

Chapter 7

The Ormond affair: a tale of a tale

Peter Tregear

In a bastion of the Melbourne establishment, in a college known for the quality of its social interactions as much as its intellectual achievements, where privileged and gifted students share a life comparatively free of care or obligation, on a night of self-congratulatory celebration, replete with liberal flows of alcohol and unrepressed sexuality, two young female students tell friends a tale of a crude sexual advance by the Master of the College. It is an awkward, uncomfortable tale, both difficult to grasp and pregnant with possibilities. In the ensuing hours, days, and weeks, as it percolates through pockets of resistance and support, it becomes glossed with the pre-judgments of those who repeat it: a conventional middle-aged family man would not be so gauche, *or* sexual domination constitutes the very core of the establishment and nice, bright young girls would never make up such a story, *or* those damned feminists are on another witch hunt, and so on. The narrative takes on a life of its own, refusing to resolve into a single meaning. The tale dances scandalously among the resident students, stakes out a grey, humourless claim in the agenda of younger academics, and is heard in hushed, sombre tones in leather and mahogany studies. It accelerates with a sudden leap into the pages of the *Melbourne Age* and brings confusion, consternation, or delight at breakfast tables across the city. All this time it defies attempts to clamp it down into an official version, leaping quickly beyond the reach of the Ormond College Council, evading the grasp of the University's mediation procedures, and the judicial hammer in successive court cases. And then it mocks the attempt of a Great Australian Novelist to co-opt it with her wisdom, at the same time

transforming itself into a debate on generational conflict among feminists. This is the Ormond Affair. It is the tale of a tale.

The Affair was conceived in an act of alleged sexual harassment; the then Master of Ormond College, it is claimed, placed his hands on the breast of one student during a dance at a party, and made an incident proposal to another behind the closed door of his office. Yet, like so many sexual harassment claims, the truth or otherwise of the allegations remain ultimately unknowable. Arising from contested interpretations of the same set of events, the basic facts are highly contested and lack substantiation from direct witnesses. While we do know that middle-aged men in positions of power can and do make the gauche, clumsiest, most unwelcome approaches to young women, we also know that people can and do fabricate, or exaggerate claims, or get swept up in an unshakeable belief in their own self-righteousness. What we can never resolve is what was the case here.

Yet, as nature abhors a vacuum, so we abhor the open judgment, and thus the unknowability of the Ormond Affair came to be conquered. This outcome, one catastrophic for the Master in that he lost his job, was achieved by the application of generalities to construct a scenario which could take the place of hard evidence. Because we know that incidents of the type alleged can and do happen, we were enabled to make a judgment, to cast the first stone, one step removed from the event itself. With no recourse to hard fact, our particular version of the tale obtained its verisimilitude depending on the extent to which it met the intended audience's preconception of how middle-aged men of *that* type behave, how young women behave, or how an "establishment" institution behaves.

An exemplar of how this process of judgment by generality took hold and found legitimacy is discernible in the manner the Affair was dealt with by the established dispute resolution mechanisms. The law, of course, traditionally provided the means of resolving competing narratives of the kind that arose in the case. Under an adversarial system, parties are able to present their tale as they choose and a judge or jury accepts one of these versions, or writes one of their own. By virtue of the aura we accord the legal system, this determination becomes the accepted version, closing the field. To perform this function, however, the institutions of the law need to be seen to be outside the field of conflict. Instead, in our "postmodern" society, we have become aware of the inescapable partiality of the tales told by

these “official” voices; a university law degree, indeed, now teaches us to question and doubt such official narratives.

Thus, in the Affair, the Ormond women came to see their dispute as not with the Master *per se*, but with an insidious “establishment,” principally in its various male-dominated manifestations in the College, the University and the legal system as a whole. This “establishment” was assumed, naturally, to be closing ranks to protect the Master as one of its own. The complainants therefore distrusted the College council, by-passed the sexual harassment procedures it had put in place, and refused the mediation efforts of the University, all because of their perceived institutional partiality. These processes were assumed to be flawed *a priori*.

