

# Recovering the Lesbian Theme in *The Children's Hour*

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**Abstract** Comparing the script of *The Children's Hour* by Lillian Hellman, its historical prototype, and Hellman's later film adaptations of the play, this paper aims to analyze the nuanced treatment of the taboo subject matter in order to revisit the complicated question of the work's attitude toward lesbianism. As critics have long noted, the lesbian theme is seemingly muted to the point that the sexuality of the characters is almost a secondary theme or even an afterthought. This paper argues, however, that the lesbian theme is clearly present in the work and that the various permutations, particularly those of the two film versions, do not marginalize its presence. The very title of the play refers to children's story-telling, after all, and this includes attempts to "normalize" the myths and fables intended for the young generation. Therefore, the mutability of the different versions can be explained as an artistic demonstration of the social dynamics of attempts at marginalizing lesbianism rather than an overt effort of the text itself to force lesbianism into conformity.

**Key words** *The Children's Hour*; Lillian Hellman; lesbianism

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One of the earliest stage depictions of lesbianism and still perhaps the most familiar, Lillian Hellman's 1934 play *The Children's Hour* has for decades generated critical disagreement as to the work's precise attitude toward sexuality —

and indeed, whether the play is primarily about lesbianism at all. The controversy was never cleared up by Hellman herself, who altered the stage version several times, made various and sometimes conflicting statements about its content, and even willingly assisted in a 1936 film version that deleted the lesbian theme entirely.<sup>1</sup> Yet, the play also concerns the very nature of language and story-telling, which is arguably why the title alludes to the practice of telling and re-telling myths and fables for the edification of children. The argument has also been made that the play can be read as a postcolonial text in which the Other can be taken as both the lesbian as well as the child of multicultural parentage, the latter having been the case for the nineteenth-century incident on which the play was based.<sup>2</sup> However, our purpose is to argue that the play can be understood as a hybridization in which lesbianism is subsumed by the perceived need to force “problem” stories and tales into “proper” conformity for social consumption. In other words, the several versions of the play and movie may have certain variations pertaining to the sexual theme, but all versions can be understood to involve the social practice of story-telling and its implications as a sort of “shell game.” Regardless of whether certain characters in the play attempt to suppress lesbianism, and regardless of whether contemporary audiences applaud them for doing so, the ploy does not succeed: lesbianism is always to be found beneath one of the shells in each of the film and theatrical iterations.

*The Children's Hour* is the story of two female owners of a girls' school, Karen Wright and Martha Dobie, who are falsely accused of being lesbian lovers by aspoiled and maladjusted young female student named Mary Tilson. One day, when Mary runs away from school after receiving some rather harsh punishment, she repeats a story to her grandmother that has originated with Martha's aunt Lily Mortar, another teacher at the school, implying that Martha and Karen are lovers. After hearing the embellished version of the story, Mrs. Tilson withdraws Mary from the school and persuades most if not all of the other parents to do likewise. In an attempt to salvage their business and reputations, Karen and Martha take Mrs. Tilson to court for libel, but lose their civil suit in part because Lily Mortar refuses to testify. Karen, who is portrayed in all versions as being unambiguously heterosexual, breaks off her engagement with the local doctor. Martha, however, admits to her old friend that she indeed possesses homoerotic feelings for her. Martha commits suicide offstage, and either just before or immediately afterward (depending on the version), Mrs. Tilson knocks at the door and says that she has discovered that Mary fabricated the story of the lesbian affair. Also depending on the version, the story ends with varying degrees of ambiguity about Karen's future.

An enormous hit on Broadway, *The Children's Hour* brought the young playwright instant recognition and launched her on a long and distinguished literary career. It is therefore perhaps surprising that Hellman continued to rewrite the play and change certain details. From the 1934 stage original and its various theatrical revivals to its two film adaptations — namely the 1936 film version that drops the lesbian theme and renames the work as *These Three*, and the 1961 screenplay that restores both name and original lesbian theme — one can infer that Hellman's attitude toward the play was nuanced. For example, her removal of lesbian references from the first film version to better reflect 1930s social mores, and especially her emphasis of both Mary's mischievous lying and the civil trial that resulted, would seemingly indicate that the lesbian theme is “largely incidental,” as has been proposed (Mantle 33).

