

# Rachel Fensham & Denise Varney: Redistribution of Power: Hannie Rayson

**Author:** Rachel Fensham & Denise Varney

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When Hannie Rayson's *Life After George* opened at the Playhouse at the Victorian Arts Centre on 1 January, 2000,<sup>1</sup> to wide acclaim, it announced that women playwrights would continue to be a force in the new millennium. It was a decade since the inaugural season of new Australian plays at the Malthouse Theatre, including Rayson's *Hotel Sorrento*, Murray-Smith's *Atlanta* and three other plays by women playwrights, had announced the arrival of a new generation of women writers. Where *Hotel Sorrento* played in the smaller Merlyn Theatre and *Life After George* in the Fairfax, Rayson's latest works, *Inheritance* (2003) and *Two Brothers* (2005), would be commissioned to go into the larger 850 seat Playhouse at the Victorian Arts Centre. In Sydney, they were scheduled alongside David Williamson's plays at the Drama Theatre at the Sydney Opera House. When Rayson says that her 'work and ... life are deeply informed by feminism', but that she is 'more connected to a nationalist tradition than a feminist' one, she speaks from an empowered position as a woman playwright who has stepped up to the hard-won privilege of narrating the nation.<sup>2</sup> So positioned on the nation's main stages, Rayson's reputation as a major Australian playwright is indisputable as is her continuing role in the dolls' revolution.

This chapter discusses two phases of Rayson's participation in and contribution to this revolution, that is, her part in the turning of the wheel that would make women the key players on the Australian stage. The first phase includes the more feminist-oriented plays from 1990 to 1996 and the second, from 2000 to the present, includes the larger-scale works that take in an expanded public sphere of feminism, nationalism and politics. It will argue that her major contribution is to represent the female subject as a woman who works and who, through her participation in public life, offers us an expanded and differentiated view of the nation. The chapter will also show how Rayson has progressed from the second wave woman-centred narrative of liberation and self-fulfilment to grapple with postfeminist ethical dilemmas and the ongoing work-family issue faced by women in contemporary Australia.

In the first phase, the 1990s to 1996 plays, we meet the funny, clever, flawed, career-oriented women of contemporary urban Australia. They are: publishers and writers (*Hotel Sorrento*, *Scenes from a Separation*, *Falling from Grace*); advertising copy-writers and café-owners (*Hotel Sorrento*); public servants (*Competitive Tenderness*); and a research scientist (*Falling from Grace*). These are followed in the later works by artists and academics (*Life After George*), community workers and farmers (*Inheritance*) and teachers, wives and personal assistants (*Two Brothers*). Most characters combine careers with marriage and motherhood and with names such as Marge Morrissey, Maggie Campbell, Beatrix George, Maureen Delaney and Julia Hamilton, they reflect the ethnically dominant anglo-celtic middle class feminine. They are also feminism's daughters: the white, educated, middle class dolls who are the products and beneficiaries of the social and economic gains of second wave feminism.

Leonard Radic noted as early as 1994, that 'it is women, not men, who are the power figures' in Rayson's plays<sup>3</sup> and we see that along with increased power in the public sphere has come an increased power in the dramatic narrative. The female characters have become the protagonists, making crucial decisions that effect the dramatic outcomes. The representation of an active femininity is, however, qualified and constrained by an acute awareness of the social context. Each of the plays, for example, is mindful of the social impact of feminism and its encounters with patriarchal institutions. Increased economic and social power is also shown to be an impersonal force at odds with the traditional feminine values of family, relationships and duty that linger in the world of working women. Family ties are seen as a pressure

point in the networks that sustain a cohesive community and ethics emerges as a contentious issue in an expanded public sphere where men and women work together. Another theme incorporates the privileges and contradictions of middle class liberalism as characters debate social justice and equity within the comfort of their homes and offices. Moving into the sphere of national politics, the arrival of a Pauline Hanson type and a redneck farmer in *Inheritance* focusses attention on the division of the nation into crude dichotomies of elites and battlers. These themes provide Rayson with the dramatic tensions that animate the plays and mark them as contemporary engagements with the broader questions of gender and politics in modern western nations.

Rayson's status has been further consolidated by her capacity to ignite debate in the opinion pages and airwaves of the media over public issues such as education, One Nation and, most recently, asylum seekers.<sup>4</sup> In a period in which Australia, like other western democracies, has moved further to the right, Rayson's theatre occupies not the radical ground of revolution in either dramatic form or content, but what might be called a middle ground. Her middle ground is to the left of both John Howard's mainstream and the Labor Party's support for detention centres. Underpinning her narratives is a belief in the reasonable if flawed capacities of human subjects and in the enduring strength of participatory democracy.

Rayson's most recent work, *Two Brothers*, and the debate that followed in the press, suggests a further move to the right in Australian politics. This polemical theatre work critiques the Howard government's policy on asylum seekers by offering a counter-narrative that is arguably just as fictional as the accounts in the public domain that masquerade as truth.<sup>5</sup> The hysterical reaction by journalists such as Tom Hyland in the Opinion pages of the *The Age* and Andrew Bolt in *The Herald Sun* points to a concern about blatant political theatre on the one hand, and an enduring bias against a woman's presumption of the role of spokesperson on the other.<sup>6</sup> No female critic or commentator castigated the play with the same vitriol as the male critics.<sup>7</sup> If this is not coincidental, then it points to an enduring gender bias about who is authorised to represent the nation and with what artistic licence.

## Early influences

Rayson's professional career spans more than twenty years from 1985 to the present, placing her within the 'third wave' of Australian theatre.<sup>8</sup> She is a Melbourne-based writer, living in the inner city suburb of Fitzroy. While she remains independent of any artistic or political affiliation to a company or movement, her career trajectory can be seen as a development of post-1960s Australian theatre with its emphasis on home grown drama.

Born in 1957, Rayson completed an Arts degree at the University of Melbourne before enrolling in the Drama School at the Victorian College of the Arts (VCA) in the late 1970s. The importance of the Drama School ought not be underestimated in the formation of Rayson as a theatre-maker. As she began reading Australian writers including Helen Garner and David Williamson, Rayson has said,

*It dawned on me, for the first time, that the material of one's life and experience was valid material for art. Insight about the human condition was not solely the preserve of Russians hovering around the samovar or Norwegians experiencing angst in their drawing rooms. What's more, being at the College engendered a feeling that we were really part of creating a new and distinctive theatre culture. An Australian one — that was to this point only fledgling. We were not hindered by oppressive traditions, we were creating the Australian theatre. It was nationalist and feminist and fuelled by a new, raw energy. It was very heady and empowering.<sup>9</sup>*

Established in 1976, with Peter Oyston as the inaugural dean, the Drama School was staffed by the 'new wave' generation of theatremakers whose values were shaped by the alternative theatre movements of the 1960s and who rejected classical and repertory theatre models. As Rayson recalls, Oyston believed that drama students should be theatre makers themselves and, rather than being too narrowly trained as classical actors, they were taught allround theatre skills from juggling and set building to running an independent theatre company.<sup>10</sup> Geoffrey Milne recognises 'the Oyston influence' as a significant force behind the

establishment of a number of small independent community theatres in Melbourne in the 1970s. These companies made new works about local people and contributed to the increased presence of Australian drama in the programming of the major companies.<sup>11</sup> Accordingly, in 1981, Rayson was one of a group of drama graduates who, with the assistance of a small operating grant, co-founded Theatreworks, a community-theatre based in Melbourne's eastern suburbs. There she began writing plays that examined local community issues. As Rayson says,

*Theatre Works gave me the time to write: I had a salary — about a \$170 a week. That was mighty. For a playwright just starting out, the opportunity to work in the theatre every day for four years was invaluable. My instinct for the theatrical comes from that experience.*<sup>12</sup>

She developed a work practice that involved talking to people about their lives, immersing herself in the community and then representing those lives, as truthfully as possible, on stage:

*When I talk about the truth, I mean the feeling that I am in this other world now, that I understand it. This has since happened in each of my plays. I can't predict when it will occur, but it always does.*<sup>13</sup>

Two plays belong to this early period: *Mary* (1985) and the Australian Writers' Guild award-winning *Room to Move* (1985). The former explored multicultural issues and introduced onto the stage a young Greek Australian character called Mary, while *Room to Move* focussed on the life of Peggy Hamilton, 'an old duck', a suburban widow of 62.<sup>14</sup> From this point, as Rayson moves further towards the mainstream, the female characters are increasingly drawn from the more powerful educated middle class.

The community theatre background, with its emphasis on community voices and truthful accounts of everyday life, set up the two enduring elements of Rayson's theatre — the preference for naturalism and realism and the privileging of content over experimentation with form. She follows, therefore, the dominant naturalist-realist path of Australian theatre, which has seen her work, buoyed by audience approval, slip its small theatre banks and spill over onto the mainstream stages of the state-funded theatres. Once at the Playhouse and the Drama Theatre at the Opera House, Rayson has challenged, through a now feminised naturalist-realist form, the male dominance of both Australian naturalism and the mainstream stage.

Following on from the successful Playbox debut of *Hotel Sorrento*, *Falling from Grace*, first performed at Playbox in 1994, was again directed by Mellor, who as part of the company's policy of producing new Australian works, had become a mentor to an emerging group of new playwrights including Joanna Murray-Smith and Michael Gurr. Leonard Radic praised the play's warm and witty treatment of contemporary themes and claimed that with this play Rayson had 'firmly staked her claim to be [David] Williamson's natural successor'.<sup>15</sup> *Scenes from a Separation*, cowritten with Andrew Bovell, and directed by Robyn Nevin for the MTC at the Fairfax Theatre followed in 1995. This collaboration explored, from a female and male writers' contrasting and conflicting perspectives, the events surrounding the breakdown of a marriage. *Competitive Tenderness*, large-cast comedy based on the minor corruptions and machinations of local government, was directed by Mellor at Playbox and also appeared in 1996.

