

## *The Herbal Bed* : literary nostalgia, cinema, and romance

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‘they were shooting a movie ... Some ‘Casablanca’ type movie’, Peter Whelan, *Divine Right*, Act Two Scene Three.

First performed by the Royal Shakespeare Company in May 1996, Peter Whelan’s play *The Herbal Bed* has become a major success in theatres in London, New York and Sydney. It is so well regarded that it has already become a school text set for senior public examinations in English literature. One explanation for the success of *The Herbal Bed* is that it combines literary nostalgia and romance with a conservative version of fashionable postmodernism. While it deals with events in Shakespeare’s life, and may seem to be a contemporary achievement in an altogether traditionally literary and poetic kind of drama which descends from Shakespeare, *The Herbal Bed* is evidence of the assimilation of the codes and conventions of media culture into the contemporary theatre. The most obvious relation between the play and the wider context of film and television is that it appeals to the revival of interest in romance which includes the success of films such as James Cameron’s *Titanic* (1997) and Baz Luhrmann’s *Romeo and Juliet* (1996). *The Herbal Bed* is interesting as evidence that a current direction to literary nostalgia is accompanied by a direction to romantic nostalgia. The construction of romance is in terms of illicit passion, failure, and the view that survival depends on assimilation into an established order of lies and coded repression. In the circumstances, if *The Herbal Bed* is to be studied in schools as a set piece of English literature it needs to be approached with an interest in late twentieth-century complications in the history of literature and the media, and with an interest in the history of the representation of romance.

*The Herbal Bed* is based on historical evidence of events in the life of Shakespeare’s daughter Susanna. In 1607, when she was twenty-four, Susanna Shakespeare married John Hall, an

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eminent physician of Stratford. In 1613, when she was thirty, she was the plaintiff in a suit for defamation in the ecclesiastical court at Worcester Cathedral. Her claim for defamation was that John Lane had said in public that 'the plaintiff had the runinge of the raynes & had bin naught with Rafe Smith', that she had gonorrhoea and that she had committed adultery with Rafe Smith, a Stratford haberdasher and maker of hats.<sup>1</sup> John Lane failed to answer the case and was excommunicated. Susanna Hall was seen to be innocent. As there are no other records the suit for defamation is a scandalous historical puzzle.

*The Herbal Bed* is a fictional solution which makes the events at Worcester Cathedral the culmination of a hidden romance. The play begins at a point of crisis when Susanna is aware that while she respects her husband she loves Rafe Smith. Much of the action is set at the back of Doctor Hall's house in the garden which provides the herbs for his prescriptions and becomes the herbal bed for the lovers' attempt to consummate their romance. Whelan's solution to the puzzle is a combination of historical romance and romantic melodrama which in some way claims to be classic literary drama. In addition to the narrative about Shakespeare's daughter, her husband and her lover, there is a continuing drama of ideas in which questions about Shakespeare, romance, and the status of women are set in the context of debate about whether marriage and the maintenance of established order depend on greater and lesser lies, and denial of passion and joy in life. The claim the play makes to be seen as literary drama is perhaps the first main issue to look at in order to see its success in perspective. When you look at it at all closely *The Herbal Bed* is theatrical, poetic, intricate, and at the same time an exercise in fashionable literary nostalgia in which the ideas are inconclusive and overrepetitive. The main appeal is through a comfortable mix of feminism and melodramatic romance focussed on suspense about the success or failure of the relationship between Rafe Smith and Susanna.

<sup>1</sup> Dennis Kay, *Shakespeare: His Life, Work and Era* (London: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1992), p. 337.

