‘Fear the Bitch Who Sheds No Tears’: The Persistence of the Female Scapegoat in Cultural Representations of Frontier Violence and Stolen Generations

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The recent Oxford Companion to Australian History argued that in the quest for distinctive images of an emerging post-colonial nation, ‘the dramatic representation of its history has ... been a relatively minor matter’. Playwrights, it is asserted, mostly look to contemporary subjects; indeed, ‘genuine reassessment has been scarcely a theatrical subject at all’. Andrew Bovell’s 2001 play, Holy Day, an examination of the South Australian frontier of the mid-nineteenth century, is the exception that proves the rule. ‘A play set in the past is only useful as far as it illuminates the present’, Bovell writes in the foreword to the program. ‘While Holy Day takes us into the world of our past, it does so only to invite a consideration of its legacy.’

A powerful and resonant drama, the reassessment of our history that Holy Day offers tells us more about our contemporary cultural preoccupations than about our past. Set as a mystery, encompassing today’s two great contested aspects of Aboriginal history—frontier massacres and the stolen generations—the play is quite explicitly concerned with apportioning blame. In proffering up one female (Aboriginal) as the unjustly accused perpetrator, then another, white, as the real (and unpunished) perpetrator, the play provides an ending that is as thought-provoking as it is, ultimately, unsatisfying.

The plot of Holy Day concerns the scapegoating of an Aboriginal woman, Linda, for stealing the child of a missionary couple. White missionary wife, Elizabeth Wilkes, refuses to speak about what happened the night her husband was shot, the mission church burned down, and her baby taken from its crib, except to state that her child has been taken. Condemned by a bloodstained shawl, Linda also stubbornly refuses to speak until making an evidently false confession in an attempt to prevent vengeance against her people. But Elizabeth is more than happy to let Linda carry the blame and to see the people who humiliated her on the mission violently punished for what the audience increasingly can see is her own crime. The result: Linda hangs herself ‘in custody’ so to speak, the entire community of Aboriginal people is massacred, and Obedience, a young Aboriginal girl, is destroyed on the very brink of her womanhood.

In the final scene of the play, the convict who is the ringleader of the massacre of Obedience in his arms. Obedience, a rough-as-guts hostess of the Travelling Inn, whom Goudry now tosses the broom.

This scene follows the most powerful describing the massacre just carried out.

When the full brunt of the shooting had been taken, they were children. Another found by the fire and wept. The white man had come back to them. They made a pile of their bodies and one who had come to the camp to warn...

Now we learn that Obedience has, indeed, tried to prevent him from speaking the truth of his parents and kept him as a sex-slave. He was slaughtered his master and mistress were back in the bush. The old woman had been by the fire and wept. The white man had come back. When the full brunt of the shooting had been taken, they were children. Another found by the fire and wept. The white man had come back to them. They made a pile of their bodies and one who had come to the camp to warn...

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In the final scene of the play, Goudry, a hard-drinking, boy- raping and ultra-vile convict who is the ringleader of the massacre, stands centre-stage with the limp body of Obedience in his arms. Obedience, we have learnt, is the stolen child of an Aboriginal woman, who has been raised to be a slave of the hard-bitten Norah, the rough-as-guts hostess of the Traveller's Rest in which most of the play unfolds, and to whom Goudry now tosses the broken girl back.

This scene follows the most powerful scene in the play; a monologue by Obedience describing the massacre just carried out:

When the full brunt of the shooting was over twenty-two people lay dead. Twelve of them were children. Another fourteen were injured. Eight had managed to escape into the bush. The old woman had been spared. Too old to run and too old to shoot. She sat by the fire and wept. The white men got down from their horses and shot the wounded. They made a pile of their bodies and set it alight. There was one white death. The man who had come to the camp to warn them. This is our history.  