The prolific output from 1990 to 1996 laid the groundwork for the critically acclaimed and multi-award winning *Life After George* in 2000. Along with its other awards *Life After George* was the first Australian play to be nominated for the Miles Franklin Award. With Rayson's nomination, not only had Australian playwriting entered the Australian literary mainstream, but a woman writer had reached this most important milestone in Australian theatre history. In 2003 Rayson further consolidated her standing with a new play, *Inheritance*, directed by Simon Philips. It was the first of her plays to be conceptualised with the grandness of scale that would take her out of the smaller, more intimate spaces to the Playhouse at the Victorian Arts Centre and the Drama Theatre at the Sydney Opera House. *Two Brothers* sold out in the 850 seat Playhouse and went into the Drama Theatre in Sydney. These venues and their box office potential were the material signs of Rayson's investment value for the respective companies. Along with David Williamson, she is now considered a writer whose plays are expected to draw capacity audiences and produce profit for the major east-coast theatre companies.

## Sister dolls on an elasticised thread: *Hotel Sorrento* (1990)

Rayson's first major success, *Hotel Sorrento*, directed by Aubrey Mellor, was part of Playbox Theatre's 'catalytic' inaugural season at the CUB Malthouse in South Melbourne in 1990 that included a number of new works by Australian women writers. *Hotel Sorrento* won that year's Green Room Award for Best Play as well as the Australian Writer's Guild Award. It was made into a feature film in 1994 directed by Richard Franklin with the screenplay by Rayson and Peter Fitzpatrick. Both the playscript (revised and reprinted in 2002) and the film as video are regularly prescribed for secondary and tertiary courses around the country.

In modern drama, Chekhov's *Three Sisters* stands as a testament to the relations of intimacy among biological sisters. In 2004, two new plays — Tony Briggs' *The Sapphires* (MTC) and Shelagh Stephenson's *The Memory of Water* (MTC) — continue the legacy of new stories about sisters. *Hotel Sorrento* reunites three Australian sisters in the seaside resort where they grew up but time and distance has strained the sisterly bond.

In 1970, the classic *Sisterhood Is Powerful: An Anthology of Writings from the Women's Liberation Movement* — edited and compiled by American feminist Robin Morgan — popularised the sisterhood as a metaphor for a womankind united through a shared gender identity. The sisterhood was a strategic counter-identity to the brotherhood of man, constructing simultaneously a collective identity united and oppressed by gender and one that was ready to take on patriarchy. Within the Australian context, as Holmes and Lake note, 'the sisterhood encapsulated the belief that all women shared the experience of subordination and thus shared common interests'.<sup>16</sup> The idea of a sisterhood established bonds that crossed family lines suggesting that camaraderie, friendship and solidarity among women could be as socially powerful as the patriarchallybased family. So despite the prevalence of famous contemporary sibling groupings, and the enduring media fascination with the Williams sisters, the Kidmans and the Hiltons, the sisterhood of unrelated women might well be the more significant power group to emerge from second wave feminism. On this view, *Hotel Sorrento*, with its fissures and betrayals, marks the breakdown of the biological sisterhood as the core assemblage of women and lays the groundwork for alternative female alliances — the non sibling-based business enterprise of *Falling From Grace* which followed.

In *Hotel Sorrento*, the three adult sisters are Meg, a London-based novelist, Pippa, who works for a New York advertising agency, and Hilary, the widowed mother of a teenage son, who has remained in the family home where she looks after their elderly father, Wal Moynihan. The sisters are divided by simmering family resentments. [Photo 6.1] There is the issue that two of the sisters pursue successful careers overseas while the third remains at home to care for their elderly parent. Then there is the issue of the autobiographical material in Meg's recently published novel and the family secrets it reveals. For Hilary and Pippa, a shared childhood has been compromised and made all the more public since the book's nomination for the Booker Prize for Literature. Pip accuses Meg of stealing 'our integrity' but for Meg her book is a personal and emotional journey in which she rediscovers long suppressed emotions.<sup>17</sup> These centre around the knowledge that both she and the youngest sister, Pippa, secretly loved Hilary's late husband. The hurt and resentment intensifies as it is revealed that Pippa, and not Meg as everyone for years had suspected, had an affair with him shortly before he died in a car accident several years earlier. When old Wal dies suddenly, the sisters find they can no longer sustain the family unit and its fragmentation is completed with the sale of the family home, the 'Hotel Sorrento'. In the end, Hilary, the one most betrayed, declares 'there is no family any more' (88).

Aubrey Mellor's three hour-long production at the Merlyn Theatre, Playbox, lingered on the expansive dialogue and played with the Chekhovian mood of melancholy reflection. Pots of tea replaced the samovar, and civilians replaced the soldiers, but there was the same slow passing of time, the comings and goings of visitors and house guests. In the *mise en scène* of melancholy reflection, the sisterly bond unraveled leaving three women unhappily free of family ties.

At first the sisterly bond is reaffirmed in affectionate recollections of their 'larrikin', beer-drinking, handyman father who was as Hilary recalls 'a bastard to our mother. Hopeless father, all that', but more loved than their mother whose suffering frightened them (10). In these dialogues, the sisters feel the pull of family and the past. As Meg, the literary one, remarks,

*Meg: ... It's like there's this highly elasticised thread that's tied around us three. Pip and me and Hilary. It's stretched from Australia to Britain and to the States and all of a sudden it's just given out and thwack we're flung back together again. (49)*

In the premiere production, the Moynihan sisters were played by Caroline Gillmer (Meg), Elspeth Ballantyne (Hilary) and Genevieve Picot (Pip). Meg was the most powerful stage image. Gillmer's costume was a good English red woollen pleated skirt and jacket, accessorised with a paisley wrap and felt hat. She was styled for the literary circuit of readings and festival appearances. Having left the space of the parochial nation to achieve literary acclaim, she has acquired the mandatory English accent and a mannered personal style. Her physical presence gave the character an air of authority that added weight to the cultural criticism of which much of her dialogue was composed. At times, her opinions were attacks on the parochialism of her native country:

*Meg: ... You know people used to ask me why I stayed in London. Why I didn't come home. And I used to say it was because the artist has no status in this country. Why make art when you can make money? That's Australia for you. (72)*

The other 'success', Picot's moody Pip, has distanced herself from home and family with an Australian-American accent and a smart New York wardrobe that is out of place at the seaside. She is restless in the languid space of home and family, 'I'm not very good at filling in time. Just doing nothing'. (87) Next to the bright stars, Hilary is parochial in accent and dress, with the self-deprecating but stoic self-irony of the one who stayed behind. Ballantyne's short cropped hair and knitted cardigans lack the colour and style of her sisters' more worldly tastes. Living and working overseas is represented in this play as the mark of a progressive female identity; staying put is cast as the more negative sign of duty and family. As Hilary admits, 'That'd be right. The parochial one. That's me.' (63)

The opposition between loyalty to family among sisters and a more self-oriented individualism marks the movement of the narrative. Meg has returned to Australia with an ambivalent attitude to home and belonging. In the early stages of the play, we learn that her novel's melancholy subject matter is home and family and though she denies it, it is strongly autobiographical. The book acts in this respect as a device for bringing the self and the family into conflict with each other. It is both a family memoir that exposes the sisters' private lives to public scrutiny and it is a work of art, the product of an individualised self. For Meg, who is the more actively assertive sister 'the problem with loyalty is that you can keep on and on, living a lie' (75). As an independent woman she believes 'choices' and 'arrangements' have replaced the female sense of duty and sacrifice; yet she is not entirely satisfied with the 'choices' she has made (58). She refuses to accept that Hilary has made sacrifices to look after their elderly father, and claims, harshly, that her sister 'made a choice'. Pip sides with Hilary against Meg. 'I'm sorry that Meg doesn't feel like that. I think it's disgusting actually' (58). And Yet, Pip's loyalty to Hilary is compromised by her own guilty secret. The relations of intimacy and trust among sisters, that can be found in Jane Austen and Chekov, have broken down.

The issues of loyalty and choice, self and family are probed further when Meg discovers that their father had liked her book, but 'didn't think [she] understood about loyalty' (70). The voice from the grave troubles Meg and fuels the righteous indignation and resentment of the other two sisters. The sisterly bond is rendered one of distrust, betrayal and suspicion. Loyalty is compromised by guilty secrets and associated with the values of an older generation now passing on. Meg and Pippa have the power to reject the networks of home and family, but they will never be fully reconciled to its loss. *Hotel Sorrento* is thus a cautionary narrative that slowly picks away at the sisterly bond as each sister looks outside the family for the sharing of ideas and belonging.

The three sisters of *Hotel Sorrento* and the two elderly sisters in the later play *Inheritance* offer a contemporary reading of sister dolls. The bonds are seen to endure in the two elderly sisters in *Inheritance* who maintain a geographical proximity to each other, but they are strained beyond repair in the younger women whose lives have gone in different directions. The severing of the sisterly bond is presented as a sad but inevitable loss, and a symptom of the fragmentation of modern family relations. As Hilary reminds her sisters, it was their mother who with great sacrifice and little regard for her own aspirations 'kept it

all together' (10). With none of the next generation willing to 'shrivel up here — like Mum', the family disperses (81). Only Hilary, the parochial sister has a child that takes her into the next generation.

