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## PLAYING WITH DOLLS: MASCULINITY AND DESIRE IN *SUMMER OF THE SEVENTEENTH DOLL*

Critics have always discussed *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll* in terms of the nationalist concerns of the 1950s, even if only to reject the idea that the play has anything to say about such concerns. Certainly, the play's institutional context, with the establishment of the Australian Elizabethan Theatre Trust for example, helped to place it at the centre of debate about Australian identity and cultural maturity. The play emerged at a distinct historical moment of cultural formation and consolidation. At the same time, it situated itself in the contested gender relations of post-war urban Australia. This coincidence has meant that the play's negotiations of gender identity have become the site of its putative engagement with questions of cultural identity. I want to argue, though, that the quest for a more adult or mature expression of "Australianness" does not in itself drive the play. Rather, underlying this narrative, and determining the shape it takes, is the compulsion to define and fix masculinity, femininity and heterosexuality. Perhaps this is what makes the play seem peculiarly relevant to the cultural debate.

Within this dynamic, *The Doll's* emphasis on unruly, problematic women directs attention away from the heavily freighted relationship between the men — Barney clearly has an enormous investment in Roo's superiority and leadership, and theirs is the coupling with which the play ends. If, as Kerryn Goldsworthy suggests, kewpie dolls are little boys in drag, then there's some kind of ideological drag show being performed here as well, with the emotional transactions between the men dressed up in their relationships with Olive, Pearl, and the absent Nancy. The familiar shortened title of the play also speaks to this issue, since the idea of dolls conjures up girl stuff, and leaves the boys' games out of the picture. In this paper, I want to investigate the relationship between, on the one hand, the play's heterosexual dynamics and its construction of female sexuality, and on the other, the submerged but central drama of the men's desire for each other.

At the centre of these relations, we find Olive. Olive who "represents the national crisis," according to one critic (McKernan 198), in that her so-called immaturity symbolises a nation's need to grow up. Critics have come again and again to the question of "what's bugging Olive?" to the puzzle of why she rejects the idea of marriage. It seems to me, however, that the question we need to ask is not about Olive's motives, since those motives could be and have been formulated in a myriad of ways (Hooton 336). If we shift the discussion from

speculation about Olive as a real person to the issue of what makes her seem so, other kinds of questions might form themselves. Why is it Olive — rather than Roo or Barney — who is seen to have something wrong with her? Why is it that *her* rejection of marriage must bear the weight of the play's emotional and ideological resolution? Why does *she* come to represent the national crisis? Why, indeed, is *Olive* opened up and laid bare for psychological inspection and analysis in this way?

The play's structure allows, indeed compels, such questions, and diverts others, especially questions to do with the men. An analysis of Olive's function in *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll* suggests that the central impulse of the play is to reproduce traditional gender arrangements through the fixing of female sexuality, and that this negotiation takes place "on firmly male-homosocial terms: it is a transaction between men over the ... discredited [and] disempowered body of a woman" (Sedgwick 137).

In a sense, cultural issues wed themselves to the erotic narrative of the play because the play actually requires such a conjugation. Olive's relationship with Roo must be fairly dubious by 1950s standards, but it harks back to the separate sphere ideology which underpins, for example, the 1890s bush legend. This ideology makes Olive and Roo's relationship seem, to a certain extent, legitimate, natural, and desirable. We see the progress of this resolution reflected in the progress of Pearl's suitcase up the stairs — and, of course, in its departure at the end of the play. Nevertheless, the play must also take into account a suburbanised postwar Australia in which this resolution is largely anachronistic, one which does not clearly circumscribe and separate the meanings of masculinity and femininity. The play begins with this problem, and searches throughout for a way to resolve these tensions and to reaffirm Olive's belief that

These are men, not the sort we see go rolling home to their wives every night, but men. (14)