Now we learn that Obedience has been raped and her tongue cut out by, so Goudry says, the Aborigines in revenge for the raid, although of course we know it is he who has finally had his way with the girl who was the object of his lust from the beginning of the play. We know this because we have previously learnt that Goudry's young mute companion, the boy Edward, has had his tongue cut out by the convict to prevent him from speaking the truth about how Goudry murdered his squatter parents and kept him as a sex-slave—Goudry's story, of course, is that 'the blacks' slaughtered his master and mistress, and the boy he had kindly rescued had been struck dumb as a result.

There is nothing too unexpected in the depiction of the convict as depraved sexual monster, responsible for the genocide and rape of the Aboriginal people, and polluter of relationships between kindly squatters and gentle blacks. This construction began emerging in the earliest histories beginning with Henry Melville on Van Diemen's Land in the 1830s and is still evident in some popular histories written today, such as Hughes' *Fatal Shore*. South Australian settler history, beginning with the notorious sealers of Kangaroo Island, has had a special attachment to the convict villain, who, as ex-convicts and runaways from other colonies, were blamed by early chroniclers for atrocities against Aborigines. The 'vile convict' appeared on stage from the very first Australian melodrama written and produced in Australia with an Australian subject in 1834 (actually written by Melville), up until 1871. Although, from then on, the convict villain was found to be framed and so redeemed, celebrated and then, finally, largely forgotten in popular theatre. Goudry's clasp on the mutilated Aboriginal girl echoes this older, pre-nationalist tradition—even when such stereotypes are now being questioned by revisionist historians.

In history-writing, a central focus on relations between white lower class men and Aboriginal women typically results in the de-emphasising of the role of the white land holders and the total exclusion of Aboriginal men. Likewise for *Holy Day*, where the squatter character in the play, Wakefield (a name reverberant with powerful South Australian associations of respectable white settlement), is authoritative yet ineffectual,
and there is no Aboriginal male presence at all. So what was perhaps more unexpected about this scene was its surreal parallel with a famous scene in the 1950s film *Jedda*. On the surface, there seems little correspondence between the mainstream and hugely popular Chauvel film fifty years ago and Andrew Bovell's play. But on closer examination they have more in common than just simply a concern with the anxieties surrounding Aboriginal child removal—and the tie is indicated within this final scene. Goudry holds the inert body of Obedience across him in exactly the same pose as the deranged Marbuk, an Aboriginal character of maladjusted sexuality and, indeed, criminality, held Jedda towards the final destructive denouement of the movie. Ironically, the absence of Aboriginal masculinity, underlined by the replacement of Goudry for Marbuk, calls to mind what is the fundamental common ground between *Jedda* and *Holy Day*—the dominating presence of the white 'missus'. It is Elizabeth Wilkes and the sexual repression and hypocrisy she represents, not free-spirited Linda, who is made the ultimate scapegoat. It is Elizabeth Wilkes' rigid posture of virtuous white womanhood that allows the degraded brutality of Goudry to be unleashed upon the Aboriginal people. She is, then, 'that rarest of all characters in an Australian melodrama', according to one of the foremost historians of the Australian popular stage—the female villain.8

It is interesting to consider that in contrast, the plucky, independent woman—not infrequently sympathetic to Aborigines—was a stock white character of Australian colonial melodrama.9 Katharine Pritchard's 1927 play, *Brumby Innes*, recognised as both the first Australian play to actually confront the brutal realities of racial relations in Australia, and the first realistic representation of sexuality in Australian drama, can also be seen in many ways as *Holy Day* for its predecessor. Yet Pritchard challenged this tradition by presenting the central white female character, a high-spirited city girl, as one who would share the victimhood of Aboriginal women at the hands of a white station-owner.10 The culpability of the missus of *Holy Day*, however, reflects more recent revisionist themes of sexuality and gender in postcolonial historiography. In histories written in the postwar wake of the British Empire, there has been an emergence of the view that white wives destroyed harmonious relations between coloniser men and the natives, or, at the very least, exacerbated racial tensions.11 (And we should not forget that *Jedda* appeared in this postwar period.) This 'white woman as ruin of empire' has also been a trope of popular histories existing in diametrical opposition to older but still enduring heroic representations of pioneer women. I do not intend to go into the argument too deeply here but the key elements of this 'white missus scapegoat' argument are clearly reflected in the characterisation of Elizabeth Wilkes.