As the elasticised thread of sisterhood strains and breaks, two of the sisters find solace in the friendship of an independent older woman, Marge, who has retired to Sorrento. Marge, played by Julia Blake in the Playbox production, is a helper figure who has both the time to talk and wisdom wrought from experience to share. Being an educated woman has not protected Marge from being left with four children after a painful divorce or from the emotional scarring that occurred, but in later life she has the independence to enjoy books and painting and is awakened '... to ... feel again' (79). Both Meg and Hilary find in Marge a supportive female connection that strengthens their own resolve about self-reliance but also female friendship. The increased importance of friendship among women is the subject of *Falling from Grace* that followed *Hotel Sorrento* and both will be seen to contribute to the discourse on the community of women.

### 'Always there for one another' — careers and friendship: *Falling from Grace* (1994)

*Falling from Grace* (1994), along with *Competitive Tenderness* (1996), is the most overtly feminist of Rayson's plays.<sup>18</sup> Suzannah, Maggie and Brock are friends and colleagues, in a self-employed creative team that runs *Metro Magazine*, which is a magazine for the liberated woman. They could be part of the vibrant cultural sector that flourished under the Keating Labor Government's promotion of 'Creative Nation' that actively courted the arts vote in the early 1990s. *Metro Magazine* is aimed at an educated female readership that expects to be served up more than food and fashion. Setting the action within a women's publishing group taps into a vital strain of feminist cultural enterprise. Magazines such as *Ms Magazine*, founded in 1972 by Gloria Steinam and edited (controversially) for a period by Australian feminist, Anne Summers, claimed to have made 'feminist voices audible, feminist journalism tenable and a feminist world view available to the public'.<sup>19</sup> Several more and less radical women's and feminist magazines, from *Bitch* to *Marie Claire*, continue to keep feminist issues in circulation and drive a wedge through the masculine domination of media ownership and publishing. By the 1990s, women's magazines, many with women as editors, promoted a popular non-academic feminist discourse, with a focus on women's stories and issues, namely 'such hitherto invisible problems as "domestic violence," "homophobia," "date rape," and "sexual harrassment — and such new goals as "reproductive freedom" and "women in development"'.<sup>20</sup> In Rayson's play, *Metro Magazine* traverses many of these issues and actively resists patronising stories of home and family. Feminist and women's presses also aim to practice a non-hierarchical management structure as an example of equality in practice and this will also feature in the play. Drawing on the reputation of feminist publishing, *Metro Magazine* signals that the play is about clever, articulate and enterprising women, professional dolls, whose work is connected to and is a product of feminist politics.

The personal lives of these professional dolls are also representative of the 1990s postfeminist working woman. Suzannah, the editor, is the divorced mother of sixteen year-old Tessa, who commutes between two parental households. Tessa is a wise-child, neither damaged nor angry, but attuned to her split household and mindful of both parents' faults. Maggie is the sub-editor and a divorced mother of two primary school-aged children and Brock is the features writer who, at 37, is happily married and pregnant with her first child. The women try to balance two goals: the 'emancipated' one they have inherited from their feminist mothers and the traditional one, the female goal of marriage and children.

The women have an intimate friendship, as the long first scene establishes, that overrides traditional loyalties of home and family. [Photo 6.2] They share intimacies about husbands, lovers and children undreamed of by Olive and Nancy over their seventeen summers.

*Brock: Speaking of sex, how did you go with that architect person?*

*Suzannah: Don't ask.*

*Maggie: Married.*

*Brock: Oh no.*<sup>21</sup>

The code of friendship is based on trust and is comically demonstrated when Suzannah nips home after lunch for a quick rendezvous with her lover, Michael, a barrister. On her return, she is taken to task by

Maggie who rightly guesses there is a secret affair going on. What matters in the conversation that ends the scene is not the fact of the secret affair, but that their code of total disclosure has been transgressed.

*Maggie: Suzannah, I couldn't give a damn if you were doing it with the Ku Klux Klan. I just thought you would have told me. That's all. I thought that's what we did. (22)*

But the women must also negotiate ambition and career within the office where despite the culture of supporting one another and sharing decisions, one is the editor, one is the sub-editor and the other the feature writer.

*Suzannah: Listen I'm the editor here and you're forcing me to pull rank.*

*Brock: Yeah, well, the editorial, policy seems to have changed without any of us underlings knowing what's going on. (33)*

In the premier production, Trina Parker's spare design utilised the transformational properties of the Merlyn stage. It was both open and divided up into discrete locations by means of minor prop and lighting changes. A generic domestic space acted as home for each of the characters at different stages of the play and was also, with only minimal changes in lighting and the addition of a table and typewriter, a multi-functional office. The effect was a blurring of the boundaries between home and work, that reflected the thematic concerns of the play. The fluidity of the stage space opened up the drama to the contemporary world in which the characters try to balance the competing demands of private and the public spheres.

The drama revolves around a story Brock is researching for the magazine's 'Top Girls' series on prominent women. Her subject for the next edition is a brilliant research scientist, Miriam Roth, 'a champion of women's health' and a woman who has challenged the male medical establishment (12). Roth is poised to make a major medical breakthrough, having developed a new drug, currently under trial, for the treatment of pre-menstrual syndrome. However, when Brock discovers the whiff of a cover-up in the trial, the story becomes too contentious to publish. It seems that in her eagerness for the drug's trial to succeed, Roth has dismissed evidence that the drug may produce birth defects if women become pregnant while taking it. The drama is thus propelled even deeper into a woman-centred world bringing the key issues of women's health and professional ethics into the purview of a feminist publishing enterprise. In the absence of an oppressive patriarchy in the office, the women have the power to make critical ethical decisions that affect their own and other women's lives. Will they do the story and risk a defamation case if the claims are wrong, or, should they warn women of the possible dangers of the drug? That conflict erupts bears witness to the complexities of professional life and we watch the way the women handle the problems that arise.

The first dilemma occurs as Suzannah tells the pregnant Brock that she cannot print the story about Roth and the new drug. Its publication might save an unborn child, a matter close to Brock's heart, but it could also lead to a costly defamation case if their information is wrong:

*Suzannah: Our major concern is staying alive. Don't be naïve. And not making asinine decisions which could land us up shit creek.*

*Brock: So what happens if these babies are being born with shocking deformities? We don't worry about that? It's not our business? (24)*

In this exchange, the slippage between 'our business' as publishers and writers and 'our' business as women, mothers and friends troubles both women. It clearly demonstrates the contradiction between traditional feminine and feminist values and capitalism, here shown as the opposition between caring, informing and doing business. Brock's concern for the unborn babies is also only slightly more pressing than her desire to see a good piece of journalistic research (her own) in print. Professional pride and pregnancy are seen to co-exist in the same female body, for the moment.

The drama develops and also takes a comic turn when it is revealed that Roth is the wife of Michael, the married man with whom Suzannah is having a secret affair. Moreover, as the coincidences grow, it is Suzannah's ex-husband Hugh who is the whistle blower exposing the birth defects. The personal and the professional are entwined around the power woman, Suzannah, in whose hands also rests the reputation and future of the magazine and her nemesis, Roth, her lover's wife. How does a woman behave in these

circumstances? What kind of ethical framework guides her decision-making and what other circumstances are brought to bear on the situation?

As a comedy, the play treads lightly on these issues and seeks a comic resolution. Suzannah pulls the story and then regrets it and the stress sends Brock into early labour. The 'faceless' men on the Medical Board suspend the drug trial and Roth is devastated. The sub-editor, Maggie, tips off a rival newspaper that prints a lurid version of the story. Michael returns to his wife to comfort her in her hour of need. Suzannah, like the biblical Lucifer, falls from grace, here the state of friendship and cooperation among women. As befits a comedy, the play ends happily with the women reunited in the maternity ward, designated as a place of reconciliation and forgiveness. In a final note of irony, Brock's baby, a girl, will be called Grace.

Philosopher, Agnes Heller, in an essay that examines the contradictions in the process of women's liberation, helps illuminate the issues at work in this play. Heller argues that emotions are materially based in the changing historical conditions in which women live and are best understood as 'feeling-investments', a concept not unlike Raymond William's historically-based concept of the 'structure of feeling'. Beginning from the premise that 'the enslavement of women is *traditional* in character' and gives rise to a certain set of emotions, she argues that a different 'feeling-investment' arises when women enter the professional workforce. For example, the traditional feminine goal of marriage and children is accompanied, she explains, by the emotional state of passivity, a response to 'the general female attitude' of 'waiting'. Women waited to be proposed to, to be married, to have children, for their men to return, for the children to grow up and then to visit them in old age. They developed the twin emotions of 'hope and fear': hope that they would carry on and fear that they would not. 'They waited for love, for recognition, for a good word and they hoped that they would get it and were afraid they would not.' There was a 'fatalism and a belief in providence', but what is of most interest to the discussion of *Falling from Grace* is Heller's idea that, above all, traditional women 'wait for grace'.<sup>22</sup>

Heller explains that the modern woman in the workplace is required to 'change[s] precisely this attitude', from waiting and passivity to the feelings that go with leading and doing. In the workplace, where 'there is a task to be pursued and done', there is no place for fatalism or passivity. Rather, according to Heller, 'what is called for are efforts to do everything in our power to avoid collapse and ensure victory'.<sup>23</sup>

Heller also explains that modern women feel guilt 'due to their alleged neglect of female duties' and this does not disappear from professional life. The reference to traditional women who 'wait for grace' and, of course, the fall from grace, resonates powerfully with Rayson's title. If, as Heller proposes, grace is a state of passivity, then women in the workplace, especially highly qualified women, undergo, by necessity, a falling from grace. To be achievers, they need to enjoy power, assume 'the "right" to be cruel', and become active, assertive and forthright.<sup>24</sup> That is, as Shen Te in Brecht's *Good Woman of Setzuan* discovered, to be a good capitalist you need to exploit others and fall from grace.<sup>25</sup>

6.0 Hannie Rayson.

Photographer: Kate Gollings.