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The beginning of the play introduces the romance as a secret which appears from within an account of the domestic events of the Hall household. A visit from the Bishop of Worcester sets a view in terms of the established code of Christian religion, although with the complication that religious dissent is linked with other kinds of dissent. The news about a visit from the Bishop of Worcester is announced in a conversation between Rafe Smith and the young Jack Lane in which Jack Lane insists on the importance of youth and pleasure and claims that he, Rafe, Susanna and Hester, the young servant woman, share a natural allegiance. Jack Lane is a young man who makes an issue of sex. When Hester leaves he makes low jokes which are a subversive celebration of sex: 'And may Bishop Parry bless her from tit to tit. D'you smell that skin as she leans over you? Oh snuffle, snuffle!'<sup>2</sup> He also reminisces about swimming naked in the river some ten years before, and he claims that Rafe stood up in the water, displayed his erection, hung some weed over it, and said in mock religiousness, 'as it points to heaven so shall it be anointed' (p. 6). The story about swimming in the river provides an initial view of male sexuality in a narrative which will focus on questions about sexual politics, and it provides a respectably outrageous first statement of a view of desire as part of an alternative, country world of natural joy in life in contrast to conventional religion and domestic virtue. The relationship between Susanna and Rafe is introduced within the framework of these questions about traditional morality and desire, and as a secret which involves lies, indirections and special codes within a domestic world which is part of an established order of coded evasions and lies. The first revelation of the romance is through a conversation in which Susanna and Rafe appear to be talking about haberdashery. When Susanna sends Hester away, and as Rafe declares his love, Susanna responds with the coded reply that he must respect his demented wife as she respects her husband. In a way which underlines crucial similarities between the

<sup>2</sup> Peter Whelan, *The Herbal Bed* (London: Warner/Chappell Plays, 1996), p. 4. All further references are to this edition.

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dramatic method and the world of the story, the stage direction adds that in performance this is to be understood as double talk: '(He takes in the implication. She is saying she does not love her husband.)' (p. 17). At the end of the first scene Susanna adds that these conditions of frustration, evasions and lies are to be endured with stoicism: 'If some things are to be endured in life, better to endure with a quietness of spirit' (p. 18). While Susanna's comment combines seventeenth-century Puritanism with echoes of Shakespearean tragedy it works as dramatic irony about whether the romance will remain on the side of quietness of spirit. One of the refinements of Whelan's design is that from this beginning the play creates a set of theatrical memories which adds to the impression of another order of pleasure and desire which passes and becomes lost in time. The more obvious feature of the design is that the first scene combines the focus on romance with the implication that the rest of the play will include respectably outrageous business about sex and sexual politics, as with Jack's treatment of Hester and the unseen flourish with Rafe's erection.

Act One Scene Two repeats the view in which virtue and domestic life are seen in relation to disciplined evasions, secrets and lies which control desire. At the beginning of the scene John Hall tests Jack's knowledge of herbal medicine and warns him about the need for professional virtue: 'Leave the man in you well behind when you become the medical man. Dull your sense of female desirability by sharpening your sense of enquiry' (p. 21). There is a related contrast between Hall's lecture on gonorrhoea, Jack's vernacular account of the treatment, and Hall's insistence that the code of the professional physician is that 'we maintain strict secrecy' (p. 24). Jack complains to Hester that Hall is nothing more than 'a straight-faced puritan' (p. 27). He adds a demonstration of what he claims is a routine game among the young people at church on Sunday. He puts his hand in Hester's placket, an action which stages the questions about sex and sexual politics in terms of performance. This is sexual politics staged in terms of comedy, theatrical sensationalism, and sexual spectacle. The events which follow involve a problematic mixture of acceptance and

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censure. Hester only complains ‘*as his hand explores*’ (p. 28), and when Susanna enters and sees what Jack has done she does not reprimand him at first, and Hester remains indulgently amused. Finally Susanna makes a statement which is one of the characteristic dramatic ironies of the play: ‘My husband will have to know ... There’s nothing I keep from him’ (p. 31). The debate proceeds via further puzzles about the extent of Susanna’s tolerance of Jack’s games and whether her marriage restricts her natural love of life. When John Hall enters Jack confesses and Hall dismisses him. When Hall leaves on his journey to attend to Lady Haines the focus returns to romance and romantic intrigue. Susanna arranges that her daughter and Hester will be out of the house that night, she accepts an invitation from Rafe to visit his cousin, and she deceives Hester with the claim that Rafe will be accompanied by his wife when he has told her that he will be alone. The emphasis is on passion and deception. When Hester returns as Rafe admits that he has misled Susanna with the suggestion that his wife will accompany him, Susanna joins in the deception and she and Rafe improvise lies which are a performance for Hester. Romance is becoming a deceptive play within the play, and the performance for Hester includes the irony that later in the play Hester saves the lovers with a major performance of a similar lie:

SUSANNA Well you needn’t worry about me being on my own,  
Hester. I’m asked to supper at John Palmer’s ... with  
Master and Mistress Smith.  
(*Rafe takes in her “connivance”*)  
RAFE We’ll call for you ... and walk you there ... at five?  
SUSANNA You see? I shall have company. I shall be safe. (p. 42)

In this extreme version of conventional well-made drama, dramatic irony supports well-made suspense: the representation of romance in *The Herbal Bed* is modelled on the mechanics of the well-made play and the traditional link between performance and lies.

By the end of Act One Scene Two *The Herbal Bed* has established a more or less comfortable mix of well-made

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romantic melodrama, repetitive variations on the theme of virtue, lies and desire, and respectably outrageous staging of questions about sexual politics. Act One Scene Three maintains the focus on romance and presents the lovers' meeting in the herbal garden. Act One Scene Three is classic historical romance developed in terms of poetic rhetoric and spectacular theatricality, although with the complication that the staging of romance is set in a framework of repetitive narrative and intellectual puzzles. The well-made play meets romantic melodrama and a comfortable, nostalgic return to the literary drama of ideas. The scene is later that night, Rafe has not arrived to take Susanna to dinner, and she is working at the furnace preparing a remedy with herbs, precious stones and metals. When Rafe appears over the garden wall he admits that even the invitation to dinner with the Palmers was a lie: 'It was another lie!' (p. 46) He confesses that the Palmers are away and he had intended to take her to their empty house but could not go through with it: 'Love is the truth. And it's the truth because it's the only thing of clear, true value' (p. 46). Throughout the scene the speech weaves the established drama of ideas about romance and lies into passionate romantic rhetoric. Susanna proceeds to weave the idea that there are lies and lies, and that love is a truth which changes the nature of lies. She says that if you confess it is as if you have not lied (p. 47), and that there are lesser lies and the great lies:

Oh there are lies we all lie that we know won't stand up to being breathed on! Within the hour they're fluttering away like leaves. Not like lies carved from solid wood from hard oak that lasts forever ... that we build our houses of. Not one of the lies that are always with us.

*(RAFE understands this as a comment on her marriage. He makes a decision.)* (pp. 47-8)

This is one of the focal speeches of the play and much of the action can be read in relation to it. Lies which might seem to be minor return to haunt Susanna and Rafe and trap them into spinning an increasingly complicated web of deception. The larger structures of their lives, such as their marriages, are lies,

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and they communicate their most important experience through a language of deception. While Rafe understands Susanna's implicit declaration of love he says that honour demands that he leave. Susanna says that she needs him and that while her marriage has given her knowledge it lacks warmth and passion, and after a digression about her bond with her husband she embraces Rafe, begins to undress him, and says that they should consummate their love in the garden: 'Here. Here in the garden. Then we can truthfully say it wasn't under our roof' (p. 51). Rafe replies: 'There's too much deceit' (p. 51). The elaborate statement and restatement of the themes continues as they begin to make love. Rafe talks at length about whether he is an honest man if he cheats in love. Susanna answers with high rhetoric about the transforming power of love and claims that love changes lies and deception into higher truth. Her crucial image is that 'Love's alchemy' changes lovers, that lovers are transformed 'in love's fire' (p. 52), and at this point the lovers kiss, and seem about to consummate their desire. The obvious achievement is that at this point the scene works as a classic celebration of romance. Classic romantic rhetoric accompanies romantic spectacle. Stage magic supports Susanna's claims about the transforming power of desire. Semi-nakedness and high-pitched poetic eroticism are part of the spectacle:

*(She takes his hand and puts it to her breast. Now he no longer resists and kisses her, pulling her night dress to her waist as they kneel among the herbs ... she taking off his shirt ... then, out of the passion, a moment of calm.)* (p.52)

The fact that this is Shakespeare's daughter and her lover in a Renaissance herbal garden which seems about to become their herbal bed adds to the authority of the scene as a representation of romance in a renewal of a tradition which reaches back to the Renaissance and beyond. The Renaissance context increases the appeal to a sense that the scene is a summation of the high culture tradition as well as romance. On the other hand, in contrast to the fact that this is Shakespeare's daughter and her lover, the scene seems closest to the nineteenth-century tradition and classic twentieth-century films. Shakespeare's

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daughter provides something similar to the romantic raptures of Tennyson and Dante Gabriel Rossetti, or mid twentieth-century Hollywood representations of passion. One essential complication is that the scene is nostalgic romantic pastiche which invites the audience to add their own cultural associations.

Another essential complication is that the great romantic scene of lovers in their herbal bed includes a critique of desire. The overrepetitive theme about lies underlines that the scene is a dramatic puzzle. At the narrative level there is the question whether the lovers' rhetoric might be an exercise in deceiving themselves. Susanna's earlier speech about the lesser and greater lies makes her rhetoric problematic and suggests that it might be another lie. Furthermore, at the traditional literary level, Susanna's key phrase, 'Love's alchemy', echoes the title of Donne's poem, *Love's Alchemy*, in which he debunks romance, claims that it is all lies, that it is impossible to 'find that hidden mystery;/Oh, 'tis imposture all', and that there is nothing more to romance than copulation.<sup>3</sup> The echo of Donne's poem underlines a further level of ambiguity at which the rhetoric and the extreme conventionalism of the scene suggest heavy irony about the whole business. From one point of view the romantic rhetoric blurs into travesty, and the high, erotic spectacle is discreet soft porn which might have pleased Jack Lane. The lovers' rhetoric and the sexual spectacle are both problematic, and the play includes that point of view. But what is distinctive about Whelan's writing is that the mix of romance, ideas and fashionable pastiche is so smooth and so discreet (like good Irish whisky in fact) that the more sophisticated complications do not undermine the appeal to romance and literary seriousness. The presence of these complications is further underlined and obscured by the fact that the lovers are interrupted. Hester returns. Rafe leaves over the wall and Hester sees him. The moment of high romance is followed by a return to domestic intrigue and the complications

<sup>3</sup> John Donne, *The Complete English Poems*, ed. A.J. Smith (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971), p. 65.

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become more sinister. Susanna tells Hester that she and Rafe have returned from dinner at John Palmer's. The possibility that this could be a minor lie is lost when Susanna realises that Jack Lane is with Hester and that he has heard what has been said. Jack Lane makes it clear that he suspects Susanna has let down her defences against desire, and he provides a sensational end to the first Act when he recognises that the potion she has been preparing is a remedy for venereal disease, the 'Italian complaint' (p. 55). The end of the scene is a combination of narrative sensationalism and intellectual sensationalism. Act One ends with a serious cliff-hanger for the interval. Does Shakespeare's daughter have venereal disease? It seems a scandalous insinuation in line with Jack's failure to match up to the standards of twentieth-century sexual politics. On the other hand, in a world where everything seems to involve lies and mysteries it might be true.