The characters of the four women, Elizabeth, Linda, Norah and Obedience, are all aspects of womanhood structurally enwined, but Elizabeth, recognisable as the 'God's police' figure in that misogynistic dichotomy of Australian culture observed by Anne Summers,12 is the pivotal character of the play. In keeping with the stereotype, her prime concern is to build and protect a private, enclosed domain in which she resolutely plays out her role of wife and mother in the Victorian cult of true womanhood. This stereotype also entails other than procreation. (And in sexuality is sexual openness, purity, rather by a steely concern for duty. The frontier is manifested in a dislike of illustration against interracial sex, and it is clear that she not only encourages her own child out of despair. But when responsibility, Elizabeth allows the storm that must follow.

Sarah McMann, the white foster character than Elizabeth, but she female sexuality. She seems, as is no sexuality among white Australians, that the death of their child, she takes and the child she will no longer bear. But being in a household where sexuality—too with whom and disharmony. With the complications collide in his absurd whose action in taking Jedda responsible for Jedda's tragic end.

Historically, the cause of racial ascribed to women, both black and white. However, it is the inherent danger, rather than frontier violence of Sarah McMann in *Holy Day* socially issues in contemporary contexts out to address.

The class, gender and race not literal structural absence—that you will never see, but whose body is not the motif—a longstanding cultural indicates the oblique relationship between white Australians' deep-seated Generations.

The connection is oblique, the child is so potently a symbol for the unknown land. Historically, the most settlers in terms of the cutting of the century the lost child became, the child—and the mother who is...

*Holy Day* makes various...
It was perhaps more unexpected scene in the 1950s film Jeeda. At the mainstream and hugely popular novel's play. But on closer examination, a concern with the anxieties that is indicated within this final scene, he is exactly the same pose of maladjusted sexuality and, destructive denouement of the futility, underlined by the replacement of fundamental common ground of the white 'missus'. It is the crisis she represents, not freedom. It is Elizabeth Wilkes' rigid and degraded brutality of GoudryWeeks, 'that rarest of all characters in the foremost historians of the lucky, independent woman—not a white character of Australian theatre, Brumby Innes, recognised as the brutal realities of racial relations and sexuality in Australian drama, can be seen. Yet Pritchard challenged this character, a high-spirited city girl, as women at the hands of a white man in Holy Day, however, reflects in postcolonial historiography. In British Empire, there has been an inharmonious relations between exacerbated racial tensions.11 (And never period.) This 'white woman' histories existing in diametrical oppositions of pioneer women. I do not see the key elements of this 'white woman' characterisation of Elizabeth

Sarah McMann, the white foster mother of Jeeda, was a much more sympathetic character than Elizabeth, but she too represents the disorder arising out of repressed female sexuality. She seems, as Jeremy Beckett put it, 'to embody a notion of failed sexuality among white Australia'.12 Banishing her husband from her bed after the death of their child, she takes an orphaned Aboriginal baby girl in place of the children she will no longer bear. But Jeeda, like Obedience in Holy Day, becomes a sexual being in a household where sexuality is denied.14 (There are interesting parallels here too with whorish and diseased Norah's determination to protect Obedience's innocence.) With the appearance of the sexual predator and outlaw Marbuk, these complications collide in his abduction and eventual killing of Jeeda. But it is Sarah, whose action in taking Jeeda represents the assimilation policy, who is ultimately responsible for Jeeda's tragic end.

