

## 'MAKING SOMETHING OUT OF NOTHING': LESBIANISM AS LIBERATING FANTASY IN *THE CHILDREN'S HOUR*

The tendency to figure "lesbian" as utopic and outside dominant conceptual frameworks essentializes that category as transgressive or subversive.

(Jagose 1994: 5)

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Lillian Hellman's *The Children's Hour* was notoriously successful in its première in 1934, and its revival in 1952, because of its inclusion of a lesbian theme. Paradoxically, the play's reception has largely focused on its symbolic depiction of the effects of slander, instead of on its depiction of female homosexuality. In recent years, the representation of same-sex desire in Hellman's play has begun to be broached, being critically read as blatantly homophobic. In this article, we would like to revise the play's agenda by proposing that its articulation of lesbianism is an indictment of the patriarchal containment of women's political and sexual desire.

Keywords: American drama, Lillian Hellman, literary historiography, feminism, homophobia, lesbian desire

### 1. Introduction<sup>1</sup>

A first approach to Lillian Hellman's *The Children's Hour* (1934, 1953) may lead one to conclude that it is concerned with issues of justice and mercy, a reading upheld by the

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play's opening with a deliberate misquotation of Portia's famous speech in *The Merchant of Venice*. The text apparently deals with the injustice and mercilessness inflicted by a community on two innocent women, Martha Dobie and Karen Wright, falsely accused of 'unnatural' sexual behavior, that is, lesbianism. A second reading arises from the play's ending, according to which society 'rightly' punishes one of the women, Martha, for admitting her passionate love for her female friend, Karen. From this perspective, it can be argued that *The Children's Hour* has been 'canonized' for its acquiescence to heteronormativity: to kill the lesbian, thus, symbolizes the fight against social chaos brought about by the subversive and "abnormal" sexual behavior (Titus 1991: 222).

This interpretation is emphasized by the changes Lillian Hellman introduced to the source of her play, an 1810 Edinburgh libel case: two women in charge of an all-girl boarding school were accused by a pupil of deviant sexual behavior and eventually won the case (Tuhkanen 2002: 1006-08). Overall, by making the women in *The Children's Hour* lose the trial and killing the "unconscious lesbian", as Martha is described in the play's early draft (Spencer 2004: 47; Titus 1991: 220), Hellman seems to have created "a profoundly conservative text" in which "she wanted to confirm contemporary sexual ideology overtly" (Titus 1991: 223). However, a contextualized reading of the first version of the play provides interesting insights according to which the text, rather than conforming to the sexual discourses of its time, reflects and criticizes them, especially through silences and the avoidance of explicitness onstage (Sinfield 1999: 17-18).

It should be noted that *The Children's Hour*, a 1934 commercial success, was revived in 1952 in the midst of the Cold War. Whereas in the (post-) Depression years of the 1930s the lesbian came to symbolize the threats of feminism to patriarchal values, in the Cold War era, despite the fact that "homosexuality was equated with communism as a threat to national security" (Spencer 2004: 52), the theme of same-sex desire was directly used to indict homophobia. Our contention is that, in both periods, Hellman used the figure of the lesbian not merely to reproduce homophobia on the stage, but to denounce its politics and consequences upon those choosing 'non-patriarchal' modes of living. From this viewpoint, *The Children's Hour* should be related to its antecedents featuring lesbianism on the American stage during the years immediately before the play's opening at the Maxine Elliot's Theatre in New York. In 1922, the English version of *God of Vengeance* (1906-7) by the Yiddish playwright Sholem Asch premiered in the Provincetown Theatre in Greenwich Village before it transferred to Broadway the following year. The play is about a young girl, Rivkele, who falls in love with a prostitute working in a brothel run by her father. The producer, the director and the twelve performers were arrested and found guilty on the charge of obscenity. *Sin of Sins*, by William Hulbert, a play about a lesbian who kills her beloved's fiancé, followed a similar fate when it opened in Chicago in 1926 and was forced to close as a result of hostile reviews. That same year *The Captive*, based on Edouard Bourdet's *La Prisonnière* (1926), encountered the same kind of adverse critical reception: the theatre was actually raided by the police, and due to the outrage these performances provoked on mainstream (conservative) society, legislation was passed allowing the closure of a theater for a year if a representation was found guilty of obscenity or immorality. The play is the story of a twenty-five year old woman, Irene, who marries Jacques in an