Act Two begins a few days later when John Hall receives a letter telling him that Jack Lane has defamed Susanna. Whelan uses the key phrases from the historical suit for defamation. The development of the scene involves further repetition about lies, and elaborate variations about misunderstanding and complicity. Susanna denies the accusations, and she and her husband and lover become partners in a campaign to prove that the accusations are false. The narrative finesses about lies involve extreme variations on conventional interest in characters' understanding and misunderstanding of each other and the events in which they are involved. John Hall assumes that there is some truth in the accusation about Susanna and Rafe, but chooses not to challenge them, and the events unfold with Susanna's tacit acceptance of his unstated understanding. When Rafe attempts to confess the stage direction comments: '*John carefully 'misunderstands' him.*' (p. 78). When Rafe and Susanna are alone Susanna assures him that nobody knows, an evasion Rafe accepts and then questions; and Susanna admits that she knows that her husband 'knows already' and that Rafe must not speak the truth to him for the reason that honest conversation is not what he wants. The variations on the themes underline the direction to melodrama:

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SUSANNA He knows already.  
RAFE How?  
SUSANNA He's guessed.  
RAFE Are you certain?  
SUSANNA It's in his look ... his tone. It's in everything he doesn't say.  
RAFE Then I must talk to him now!  
SUSANNA No! That's the last thing he wants. He knows and mustn't know. He wants our silence.  
RAFE That's a travesty of him and you know it. He's the most honest man I know. (p.82)

Even more clearly than in Act One Scene Three the exchange is an extremely conventional kind of melodrama, and the comment about making a travesty of John Hall parallels the undertone of irony which accompanies the more obvious claim to high seriousness.

Act Two Scene Two is set at Worcester Cathedral at the time of the hearing of the suit for slander. It presents a long confrontation between the group from Stratford and the zealous Vicar-General, Barnabus Goche, and it ends with a sensational religious vision which saves Susanna's reputation. The events involve an obvious debt to Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*. The confrontation with Goche involves a dramatic contrast between his concern with spiritual values and the concern of Susanna, John and Rafe with their survival in the world. Goche is concerned with 'the health of the soul above that of the body' (p. 99), and he sees the plague as divine punishment for a decline into a widespread 'death of the spirit' in a contemporary world threatened by 'the poisoned flood of moral and spiritual crime' (p. 100). In contrast, Susanna has attempted to persuade herself and her husband that their reputations must be preserved in order to preserve his work as a physician, and that God 'wishes the sick to be healed' (p. 88). The heavy question that hangs over Act Two Scene Two is what remains of the romance between Susanna and Rafe. The debate between romance and religion involves a problematic reconfiguring and problematising of the idea of 'death of the spirit'. The preservation of Susanna's reputation and marriage seems to be a

process of repression which is loss of life and 'death of the spirit'. Echoes of earlier speeches add to the conventional literariness. Susanna uses the word 'spirit' in her earlier advice to Rafe that it is 'better to endure with a quietness of spirit' (p. 18), and Jack laments that when she was younger she 'danced like the spirit of the year ... What happened?' (p. 32). In a characteristic way the design continues the debate in terms of literary complexity which is simplistic and inconclusive as well as conventional. The cathedral setting and Goche's religious convictions are not accompanied by any major granting of authority to church Christianity. Goche's sense of a contemporary 'death of the spirit' becomes interesting mainly as a parallel to late twentieth-century pessimism. The ending of the scene is an extreme variation on conventional literary 'seriousness' and romantic melodrama. When Goche questions Hester he tells her to look up at the roof of the cathedral, where she seems to 'see' something. Goche says it is God listening to her, and she agrees. Hester's address to God proves to be a defence of Susanna which is an inspired performance of 'easy lying' (p. 113). She improvises a series of lies which convinces Goche that he must accept defeat and agree that Susanna is innocent. When Goche leaves Hester's explanation provides a sensational formulation of the theme about lies: 'I saw God ... up in the roof ... and I was so glad! For I could see that he wanted me to lie!' (p. 114). The scene ends with a return to narrative sensationalism and intellectual sensationalism which balances the end of Act One. Is Hester's vision a miracle or a fake? What does it mean if God wants lies? Does it matter? Who cares?