6.1 Genevieve Picot, Caroline Gillmer, Elspeth Ballantyne in 1990 Playbox Theatre production of *Hotel Sorrento*.

Photographer: Jeff Busby.

6.2 Catherine Wilkin, Deidre Rubenstein and Diane Smith in 1994 Playbox Theatre production of *Falling from Grace*.

Photographer: Jeff Busby.

6.3 Jill Forster, Sue Jones and Lucy Taylor in the 2001 Melbourne Theatre Company production of *Life After George*.

Photographer: Jeff Busby.

6.4 Monica Maughan and Lois Ramsey in Melbourne Theatre Company production of *Inheritance*.

Photographer: Jeff Busby.

Suzannah's fall occurs on that view as soon as she becomes an editor. Having made that move, it follows she will put business before friendship and hard-headed decision-making before loyalty to women friends and colleagues. Moreover, she is equally assertive in her relationships with men. Rather than waiting for exhusband Hugh to do the right thing, she demands he fulfil his parental responsibilities. Rather than waiting for her lover to pay attention to her, she tells him to go home.

The conflict between traditional and modern values is captured in many moments of the performance. One of these, coheres around the sign of the briefcase. It is placed next to Brock as she lies like a beached whale on a couch.<sup>26</sup> Her advanced pregnancy now silencing her, the briefcase looks small and out of place next to the pregnant woman, whose large belly reminds us of that other source of female power, the power of the body in giving birth. Later, in the hospital waiting room, Suzannah opens her briefcase and takes out a pair of oddly-shaped hand-knitted baby booties, which is described in the script as '*a small inept example of knitting*' (68). The image brings together the woman in the corporate suit and knitting-for-baby in a confrontation that comically fails to reinstate the traditional feminine craft.

*Maggie: What is that?*

*Suzannah: It is a bootie.*

*Maggie: Uh Huh. (68)*

At the pressure-points of a fragmented modern life, Suzannah's fall from grace is also her accession to being a fragmented 'part-time person', broken into doll-parts, separating husbands from female friends, family from colleagues, and work from home (27). She is unable to integrate competing demands and appears distant and cold. The play comes down heavily on the side of a restored unity of self, resolving the conflict by showing that friendship among women is the unifying force. But it is only, at best, a temporary solution to a more long standing problem for women in public life.

For research scientist Miriam Roth, there is a different fall from grace. She has 'invested everything' in her career: there has not been 'anything else' (39). Her professional credibility is so merged with her personal identity, that when her reputation is in ruins, she feels she has lost everything. Roth's fall from grace, however, comes with an ironic twist. She finds that her fall has made her attractive once again to her straying husband.

*Michael: ... I love you very much.*

*Miriam: Is that all it takes? ... My fall from grace? (60)*

Her fall also re-ignites her own capacity for sexual pleasure: 'I'd almost forgotten how good it is' (60). The wry observation that a career is not good for a woman's sex life, highlights a conundrum. To be in the workplace involves a renunciation of the traditional gracefulness and allure of feminine passivity, and thus activates a fall from feminine grace. The compensation is the acquisition of masculine power. But to lose face in the workplace, calls for the masculine act of falling on your sword. The fallen Miriam (whose biblical counterpart stood up to Moses and was stricken with leprosy as her punishment) thus undergoes a double fall — from feminine grace and masculine honour, demonstrating how woman is a double coded sign. She simultaneously bears the meanings attached to feminine and masculine behaviour. In the strange conundrum of the woman who enters the masculine workplace, falling on her sword returns Miriam to the feminine state of grace! Disgraced, and having exchanged her power suit for a bathrobe, she now acquires a more traditional form of grace: waiting for the scandal to blow over, waiting for a new appointment and waiting with desire for her husband to come home to her. Miriam's fall demonstrates with remarkable dramatic economy that which ever way she turns, the professional woman finds herself negotiating a double coded world.

This insight also helps set the agenda for a postfeminist intervention into the continuing problem of women in professional life. It offers a telling critical insight into postfeminist subjectivity seen here as an importation of traditional constructions of the feminine into the new nexus between the public sphere of equal opportunity and the private sphere of sexuality and relationships. The groundwork for the fall, as Heller suggests, is laid in the contradictory emotions that govern women's lives. The female subjects in

*Falling from Grace* have the education and self-knowledge to claim financial and emotional independence from men but they pay by foregoing the state of grace that accompanies the traditional feminine role of caring and waiting.

Finally it must be remembered that the idea of a 'fall from grace' belongs to the Catholic idealisation of the traditional feminine subject, who like the Virgin Mary, is compensated for her lack of agency by the attribution of grace. Moreover, in the discourse of the Vatican, the state of grace is presented in such a goodly and desirable light that it is seen as morally preferable to power. No wonder Maggie, the harrassed divorcee and company chief, feels so bad.

### 'I told him I was the Dean of Arts', working wives: *Life After George* (2000)

The impact of public life on female subjectivity is given a sharper edge in *Life After George* (2000) where Lindsay Graham is the Dean of an Arts Faculty at a large university.<sup>27</sup> Rather than being part of a self-employed creative team, like the women in *Falling from Grace*, Lindsay, like Miriam Roth, holds a senior position in a patriarchal institution where there are few women at senior level. Anne Summers' figures suggest Lindsay is one of only 55 women among the 267 deans at Australian universities.<sup>28</sup> The play makes it clear that Lindsay believes she has to work harder and longer than any male academic, even if this is not the case in fact, and that her ambitions have contributed to the fragmentation and deferral of any meaningful and satisfying personal life. She appears decidedly 'graceless' in her relations with people — bullying and officious — but as we learn of the price she has paid for her career, including the 'crippling panic attacks' she still experiences (70), the play offers a more complex representation of the character. If the play initially reproduces masculinist constructions of the 'bitch at the top', then it arrives in the end at a more sympathetic, feminist, understanding of women and power.

The context for *Life After George* is also significantly different from *Falling from Grace*. By 2000 when the play appears, the neoliberal agenda of the Howard Government has been in place for four years and in the new economic climate in which Lindsay runs a faculty, there is no place for 'bleeding heart lefties' who oppose the imposition of university fees. To her colleagues who remember the Whitlam era of free university education, Lindsay is a class traitor, 'a middle manager with a marketing brief' (58). Lindsay speaks the language of the corporatised university:

*Lindsay: The Faculty has a two-million-dollar operating deficit. By the year 2005 your Department will be half a million dollars in debt. The time has come to think carefully about income-generating activities. (57)*

The most telling sign of her abandonment of the principles of equity and justice for which she once fought is her pejorative use of the 'elite' word. When it is suggested facetiously that rather than offering traditional academic subjects, they make money out of 'teaching tourism, marketing and hospitality management' (57), the following exchange takes place:

*Lindsay: Your elitism doesn't wash anymore, George.  
George: Elitism is it? You used to call it academic excellence. (58)*

Lindsay has also abandoned her youthful feminism. Other women find her competitive and unsupportive.

*Poppy: You've got to be joking! You spend the entire time at meetings addressing your comments to the middle-aged men at the table. I can tell you, the younger women on campus find you competitive and unsupportive.  
Lindsay: The younger women on campus need to show some backbone. Your lot are spoilt brats as far as I'm concerned. I'm fed up with your incessant carping. You've been handed everything on a plate and you just expect the gift-giving to continue. (40)*

Lindsay's aggression towards Poppy, her ex-husband's young wife, and her accusation that her generation is 'anti-woman', shows the damaging effects of power. To read lipstick on a younger women as a sign of anti-feminism recalls Germain Greer's reference to journalist Suzanne Moore's high heels as 'fuck-me

shoes'. As Astrid Henry argues in a complex discussion of generational change in *Not My Mother's Sister*, in wanting to differ from their feminist mothers, younger women are not anti-feminist. 'They are not apathetic toward feminism; quite the opposite, they are actively engaged with it. In fact, it is their desire for feminism that makes them struggle with it.'<sup>29</sup>

In fact, Rayson, somewhat ironically, offers Poppy an ethics of feminist practice,

*Poppy: I just want you to know. I have a rule. 'Never have sex with a married man.' George and I waited until after you two had separated before we slept together.  
Lindsay: What do you want, the Human Rights Medal? (40)*

Lindsay is highly amused by this example of ethical hypocrisy but in a flashback, we are shown a similar attempt by Lindsay thirty years earlier to square the ethical ledger with Beatrix, her lover's wife:

*Lindsay: ... I'm a feminist. And as such I feel my first loyalty is to my sisters. So I thought I should come and see you. And tell you myself. I'm having an affair with George. (39)*

This comic scene, with its awkward truths and clumsy declarations, points to a more serious issue that runs through all of Rayson's plays. Where men have a code of mateship, for better or worse, that structures their social relations in public life, the familial and domestic codes that pertain to women do not equip them for public life. The feminist sisterhood was an attempt to recode female relations for independent and autonomous women, but as these examples show, the project suffered from an ideological transparency that lacked the subtlety and finesse to work in the everyday. The sisterly code also, as the generational conflict between Poppy and Lindsay and between Beatrix and her daughter Ana shows, came up against the politics of inclusion and exclusion on the one hand and individualism, or self-interest on the other.