Historically, the cause of racial conflicts on Australian frontiers has been easily ascribed to women, both black and white, and to sexual tensions generally.13 In Jeeda, however, it is the inherent dangers surrounding Aboriginal child removal and adoption, rather than frontier violence, for which the white missus is blamed. The echoes of Sarah McMann in Holy Day serve to make the link between these two vexed historical issues in contemporary considerations of Australian identity, which the play sets out to address.

The class, gender and race relationships depicted in Holy Day are built around a literal structural absence—that of Elizabeth's missing daughter, who we not only never see, but whose body is never found. The decision to use the 'lost white child' motif—a longstanding cultural icon of the colonial experience for Australians—indicates the oblique relationship between this historical preoccupation and middle-class white Australians' deep-seated emotional response to the history of the Stolen Generations.

The connection is oblique, rather than direct and explicit, because the 'lost white child' is so potently a symbol for the anxieties of colonial settlement in a strange and unknown land. Historically, the lost child motif symbolised the apprehensions of settlers in terms of the cutting of ties with their home country. But in the late twentieth century the lost child became, unsettlingly, the abducted, the abused, the murdered child—and the mother who seemed to grieve perhaps a liar and even a killer.

Holy Day makes various references to the real-life disappearance of Azaria
Chamberlain at Uluru in the 1980s. From the dramatic opening scene, depicting Elizabeth looking out over a vast desert plain, while storm clouds roll and lightening flash around her, the audience can scarcely avoid missing the allusion. Against a burning cross and the words 'Terra Nullius' the ragged, pale, and bleeding white woman clutching ashawl to her face chants religious incantations to her god:

Do my justice, Lord, and fight my fight against a faithless people. From the deceitful and impious, rescue me. From the impure, protect me. For You, Lord, are my strength ... Bring me to the Holy Day. Then I will go to the altar of God. Then I shall eat of His body and drink of His blood, the blood of my gladness and joy ..."17

The scroll across the top of the play program—'A desert. A murder. A missing child'—Norah's repeated admonition to 'Fear only the bitch who sheds no tears', and the bloodstained baby's clothing, all reinforce this reference.

The pull of this headline drama itself derives from colonialist anxieties still relevant to white Australians in Central Australian landscapes. Kay Schaffer has commented upon the deep well of Australian suspicion that Lindy Chamberlain confronted in the 1980s:

The codes of meaning through which the population interpreted the death of Azaria Chamberlain and the character of her mother must have existed in the culture long before the event took place. Reports of the death of the baby gave shape to 200 years of historical constructions about the land waiting to solidify around a woman and an event. The disappearance of the child at Ayers Rock allowed Australians to pour a century of fear and frustration, evidenced by representations of the bush as cruel mother, on to a woman who became the archetypically evil mother ... The 'meaning' which materialised around the infant's death already had been constructed within an Australian imaginary ... It is not the 'rality' or the 'facts' of the case which deserve closer scrutiny but the modes of representation which enabled the population to read the events according to pre-existing systems of meaning."18

Azaria's dry-eyed, religiously inclined mother (or so she was represented) allowed dongs, not people, to be slaughtered in retribution for her daughter's disappearance. But there are in fact historical literary precedents even for this, which ironically connect the lost-white-child motif to the processes of explaining and excusing colonialist genocide. In 1844, Louise Meredith, a Tasmanian squatter's wife, poured derision on a similar claim by an Aboriginal mother. When asked by Meredith's husband of the baby's whereabouts, 'she replied with perfect nonchalance,' exclaimed this historical white missus, 'I believe the Dingo patta! She believed the dog had eaten it! Numbers of the hapless little beings are no doubt disposed of by their unnatural mothers in a similar way ...'19 Infanticide, like cannibalism, has long been endorsed as a core feature of 'the primitive', justifying and rationalising colonial brutalities. Such obscure connections which link Holy Day's scapegoats Elizabeth and Linda with real-life scapegoat Lindy Chamberlain are drawn upon and reworked not in any conscious way, however, but rather as another layer of cultural practice, put down on the palimpsest that is the Australian past. So cultural anxieties about dangerous women, vile men and innocents betrayed are deftly and powerfully woven into a tapestry of guilt and accountability for our colonial sins.