The criminal proceedings which eventually arose followed in the first instance the most ancient principle in the Anglo-Australian legal system; faced with an absence of determinative evidence, the court found the Master “not guilty.” However, in matters involving sexual politics above all, we have been made conscious of a difference between “not proved guilty” and innocent, and we now “know” that laws of evidence and procedure may contain systemic bias. Hence, the courts were seen not to have resolved the question, but merely to have abdicated the field. Indeed one trial judge, in finding the Master not guilty, felt obliged to state that he “did not disbelieve” the complainant either, explicitly leaving the competing narratives to continue elsewhere.

In this respect the Ormond Affair exemplified the weaknesses, if not impotence, of both the long-established principles of conflict resolution, and, the newer forms of conflict mediation in dealing with sexual harassment. The courts failed because they no longer possess the requisite “aura” of impartiality to deal with such matters. Mediation failed not only because it shares the same problem, but also because it recognises that the problem of context, of competing narratives, extends to the disputing parties themselves. Mediation holds out the possibility of a ruling which acknowledges the legitimacy of more than one co-existing version of the truth, a possibility which was distasteful both to the aggrieved parties and those who had come to see their cause as emblematic. The irony is that, despite our questioning of the legitimacy of the courts, we still hanker for a clear-cut finding, for a simple narrative which we can then call “the truth,” it is just that now this truth is left to be created *sui generis* out of the ideological presumptions which surround the event, not in the event

itself. In the Ormond Affair the “unknowable” events in fact became a vanishing point, a moment of pure functionality, or — to borrow poststructuralist jargon — an empty sign. And it was precisely because the Affair had in its most crucial details, in fact, no fixed content that it served as a compelling vehicle for ideological conflict. Its power and enduring fascination was fed, moreover, by the very contrast between the sordid, worldly nature of real sexual harassment, and the elusive, ideal nature of the relatively uncomplicated narratives upon which the defining offence is based. Every retelling of the tale, every stated or implied judgment of guilt or innocence imputed to the Master, therefore, enters the realm of pure ideology, it tells us everything about the speaker and nothing about the event.

How, then, does one write about the Ormond Affair without similarly revealing one’s own preconceptions in a naked and unsatisfactory manner? Obviously it is not possible, in the circumstances, simply to report the official results of conflict resolution mechanisms without appearing hopelessly uncritical. Helen Garner’s *The First Stone* illustrates the dilemma perfectly. Denied direct access to the material she wanted, she wrote a frustrated and irritable account of her failure to grasp the event. The result was a book about a book she had been unable to write.

I suspect that the only satisfactory level of analysis is to consider, in the manner of Foucault, the genealogy of the Ormond Affair; that is, the way the dominant narratives which gave it momentum grew and developed, and to speculate on the functions which they might serve. In other words, to write about the Affair in a manner which makes no attempt at a factual reconstruction, but rather tries to reveal or flesh-out hidden assumptions, so as to suggest that what we have previously claimed to know about the affair may not be as fixed as it has previously had appeared. What follows does not even begin to be a comprehensive study in this manner. I merely wish to make some preliminary remarks for possible future elaboration and consideration.

A quick perusal of the vast literature of press cuttings, books, and journal articles on the Affair reveals that the most common narrative at work was what we might call the “accusatory narrative.” This had, broadly speaking, three key elements:

- 1) The link between power and sexuality. Hierarchy is inherently masculine, and the hierarchy sustains itself, among other means, through sexual domination.

- 2) The existence of “the establishment” as an entity which protects its own. Traditional social structures — the university, courts, and so on — act to sustain the establishment.
- 3) The relative powerlessness of young women who try to succeed within the establishment. In trying to gain access, they have no choice but to participate according to the rules of the establishment.