Gradually, the play uncovers another side that offers a more sympathetic understanding of women in professional life. Agnes Heller's distinction between women who become competent in a patriarchal organisation and those who aspire to leadership, is again illuminating. She explains that within patriarchal culture 'to become a "boss", presupposes something else: the enjoyment of power. Women on the whole, however, feel ill at ease in power situations.'<sup>30</sup> Lindsay's rise to a senior position springs not from patriarchal culture but is in part related to a feminist counter cultural sphere where to become a boss is an aspiration, a feminist project and a right rather than a pleasure. The *mises en scène* of the plays in production clearly establish the university as a masculine space. In the MTC production, each scene, whether set at the university or at another location such as the home, is staged within the high-ceilinged long-windowed white-walled room of a sandstone university.<sup>31</sup> A wooden 'antique' desk and a large brown leather armchair suggest the male domain. As well as acting as dramatic setting and intellectual milieu, the university, style as a lofty place of tradition and stability, frames the events that take place in both the personal and public lives of the characters. Richard Piper's Professor George drapes himself, in a crumpled cream suit, across the desk and sits comfortably relaxed in the chair. In Sydney, Geoff Morell's George wears a leather jacket, jeans and Cuban heeled boots in a more youthful characterisation that easily turns the traditional place of learning into a sexualised space. Both Sue Jones in Melbourne and Robyn Nevin in Sydney, by comparison, are light-footed and slight, dwarfed in size but with the loud and resonant voices they need to establish their presence in the masculine space. While the young Lindsay is welcomed into the space as an attractive, clever and subordinate student, her rising status and increasingly managerialist comportment see her become a dominant figure who creates conflict in the office and at home. George while still married to Lindsay feels eclipsed as he complains to his friend Duffy:

*George: I feel as though Lindsay competes with me. Every day. About even the smallest thing. She has a bigger office than I do, in the Faculty Building. She has more honours students asking her to supervise their theses. She can write faster. She publishes more. In fact she is superior in every way, really. For instance, last night I spent six dollars on two A4 batteries, when apparently you can get them at Coles for four dollars ninety-nine.  
Duffy: Aren't you a fucking idiot. (26)*

Yet as the dramatic action demonstrates, Lindsay is actually 'ill at ease' at the top, taking a week off work to deal with personal matters and arguing with younger feminists she would have once supported and

admired. As with *Hotel Sorrento* and *Falling From Grace*, Lindsay is not a singular female hero, but one of a group of three women. This time, the women are united not through family, friendship or professional ties but through their relation to the central male character. Each has been at one time married to Peter George, Professor of History at Lindsay's university. Thus the women, as in *Hotel Sorrento*, appear at the outset to be rivals for the love of the same man, however, Rayson rewrites the traditional scenario by filling the female characters with enough substance for each to stand alone. Again, the man in question is dead and the action deals with the aftermath of his death as each woman reflects on her own circumstances.

The marital and extra-marital affairs of George make for a sub-plot in which the male hero becomes the comic character and a foil to the more seriously minded investigation of women at the top. Lindsay is George's second wife whom he met nearly thirty years ago when she was his honours student and he was still married to his first wife Beatrix. In a seduction that appears consensual, but would be (rightly) considered differently today, George and Lindsay begin an affair in the early 1970s while she is still his student. After divorcing Beatrix who is left to bring up their two children, David and Ana, George marries Lindsay, who graduates and begins her rise through the ranks of academia. After nearly thirty years and as Lindsay approaches fifty, George leaves to marry thirty year old Poppy, Lindsay's nemesis, who works in publishing. At the time of his death at the age of fifty-eight in a light plane crash, which occurs just prior to the commencement of the play, George had been flying with an unknown twenty-eight year old woman. The discovery of her body alongside George's in the wreckage of the plane shocks all of them. For a time, the mystery of the woman's identity adds another layer of cruelty to George's character and Poppy is distraught. But the resolution of the mystery brings the narrative of Lindsay's youthful relationship with George back into focus and sheds a sympathetic light on her hardness. The body is that of George and Lindsay's adult daughter whom Lindsay gave up for adoption twenty-eight years ago. Lindsay had never met her daughter and George had not told her he had traced her.

If Rayson's initial intention was to make Lindsay exemplify the student radical who turns authoritarian, she is also cognisant of the choices women make on their way to the top. In a quiet scene towards the end of the play, Lindsay relates how her daughter's letter requesting a meeting with her birth mother had arrived on the day she was to be inaugurated as dean:

*Lindsay: All the time I'm asking myself — what is the appropriate course of action for someone in my position, and I end up comparing myself to some fictitious man, doing my job. How would he cope, if this had happened to him? And I know he would bury his pain and get on with it. That's why you get paid good money, because people trust that you'll put the job first. (70)*

She had never told George, who at that time, in the 1970s, was still married to Beatrix, who was also pregnant. Nor had she replied to the daughter's requests for a meeting. The scene, disturbingly and insistently, provokes the audience to come to some understanding, both intellectually and politically, of the problem of women in positions of power. Does she make decisions as an independent subject or does she constantly look over her shoulder to a male norm? How are power, desire and maternity to be assembled in a way that is neither melodramatic nor hopeless? The scene also raises the ethical issue of George's sexual relations with his honours student and the long-term damage to the young woman. These complex problems are left unresolved with commendable restraint. Within the dramatic world of *Life After George*, Lindsay will find no resolution, as indeed, historically, there is no end to this story yet. She will bury herself in more work, conscious, however, that it has become a life sentence.

The play makes serious points about women and power, despite the focus appearing to be on George. At the beginning and end of the play, the women have gathered, somewhat awkwardly, for George's funeral. [Photo 6.3] The first two wives tolerate each other, but there is a further generational difference with George's young widow.

*Beatrix: Who would have thought it? You and I sitting by the fire in Tuseany, crying over our dead husband. [Pause] I suppose we should contact whatsername.*  
*Lindsay: Poppy. You can't even bring yourself to say her name.*  
*Beatrix: Well, honestly. (20)*

The age differences allow Rayson to make a commentary on the generational differences between second wave feminists and their third wave 'daughters', who were born after 1975. Poppy at thirty-five and Beatrix and George's daughter, Ana, at twenty-eight, are both critical of the older women. Ana accuses her mother of being 'judgmental' (37) and Poppy tells George that Lindsay's youthful activism, her radical thesis and her commitment to reform means nothing if she's not 'setting a different agenda now'. That she's not is evidence, says Poppy, that 'baby boomers suck' (47).

At the same time, there is an equally critical view of women who sacrifice personal ambition for the sake of marriage and family. The play moves beyond simplistic representations of women's experience of oppression to represent a more ironic discourse on middle class women as resigned and knowing instruments of patriarchy. In the case of the first wife, Beatrix, it is the familiar trope of the woman who sacrifices her career only to be dumped for a younger woman and left with the kids. Caught by surprise, she experienced deep shock 'that lefties could be as indifferent to other people's suffering as any bull-necked capitalist' (11). Thirty years later, the older Beatrix has 're-invented' herself as a desiring subject, living in Tuscany with her new husband and restoring fourteenth century ceiling murals. On the meaning of George's current life, she finds little, considering him, with some lasting affection, as 'a ridiculous old fool ... a silly, old, middle-aged duffer' (21). She is moved, nevertheless, to make the journey home for the funeral with a tender and outrageous letter from George in her handbag — resigning herself again to his cruel charm in a gesture towards the compromises made within the heterosexual romance. The letter is so tender in its memories of their youthful romance, that it could only have been written by a woman writer who was more fully cognisant of the play of desire in women's imaginative lives!

### 'But I don't think we agree': contrasting gendered perspectives in *Scenes from a Separation* (1996)

The theme of divorce is taken up again in *Scenes from a Separation* (1996), co-written with Andrew Bovell that offers two versions of a marriage breakdown.<sup>32</sup> As Helen Thomson pointed out in her review, it is 'a disturbing snapshot of the 90s, performed with style and panache.'<sup>33</sup> Nina Moss and Mathew Molyneux are a middle class couple in their late thirties who separate. The lead-up to the separation is played first from Mathew's point of view (written by Andrew Bovell) and then Nina's (written by Rayson) which follows as Act 2. Across the two acts, scenes intersect and repeat as the gendered viewpoint displaces the singular narrative from its position of dominance in conventional naturalist theatre. It is a fascinating experiment in co-writing that challenges spectators to shift their points of identification from husband to wife across the two acts.

The characters belong to the upper middle class milieu of inherited wealth, private schools and university education. There is in the writing (especially Rayson's) a mild critique of the middle class characters. Rayson's Mathew is a private school, Melbourne University educated 40 year old inheritor with his brother, Darcy, of their father's publishing company, Molyneux House. Rayson makes sure we see the founding father as a philanderer and a drunk. The characters in both parts are clever, self-assured, literary types. While Bovell shows their power, Rayson's section draws attention to how terrifying their confidence can be.

The repetition of the lead up to the separation in the second act presents an opportunity to compare the male and female-authored versions of the separation. The gender dichotomies are clear-cut. In Bovell's version, Mathew wants Nina back because he says nobody knows him like she does and he can't imagine building that kind of knowing with another person.