attempt to be 'saved' from her obsession for her lover, a married woman. However, her husband is unable to 'cure' her (Faderman 1992: 66; Sinfield 1999: 137-39; 177-78). As Sinfield states, what the critical reception and public reaction to these texts indicate is that censorship is:

an area of pressure, not an absence. The social order promoted same-sex awareness, as well as penalising it, through a continuous flirtation with the impermissible. To be sure, individuals were subjected to vicious penalties, but these too made homosexuality present, even while forbidding it. We are looking at what I have called a faultline in the system: a point where the dominant ideology is under strain, where powerful competing concerns produce urgent ideological work. (1999: 72-73)

We believe that, in Hellman's case, self-censorship was at work since she suggests lesbianism but never has it staged. It is from this standpoint that *The Children's Hour* will be analyzed.

## **2. 'None of us should see salvation'? Same-sex desire as deconstruction of patriarchy in *The Children's Hour* (1934)**

In her article 'Murdering the Lesbian' Mary Titus suggests that during Hellman's childhood and youth, in the first two decades of the twentieth century, the feminist movement was already discredited, as exemplified by the emergence of the New Woman at the turn of the nineteenth to the twentieth century (1991: 215). As Lillian Faderman shows in her work *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers* (1992), such a discredit was directly linked to the advancement of the suffragist and feminist movements which began to challenge mainstream, patriarchal values, especially those related to the family. Whilst close female relationships were encouraged in the nineteenth century as a means for women to find consolation and support *prior* to marriage, such 'romantic friendships', with the advent of sexology, became the target of mainstream (male) discourses. The feminist movement, fighting for women's suffrage, their right to higher education and access to the labor market, encouraged these female attachments. This period saw the birth of quite a few all-women colleges which meant that middle class women, with career ambitions, did not need to consider marriage as the only option for surviving economically. Consequently, romantic friendships, and the feminist movement associated with them, were accused of making women unfit for marriage and family life.

The lesbian—the sexual invert—came to symbolize the dangers brought about by feminism and romantic friendships as the result of the popularization of work by sexologists, especially followers or interpreters of Freud after the First World War. Until then, there was resistance "to attribute sexuality to such proper-seeming maiden ladies" and, as Faderman goes on to explain:

...as the late nineteenth-century feminist movement grew in strength and in its potential to overthrow the old sex roles, it was not too long before feminism itself was also equated with sexual inversion and many women of the middle class came to be suspected of

anomaly, since as feminists they acted in ways inappropriate to their gender, desiring to get an education, for example, or work in a challenging, lucrative profession. (1992: 46)

This explains the fascination with, and fear of, the lesbian in the 1920s as exemplified on the stage by the plays mentioned previously. Moreover, in the Depression years of the 1930s, the convergence between feminism and lesbianism became more apparent since women's search for independence meant competition for jobs with men who had to support (traditional) families (Faderman 1992: 94). Our contention is that at the time of its première, *The Children's Hour* mirrored the origins and the results of these changing positions towards what once was considered to be mere 'romantic friendships' between women, and then lesbianism.

In Hellman's play, Karen and Martha's liaison actually contains all the ingredients of a romantic friendship. As such, it represents a threat to patriarchal, Victorian values which, despite the bohemian atmosphere of the 1920s, had never disappeared. Martha fears that Karen's engagement to a young doctor, Joseph Cardin, will put an end to her emotional and professional relationship with her friend. In their conversation about Karen's forthcoming marriage, we learn that both women went to college together, presumably to an all-female institution. Such places came to be regarded as dangerous for women; colleges "masculinized" girls making them crave for "privileges" ascribed to men and encouraging same-sex desire (Faderman 1992: 14). Martha is aware of the incompatibilities between marriage and a successful professional life. "I don't understand you", she tells Karen. "It's been so damned hard building this thing up [the school], slaving and going without things to make ends meet ... and now we're getting on our feet, you're all ready to let it go to hell" (Hellman 1979: 16). Clearly, Martha articulates the ideology of the New Woman. The sexual element that was attached to that figure in the early twentieth century is reflected later on in the same act when Martha's aunt, Mrs. Mortar, a former actress, points out that her fondness for Karen is *unnatural*, a term used by turn-of-the-century sexologists to refer to lesbianism. Moreover, Mrs. Mortar suggests to her niece that it is about time she got "a beau of her own" (Hellman 1979: 20).