For an historian this is difficult to present as being a 'genuine' or 'authentic' performance makes it clear for literary purposes makes various references to 'true' and 'false' history. The playwright states that her work is 'distorted',20 while the artistic truth of the holocaust that occurs in the play includes, without explanation, the earlier history21—this being the traditional composing 'true' history. Only the change in the construction of the 'history' itself was derived from an early 'map' by T.J. Ryan ... deliberately open to personal experience and observation can be reinvented throughout.

In the process of representing the play, playwrights, we know that we work for the present. Yet true records of South Australian history, as there have been more satisfying and less predictable. One of these would be the story of the century missionary Christina MacKellar, who among other things taught Aboriginal children, and ended up as one of their 'hoots of laughter' and therefore as a 'precious sense of identification' and the typical missionary's picture of how Smith's great-grand-daughter, concerning an escaped convict who was an Aboriginal person, his tragic stricken against the injustices of being hanged to be hanged in colonial South Africa, have been ensured by his hanging more covert.22 Was Donnelly a problem taken up his cause?

The other historical story is about the nursing sister at Point McLeay after her resignation, having been told she took morphine and killed records pertaining to the event. This was not mentioned in the play which did, however, mention that she had been worried about a smell.
For an historian this is disconcerting, however, not least because the play is presented as being a ‘genuine reassessment of the past’. As the program sold at the performances makes it clear from the outset, Holy Day is framed as ‘history’, and makes various references to ‘truth’ or what might be called ‘knowledge-power’ claims. The playwright states that he is depicting a history that has been ‘denied’ and ‘distorted’, while the artistic director refers to the implications of the play for ‘the truth of the holocaust that occurred in this nation’. Most crudely, the program includes, without explanation or reference, a four-page long timeline of Australian history—this being the traditional and unapologetically orthodox way of presenting ‘true’ history. Only the designer’s commentary offers a sense of the literary construction of the ‘history’ proffered in the play. She explains that her design, derived from an early ‘map’ by settler Thomas Wakefield, has been:

... deliberately left open to show the periphery, where edges get blurred through personal experience and observation, and the history that is presented to future generations can be reinvented through a complex variety of truths and perspectives.

In the process of representing history, regardless of whether we are historians or playwrights, we know that we all essentially write stories and construct a past that works for the present. Yet truth, as they say, can be stranger than fiction. In the records of South Australian history there are two alternative stories which would have been more satisfying and less cliché ridden as an historical plot for Holy Day. The first of these would be the story of convict Thomas Donelly recorded by the nineteenth-century missionary Christina Smith. Smith herself was an intriguing female character, who among other things travelled with Aboriginal guides, established a home for Aboriginal children, and endeavoured to Christianise the Bunda people in the face of their ‘hoots of laughter’ and ‘yells of ridicule or disapprobation’. Her writings reveal a ‘precarious sense of identification’ with Aboriginal women when the men are absent, and the typical missionary’s preoccupation with infanticide. Jane Haggis has written of how Smith’s great-grand-daughter actually reconstructed a story out of her records concerning an escaped convict, Thomas Donelly. Donelly was hanged for murdering an Aboriginal person, his tragic and possibly false conviction representing a blow struck against the injustices of the frontier. This same Donelly—the only European to be hanged in colonial South Australia for killing an Aboriginal person—may in fact have ensured by his hanging only ‘that Indigenous deaths at settlers’ hands became more covert’. Was Donelly a scapegoat? Why had a white female missionary seemingly taken up his cause?