*Mathew: ... It's the smell of her, the shape of her face in profile, the way the hair fell across her shoulder, the kineasthetic sense of her. That's what's gone. It's as though somebody has torn my right arm away. (92)*

While Mathew hates himself for becoming nostalgic, Nina in Rayson's script enjoys her new freedoms.

*Nina: I like driving. It's strange, when I was married I was always the passenger. Mathew drove. Unless he was drunk. (43)*

Moreover, she ‘wants this new life’, no matter how hard it is (94).

There is an assumption across both acts that Mathew is primarily to blame for the marriage breakdown. Bovell's Mathew is just as his family and associates describe him: emotionally and intellectually lazy, self-centred, work-oriented and opinionated. He is taken to task by Siobhan, the young literary editor, for refusing to consider gay writers. Bovell offers his male subject up, a little too easily perhaps, to the clever women — his mother, wife and young female employee — who analyse and reject him as a relic of a masculinity from which they have moved on. Bovell limits Mathew's finer qualities to soliloquies uttered when alone in his car. His brash and proud masculine subject only reveals his feelings when he stands to lose what he wants.

Rayson spends much of her stage time on the idle chatter of the group to give us a sense of the family dynamics. Her Nina is as naive and vain as Bovell's Mathew is boorish. In avoiding same-gender favouritism, each writer appears to overstate their characters' faults. Rayson's Mathew is a nicer person than Bovell's and her Nina is less saintly than Bovell's. She is more self-centred but is also a more desiring subject who acts out an affair that is only hinted at in Bovell's version. Rayson's Nina imagines herself saying to her husband, ‘I'd had such a wonderful time with him ... I wanted to scream at him, ‘I'm denying myself the most perfect lovemaking I've ever had, and you're not even grateful’’ (82). She is also more complex, uncertain, ambivalent. She is better able to fill the space between marriage and separation; to articulate the inbetween state of separation that lies between the past and the unknown future.

The differences between the two playwrights' visions boils down to the different conclusions drawn by their characters: Bovell's Mathew wants his marriage back; Rayson's Nina does not. Beyond that, Nina sees the future as a place of opportunity and locates marriage in the more restricted past.

## The banality of the ordinary — grandmothers and battler-dolls: *Inheritance* (2003)

*Inheritance* returns to the theme of sisters but this time they are an older generation of women born and bred in rural Australia.<sup>34</sup> Rayson moves outside the inner city milieu for this play and returns to the kind of research-based drama that created *Mary* in the 1980s. Rayson has said of *Inheritance*, ‘I want to take audiences outside the mainstream into other worlds that inform us about who we are as Australians’.<sup>35</sup> The dramatic narrative is constructed along empirical lines of inquiry, observation and analysis, gleaned from field trips to country Victoria over a two-year period.<sup>36</sup> The spectator is thus invited to identify with life-like characters representing ordinary country people and to think about contemporary rural issues.

The national interior in the play is both a geographic and psychological space, in which country Australia becomes the site for family conflict and breakdown. The location, the Mallee in north-eastern Victoria, is a sheep and wheat region well-known for its treeless, flat and dry landscape and has suffered from drought in recent years. Within this setting, the masculinist bush narratives of explorers, settlers and poets is recast as a contemporary family drama in which broader national themes of inheritance, land ownership and dispossession are explored through the actions of dominant female characters.

The action is set against the background of a global economic context in which free trade agreements have increased competition for the former mainstays of the rural economy — wool, wheat and sugar. The escalation of urbanisation has led to significant decline in rural populations, with the closure of town banks and schools putting further pressure on small businesses and leaving little work for the rural working class. In the mid to late 1990s, the right-wing One Nation movement took hold in some country areas, attributing the depressed state of rural economies to a range of government policies from free trade and globalisation to migration, multiculturalism and Aboriginal welfare. With the proportion of anglo-celtic Australians higher in rural areas than in the cities, where by 1996, one in five Australians was born overseas, the One Nation movement almost inevitably promoted the interests of anglo-celtic Australians.<sup>37</sup> In this respect, the movement had a strong white racist underpinning. Accordingly, a sub-plot in *Inheritance* investigates the emergence of One Nation leader Pauline Hanson, through the character of Maureen Delancy, who by the end of the play has won a Federal seat as the Independent member for Murray. A further context for *Inheritance*, like Katherine Thomson's *Wonderlands*, is the post-Mabo era of Australian race relations.<sup>38</sup> Maureen is the spokesperson for white resentment of the Mabo decision and the aboriginal adopted son, Nugget, is the target

of a racially based backlash against what John Howard has called the 'black armband' version of Australian history.

Girlie Delaney and Dibs Hamilton, the dominant female characters, are eighty year-old twin sisters who have spent their lives in the Mallee region of north-western Victoria. At the Playhouse at the Victorian Arts Centre, they were played by well-known veteran actors Monica Maughan and Lois Ramsey. Maureen, who is Girlie's daughter-in-law, is played by Geraldine Turner. Girlie, who had been a publican's wife during her marriage, has echoes of Olive, but Dibs is an entirely different character. She has become the pastoralist's wife, who has lived a financially secure if hard-working life on the family farm. Neither sister has a tertiary education or a profession, although Dibs had once dreamt of becoming a nurse in Melbourne. Maureen earns her family's small income by working in a shop in the nearby town of Swan Hill.

In the MTC production, the flatness of the Mallee is amply set out on the large Playhouse Stage at the Victorian Arts Centre and at the Drama Theatre at the Sydney Opera House. Realism's iconic stage-to-life representational system gives the play both a sepia-look of 1930s outback Australia where the story begins and the contemporary look of denim and trainers where the story ends. The greater spatiality was marked by the presence on stage of a car, a truck and a moving motorised lawnmower. The stage was at times big and noisy as in a conventionally masculinised exterior space, appropriated here by the desire of a confident female playwright for a grandness of scale.

The older actors produce a vocality marked by the accent and *timbre* of old Australia, associated in the cultural imagination with *Dad and Dave* on the radio and *The Sullivans* on television. Dibs and Girlie's speech is rendered in an accent marked as comic through its deviation from the urban educated voice of mainstream Australia. Quaint phrases such as Girlie's 'Crikey O'Reilly' enact a nostalgic Australianness heard in Australian film and drama to connote the bush, the working class or the past (7). It locates their subject positions within a historical time and place of the nation — the white farming community old enough to have grown up in white Australia, before the period of postwar prosperity and mass migration. Rayson, as a daughter to this generation, gives a rare theatrical voice to the elderly women who, as the Bureau of Statistics records, outnumber men by a ration of 2:1 and controls the family assets.<sup>39</sup> The volume and speed of the actors' delivery in performance show the women to be sprightly and mentally astute octogenarians, a fact that later makes them culpable for the moral choices they make. The women are intolerant of difference — 'vegetarians', 'wogs' and 'catholics' (15) — and as the plot unfolds behave with increasing morally repugnance. It is around the latter point that the play shifts gear from a family narrative to a more contentious representation of the racialised exclusionary practices at the heart of white family relations.

Despite the differences in the fortunes of their adult life, Dibs and Girlie share a common girlhood and set of attitudes that endure to the present. The sisterly bond in the present is linked to a family saga that goes back three generations to the pioneers who 'broke their backs clearing this country' (49). The property's name, Allandale, recalls Grandma Jessie Allan, and marks the matrilineal line that has handed the property down to the twin girls. Dibs and Girlie construct their sisterhood through narrating formative experiences. In one flashback, they sing *Two Little Girls in Blue* and, in another, they discover their father hanging from a rafter in the shed. In another flashback, it is 1941 and the sisters, now eighteen, decide which one will stay on the farm and look after 'Mum'. Girlie, the more pushy of the sisters, proposes they toss a coin. By this arbitrary decision, Dibs 'loses' and stays to eventually take over the title of the farm; Girlie is free to leave with a ten thousand pound pay-out of her share. Over the years, Dibs' family has prospered while Girlie and her family now work on the property as share farmers. The arbitrary determination of inheritance has had social and economic consequences that have split the two sides of the family into rich and poor.

In performance, the sisters' closeness is signified by their short white hair, rounded figures, floral frocks and aprons. While they are self-consciously ordinary, they join that powerful class of Australian dramatic character — the widowed matriarch — who is alternatively powerful and manipulative. Dibs and Girlie are a generation younger than Emma Leech, the seventy year old mother of Olive in *The Summer of the Seventeenth Doll*. But like her, they control the family's monetary and emotional fortunes with fierce defensiveness. Unlike Lawler, Rayson is careful to fill in the background to the old women's behaviour, offering a means of understanding their actions. This knowledge functions, on the one hand, as a complex

representation of inheritance within farming families and, more problematically, as the explanation of the disinheritance of Dibs' children that follows.

Family relations reach a critical point with the death of Dibs' husband Farley, who has acquired the property through marriage. When the newly widowed Dibs and her adult son William read the will, they are shocked to find Farley has left the farm to Nugget, the adopted aboriginal son. The will also reveals what Dibs has long suspected but denied, that Nugget is her husband's biological child, the product of a sexual encounter with a local aboriginal woman, long deceased. Dibs, with her son William as her witness, rips the will up saying 'This is my farm ... No one gets anything until I say so' and conceals the torn pieces of paper in the pocket of her floral apron (64). It is a shocking theatrical moment. Unexpected and shameful. The scene intensifies the narrative line that has been building throughout the play — that Nugget is 'other', not family, 'not in line' and is to be denied any rights to the property (49).