Many critics, in fact, have viewed the lesbian theme of the play as being oblique if not somewhat misunderstood. The critic Shuei-may Chang, for example, has argued that the draconian treatment of the adults toward Mary was the actual reason for events to have spiraled out of control, and consequently that the play should be reinterpreted as an observation on “the pursuit of justice and the lack of mercy” (Chang 1). Carol Strongin Tufts believes that Hellman wrote the play to acknowledge lesbianism, but in such a way that the practice is undermined: “gossip can kill,” Tufts states as the theme of the play, “but if the victim happens to be a lesbian, it has, after all, been for the best” (Tufts 76). Anne Fleche proposes that lesbianism is indeed present in the play, even though it is bent to conform to the social climate of the times, much as a carpenter's “lesbian rule” is a device that is bent over uneven surfaces in order to provide accurate measurements (Fleche 16). Benjamin Kahan likewise understands lesbianism to be present in the play, although he believes that Hellman has distorted the play's address of sexuality to provide an indirect but nonetheless convenient thesis that lesbians are not born but rather are heterosexuals who are caught up in the situations of the moment (Kahan 177). Somewhat closer to the assumptions upon which we base our own argument, Mary Titus proposes that the “text seeks simultaneously to confirm but condemn public opinion, while the diffusion of desire through the characters and the violence against the one self-admitted lesbian character in the play point to Hellman's contradictory private response to the changing sexual ideology” (Titus 326). And as one would expect, Slavoj Žižek employs heavy theoretical artillery in judging the second filming (the one in which lesbianism is reinstated) as a “‘drama of false appearances’ [that] is thus brought to its truth: the evil onlooker's ‘pleasurably aberrant viewing’ externalizes the repressed aspect of the falsely accused subject”

(Žižek 109).

For many past commentators on *The Children's Hour*, presumably, the actual tragedy at the center of the plot is the unfolding of circumstances rather than the inborn sexuality of one of the main characters. Indeed, there is good reason to believe that lesbianism in the play was not deliberately planned as an erotic claptrap, but an artistic expression of the playwright's insight into a deviant-phobic society that may indeed suffer from greater shortcomings than merely being sexually obsessed. To wit, these shortcomings involve a type of normative storytelling in which the Other is forced into conformity in order that an "appropriate" cultural narrative for children's hour may be constructed. But first it is necessary to provide a brief overview of lesbianism and homophobia, and then to trace the evolving process of Hellman's artistic representation of lesbianism from the legal records of the Scottish lawsuit, to her original 1934 play, and further to the two screen versions, in order to unveil the author's intentions of presenting the deformation of the social acceptance of lesbianism.

### **Heteronormativity and Homophobia**

The roots of heteronormativity may be traced to those foundation works in gay and lesbian studies in the 1980s, including the groundbreaking perspective of Michel Foucault, and feminist arguments contributed by Adrienne Rich and anthropologist Gayle Rubin, to name only a few.<sup>3</sup> All of these works share the same basic notion that only when the single sexual standard is replaced by an anthropological understanding of different cultures as unique expressions of human inventiveness, rather than as the inferior or disgusting savage habits, that the pluralistic sexual ethics can be achieved.

Like gender roles and differentiations, female heterosexuality has largely been taken for granted, but, when addressed as an issue to be explained, it has been a very difficult phenomenon to account for. In Foucault's opinion, while genetic heritage provides humans the potential to practice sexuality through a wide range of behaviors and to conceptualize human sexualities in a variety of forms, social environment determines what sexual practices individuals select to express from the genetic repertoire and what sexual practices individuals use to think about themselves as sexual beings.

According to the feminist psychoanalytic explanation of female heterosexuality, as articulated by Nancy Chodorow, the Oedipal crisis arises when a girl discovers the socially inferior status of her first-love object, her mother, as the possession of a powerful father. Consequently, the girl, seeing the father as the only

parent having the power to confer dominant status, attempts to develop a special relationship with him so as to achieve equality with him and other men. Later in adulthood, this special relationship which the girl earlier sought with the father, in aim of attaining equality with men, is transferred to other males for the same purpose, and thus female heterosexuality is formed. Apagogically, a girl's negative Oedipus complex would determine for her a female object-choice. Therefore, in the psychoanalytical theory of female sexuality, a woman's homosexual object-choice is customarily explained as an "enduring, active, and phallic attachment to the mother consequent upon the disappointment of her Oedipal love for the father" (Laurentis 183).

In *The Children's Hour*, Martha Dobie, a self-acknowledged and suicidal lesbian, provides an example of the formation of female homosexual inclination, with her drifting father-absent childhood and her independently struggling late adolescence and young adulthood with Karen Wright. With more tremendous impact than the psychoanalytic significance of Martha's homosexuality formation is the supposed connection between lesbianism and single-sex schools, a public discourse established in the play and in reality with Mary Tilford's knowledge of lesbianism. The play's construction of the girls' school as an unsafe environment for heterosexual women with no apparent evidence would seemingly indicate the potential for lesbianism and convey the implication of its deleterious consequences. But a close attention to the manner in which the plot unfolds would indicate that any such assumption is overly simplistic.