The other historical story is the sad story of Miss Phyllis Flower, who was a nursing sister at Point McLay mission in the 1920s. A few months after tendering her resignation, having been told she had to take a forced transfer to Alice Springs, she took morphine and killed herself. One of the ‘chief causes’, listed in the mission records pertaining to the event, was that the baby of an Aboriginal woman had died. This was not mentioned in the report published in the local Adelaide newspaper, which did, however, mention two of the other listed causes. ‘Miss Flower apparently had been worried about a small legal action which she had told her friends she
thought was to be taken against her, and this had preyed upon her mind'. The Advertiser reported, 'On the Thursday before the tragedy she took a native patient from the mission station to the Adelaide Hospital, where he died within a few days of his admittance.' It is certainly not clear how the death of the Aboriginal woman's baby, which had occurred whilst Sister Flower was in Adelaide with the sick man, corresponded to the 'small legal action' However, the records show that the nursing sister had previously reported the mission superintendent to the Aborigines Protector. The superintendent had 'got to know and blamed Sister' and this was listed as another of the chief motivating factors behind her suicide. It is unclear for what exactly she had blamed the superintendent, but the next cause listed was the Sister's concern over the 'young lady keeping house for him'—the Sister was 'afraid of this being the downfall of the wife and family'. The final cause, as hinted at by the newspaper report, was that the superintendent had apparently reported the Sister for 'legal action for defamation of character'. In this case, then, it would appear that the white missionary woman may have been the scapegoat for some complicated tragedy involving the death of a child—of an Aboriginal woman.

But the problem is not that there are arguably richer and more interesting stories in South Australian history, like these. The problem is not only that the repellant Elizabeth and revolting Goudry serve to obscure the complexities and ambiguities of white women's and convicts' relationships with Aboriginal people under colonialism. What these stereotypes obscure, fundamentally, is the role of those who wielded the power over, if not the practice of, the two great genocidal crimes in our history—mass killing and mass child removals. The genteel squatter Wakefield would not countenance the killing of Aborigines even in the face of cattle spearing, and would free enfranchised Linda if only Elizabeth would give him the word. Indeed his complicity in the clearance and persecution of indigenous peoples is only acknowledged as far as his need for a respectable wife forces him to accept Elizabeth as she is. At the last moment—just before the impending massacre—Elizabeth comes to him to tell him she 'is ready to tell...the truth', but Wakefield stops her:

Don't...for if you do then I can only turn you away. But if you stay quiet then yes, I can take you, for a man out here needs a woman by his side. But this is our agreement, Mrs Wilkes. You and I will be silent about what passed. For what is not spoken will eventually fade.

And because the play is, like Jedda, set on the remote frontier far away in space and time from the government interventions that child removal required, the cold-blooded bureaucracy and political expediency that saw mass child removal conceived as a 'solution' to the 'Aboriginal problem' is ignored altogether. In place of the urban politicians and public servants (all white men) who actually formulated and orchestrated these Stolen Generations policies, we are presented with the female publican of outback Australia, anti-establishment, man-hating Norah, the 'Damned Whore' counterpart to Mrs Wilkes, as the culprit. Holy Day provides a story with scapegoats that clearly operate to remove guilt from certain elements in our society, and assuage the consciences of those who attend the theatre.

Theatrical and dramatic production, with its melodramatic and historical themes, are not concerned with reiterate, extend and play with the jolt of recognition and emotions. Thus Holy Day draws the understanding that the present postcolonial concerns with the courage to understand our past prove the rule.

Notes
Theatrical and dramatic productions, however much they may draw upon historical themes, are not concerned with 'genuine reassessment of our past'. Instead, they reiterate, extend and play with cultural traditions and contemporary concerns, relying on the jolt of recognition hitting the unexpected to trigger the audience's emotions. Thus *Holy Day* draws upon old gender and class stereotypes, and longstanding fears embedded in the Australian psyche, to refugue them in terms of present postcolonial concerns with 'reconciliation' and apology. Billed as 'a cry to find the courage to understand our past', in the end, it is, indeed, the exception that proves the rule.

Notes
THE REGENERATIVE SPIRIT


28 *Correspondence of the Aborigines' Friends Association*, State Library of SA: SRG/139/1 File 88.


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