The scene also demonstrates, as Homi Bhaba has said, that the 'other' 'is never outside or beyond us; it emerges forcefully, within cultural discourse, when we *think* we speak most intimately and indigenously 'between ourselves''.<sup>40</sup> Rifling through Farley's writing desk, Dibs and William 'between ourselves', place the other 'beyond us'. This objective drives the rest of the plot. In a second related scene, Dibs and her sister commit a further travesty of justice. On a holiday weekend away from their families, the sisters sit in the dimly lit dining room of the Grand Hotel Mildura, in all its faded glory, and sip chardonnay just 'between ourselves'. There they complete the act of exclusion by hatching a plan to disinherit Dibs' children and transfer the property to Girlie's son, Lyle. As a stage spectacle, the sisters at dinner mimic the male business lunch. They sip 'this' chardonnay, which they declare to be 'not a bad drop', and are emboldened by their upmarket adventure (82). The following morning, they visit the solicitor's office and sign the papers.

The scene highlights the elaboration of exclusionary social practices, its ritual sacrifice of the 'other' and its celebration of and pleasure in the power to manipulate events. The treachery enacted in the room strikes at the heart of the principle of inheritance, the passing on of a property to children. The disinheritance of Dibs' children, carried out in such a devious manner, is an act of 'othering' of the illegitimate aboriginal son, but also of William, the homosexual son, and Julia, the divorced daughter: since blacks, gays, and single women typically are the non-subjects of heteronormative hierarchies. In the MTC production, the old ladies in their best clothes, amidst the tawdriness of the hotel décor, underline the banality of racism and prejudice as it is practised by ordinary old ladies on behalf of the good of the family.

The opposing case is put by Maureen Delancy, the daughter-in-law, who believes that Lyle deserves the land because he's worked on it and the 'Pansy-Boy' William has not, while Nugget is the undeserving 'boong' (66). Her claim on Lyle's behalf is not without some justification, but her case against William is as much for his sexuality as his birthright and with Nugget it is a mixture of resentment and racism. Maureen takes moral courage from seeing herself as a battler, that deserving and underprivileged class identified by John Howard as, 'somebody who's not earning a huge income but who is trying to better themselves'.<sup>41</sup> She struggles to make ends meet as Lyle her husband fails to make their farm pay,

*Maureen: I'm the one keeping this family together. I'm the one who treks off to Swan Hill every bloody day to work in that shop.*

*Lyle: So you keep telling us.*

*Maureen: I'm putting in a sixty-hour week — for what? We're going down the toilet and you won't do a damn thing about it. (17)*

While Maureen makes serious social realist points about hardship outside the privileged sphere of the urban middle class, like Pauline Hanson and One Nation, sympathy for her is undermined by her bigoted solutions. Maureen with her bad grammar and strident tone represents a class of white Australian women who position themselves as spokespersons of the nation, confident of their status as national subjects. She is predictably part of the hostile reaction to Mabo believing that land rights are 'tribal voodoo' (36) and does not see the irony in her defense of the pastoralists who exploit the members of her own non-landowning farm labouring class.

Of all the female characters in Rayson's plays, Maureen is the only one to belong to a political movement and to stand for election. At the beginning of Act Two, she arrives on stage on the back of truck,

festooned with banners and bunting, and accompanied by triumphal music. This loud and colourful theatrical spectacle heralds, finally, the arrival of the female subject on the national political stage. However, her 'Vote One Maureen Delancy — Putting the Mallee First' campaign is an appalling image of the powerful female subject, pointing to the problematic aspect of power that adheres to the feminine as well as the masculine subject. Her slogan is 'Lend a Hand' (52). She addresses the crowd as one of them, a woman born and bred in the Mallee. In her speech, the discourse of belonging is coupled with the discourse of a fair go: 'Let's get one thing straight. You deserve — your kids — deserve — the same basic facilities as city people take for granted.' (53) She then regales the crowd with a feisty story of how she once told off 'this big hairy bloke in a leather vest with tats all over him' whose gang was going to trash a pub she was working in at the time. She states her opposition to the multinationals and foreignowned banks. This is all so far so good and the crowd on stage and the audience in the theatre are laughing. Maureen is over-dressed and has big hair; she is a comic spectacle.

But then the discourse of belonging and a fair go takes the listeners and the audience into the far right of racism and xenophobia:

*Maureen: And I'm talking about every Asian, Moslem and Hottentot who come here and refuse to sign up to the Australian Way of Life. There are women who come to this country who are not prepared to show their faces. Well, I say, 'Don't show your face around here. My friends, this is our country, where people say g'day to each other in the street and lend a hand when they see a mate in trouble.(53)*

With these words, Maureen has completed the apotheosis from battler to national spokeswoman and the theatricality of the scene, with its triumphal parade and music, etches the moment into the audience's reception. At once, the powerful woman is revealed as a dangerously divisive figure, and a warning that women are just as capable of appropriating the patriarchal language of self and other, us and them.

Maureen's speech recalls Jennifer Rutherford's identification of the 'code of neighbourliness', that operates as the imagined tradition of white Australians. Rutherford writes that this code:

*is what has been called on in both real and fictional dramas to distinguish Australians from other nationalities: a neighbourliness, a generosity to the other in times of need, coupled with spirit of equality and the rejection of visible hierarchies.<sup>42</sup>*

However, as is clear, Maureen's neighbourliness is exclusively the domain of those who look and think like her. She is a Pauline Hanson doll, whose concern for her white neighbours rests on their being deserving and the others who are not.

The MTC production walked a fine line between criticising and reinforcing the One Nation phenomenon. The colourful theatricality of the stage and Maureen's exaggerated persona seduces the audience into a happy reception of the comic opening to the second act. The slide into racism undercuts Maureen's comic bravado, but the comedy also trivialises the seriousness of the views she espouses. Rayson was quite focussed on airing the darker aspects of Australian culture. As she has said, the play is 'not a nostalgic piece. It's quite chilling, with racism and a climate of hatred that is supported by the current government'.<sup>43</sup> But there remained a question, however, about whether the formal structuring of the scene and its on stage enactment reduced the critical intention.

As the play pulls its various narrative threads together, Maureen's run continues unopposed. In fact, she inherits the farm and wins a seat in parliament. In a tragi-comic twist at the end of the play, the daughter-in-law, the non-blood relative, inherits the farm. This occurs as before the sisters can tell Lyle of the Mildura plan, he hangs himself, like his grandfather before him, from the rafters of the shearing shed. The moment is melodramatic and tragic, but there can be little sympathy for Lyle who has violently bullwhipped his nephew and nearly killed Nugget. The wordless spectacle of the hanged man brings the second act to its close. A penultimate scene or epilogue follows and moves the narrative forward a year to the Pauline Hanson-like image of Maureen Delancy, the new independent member for the Mallee, on the television news. The widowed Maureen has sold the family farm (inherited from Lyle) to finance her campaign. These narrative choices deny the sisters their moment of agency but give it to Maureen. The old ladies and the city relations

are outmanoevred by Maureen whose bigotry and opportunism give her a morally hollow but effective political victory.

In this play, the female characters are powerful but deeply flawed representing the path to be avoided in the feminist revolution. Manipulating the discourse of family and belonging to their advantage, the women demonstrate how what's best for 'our family' has justified actions that are otherwise connected to ignorance, prejudice and revenge. 'Our family' is revealed as an exclusionary zone defined by those deemed by Girlie, Dibs and Maureen to be other to it. These will be Nugget for his blackness and his illegitimacy, William, for his homosexuality and 'selfishness' and his sister Julia for her 'effeminate' son Felix. Of the sisters, Girlie is the more manipulative, but Dibs is a willing co-conspirator. [Photo 6.4] Both are morally culpable and demonstrate the co-existence of family values and acts of exclusion.

## Stylistic innovations: temporal hybridity

The early works, from 1990 to 1996, share the thematic and aesthetic concerns of the naturalist and social realist dramas that have constituted the theatrical mainstream since the late nineteenth century. In the best reformist tradition of the genre, the plays comment on the changing status of women in modern western culture. In its mimetic dimension, the dialogue seeks to represent the speech patterns and ideological assumptions of the characters' social milieu. 'God I hate being forty' is the funny opening line of *Falling from Grace*. Delivered in the context of champagne with girlfriends at Café Blue, it is also a statement of gender, class and religion. The representational system of the plays thus offers the spectator, who recognises the familiar milieu, a *mise en scène* with which she can readily and comically identify.

