conventional lines. His subject is first placed (invented) as an observation drawn from nature. "Not far from the scene of my Meditation," he remarks, he saw "an excellent Machine call'd a Mouse-trap . . . which included in it a solitary Mouse." Next, he ironically counterpoints his announced

subject with a reflection on human ingenuity: “I . . . contemplated a while upon the no little curiosity of the Engine, and the subtilty of its Inventor” (sic). This leads, supposedly without effort, to his conclusion concerning the efficient, material, and formal causes of death, all of which are encapsulated as a recognition of the “Enticement which so fatally betray’d the incautious Animal to its sudden rune, and found it to be the too, alas, specious bait of *Cheshire-Cheese* (sic)” (3: 145; act 3). Throughout this display, Trifle draws attention to what should be noticed least: the ‘natural’ progress from one topic to another that he thinks evinces his facility in rhetoric but that instead exposes his fatuity in society. The same process is repeated again and again. When he manages another moment alone with Clarinda, he immediately launches into a treatment of the accident of quantity. “How long,” he asks, “shall I languish in expectation of your noble favour, for the enjoyment of which, *my desires are as great, as my deserts are little*” (3:163; act 5, emphasis added)? He even resorts to the same tired predicaments or general places when confronted at the end of the play by a mob enraged at the advance of technology, and which blames Sir Formal for their loss of employment. They are not long impressed with his bloated consideration “by what occasion or accident this unheard of torrent of tempestuous rage was thus inflam’d.” They will not sit still, any more than his prospective wife will, for his homily on the dangers of “passion . . . which with its sudden, and alas! Too violent circumgyrations, does too often shipwreck those that are agitated by it” (3:168; act 5).

All of these devices are evident in Wilson and his Ciceronian contemporaries, and although they were more than capable of a complex realization, as Sloane observes in his

analysis of Donne, Shadwell sees these instruments as at least potentially ineffective and, therefore, comical (see Sloane 147-207). What he sees in the same light is the *other* method used by Trifle to arrange a discourse, a technique that stamps him not merely as a peripatetic, but as a Mixt Ramist. At his very introduction, Sir Formal wends his way through Ramism as rapidly as he sprints elsewhere through the topics, and to the same effect. Transported with praise for his patron, Sir Nicholas, Trifle predicts to Bruce and Longvil that “Fame has not promis’d more of him to your Expectation, than he will perform to your Understanding” (Shadwell 3:111; act 1). Of course, not much can be made of the unstable printing conventions that prevailed in the seventeenth century, but in this case the capitalization fortuitously marks the “invention” of a Ramist “minor part” between “Fame,” “Expectation,” and (promised) “Understanding.” Because Ramus thought in schematic rather than in simple categorical ways, he always neglected the idea of predication in favor of that of topicality. A student of Ramus, in other words, would learn to answer specific questions by “inventing” a topical connection between the subject and predicate of the given proposition and “arranging” the results as a syllogism. The example given by Ong in his study of Ramus illustrates the procedure well. A student under examination might be asked the question, “Is man dialectical?” If that student were a Ramist, he would invent a minor part linking man to some middle term, which might also be placed under the concept of dialectic. In this case, the answer is rationality. The full syllogism runs: “Whatever is rational is dialectical, but every man is rational. Therefore, every man is dialectical” (Ong 182). Sir Formal is likewise connecting (without reason, by the way) two hypothetical syllogisms. The first is that if

someone is famous, then that person raises expectation. Sir Nicholas is famous. Therefore Sir Nicholas raises expectations. The second joins expectation to performance and understanding: If expectation is validated, it is done so in performance (with an attendant effect on the observer's understanding). The expectations raised by Sir Nicholas are well-founded. Therefore, Sir Nicholas will perform to the understanding of Bruce and Longvil.

Trifle repeats the method in the very next sentence, as if his skill would be missed did he not, when he compliments Sir Nicholas as “the finest *speculative* Gentleman in the whole World, and in his *Cogitations*, the most *serene* Animal alive” (Shadwell 3:111; act 1, emphasis added). Offered at this point is a double invention, among the concepts of Gentleman, World, and Animal, and more abstractly among speculation, cogitation, and serenity. The same kind of ingenuity in the same form, it should be said, can be characteristically seen in a good deal of Puritan writing, especially that produced in Massachusetts. The New English poet and minister Edward Taylor, for instance, carefully and very Ramistically syllogizes his love for his fiancée, in the letter in which he asks her to marry him (Taylor 3:37-39). Alan Pope has elsewhere remarked on Michael Wigglesworth's dependence on the Ramist syllogism in Meat out of the Eater and The Day of Doom (Pope 210-26).