It is not surprising, then, that the *Doll's* opening should emphasise disruption and transition — both in Bubba's description of the changes that have taken place since the last summer, and in the women's excited expectation of the men's arrival. Bubba's first words reveal that Nancy's departure has upset the accepted relationships between the characters. Nancy has disturbed their assumptions about the ways men and women behave, as Pearl's misgivings imply. Thus, the *Doll* begins at a crucial moment for the project of legitimation I have outlined above, a moment which raises the question of what it means to be a woman. In their conversation concerning Nancy's marriage, the two unmarried women — one older, one young — circle around the central,

although absent, married woman. At issue is not the marriage itself — Olive's belief that Nancy made a mistake is another question — but rather what Nancy's marriage means. Pearl and Bubba debate this in terms of Nancy's sexuality, that she must have "made herself cheap," as Pearl puts it. Their discussion also registers the exchange value of the marriage, the nature of the trade that Nancy has made. Nancy's marriage and her status is a fixed point around which the play positions the other women. Nancy's sexuality is similarly fixed, and is, significantly, absent.

Bubba occupies a far more volatile position, as Pearl suggests, and Pearl's sexuality is shaped almost entirely in relation to her role as a would-be lady, "quite literally as well, if her 'well corseted' (5) figure is any indication." Indeed, the very ambiguity of her position in Olive's household causes Pearl to impose her sexual morality all the more monolithically on the women around her. As she tries to fix the meaning of female sexuality, it is significant, as Kerryn Goldsworthy suggests (99), that Pearl mediates between Olive's house and the suburban world outside it. As Pearl, Bubba and Olive wait and wonder whether Nancy was "cheap" or not, this opening sequence makes it quite clear that in this play, however women understand themselves — "as moral or social creatures but most signally as sexual creatures" (Sedgwick 151) — they do so not as sexual subjects in their own right, but as the objects of a sexuality whose proper subject is male. Olive aptly says at the end of the play that what hurts is "havin' another woman walking around your inside and sorry for you 'coz she thinks you've never been within cooe of the real thing" (90).

Olive's comment highlights both her distance from this understanding and her tacit recognition of it. The potential instability of the female sexual subject, circumvented in Nancy and Pearl and not yet realised in Bubba, has its embodiment in Olive. The stage directions tell us that she is "curiously unfinished," going on to characterise this quality as the "eagerness" of "extreme youth" (7). In comparison, however, to the other women around her — Pearl, Bubba, and also Nancy — what makes Olive "unfinished" is not simply youthful enthusiasm. She is a middle-aged woman, but she is not married; she is not young but she likes dolls; she depends on Roo but lives independently of him for seven months of the year. The curiously unfinished thing about Olive, then, is that her sexuality, emphasised by her entry and by the association of the stage space with her body, remains unattached to a conventional feminine understanding.

Olive's is a characterisation full of tensions in terms of the subject of her sexuality, and what this means for her identification as a woman. Olive's first entrance establishes her as an object of the male gaze, as does the association of the stage with her body; but, she is clearly less alienated from her body than

is Pearl. Laura Mulvey has suggested that woman as object represents a confrontation with male castration and impotence; as potential subject, she refuses to mirror male subjectivity.<sup>1</sup> Thus, if Olive with the departure of Nancy and the arrival of Pearl is socially and emotionally uncertain, then she introduces a more significant uncertainty into the play's heterosexual economy and its inscription of sexual difference. She becomes its primary vehicle for the change in normative femininity. Beginning with the fixed point of Nancy's marriage and the gender roles that it establishes, the play takes female sexuality — in particular, Olive's — as a problem which must be resolved in order that the reproduction and conservation of gender roles and male ascendancy might take place (Sedgwick 146).