Indeed, the homosexuality presented in *The Children's Hour* appears as a rarely mentioned or depicted taboo, but at the same time, is the very blasting fuse that sets off the conflict. The various other plot occurrences, such as Mary's vicious lies and manipulation, and even class differences and struggles, further obfuscate Hellman's attitude toward homosexuality. But one must never discount the simple facts that Martha indeed admits to homoerotic feelings for another woman, and that Lily Mortar has refused to testify in court, presumably because she truly believes that her niece is a lesbian and neither wishes to perjure herself nor provide damaging truthful testimony. Also pertinent to the analysis is the manner in which Hellman selectively chose details of the original incident on which the play was based. The most prominent modification of the play from the real case is the addition of a confessing and a suicide-committing lesbian, which determines the approach a psychoanalytical one to the homophobic panics of the entire society and the internalized homophobia suffered by the homosexual. Hellman, in her presentation of homosexuality and her representation of the historical case, tries to

maintain a balance between probing into the inner struggle of those involved, and unfolding the homophobic social environment that breeds the calamity.

The concept of homophobia has gained currency, for decades, as a one-word summary of the widespread abhorrence and hatred behind irrational fear against homosexuality. In forms of fear, anxiety, anger, discomfort and aversion, homophobia is not limited to the heterosexual, but also targeting at identity formation of the homosexual affected by heterosexual socialization, the psychological formation termed as Internalized Homophobia, or IH.<sup>4</sup> The notion of IH has become a backbone as well as a tradition of the psychological literature dealing with lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) experience confronting internalization of pejorative societal homophobic attitudes. In an attempt to manage their own internalized homophobia, sexual deviants, alert and vulnerable to the self-hatred, may engage in self-destructive behaviors like suicide and self-mutilation.

### **From Court to Stage**

As previously mentioned, the story of a boarding-school girl accusing her two headmistresses of having an inordinate mutual affection is not entirely a fictional creation by Hellman, but is rather the author's re-creation of a notorious 1811 Scottish lawsuit, *Miss Woods and Miss Pirie against Dame Helen Gordon*.<sup>5</sup> The lawsuit offered Hellman a safe medium for exploring very personal issues, as she commented that "one thing that has struck me about *The Children's Hour* is that anyone young ordinarily writes autobiographically. Yet I picked on a story that I could treat with complete impersonality" (Gilroy 25). Nonetheless, Hellman's "impersonality" toward the original case is complicated when one considers whether or not she identified with the young teachers.<sup>6</sup>

Another major point of departure was the avowed lesbianism of one of the two women characters, and this is arguably the most important departure from the original trial. As presented in the published prints of the trial, the two teachers consistently maintained that they were heterosexuals and that the story of their lesbian relationship was a pure fabrication. Hellman's attribution of homoerotic feelings to Martha is therefore solely the author's artistic innovation. Thus, one may argue that the actual trial was more about hearsay and vicious gossip, hysterical children and the destructiveness of their exaggerations, and so on, but the fact remains that lesbianism is not only the focus of scandal in the play, but an actual orientation of at least one character.

Another departure from the original court record is the deletion of the judges' obvious confusion about the physical details of actual homosexual relationships.

As Lillian Faderman explains in her 1994 book, the judges were “exposed to evidence that revealed an aspect of female sexuality that was not supposed to have existed, and however they might decide the case, the implications would be distressing” (Faderman 255-7). On the one hand, the absolute physical and moral improbabilities of “the thing” charged against two ladies were identified by the court as favorable testimony for the schoolmistresses, for the judges simply could not conceive of how the two women could literally have performed the acts described. On the other hand, the court could simply not understand how Jane Cumming and the other girls would have been in possession of such detailed sexual knowledge had they not actually witnessed the sexual behavior described in their accusations (Tuhkanen 1005). Thus, if Jane Cumming indeed possessed any accurate knowledge of the practices described, then she must have gotten that knowledge because of her foreign ancestry and upbringing. Because she was of mixed ethnicity, Cumming became a handy scapegoat for the emergence of the specter of lesbianism in the Scottish school for young ladies. At any rate, the court ultimately concluded that the mistresses were not guilty because lesbianism was a thing unheard of in their part of the world. Furthermore, most of the girls were unable to secure places in other private schools (Tuhkanen 1026).

More than a century after the Scottish case, Hellman encountered the story in a 1931 book titled *Bad Companions*. Despite the passage of time, lesbianism was still an explosive topic when she wrote her play in 1934. As Mary Titus explains in some detail in her analysis of the play, a lesbian-phobia emerged in the early part of the twentieth century due to women’s successes in a variety of arenas, particularly the financial and sexual, especially the latter. According to Titus,

As a result of these cultural shifts in the ideology surrounding women’s sexuality, Hellman and her contemporaries, particularly other women artists and professionals, experienced powerful social pressure not to make choices that could potentially separate them from the heterosexual path of marriage and childbearing. Frequently this pressure came in the form of accusations of sexual deviance. (Titus 215-16)