Act Two Scene Three returns to more direct focus on romance and adds an emphasis on separation, sickness and death. Rafe visits Susanna and says that he intends to leave Stratford. Shakespeare is old and sick and about to be brought into the garden for treatment, and it seems possible that he might be dying (although the real Shakespeare did not die for another three years). John Hall and Susanna talk about the fact that 'that night' she had prepared the potion for venereal disease for her father (which solves the puzzle about the accusation

against Susanna) and John Hall says that Shakespeare is 'far beyond that now' (p. 120). The evocation of the death of genius and the emphasis on disease and disillusion add to the implication that romance and life are finished for Susanna and Rafe. On the other hand, in accordance with the well-made design the ending adds another puzzle. When the others go to carry Shakespeare in, Susanna returns to the theme about lies and says to Hester that Shakespeare was a liar: 'He was a liar, too. Must have lied to my mother every time he came home. Yet when he was with us ... we were so warm!' (p. 123). The implication is that Shakespeare led an independent life in London (perhaps even to the extent that he contracted venereal disease) and that he is a testament to human passion and the true life of the spirit. As the two women stand at the furnace, Susanna adds: 'Well ... leave coldness to the stars. Give us life ...' (p. 123). It seems that Susanna might not have lost her will to life, that her apparent submission to marriage and respectability might hide a determination to continue her romance with Rafe. The reference to the stars is a reminder that the historical perspective is a double view of the early seventeenth century and the present. While the cold stars belong to a seventeenth-century cosmos, they are a reminder of the different, twentieth-century cosmos and late twentieth-century experience. Susanna's commitment to 'life' can seem to be an affirmation of the twentieth-century world of the death of God, and a testament to the importance of desire in the world to which the audience is returning. On the other hand, the arrival of Shakespeare stresses uncertainty, dark mysteries, and echoes of Goethe's sense of a period of failure and 'the poisoned flood of moral and spiritual crime'. From that point of view the ending is a lament for the failure of romance and Susanna's statement about life can seem to be about survival in conditions of loss and sad retrospect.

*The Herbal Bed* builds on the British literary drama of the seventies and eighties, and the modern tradition of realism and the drama of ideas that includes Arthur Miller, Shaw and Ibsen. But *The Herbal Bed* is an exercise in nostalgic literary drama rather than a direct continuation of the tradition, and it is

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nostalgic literary drama which is a rather misleading, and conservative, kind of postmodernism. In one sense *The Herbal Bed* is the *Pulp Fiction* of the literary-minded, middle class, theatre public, and finally a lot less interesting than *Pulp Fiction*. Peter Whelan's other recent plays make clear that his achievement is that he provides a successful merger of comfortable, 'literary' nostalgia and fashionable postmodernism for the English stage. *Shakespeare Country* (1993) is an imitation of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* which involves a pair of actors from the Royal Shakespeare Company, two senior academics, and Billy Shake, an American Country singer who is descended from a bastard son of the Bard. *Divine Right* (1996) is set in the year 2000 and presents the end of the English monarchy in terms of political debate and imitation of television news and drama. Whelan's strength is that he reworks the tradition of literary drama in plays which can seem to retain the authority of literary form and educated intellectualism and at the same time appeal to the current fashion for mixed material, knowing nostalgia about high culture, and media culture commodification. *The Herbal Bed* is literary nostalgia in the sense that it is an empty recalling of literary drama in terms of sensational melodrama and an inconclusive, repetitive and conventional drama of ideas. (In that way it recalls Sardou rather than Shaw and Arthur Miller and if it is not made into a film it might be turned into an old-fashioned opera). One of the critical challenges is to see not that it lacks ideas or subtlety but that it is an extreme case of literature as thinking fiction, although with the difference that it deals in literature and ideas in terms of standard formulations, repetition in excess, and comfortably inconclusive cleverness.