Which is not to say that masculinity is not a problem. To the contrary, Pearl's reply to Olive's assertion about Roo and Barney's difference from city men — that she "never knew there was any difference" (14) — suggests that it is. The play embeds its definitions of gender in a strictly contained expression of heterosexuality, the ritual summer coupling. Heterosexual desire signifies itself not through sex, however, but through domestic ritual. Again, we follow the ascent of Pearl's suitcase to the ecstatic heights of the upstairs room. Similarly, Pearl's complacent knitting at the beginning of Act Two measures the progress of her liaison with Barney. But domestic rituals such as these have the potential to emasculate a man, as Olive's comments about "soft city blokes" and "professors from the university" reveal. While it's an emasculation effected in part by the daily grind of nine to five labour, we should note that the play presents this grind in terms of the return to the feminine domestic world, of regular contact with women. Olive's remarks about men who "go rolling home to their wives" illustrate this, as do Roo's circumstances in Acts Two and Three. So, at the same time as the play's definition of masculinity requires a rejection of the traditional means by which the structure of the nuclear family defines gender and organises social life, that organisation is seen as pathological, contagious. An underlying impulse in this play is the need to carve out of an uncontaminated space where men can be men with other men. This need is given obvious physical form in the distance which separates Melbourne and Queensland.

This kind of patriarchal heterosexuality, as Gayle Rubin has argued, "can best be discussed in terms of one or another form of the traffic in women: it is the use of women as exchangeable, perhaps symbolic, property for the primary purpose of cementing the bonds of men with men" (Sedgwick 24–25). Certainly, the idea of exchange or trade-off runs through the play, thematically and structurally. Olive refers to it ironically when she castigates Roo: "That's how I've always met you, standin' on the front verandah with a cash register" (26). She returns to this theme at the end: "Settling-up time already, is it? Well, make

me an offer — vase, decorations, and everythin' else you've smashed — how much?" (89). Pearl is a substitute for Nancy; Olive trades five months of heaven for "all the marriages" she knows; Barney seems to exchange Johnnie Dowd for Roo; Johnnie and Bubba look set to become the next Roo and Olive; the play begins with the three women but by the end has exchanged them for the two men; and, until very recently in the critical orthodoxy, dolls stand in for babies.

And what about the human dolls? While it appears that the main difference of this seventeenth summer is the absence of Nancy, the rupture in the men's friendship is at least as important. Olive makes the distinction when she says:

Righto, so it means a lot to all of you up North. But why the hell couldn't you leave it up there? It's got nothin' to do with our time down here, has it? Did you have to smash that up as well? (81)

In one sense, she's right, but the narrative of desire underpinning the play makes clear the extent to which the exclusively male off-stage experience shapes and controls the surface drama of "our time down here." After the first scene, it is not the play's feature romance but the conflicts between the men which occupy the central interest of almost every scene.<sup>2</sup> After their confrontation in Queensland and separation for two months, the summer lay-off means a chance at reconciliation for Roo and Barney. In this light, it is particularly significant that Barney relates to Olive the story of his break-up with Roo, the play dramatising it through her responses, and apparently resolving it through her at the end of the first scene. Indeed, it is her relationship with Roo that mediates between the men throughout the play, and it is always Olive who describes the men to others, referring to them as "a coupla kings," "two eagles," and so on. Again, the tableau at the end of the first scene provides an image of this dynamic: Barney stands smiling, watching Roo and Olive embrace. Olive acts as "the heterosexual token of exchange for what the men seem to want, but cannot directly name or negotiate with each other" (Looker 205).

When Roo and Barney arrive at Olive's house, there are inequalities between them that have never appeared before: Roo has no money, and Barney has no woman. The financial difference between them diverts attention away from their desire for communion. It seems, however, that while Barney needs to be equipped with a woman for the summer, in Barney's eyes, at least, Roo does not need money. Pearl's presence equalises them again. Interestingly, the second scene juxtaposes an argument between the men about money with Barney's attempts to mollify Pearl. At the end of that scene, Pearl's suitcases are the only thing that can compensate for what Barney takes as a personal rejection by Roo's "lousy rotten pride" (43). Similarly, when thinking of ways to

reconcile Roo and Dowd, the men reject "getting full together" (62) in favour of having a day at the races with the "sheilas."