What women do together becomes far more threatening to men if women are socially and economically independent, because they can reject marriage and the family as dependent females never could. At any rate, the anxiety about potential female rejection of patriarchal sexual and family patterns, as associated with feminism, was becoming increasingly fierce in the 1930s. Facing social hostility,

many American feminists at the time, on the one hand, admitted the importance of passionate friendships between women, and on the other hand, implied that such expression between women was somehow deviant and needed more explanation than heterosexuality, Titus further elaborates. This paradox unfolds an interesting inverse relationship between the amount of social independence a woman has in a society, and the latitude she is permitted to express affection for another woman. Arguably, this is a partial explanation of why Hellman chose to alter the lesbian theme from the original Scottish court case, and to have the final denouement end in the suicide of the lesbian character.

Moreover, Hellman's other innovations also include the construction of a bipolar opposition between the two women. One of them, Karen, is engaged to the local doctor, himself an aristocratic nephew of Mrs. Tilson and thus a first-cousin-once-removed of Mary's. Always quick to laugh off his young relative's histrionics, Joe Cardin provides not only a firm rationality to the plot but also a strong heterosexual orientation for Karen. In an almost overdetermined manner, Karen repeatedly assures Martha that her relationship with Cardin is solid, is based on true love, and has been postponed solely because of economic exigencies. Martha Dobie's confession and eventual suicide, as well as Karen Wright's voluntary and contented engagement in a heterosexual marriage to the young doctor, suggest that Hellman wished to clarify the sexual orientations of her characters, and furthermore, to leave audiences with a fairly black-and-white portrayal of the two women. And even though the parentage of Mary Tilson may be slightly ambiguous, with Cardin in a passing moment dismissing her antics as representative of "another branch of the family," she is nonetheless a fourteen-year-old who has acquired sexual knowledge the good old-fashioned way — by clandestinely reading adult books. Hellman therefore deletes the speculation of the trial judges that precocious sexual knowledge is due to a "questionable" ethnic heritage and upbringing, and instead relegates this graphic knowledge to Mary's curiosity.

But this is precisely the sort of seemingly minor detail that reinforces the importance of the lesbian theme. Why, after all, would Mary Tilford be curious in the first place? Most people, when asked this question about any teenager, would probably smile and reply that curiosity is an inborn trait among intelligent human beings. However, one may additionally view this change in the original source material as a way of indirectly reinforcing the fact that sexuality is an inborn characteristic — and lesbian sexuality as well. In other words, if Hellman has purposely deleted the Scottish judges' argument that sexual knowledge must arise



from some corrupting influence — be it a foreign ethnic and cultural background, or too many secret sessions with sexual books — then perhaps she has surreptitiously left the text with evidence of a natural world in which some women love each other by dint of their natural propensities. Thus, the possibility of lesbian relationships is clearly stated in the play, even though it comes in through the back door in order not to scandalize audiences who might consider the possibility a bit too intense for easy consumption. If this is so, then perhaps many of us never entirely outgrow or need for a “children’s hour” in which certain details are mollified.

### **From Stage to Screen**

The elusory intelligibility of lesbianism in *The Children's Hour* from its stage version to its two screen versions, *These Three* and *The Children's Hour*, forms a traceable clue of Hellman’s strategic management of the sensitive topic. In order to be able to move the play onto screen, Hellman made drastic changes in her 1936 screenplay, directed by William Wyler. Most awful among these rearrangements were the substitution of the original lesbian rumors with accusations of an affair between Martha and Karen’s fiancé Joe, and the forced renaming of the film owing to the Production Code Administration’s fear that the notoriety of *The Children's Hour* had spread. Though obliged to the lesbian theme of her original, Hellman was reportedly satisfied with adapting the screenplay into a heterosexual love triangle with complete compromise, saying that the play’s central theme of evil was unaffected by the changes (Albert 170).

With no evident reference to lesbianism in the 1936 version, and with even intentional construction of a heterosexual love triangle in place of a homosexual one, it seemed, at the time of its production, as if everyone participating in *These Three* knew the subject matter of the original play and could not help suggesting a “Martha’s Theme.”<sup>7</sup> It seems understandable that such visionary audience and critics as Bernard Dick discover that the theme is often heard when the women are together, and further interpret the scene in *These Three* when Martha is watching Joe dozing off as suggesting Martha’s intense loneliness, not because she is losing Joe to Karen, but because she is losing Karen to Joe. Therefore, it is reasonable to deduce that Hellman’s satisfaction of this screen adaptation roots in its invulnerable manipulation of the lesbian taboo, with “Martha’s suppressed love for Karen existing within the subtext of the film; it is something one senses rather than perceives” (Dick 39).