In the “accusatory narrative” version of the Ormond Affair, we were given a perfect example of these elements at play. The establishment, here personified in the (aptly named) “Master” asserted its authority sexually, and it demanded its dues. The complainants were faced with a devil’s alternative: submit to his sexual advances or renounce the benefits of participation in the establishment. The submission amounted, thus, to objectification, being reduced to sexual passivity and autonomy. It is this act of objectification which lies at the heart of the alleged crime, and it is this which allowed comparison of the alleged events with rape and other serious forms of sexual assault — a comparison which might otherwise be seen as sensationalist, or even obscene. The violation in all such cases is in essence the same no matter what the severity of the offence; the degree of violation is not as important as the defining nature of the degrading experience.

If, as we posited earlier, the unknowability of the Ormond Affair was conquered only through the application of generalities, it becomes easy to see how the “accusatory narrative” quickly gained a privileged position in this tale of a tale. This is because the “accusative narrative” allows the specific elements of the Affair to be collapsed easily into the general without inviting critical resistance. The specific events, as they were alleged, merely confirmed what we, the receptive audience, already “knew.” The man in question, the Master of Ormond, *became* the establishment; the figure of Dr Gregory collapsed first into Ormond the institution, then into the wider conspiracy of male power embodied in the University and the Courts. The failure of the women to obtain a satisfactory redress was precisely *because* of the power imbalance between the establishment and young women. The common identity, and thus bias, of all involved in the Master’s defence was assumed to follow naturally from the existence of an establishment as an institution *per se*. In such circumstances the unknowability of the original event was easily transcended, and the Master condemned to ignominy with barely an expression of regret.

One of the most powerful insights offered by such an analysis is, however, that a narrative may be most accurately characterised by what it excludes. Here, we lost not just the specificity of the original event, but also the complexity of interpersonal relationships, especially sexual ones. By focusing on the structural level, we lost the permutations and combinations which life outside the textbook can throw up: middle aged men may commit sexual crimes, but intelligent women can also bring false accusations; an institution may shield a man, but it may also betray him; young women can fight courageous and lonely battles, but they can also be misled by more powerful personalities. It is not surprising, therefore, that Garner's book displays a kind of nostalgia for this more complex, even fraught, world of interpersonal relationships. She wanted to get behind the women and their blank, structural facade and look for a more interesting, more personal narrative. She failed because the women were aware that she was going to muddy their narrative purity.

The principal alternative narrative, if you like the "defensive narrative," posited that the Master was an innocent man, horribly wronged. Three common lines of argument in this narrative be summarised as follows:

- 1) There was either an unconscious or deliberate conspiracy at work within the College and University which sought to make an example of men in positions of authority.
- 2) The Master was tried by media, not by a fair and impartial consideration of the facts in dispute.
- 3) The offences described were, in any case, fundamentally trivial, and the claimants should not be so "afraid of life."

This narrative, however, was in comparison much more difficult to sustain. It first of all relied upon the specificity of the original events, and thus was defeated by their very unknowability. And, unlike the "accusative narrative" it did not lend itself easily to generalisation. The "feminists claim another scalp" line of argument, for instance, implied diminishing or denying the entire field of sexual harassment, which is untenable. To so argue, however obliquely, was, furthermore, to become identified as one to the forces supporting the establishment, thus bolstering the credibility of perhaps the defining generality of the "accusative narrative."

What remained of the “defensive narrative” was an “even if” position, that is: even if the alleged events had occurred, they were not sufficiently serious to justify the gravity of the punishment; whereas the women suffered a moment of embarrassment, the Master suffered a lifetime of humiliation. In passing it was usually noted that mechanisms had existed which could have resolve the dispute more constructively, but these had been rejected by the complainants, who were content with nothing less than bringing him low. This argument, however, implies either that the Master is guilty — thus denying his consistent protestations of innocence — or that the question of guilt or innocence itself should not be taken so seriously. And it certainly fails to take into account the symbolic importance of the case, such as allowed one caller on talk-back radio, for instance, seriously to posit that it was more important that an example be made of such an establishment figure than the truth or otherwise of the specific case be known.