The fight at the end of Act Two highlights the way in which the play channels male desire through its heterosexual relationships. It also begins a process of displacement which marks the rest of the play. The conflict in this scene represents a moment of reckoning between the two men, in which the dramatic syntax equates Roo's economic failure as a man, as he sees it, with Barney's amorous decline. The violence of the scene and its meaning, however, are transferred into the image of Olive cradling the seventeenth doll. The same displacement takes place in a conversation between Emma and Roo in Act Three. Roo asks Emma, "Whose fault do you reckon it was, mine or Barney's?" Emma avers that it was "nobody's fault," saying, "You 'n' Barney 'n' Olive, you're too old for it anymore" (82). While her analysis obviously contains the seeds of subsequent immaturity theories, the conversation ends with Emma's image of Olive:

Olive? Olive's a fool. I'll show you somethin'.

*[She puts the cup and saucer on the sideboard, rummages in the cupboard underneath, and drags out the seventeenth doll. She speaks with bitterness.]*

You see this? Middle of the night Olive sat here on the floor, huggin' this and howling. A grown-up woman, howling over a silly old kewpie doll. That's Olive for yer! (84)

Olive becomes the problem: "a grown-up woman" whose playing with dolls indicates that she has never developed a Pearl or Nancy-like acceptance of what it means to be a woman.

Laura Mulvey suggests that such a displacement represents the escape of the male unconscious from the confrontation with potential impotence, a confrontation which Roo and Barney both experience in different ways. "Pleasure," writes Mulvey, "lies in ascertaining guilt ... asserting control and subjugating the guilty person through punishment or forgiveness. This sadistic side fits in well with narrative" (21-22). The play resolves the rivalry and restores the bonds between the men by attributing the failure of a seventeen-year romance to Olive's immaturity. The fact that it concludes with her rejection of Roo's proposal of marriage and his rejection of her, implies that it also punishes her for her instability in the play's heterosexual economy. The ambiguity of her position, and of her potential to be the subject of her own sexuality, have disguised the extent to which the play's structuring of sexual difference requires her to function as a guarantor of masculinity and male power. What Roo has valued in Olive for seventeen years is exactly what he rejects in her now. Moreover, the logic of the play, as I understand it, represents

their romance as coming to grief because of its inherent impracticality and immaturity. By implicit contrast, the relationship between the men falters because of the limitations and incapacities of the individuals, not because of the nature of the relationship itself.

This resolution closely matches Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's account of narratives driven by male homosocial desire: "in the presence of a woman who can be seen as pitiable or contemptible, men are able to exchange power and confirm each other's value even in the context of the remaining inequalities in their power" (160). Olive absents herself from the end of the play, enacting her final alienation from her own sexuality, and leaving that space to the men. Normative femininity becomes pitiable and contemptible and preferably absent — like Pearl, also departed, or Nancy, who has been missing all along. In the *Doll*, Roo and Barney know what they have "lost." But what they have lost reaffirms their relationship because it remains to them as the only alternative. And in the end, loss is what you get for playing with dolls.

## Notes

1. Following Lacanian theory, Laura Mulvey maintains that there are "two contradictory aspects of the pleasurable structures of looking in the conventional cinematic situation. The first, scopophilic, arises from pleasure in using another person as object of sexual stimulation through sight. The second, developed through narcissism and the constitution of the ego, comes from identification with the image seen" (18).
2. See, for example, Act One, scene two; Two, scenes one and two. All of these examples illustrate the extent of Barney's investment in his idea of Roo as a "little tin god."

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## HALF POEM

words half thought half dreamt  
half written pushing the edge  
of sleep hypnogogic images  
pulled from daytime fear  
unresolved pain fade the poem  
is floating out of reach its shadow  
across the morning like love  
it will never return hovers over  
precipices always just out of reach