The 1961 film adaptation of *The Children's Hour*, also directed by Wyler, was released under its original title with the lesbian theme restored. For Hellman, the

fidelity of the 1961 film version to her original play would seemingly have been more flattering to her than the bowdlerized *These Three*. However, when comparing the two film adaptations, Hellman expressed her reservations with the second adaptation, commenting that “the first *Children’s Hour* was better than the second” (Doudna 197). There may have been many reasons for Hellman’s deliberate alienation and negative evaluation for the 1961 movie as the original scriptwriter, with misinterpretation and distortion of her original intention at the top of the list. Despite the intact lesbianism in the 1961 screenplay, the changes made by Wyler actually reinforced the moral perspective of the Production Code Administration, in that one may perceive a subtle but distinct condemnation of lesbianism in this new version.

The first change of the 1961 screenplay from the original stage version is the weakened role of Mary, whose reading of *Mademoiselle de Maupin* is replaced by her reading of only pulp novels. The film depicts Mary as not intelligent, even puzzled by her own accusation of the “unnatural” thing between the two teachers, a rancorous wicked teenage girl with no shrewdness, a spoiled child who will do anything to get out of attending school. Hellman’s original attribution of Mary’s knowledge of sexuality to forbidden reading rather than to her racial and social inferiorities, provides justifiable reason for the belief that Hellman does not reject the idea of an unacknowledged lesbian desire as the source of Mary’s actions. The cramped narrow space in the boarding school is suffused with a tense atmosphere of competition and resentment. In an entirely female community in the girls’ boarding school constructed in the original play, full of jealousy and manipulation, Mary’s claim of the teachers’ lesbian relationship seems to unravel what is already in the air. Hellman’s artistic addition of Mrs. Mortar, who feels in competition with Karen Wright for the attention of her niece, Martha, is a deliberate strengthening of the stifling environment. The function of the role of Mrs. Mortar does not end with launching dramatic conflict, but works in concert with Mrs. Tilford, who seems to find the idea of Martha and Karen making love easy to believe. Mrs. Mortar’s accusation of Martha’s affection for Karen from the original play as being “unnatural, just as unnatural as it can be” (Hellman 21), echoes with Mrs. Tilford’s firm conviction of the teachers’ lesbian relationship merely deducing from Mary’s uncertain description of “funny noises” and “funny things” in “fast, excited” whispers to her grandmother (Hellman 42). There is reason to infer that an unacknowledged but present potential desire is implied in the two old ladies. What’s more, the description of the sex-segregated school, with the shifting of bedrooms and the secret circulation of a forbidden copy of *Mademoiselle de*

*Maupin*, further suggests the “homosexualizing influence” of a “sex-segregated adolescence,” during which “the unwholesome fashionable practice of sex-segregated schools brings young people into a homosexual atmosphere” (Dell 309).

Mary’s accusation in the original play articulates and thereby actualizes Martha’s unacknowledged desire for Karen, a desire that women of the earlier century would have seen as a delightful fascination or a happy refuge from the lovelessness of a sexually dichotomized world, and which is now self-acknowledged as leprous, making Martha feel dirty and ashamed. Martha’s unacknowledged desire is her fatal flaw, which brings on the tragedy, and her homophobic sense of shame and guilt, and her consequent unforgiving punishment on herself, provide “justification” for Hellman’s arrangement of her death. Understandably, Martha’s suicide exhibits the fact that ignorance and prejudice of society sends a strong message leading to conflicting feelings regarding sexual orientation. Unconscious or conscious, people of any sexual orientation internalize the homophobia that surrounds us, resulting in depression, fear, shame, guilt and self-hatred with any self-acknowledged deviant orientation. Martha’s internalized homophobia established in a heterosexist environment, at the time of meeting with her self-acknowledged homosexual desire, transforms into a fatal impulse of suicidal bravery.

Martha’s internalized homophobia, a complex psychological trauma, is treated with helpful ambiguity in Hellman’s original play, with the final appearance of the innocence-saving message brought by Mrs. Tilford. However, it is this artistic arrangement of Hellman to delay a hasty association of Martha’s death to a fear of social punishment that the 1961 screen version recomposes. A radical structural re-composition in the third act of the film is achieved with the plot lines changed from the original “Martha’s confession — Martha’s suicide — Mrs. Tilford’s revelation” to “Martha’s confession — Mrs. Tilford’s revelation — Martha’s suicide” in the film. The original sequence in the play provides an imagination space for the audience to speculate Martha’s psychological trauma and the reason for her committing suicide. Be it the impulses caused by her internalized homophobia. Be it Martha’s fear of the external legal and social punishment. Be it her pricks of conscience revealing the nonreciprocal desire for Karen. Be it Karen’s harsh rejection and negation. The doubt increases with the confession by Mrs. Tilford that follows. Moreover, the last lines and stage directions in the original play, with a collection of hopeful images, suggest that, with Martha’s death pushing the play to its climax, Mrs. Tilford’s appearance makes fresh beginnings possible. Hellman is intentionally inviting the thought-provoking ambiguity about Martha’s suicide

motivation.

