

THE EMPTY VESSEL - another view of *The Ghost Wife*

Jonathan Mills and Dorothy Porter's opera *The Ghost Wife* is promoted as "based on Barbara Baynton's short story, *The Chosen Vessel*" however as Keith Gallasch suggested, RT 34 "the connection with the original is, in many ways, only important as an impulse". I want to tease out the connection with the original story and the original that in turn inspired it, Henry Lawson's, *The Drover's Wife* which was written in 1892 four years before Baynton submitted her first and shorter version under the title, 'What the Curlew Cried', but published by A.G. Stephens in *The Bulletin*, as 'The Tramp'.

Baynton's earlier version focused, as *The Ghost Wife* does, on the unequal contest between the woman alone with her baby preyed upon by a passing tramp or swaggie. By the time the final version was published in *Bush Studies* in 1902 under the title, 'The Chosen Vessel', Baynton had added a final section with four new characters, a horseman riding by who ignores her cries for help, believing instead that he has seen a vision of the Virgin Mary which frightens him, his mother from whom he is in flight, a priest in a nearby town to whom he confides his sighting of the virgin and a luckless Boundary Rider who comes across the dead woman and her child the next morning.

Effectively Mills and Porter pared Baynton's story back to its first version (*The Tramp*) for reasons presumably of clarity, focus and stageability. They have also changed elements and motifs within Baynton and imported other images a number of which oddly echo Lawson's 'The Drover's Wife'. Many of these changes and additions are powerful and effective, in particular the Mills/Porter resolution of the story which sees the return of the wife as a ghost to haunt her unfeeling husband, however other changes make images which were subtle, powerfully poetic and dreadfully menacing; crude and overplayed.

For Baynton the organising image is the indivisible duo of mother and baby and its paradoxical apotheosis as the virgin and child abandoned and ignored in their hour of dire need. Baynton carefully sets this up in the opening paragraphs, the vulnerability of the woman is not because she was a woman per se, but because she was a mother, a woman with a baby.

Baynton identifies the woman and her baby with the cow and her calf and later the ewe and lamb, and the predators on them form a corresponding sequence of images - dingoes, crows and dogs who prey on the weak who are weakened by their strong defence of the even weaker their young. Baynton even gives the swaggie a dog who kills sheep while his master kills the woman. The final moment of the story has the swaggie desperately trying to wash the sheep's blood off the dog's mouth "for the sight of blood made the man tremble".

By jettisoning this entire sequence of images, *The Ghost Wife* failed to fully animate and make palpable the relationship between the mother and child, yet it is the *raison d'etre* of her character, the absolute locus of her vulnerability, she must always think not what to do simply to protect herself but how to do it without waking the baby.

To fill the metaphoric holes Porter is forced to import other images - black snakes, black spiders and dark horses. There are no snakes or spiders in Baynton, though a snake features prominently in Lawson's *Drover's Wife*. For Porter the snakes are aligned with the men - the swaggie who rapes her and her husband who leaves her alone, and the crudity of the sexual implication was breathtaking in its obviousness. In Lawson the wife kills the snake in the *Ghost Wife* the trouser snake wins.

The black spider which becomes a black widow spider and hence the ghost wife who returns to haunt her husband works better, but can only work in relation to the wife alone, it separates her from and ignores her relationship with her baby, leaving it quite unsupported literally. The dark horse is indeed a strange one, a mysterious import, for Porter it represents the night and somehow becomes an image of repressed female sexuality whereas for Baynton, the horseman was her nemesis.

Another apparently minor change surprised me. In **The Ghost Wife** the woman leaves a teapot on the table with some food hoping the swaggie will take them and leave her alone. In 'The Chosen Vessel', the woman leaves a brooch that had belonged to her mother. A brooch is an intimate, personal object, bodily related to the essence of the woman's sexuality and her femininity, aligned to her heart, her breasts and her throat the parts of her body most vulnerable in Baynton's schema, since it is ultimately her throat which is cut. The teapot was a poor substitute, it denoted a whole other raft of other images that desexualised and diminished her individuality.

In **The Ghost Wife** the bush hut is the most powerful image and it is not only another instrument in the music but almost another character in the drama. Whereas in Baynton it is allied to the woman's body and Baynton dramatises the Swaggie's attempts to penetrate the hut through the cracks as he slowly circles its outside walls in a sequence that has a masturbatory orgasmic quality, the woman can only see and feel him as a moving dark shadow outside.

The metaphorical rape is climaxed in Baynton not by the swaggie finally breaking into the hut, as he does in **The Ghost Wife**, but by the woman unbolting the doors and running out into the darkness when she hears the sound of a horseman riding by. This is infinitely more surprising and dramatic, because it gives her the apparent initiative and then tragically and horribly turns it against her when she runs straight into the waiting arms of her murderer.

The rape in **The Ghost Wife** is explicit and ugly and takes place on stage, whereas in Baynton what happens to the woman is dreadfully suggested - and anticipated by the reader but never made explicit, she is killed because she is later found dead. What Baynton describes is infinitely more powerful than seeing the *Ghost Wife* anally raped on the kitchen table. We are with her as she escapes the house - the fortress, that was too flimsy to protect her and has become a trap.

In **The Ghost Wife** the woman puts her baby under the table for protection, in Lawson the Drovers Wife puts her children to bed on the table top to protect them from the snake, in Baynton the woman never lets go of the baby, running out with it in her arms and holds onto it until the very end. One of the most awful and memorable images in 'The Chosen Vessel' is of the woman's hand frozen in death still holding onto her baby's nightdress.

Interestingly the particular strength of 'The Chosen Vessel' as an innovative piece of writing was not even explored in **The Ghost Wife**. The strength of the story is its complexity and the tautness which it achieves with a limited number of tightly orchestrated metaphors and some startling changes of perspective. It is acutely cinematic in these jump cut shifts of points of view, which is why it reads today as a modern text. Baynton literally cuts on the moment of greatest impact, and the narrative progresses by montage.

See *The Opera* by all means it works in its own terms but do go back and read *The Story*, it was an important "impulse".

SUZANNE SPUNNER -----