Whelan's use of Shakespeare appeals to a sense that Shakespeare defines literature, that the presence of Shakespeare guarantees literariness, that knowing about Shakespeare is an essential part of the experience of *The Herbal Bed*, and that *The Herbal Bed* involves a special kind of contemporary knowing which includes traditional literature and is something else. After all the fact that the play is about Shakespeare's daughter is a matter for inference and depends on the audience's prior

knowledge about the historical puzzle. That Shakespeare is the unseen, sick, old father is a matter of special understanding as he is not named. In a similar way the narrative design and the theme about lies encourage involvement in terms of knowing understanding, and the stage directions demand complicitous reading between the lines of the performance: '*HESTER says it out of her feeling for RAFE and SUSANNA knows it*' (p. 14). At key points the speech works as comment on the importance of thinking and meditation, as when John Hall lectures Jack: 'You see, when you came to me I thought you might have the usual problem that most have ... of applying the mind ... of concentration ... of absorbing knowledge ...' (p. 20). In fact, the emphasis on thinking includes obscure textual detail like subliminal obsession or a subliminal message. The first scene includes obscure variations on the theme about thinking and knowing: 'I thought this is alright! All I have to do is enjoy myself' (p. 25), 'she knows what she's doing, sir' (p. 26), 'He knows she does it. He couldn't help but know could he? d'you think ...' (p. 27), 'You'd think as a doctor ...' (p. 27), 'You don't think it happens?' (p. 28). 'I think it's for him to tell you' (p. 32), 'I think it best if my wife stays so that she knows what passes between us ... I think, first, you should ...' (p. 33). The overemphasis and the repetitive drama of ideas are not an indication of great significance. They contribute to a situation where the literary drama of ideas becomes nostalgic literary hype, an extreme kind of accessible and clever meaningfulness where extravagant repetition of the main themes has the effect that you could sleep comfortably through a scene or part of a scene (as many people do at this kind of play) and still not lose track of the debate about lies and the death of the spirit.

Narrative excitement, theatrical spectacle, and sensational intellectualism become part of a comfortable theatrical commodification of Shakespeare, religion and romance. At one level the events chosen from Shakespeare's family life have the interest of an English tabloid news story: Bard's daughter bonks draper. The element of respectable tabloid literariness is an indication of the general direction to a merger of the literary drama of ideas with media culture. Act Two stresses that after

all Shakespeare sold dreams and lies (and might have had venereal disease), and that everyone has to survive somehow in a world threatened by 'the poisoned flood of moral and spiritual crime'. Susanna's claim that Shakespeare 'was a liar, too', links with Hester's sensational claim that God wants lies with the effect of a comfortable appeal to cultural disillusion and pessimism. The connections include reference to the idea that performance is dissimulation: 'you inherit from your father the art of dissembling' (p. 105). The reference to Shakespeare appeals to comfortable complicity with a merger between traditional literary drama and the culture of the dream merchants and spin doctors of the media. Everything in the extreme version of well-made narrative and inconclusive drama of ideas clicks into place in a way which recalls Yeats's complaint that Shaw was like a machine, with the difference that the cleverness of Whelan's drama is similar to the concern with design in other postmodern commodities. At that level there is a characteristic blur between literary nostalgia and pleasure in fake literature.<sup>4</sup> Shakespeare's life provides a medium for establishment drama which imitates the endless cleverness and distraction of the commodity fictions and advertisements of media culture. In that way *The Herbal Bed* fits the current situation where theatre companies such as the Sydney Theatre Company are large business organisations whose market strategies are influenced by government subsidies and corporate sponsorship.<sup>5</sup>

The more obvious reason for the success of *The Herbal Bed* is that it combines romance and sexual politics. The limitation is that it combines romantic nostalgia with an appeal to a limited kind of feminism. Romance is 'theorised' and interrogated in terms of a limited set of feminist ideas. Whelan places Susanna at the centre of the play and makes her a strong

<sup>4</sup> For discussion of the aesthetic of 'total fake' see Umberto Eco, 'Travels in Hyperreality' in *Faith in Fakes*, translated by William Weaver (1973, 1986; London: Minerva, 1995).

<sup>5</sup> For relevant comment see Graeme Blundell, 'Failure to Perform', *The Australian*, 13-14 June, 1998, p. 28.