However, the film adapter's exhausted trial to clarify and define Martha's suicidal psychology is a thankless task for its resolving and demystifying the ambiguity. To confirm the fatally driving force of Martha's internalized sense of homophobia, generated in the homophobic environment and the homophobic culture in general, Wyler promotes a more depressive and pressing atmosphere of the homophobic community, and makes Martha's sense of inferiority and dirtiness outspoken in the film version. The suffocative and besieged condition of the two ladies is broken with Martha's suicide and Karen's marching from the crowd of curious onlookers.

The strongly socialized heterosexual Karen in the play, with her decisive refusal to face Martha's confession and her striving attempt of suppressing and stifling the sudden acknowledged desire of Martha by trying to silence Martha forcefully, contributes to Martha's self-loathing, shame and her final suicide. In the play, Martha's confession is forcefully silenced by Karen's crying that "It's a lie. You're telling yourself a lie", in a shaken and uncertain tone (Hellman 79). Karen in the play rids herself of a heroic image by sneaking into the pervasive homophobic atmosphere. One might even suppose that Karen enjoys the suggestive surname "Wright" because it signals her "right" sexual orientation and her "right" choices. Thus, the play is not a play of the two mistress, but a play of Martha, whose individual tragedy is brought by her fatal flaw of an unacknowledged and unaccepted desire.

The various changes in plot, stage arrangements, and even character portrayal in the 1961 film, at first glance, might seem to follow the original intention of Hellman. In fact, most if not all of these changes result in a rather large alteration in the play's theme. For example, the stage locations of the two characters in the final act are altered for the 1961 film: rather than assigning Martha kneeling beside Karen, the director arranges a positional balance between Martha and Karen, with each of them occupying one side of the screen. Also, When Martha in the play confesses bitterly and softly in an emotionally self-controlled calmness, Martha in the film experiences a hysterical mania with an emotional meltdown. Karen in the film, rather than horrified and confused, patiently listening to Martha's emotional disclosure with no rude interruption, discloses a strong sense of understanding and compassion for Martha's state, and tries to comfort Martha by convincing her with gentle words and gestures. However, the contrasting opposite positions between the two ladies are highlighted in the play, with Martha proceeding and Karen receding; while, in the film, a sense of harmonious mutual understanding is taking the place.

In the play, the dialogue of the two ladies is concluded by Karen's decisive order of Martha disappearing from her sight. Quitting the scene slowly, carefully and quietly, Martha's adjacent suicide, only a few minutes after her exit, seems predictable for the audience as well as for Karen. Hearing the sound of the shot, fully realizing the death of Martha, Karen does not move until a few seconds after the sound dies out. These few seconds of stillness seem to be Karen's pronounced capital punishment for Martha's crime of improper desire and lead to a freeze-framed distance between Martha and Karen, and the insuperable gap between two worlds. Karen's coldness towards Martha's death is reinforced by her toneless rejection to Mrs. Mortar's request of sending for a doctor. Not crying herself, Karen firmly orders Mrs. Mortar to stop crying, a gesture of vital importance for understanding the relationship Hellman intends to construct between the two ladies. Are they real lovers? The answer is definitely no. Karen's posture is well revealed in her detachment and alienation from Martha, who is trying to seek a consonance, with extravagant hopes, in Karen. It seems that Karen gets her final relief of a heavy load when Martha, the black sheep and the inharmonious factor, is rid of. "We're not going to suffer any more. Martha is dead" (Hellman 84). The reversed legal judgment brought by Mrs. Tilford seems to have opened a new chapter for people trapped in the muddy scandal. The atmosphere is once again cleared and purified, which, after long days of coldness, "seems a little warmer" (Hellman 86).

The film possesses disparate differences from the play in terms of stage direction and demeanor of the characters, the most prominent of these being Martha's manner of suicide and Karen's reaction towards the suicide. In the film, the confessing scene of Martha towards Karen is interrupted, not by Karen's irritation, but by the visit of Mrs. Tilford, bring with her the reversed court judgment and her plea for forgiveness. Different from Karen's active and profound conversation with Mrs. Tilford in the play, the communication between the two surviving victims of the scandal is concise.<sup>8</sup> With Martha still alive at the time of the visit, the role of Karen is weakened in her confrontation with Mrs. Tilford in the film. Many of Karen's lines in the play are cut in the film, maintaining only her brief condemning words at Mrs. Tilford's confession. Due to Martha's postponed suicide in the film, Karen's reaction to Mrs. Tilford's confession is plainly hatred and ungratefulness, without a shred of mutual understanding or comfort as presented in the original play. In the scene of the two teachers receiving the old lady, Martha stands in the foreground facing the camera, with Karen and Mrs. Tilford in the background, which shifts the center of the screen onto Martha and foreshadows Martha's suicide.