The more confident stylistic innovations of the later works present more incisive comments on women's lives. *Life After George* offers a critique of the liberal feminist position by showing how a woman at the top can conform to the dominant masculinist culture. *Inheritance* is a terrible tale of the betrayals that take place among and between the women of the family. There is a development in these plays towards the less photographic and more codified 'selective, critical, inclusive' practices of realism and the narrative form of epic theatre.<sup>44</sup> The female characters are empowered to break the naturalist frame to engage with the audience in the expanded time and place of a more hybrid dramatic form. Characters share confidences, narrate events and analyse their own behaviour in conversation with an imaginary spectator. For example, in *Inheritance*, the characters narrate what might have been expository dialogue in the earlier works:

*Dibs: [to the audience] We were all very disappointed when Julia and Hamish separated. I'm Dibs. Julia's mother. She's coming up this weekend, for our birthday. Girlie's my name. We're eighty tomorrow.'* (5)

In both *Life After George* and *Inheritance* the narrated events are highly selective, offering a situated rather than a universalist view of the past. The spatio-temporal system of simultaneous actions in the past and the present begins to disrupt the linear space-time continuum of the naturalist worldview. *Life After George* is the most ambitious in this regard. The characters enact their younger selves in the same spaces that the action in the present takes place. For example, the character Lindsay is a middle-aged woman but the text stipulates that the actor must also enact the character's past relations with George slipping, in an instant, into her younger self without the use of visual or aural markers. Where in Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* (1949), for example, Willy's retreat into the past is signified by a lighting cue, the dappled leaves, Rayson offers no such device. The transformation in time is effected through adjustments in voice, bodily comportment and action in such a way that naturalism's iconic stage representational system is temporarily suspended. There is an ambiguity, however, about whether the enacted past is a product of the character's memory or a narrative intervention by the playwright; an opportunity for the character's past experience to comment on the present or for the creation of an ironic distance between character and action. At times it is both. In the first of the memories, in a monologue addressed to the audience, Lindsay recalls the day thirty years ago when she first meets George. She is clearly speaking as her middle aged self and laying claim to the memory as her own treasured object. At the completion of the speech, however, she becomes her younger self and the audience witnesses her first encounter with George, now re-enacted in the present of the dramatic work as a dialogue that took place thirty years ago. The extent to which the meeting is an enactment of Lindsay's personal memory or an authorial intervention remains unclear. The enactments of

memory give the play a 'temporal flexibility', to use Elin Diamond's term, that is more in keeping with 'the shifting time-sense' of the present than naturalism's linear time.<sup>45</sup> This temporal flexibility adds a degree of complexity to *Life After George* that disturbs the spectator's immersion in the narrative in such a way as to create a Brechtian-like historicisation of the present. The blurring of the status of the enactments — are they personal experience or narrative intervention — suggests for the first time in Rayson's work, that truth might be contingent and situated, constructed from difference rather than verisimilitude.

*Life After George* and *Inheritance* both make a further break with formal naturalism to deploy a more heterogeneous dramaturgy in the form of genre-mix — realism moves the drama along and its satire endears it to its audience, but the element of tragedy appears, awkwardly and suddenly, catching its audience unawares. Melodrama and farce flash past just as quickly. In *Inheritance*, the sudden shocking appearance of the hanged man, both tragic and melodramatic, sits awkwardly with the social injustice of disinheritance on the one hand and the comic dialogue on the other. It remains unclear how the spectator is to respond to the genre mix and points to the enduring problem that always threatens to turn modern drama into melodrama — how to dramatise the truth of ordinary people leading ordinary lives — without reverting to the over-determined sign, or the *cliché*. The shift into the tragic mode in *Inheritance* is without precedent in her earlier work. In this first attempt at a new direction in writing, there remains something unresolved and contradictory. The mix of comedy and tragedy breaks up the dramaturgical unity of the play, suggesting an uncertainty, at the level of discourse, about the framing of the social and political events portrayed. It will be interesting to observe how Rayson develops stylistically in the decade ahead.

Taking account of the innovations in the later plays, Rayson's plays occupy the middle ground of a continuum from the well-made play to the experimental. The feminine subject occupies an expanded space incorporating the domestic sphere but equally the café, the corporate office and the international flight. The modern feminine body is also an expanded *corpus*: it has a child in one hand and a briefcase in the other; so that desire and duty are seen to co-exist in uneasy tension.

If there is a unifying discourse that links each of the plays, it is an affirmation of the educated and articulate woman who is confident of her place in national culture. But it is also the case that traditional feminine values of loyalty, friendship and trust will come into conflict with the more recent attributes of ambition, desire and power that accompany women's entry into the competitive public sphere of corporate capitalism. Rayson's plays offer the middle-class spectator a progressive but qualified vision of contemporary social relations — she sees herself reflected in pleasing and empowering ways but is also alerted to the complexity and compromises of modern life for women.

Rayson is perhaps best understood not as a feminist writer but as one of feminism's daughters: a beneficiary of social and economic progress rather than an avowed feminist herself. To refer to her as a 'daughter' is not to render her an immature writer or to deny her agency as a social commentator of influence and note. It suggests rather that she follows the path already opened up for women and in doing has the positive effect of consolidating women's presence in the narratives of nation.

## Notes

1. *Life After George* broke box office records for the company and returned for a two-week season at The CUB Malthouse in July 2001. The MTC production toured to Brisbane, Hobart and regional Victoria. The STC mounted its own production at the Wharf Theatre directed by Marion Potts in October 2000. The Sydney *George* was a near sell-out, second only to David Williamson's *The Great Man* staged in the much larger capacity Drama Theatre at the Opera House.

2. Denise Varney 'The desire to affirm and challenge: an interview with Hannie Rayson' in *Australian Drama Studies* 42 (April) 2003 p. 152.

3. Radic, 'Power and how women use it', *The Age*, 11 August, 1994, p. 18.

4. For a discussion of Rayson's contribution to the debate on higher education see Denise Varney 'Hannie Rayson's *Life After George*: Theatrical Intervention and Public Intellectual Discourse' *Australian Drama Studies* 42 (April) 2003.

5. The case for misleading government press releases is persuasively argued in David Marr & Marian Wilkinson, *Dark Victory*, Crows Nest: Allen & Unwin 2003.
6. Tom Hyland 'Drowning in propaganda' *The Age*, 16 April 2005, p.9 and Andrew Bolt 'Hannie's Evil Brew' *The Herald Sun*, 15 April, 2005 p.23.
7. For example Kate Herbert wrote 'a new play inevitably has glitches. *Two Brothers* is entertaining but its narrative and dialogue need some reworking to give it the punch this topic warrants.' *Herald Sun*, 15 April 2005 p.86.
8. The term 'third wave' is used in Milne, p.234,
9. See Varney 'The desire to affirm and challenge'.
10. Ibid.
11. Milne, *Australia (un)Limited*, Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2004, p.227.
12. For Rayson's own account of her early career see the interview with the author in Varney 'The desire to affirm and challenge'.
13. Ibid.
14. Hannie Rayson, *Room to Move*, Montmorency: Yackandandah Playscripts, 1985, p. 1.
15. Radic 'Power and how women use it.'
16. Katie Holmes and Marilyn Lake in Marion Quartly, Susan Jonson and Patricia Grimshaw (eds), *Freedom Bound*, St Leonards: Allen and Unwin, 1995, p.138.
17. Hannie Rayson, *Hotel Sorrento*, Sydney: Currency Press, 1990, p.88–89. All further references to this text are given as page numbers in brackets after the quotation.
18. First performed at Playbox Theatre Centre, 9 August 1994.
19. <http://www.ms magazine.com/Downloaded> 25 January, 2005
20. Gloria Steinam, 'The Media and the Movement' in Robin Morgan ed. *Sisterhood is Forever: The women's anthology for a new millennium*, New York: Washington Square Press, 2003, p.108.
21. Hannie Rayson, *Falling From Grace* Sydney: Currency Press, 1994 p.3. All further references to this text are given as page numbers in brackets after the quotation.
22. Agnes Heller, 'The Emotional Division of Labour Between the Sexes: Perspectives on Feminism and Socialism' in *Thesis Eleven*, nos 5-6, 1982, p.63.
23. Ibid.
24. Ibid p.64
25. In Brecht's play *The Good Person of Setzuan*, the good and kind Shen Te finds that she cannot run a business and look out for the poor. In order to turn a profit, she commits the sin of lying by disguising herself as her male cousin Shui Ta. The play reveals the incompatibility of capitalism with humanism and Christianity.
26. Playbox production 1994.
27. Hannie Rayson, *Life After George*, Sydney: Currency Press, 2000. All further references to this text are given as page numbers in brackets after the quotation.
28. Anne Summers, *The End of Equality*, op.cit. p.196.
29. Astrid Henry, *Not My Mother's Sister: Generational Conflict and Third-Wave Feminism*, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2004, p. 20.
30. Heller, 'The Emotional Division of Labour', p. 64.
31. Richard Roberts' design for the MTC production at the Fairfax Theatre.

32. Andrew Bovell & Hannie Rayson, *Scenes from a Separation*, Sydney: Currency Press, 1996. All further references to this text are given as page numbers in brackets after the quotation.
33. Helen Thomson, 'Stylish break-up' in *The Age*, 17 November, 2003, Arts, p 16.
34. Hannie Rayson, *Inheritance*, Sydney: Currency Press, 2003. All further references to this text are given as page numbers in brackets after the quotation.
35. Robin Usher, 'Hannie's outback odyssey', *The Age*, February 21, 2003.
36. Varney, 'The desire to affirm and challenge'.
37. Jon Stratton describes the anglo-celtic ethnic group as those who claim a British or Irish background and who consider themselves the core Australian culture. All other cultures are by this logic 'ethnic' and peripheral. Jon Stratton, *Race Daze: Australia in Identity Crisis* Annandale: Pluto Press, 1998, p.10. See also Ghassan Hage (1998).
38. See Chapter Three.
39. <http://www.aic.gov.au/publications/crimprev/old/ageing-t.html>
40. Bhabha in *Nation and Narration*, p.4.
41. John Howard cited by Nicholson and Koutsoukis in *The Age*, 2004.
42. Rutherford, *Gauche Intruder*, p.7.
43. Robin Usher, 'Hannie's outback odyssey', *The Age*, February 21, 2003.
44. Pavis, *Analysing Performance*, p.211.
45. Diamond 1997, p.142.

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