Shakespeare's daughter can seem to be similar to David Mamet's *Oleanna*, in *The Herbal Bed* sexual politics support a return to romance in which stereotypes are questioned and recycled, and recycled as they are questioned.<sup>6</sup> While the garden provides the herbs for John Hall's medicines it is part of the domestic world looked after by Susanna, and defined by the Bishop as conventionally feminine: 'too beautiful ... you're close to God in your herb garden, doctor ... too fragile ... these wisps of flowers and slender stems' (pp. 7-8). The identification of the garden with Susanna contributes to the view that the main concern of the play is with her domestic world, her female body, her feelings, and her sense that her identity is defined in relation to the transformation promised by romance. The scenes end with *coups de théâtre* about the mystery of Susanna's woman's heart, with the finesse that the approach is through variations about lies and the oppressions of the patriarchal order. At the end of Act One Scene Two the lovers' agreement to meet is followed by a view of Susanna as the wife in the garden, with the irony that her storm of passion about her agreement to meet Rafe is expressed in conversation with Hester about her love for her daughter, her fear that her father will die, and her fear that she might be barren. The end of the scene focusses on the mystery of her romantic woman's heart within the domestic world: 'Bess ...this blackness round my heart has nothing to do with her. Get her. It's time you were gone. I have some bits of things for you to take' (p. 44).

The representation of romance in *The Herbal Bed* draws on the culmination of the long tradition of romance in twentieth-century film. *The Herbal Bed* looks back to classic historical romance films such as *Gone With the Wind* (Fleming, 1939), and mid-century romantic melodramas such as *Casablanca* (Michael Curtiz, 1942). In addition the story of Susanna and Rafe draws on the success of recent exercises in historical romance such as the Merchant Ivory films, and Kenneth Branagh's version of Shakespeare as historical romance in his

<sup>6</sup> For discussion of the history of romance see Catherine Belsey, *Desire: Love Stories in Western Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1994).

film version of *Much Ado About Nothing* (1993). The wider context includes the continuing history of critical awareness of the sexual politics of women's films and cinema genres such as historical romance.<sup>7</sup> But most of all *The Herbal Bed* is similar to contemporary films such as *Titanic* which turn political debate into formulaic feminism and nostalgic romance. One of the more striking complications of *The Herbal Bed* is that the final puzzle is similar to Ilsa's stoic acceptance of her duty to her husband and the failure of romance at the end of *Casablanca*. But Whelan's method involves a simplification of the sexual politics of films such as *Casablanca*, and an even more extreme equivocation about whether the whole business of romance and the representation of romance is like a hyped-up dream, or a magical lie, or a glamorous fake. The film tradition of romance includes awareness that it might not be more than sentimental, commercial rubbish. One critical reaction to the play on which *Casablanca* was based was that 'its big moment is sheer hokum', and one of the original reviewers commented that the film was 'The ... kind of hokum .... good in its original context in other movies'.<sup>8</sup> At one level *The Herbal Bed* uses the finesse about whether Shakespeare was a liar as support for a love story which is increasingly reminiscent of the television series *As Time Goes By*, in which the echo of *Casablanca* services aging romantic nostalgia. On the other hand, the main focus *The Herbal Bed* returns to with such insistent and comfortable cleverness is the kind of classic romance defined in a stage direction at the beginning: 'He stares at her as a man in love and she is very conscious of it.' *The Herbal Bed* claims to be a classic representation of romance at the same time as it suggests that romance is not

<sup>7</sup> See, for example: Annette Kuhn, *Women's Pictures: Feminism and Cinema* (1982; London: Verso, 1994); Christine Gledhill, ed., *Home is Where the Heart Is: Studies in Melodrama and the Woman's Film* (London: BFI Publishing, 1987); Laura Mulvey, *Fetishism and Curiosity* (London and Bloomington: British Film Institute and Indiana University Press, 1996).

<sup>8</sup> Aljean Harmetz, *Round Up The Usual Suspects: The Making of Casablanca* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1992), pp. 13, 39.

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more than a distant, historical puzzle, and that traditional literary drama is beyond the real interests of contemporary mainstream theatre.

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