An experienced film reviewer would not neglect the unsmooth awkwardness of the shifts in the film. Martha's suicide, postponed in the film by the clarification of her social reputation, is not sufficiently justified. If it is due to her fear of the sudden self-acknowledged desire, the postponed suicide seems too dilatory and weakened in its tragic effect. If the suicide results from her self-resentment and sense of guilt for Karen, it remains discrepant with Karen's tendered reaction to Martha's confession. What is equally reduced in the film is the depiction of the role of Mrs. Tilford, whose vital place at the closure of the play is completely abolished in the film. She is rushing in and out of the scene, functioning only as a messenger of the reversed court decision. Moreover, different from Karen's acceptance of Mrs. Tilford's apology and warm-hearted gesture in the play, Karen's arbitrary order of Mrs. Tilford to leave sounds like the same arbitrary recomposing of the original play by the film director. Mrs. Tilford's final appearance is a meticulous design of Hellman signifying a purified promising future with the exile of the deviant, rather than a tool for a sudden plot turning. It is therefore reasonable to believe that the film adaptation deforms a tragic play into a melodramatic film.

In addition to this, Martha's suicide by shooting herself is replaced by her hanging herself behind the locked bedroom door in the film. At the first glance, this change adds more visual excitement to the screen with the vestiges of the suicide: an overturned chair and dangling feet in silhouette. However, with careful analysis, a deeper comprehension of the change naturally emerges; the silenced death of hanging makes Martha's suicide a gesture of defeat. In a study on the types of execution methods, it is maintained that death by gunshot "may still be the most humane form of capital punishment, and it may be the most dignified — associated, as it is, with military execution" (Head 81). Hanging, on the other hand, has become nearly synonymous with the lynchings of African Americans in the American South, evoking cultural memories of the white Southern oppression, and arguably, relegating Martha to the role of the Other. The stage direction in the original play emphasizes the sound of the shot in that it breaks the dead silence, a catharsis and a release. While the smothering death brought by hanging aggravates the already tense atmosphere. This subtle change can be viewed as keeping with the social mood and expectations of the times. Martha's hanging herself sets a precedent for miserable endings in films addressing homosexuality.<sup>9</sup> If not victims, lesbians were depicted as villains or morally corrupted, or even predators and vampires.<sup>10</sup> The silenced death by hanging, compared with the explosive shooting, rids the deviant of any power of utterance.

According to Hellman's original plan, Martha's suicide, to be emotionally

powerful or tragic, must arise inevitably from her fatal “flaw” with the sudden acknowledged repressed desire and be directly attributed to it. The 1961 film producers were so eager to be faithful to the original that they cleared what they believed to be the obstacle for comprehension of the tragedy, ahead of the tragic moment. Ostensibly, retarding Martha’s suicide after Mrs. Tilford’s clearing of their crimes seems to be helpful in eliminating possible attribution of Martha’s death to her fear of social rumor, while artistically the change ruins the enchantment of irony and ambiguity of the original play, and reduces the credibility of Martha’s death. It would be reasonable then to believe that Hellman’s veiled complaint of Wyler’s “over-respectfulness” to her original, is a tactful criticism of his distortion.

### **Conclusion**

Whether or not the death of Martha is fundamentally altered by Wyler, the fact remains that Martha dies in all film and stage versions. One may thus be tempted to infer that the elimination of the lesbian character (or sexually problematic character, in the case of the 1936 film) is intended to suppress a controversial theme by altering the plot. However, the argument may also be made that the ambivalent lesbianism of *The Children's Hour* is much more than merely catering to the tastes and social mores of the contemporary audience. Simply stated, the demise of Martha is not the end of lesbianism in the story. Brutal and tragic as Martha’s end may be, the community has been “restored” in a sense, but in a very elusory way. Martha may be dead, but there is also a fair amount of indirect evidence that other characters in the play have homoerotic feelings, particularly Mrs. Tilson’s housekeeper Agatha and Martha’s aunt Lily Mortar. Thus, lesbianism has not been eradicated in actuality in the play’s universe, but merely in the normalization of the comfortable tale that women should have traditional heterosexual relations with men, and that this tale alone is suitable for consumption by the children. Thus, one may also infer that the norming of the “children’s hour story” is the true return to normalcy.