The symbolic importance of the case can help us to explain, furthermore, why the Master seems to have been ultimately abandoned by the very institutions which might otherwise have been expected to support him — such as the College’s governing body, or its ultimate authority, the Uniting Church. In so far as the College had, by virtue of the changing political climate and through the case itself, become uncomfortably aware of itself as an *elitist* institution, founded upon old-fashioned, patriarchal values, the forced resignation of the Master took upon the character of an act of self-censorship; a purging mechanism necessary if the more substantial “politically incorrect” elements of College life were to continue unchallenged. The College effectively turned the Master into its symbolic “other,” by getting rid of him it could pretend to itself that it had distanced or purged itself of the characteristics he had, in his apparition as an embodiment of the now dominant narratives, come publicly to signify. In a textbook playing out of Roland Barthes’ idea of ‘inoculation’, here the admission of a supposed localised wrong-doing served in fact to protect these various institutional interests against the risk of a more generalised subversion.

This mechanism can be seen to apply equally to the actions of the complainants themselves, and in my mind this is one of the stings in the tale’s tale. Whereas the complainants and their close supporters could, by virtue of their sense of injustice and moral outrage, distance themselves from the culture of the College, this distance at the same

time allowed them to continue to reap the benefits of the College without compunction. Hence one of the complainants could, apparently without irony, approach the Master, the man she claims had harassed her and ask (and receive) a reference for a position as an Articled Clerk in a top Melbourne law firm. The fact that Colleges and city law firms are traditional establishment forms of patriarchal power *par excellence* thereby became disguised under a discourse of institutional wrongdoing and personal victimhood. By falling for their own disguise the complainants unwittingly bolstered the very system they at the same time claimed to be challenging.

By way of conclusion, I wish briefly to extend this exposition to speculate upon ways in which the nature of the Affair could reflect some of the broader concerns of this book. If, as I have argued, the Affair was sustained principally by flooding the unknowability of the original event with narrative generalities, it remains to be asked why the academy was so unwilling or unable to offer a dissenting critique of this process amidst the furore. Why was it unable to wield what is arguably its greatest asset, reflective knowledge? Instead, what unfolded, in fact, was a substantially a campus-driven affair — from its protagonists through to its major media commentators.

I would suggest that this situation could only arise because of the insidious concern on campus with what we might broadly call “consumer satisfaction”; here an obsession with the appearance of righteousness at the expense of critical rigour. The ideological sutures which acted to eliminate the ambiguities of the Ormond Affair thus satisfied “market expectations”; the dominant version of the tale comfortably fulfilled the expectations of those already predisposed to consume it. In so doing the Affair reflected a logic already driven into the core value system of higher education. With HECS equating the value of education with income-earning potential, students now demand the outcome (qualifications which will be financially lucrative) they want (pay for); and if the user has to pay then the user will tend to avoid having the security of dominant preconceptions challenged in ways she or he does not want or expect. In such a climate the University can no longer provide a space for truly disinterested critical thought; it must conform first and foremost to principles of economic utilitarianism. Hence the West Report on education unself-consciously reduces the once profound relationship between the teacher and student to that of “client and customer.” Although we may thereby “get what we want” (i.e. “value for money”) from the modern

reformed campus, we also destroy at the same time its ability to discern that what we want is always a social, and not an absolute, truth, and thus open to constant discussion, re-negotiation and re-evaluation. The irony for those who saw in the outcome of the Affair hope for genuine political advancement on campus is that at the very same moment the University continues to be obsessed with such “battles of appearance,” this underlying consumerist ideology is sweeping all before it. In diverting so much attention to an alleged and forever indeterminable wrong-doing, those who sustained the Ormond Affair unwittingly participated in an ideological effort which is rendering this ascendancy invisible.