If Trifle stands for Mixt Ramism, then Gimcrack seems equally intended as a representative of Ramism's Systematic strain. Upon his first presentation to us (and the other characters), we see him engaged upon an exercise that his wife had announced as “learning to swim.” What this phrase means is telling in more than one way when she

elaborates that “he has a Frog in a Bowl of Water, ty’d with a pack-thred by the loins; which pack-thred Sir *Nicholas* holds in his teeth, lying upon his belly on a Table; and as the Frog strikes, he strikes” (Shadwell 3:125; act 2). Her account of this procedure is in fact glossed by Trifle, whom we discover prophesying to Sir Nicholas that his method will surely succeed, if only because the frog is the “most curious of all amphibious Animals in the Art, shall I say, or rather nature of Swimming” (3:125; act 2).

In one sense, Trifle’s uncertainty of what to call the ability of the frog only highlights the major thematic binary around which the comedy is constructed: art and nature. Throughout the play, virtually everyone’s nature is alternately disguised and revealed. Each character is motivated likewise by an entrenched desire to hide his or her own deficiencies, while exposing those of others. Thus, art implies the creation of a transgressive self, even as nature puts the lie to other possibilities.<sup>5</sup>

Comically complicating all of these frantic endeavors at deceit or understanding is the fact that Gimcrack and Trifle are not in on the joke. They can’t be, since in stolid Ramist style they fail to see any distinction between art (*ars*) and nature. Because any art reproduces nature in its methodic form, then to know a form is to know nature. This is why Gimcrack doesn’t need to do anything else *but* reproduce the locomotive “method”

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<sup>5</sup> On this point, and on the theory of a comedy of “humors” in Shadwell, see Alssid (24-29).

of the frog. Implicitly, for a Ramist of any kind to understand art meant understanding nature.

Gimcrack demonstrates that this is the manner of his mis-perception when he routinely refuses to pursue any theory beyond its methodic invention. As insistently as Trifle returns to the topics, Gimcrack believes that by “Art” a man “may appropriate any Element to himself” (Shadwell 3:126; act 2). So, even when he is directly disputed by the irascible Snarl, Gimcrack remains equably convinced that a man may become a sheep as a consequence of a blood transfusion (3:128; act 2). In the same way, he smoothly appropriates the spontaneous creation of Longvil into his already developed taxonomy of spiders (3:141; act 3), albeit that any of the categories involved would be instantly recognized as specious and even ineffective.

This is the objection voiced by Longvil when he observes that as Gimcrack practices it there is “no use of Swimming” since he never goes near the water. Predictably, Gimcrack is unfazed. He is even proud that he contents himself “with the speculative part of Swimming” and cares “not for the Practick. . . . Knowledge is my ultimate end” (3:127; act 2). The false distinction drawn here contrasts with the perceptibly unnatural one *not* drawn earlier. Indeed, the sharpest irony of Gimcrack and Trifle is that as they conflate form with fact they simultaneously multiply distinctions without discrimination at every other juncture of their lives. Again, Gimcrack appears precisely here as a Ramist, when he defends without reservation the preeminent worth of knowledge before the base skill of putting something to use (*usus*) or application. The unspoken assumption among Ramists was that to use something was to do no more than

apply it repetitively, while to comprehend an art, any art, was to touch the essence of reality (Ong 264). Gimcrack therefore collapses art and nature together, as Puritans in their “plain” style sermons always offered an application of the studied doctrine, but reveled most in its logical explication.

In the end, gaining a better appreciation of Gimcrack and Trifle should encourage ongoing critical reappraisals of Shadwell’s work. It may even be a sign of his skill, and an unfortunate effect of it, that he should so competently construct his characters that their varied origins become subsumed beneath the narrative they act out. As James Sutherland observed nearly forty years ago, it could well remain “one of the minor injustices of literary history that Thomas Shadwell should still live on uneasily in the ludicrous image” that was created for him. In spite of Dryden’s derogation, “Shadwell is nearly always sensible, refreshingly so in an age of so much adolescent farce and inane heroics” (120-21). Shadwell at least never failed to possess in the opinion of his contemporaries a keen perception of the foibles of those he saw around him (Alssid 22-23).

Christopher Wheatley more modestly concludes that Shadwell deserves reconsideration if only because his work demonstrates “how a complex system beliefs is necessary to make sense out of an ordinary writer . . . , whom nobody appears to have found overly complex [even] during the late seventeenth century” (32). In any case, it remains remarkable that the longest critical debate over The Virtuoso, extending from Borgman in 1928 to Wheatley in 1993, has involved the Lucretian philosophy underpinning Bruce and Longvil’s exercise of wit. Trifle and Gimcrack still suffer from

the fate of critical oblivion that they brought on themselves. They are, however, no less well-drawn than their opposites and no less instructive, for all their ignorance of themselves.

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