But one again, the mere rewriting of stories to have comfortable endings may not necessarily obviate the qualms that the lesbian plot naturally invokes when individuals are forced into the role of the Other. The reason is that the safely and conveniently exiled sexual “deviant” is never entirely banished from the plot. While this argument may also suggest that Hellman is simply “having her cake and eating it too” — in other words, catering to both the sexually repressive temper of the times while also preserving her liberal and sexually liberated credentials — the fact remains that all versions of the stage production and film simply do nothing to

suppress sexual variation, not for society or even for the children. True, the 1936 film elides lesbianism entirely, while the 1961 film acknowledges lesbianism but attempts to eradicate it, but neither film manages to stifle the eroticism of sexual variations. In fact, as Žižek argues, the 1936 attempt to delete the lesbian them may have inadvertently heightened the “repressed eroticism” of the attraction between Karen and Martha (Žižek 109).

Thus, when Martha Dobie confesses her acknowledged desire and laments her own fatal flaw, Hellman denounces the deviance-phobic society and its destructive power, and expresses in a subtle way her understanding and sympathy towards the exiled deviant. The deviant lesbian and the stifling environment in Hellman’s literary creation, are deemed as an extreme type of female independence and patriarchal panic caused by potential deviants. The accused contaminating sexual eccentricity of the mistress triggers panic extermination for its subverting power against the patriarchal ideology on female subordination. Women’s growing economic independence and professional competence would be regarded as an achievement at the expense of socially accepted feminine qualities, among which female heterosexuality and subordination rank the most basic.

Hellman, a female playwright in a male-dominated American theatrical arena with her double-edged success, was accountably pushed to the limelight of fame as well as skepticism. By eliminating the lesbian and purifying the heterosexual community through her artistic exile of the lesbian Martha in *The Children’s Hour*, Hellman is plausibly declaring her anti-homosexual determination and her own heterosexual orientation. However, with a comprehensive look at the historical vicissitude of the lesbian scandal from court to stage, and further from stage to screen, a more convincing conclusion can be reached. Hellman, by sacrificing the deviant Martha and standing by the “right” Karen, intends to silence the public doubt and censure, and by issuing Martha a strong voice of confession and self-liberation, attempts to condemn the disciplinary institution of heterosexuality. And in doing so, she constructs both a “safe” story to be told to the children during story-hour, but at the same time, a story of human sexuality that merely reassures the protectors of convention without deleting the very subject-matter of their concern.

## Notes

1. One can assume that the textual emendations were not solely due to the social controversy of lesbianism in the 1930s when the play was first produced, because Hellman continued to make



alterations four decades later. In fact, a 1972 version of the play is included in the anthology *Forbidden Acts: Pioneering Gay and Lesbian Plays of the Twentieth Century* with the following note from the Little Brown edition from which it was extracted: "For this edition Miss Hellman has made numerous small revisions and emendations in each of the plays: the texts as given here are henceforth to be regarded as definitive" (Hodges 177).

2. In his article "Breeding (and) Reading: Lesbian Knowledge, Eugenic Discipline, and *The Children's Hour*," Tuhkanen argues that the lesbianism of the play should be re-evaluated with greater attention to the "colonial and racial subtext," referring to the East-Indian ancestry and early upbringing of the actual girl upon whom the story was based (Tuhkanen 1003).

3. Relevant works include Foucault's *The History of Sexuality*, Rich's "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," and Rubin's "Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality."

4. Alan Malyon coined the concept of Internal Homophobia in his article "Psychotherapeutic Implications of Internalized Homophobia in Gay Men."

5. The first published print of the case is the chapter entitled "Closed Doors, or The Great Drumsheugh Case," in *Bad Companions*, recounted by William Roughead (New York: Duffield & Green, 1931, 109-146). A published reprint of the case, *Miss Marianne Woods and Miss Jane Pirie Against Dame Helen Cumming Gordon*, is a photo-print edition of the National Library of Medicine copy, with manuscript notes by Lord Meadowbank, one of the judges of the case, in the margins (New York: Arno Press, 1975). Lillian Faderman, in *Scotch Verdict* (New York: William Morrow & Co., 1983), frames her account of the trial within an autobiographical narrative, reshapes the court depositions, and modernizes the language of the trial testimony in the interests of readability. The printed edition cited in this paper is the 1994 edition published by Columbia University Press.

6. Hellman told in 1968 that "I have no idea about this story. I suppose because I know something about New England I put the play there and the girls were my age. I changed it. It took me two years. I think they started out twenty-six and got to be twenty-eight by the time the play was over. I put the school in a New England town and changed the whole plot really" (Funke 96).

7. Bernard F. Dick coined the phrase to describe the score of *These Three*, which he believed "lack the hopeful, romantic character of the music associated with Karen and Joe," that was typically heard by audiences when Martha appears.

8. Karen says in one version, "It's over for me now, but it will never end for you. She's harmed us both, but she's harmed you more, I guess" (Hellman 85).

9. An example is the death of Sandy Dennis's character in the 1968 film *The Fox*.

10. Examples include the portrayals of brothel madams by Barbara Stanwyck in *Walk on the Wild Side* and by Shelley Winters in *The Balcony*.

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