These last words can be related to popular notions on Freudian theories during the bohemian 1920s. The most sophisticated and avant-garde (male) members of the bourgeoisie, as they saw themselves, accepted the notion that sexuality—heterosexual, homosexual and bisexual—had to be experienced as an escape valve for repression. Consequently, lesbianism, for example, could be considered as a mere stage some women underwent, enabling them to become the perfect partner in a heterosexual, companionate marriage—one in which man and woman would be on equal terms as a result of female sexual liberation and social advancements. Karen has such a notion of marriage as she believes that her life with Cardin will not interfere with her career. Mrs. Mortar's words suggest that Martha should follow the same track and overcome her 'lesbian phase'. Danger, therefore, lies in the fact that Martha is unwilling and/or unable to undergo the whole evolution of female sexuality according to the 'modern' ideology of the time. As she is a model to the young pupils – she teaches in an all-girl boarding school – her attitude could represent both a social and a political menace. So it follows that Mary Tilford, the student who accuses the young teachers of deviant sexual

behavior, is in fact the one to exploit the fears towards the kind of counter-ideology that was being passed on by these female/feminist institutions.

When Mary first appears on stage, she is described as a fourteen-year-old who is "neither pretty nor ugly. She is an undistinguished-looking girl, except for the sullenly dissatisfied expression on her face" (Hellman 1979: 8). That is, initially there is nothing remarkable about her except her constant dissatisfaction for which the play provides no clear answers. What is remarkable, as the play immediately shows, is Mary's mind, which seems to justify ideas about the negative consequences of knowledge and education for women. She is a clear example of how such an access to 'rational matters' masculinizes the feminine. According to Judith Butler's reading of Jacques Lacan, within patriarchy women are a reflection of the Phallus since masculine subjectivity, provided by the Symbolic through language, requires the Other —the female— to confirm his own subject position. Women, therefore, are or reflect what men are not supposed to be. Mary does not want to be the Phallus, understood as that which signifies the masculine's "Other, its absence, its lack, the dialectical confirmation of [male] identity" (1990a: 44). Mary wants to have the Phallus, that is, the phallic power, to create meaning. To do so, she needs access to knowledge and to the language that constitutes it. In the text, this is reflected in her discovering that two pupils, Peggy and Evelyn, have been eavesdropping on a conversation in which Mrs. Mortar accuses Martha of having 'unnatural' feelings for Karen. This information gives Mary the power traditionally associated with men and she uses it as men do, for her own benefit. She is also the source of knowledge for the other girls, to whom she passes over her copy of Théophile Gautier's novel *Mademoiselle de Maupin* (1835) which deals with transgenderism and homosexual love and which, eventually, inspires her to accuse Karen and Martha of lesbianism. Moreover, she also puts into practice her power through physical violence at the end of Act I: "MARY makes a sudden move for her [Peggy], grabs her left arm, and jerks it back, hard and expertly. PEGGY screams softly. EVELYN tries to take MARY'S arm away. Without releasing her hold on PEGGY, MARY slaps EVELYN'S face. EVELYN begins to cry" (Hellman 1979: 30).

Mary's behavior is linked to her precocity, to the extent that Karen wonders at how they always talk about the child "as if she were a grown woman" (Hellman 1979: 14). It is interesting to notice that this was one of the characteristics the famous English sexologist Havelock Ellis associated with sexual inversion: "distinct precocity of the sexual emotions, both on the physical and *psychic sides*" (1995: 384, emphasis added). Although Mary has no affectionate feelings for anyone, except the selfish love she feels for her grandmother, her conduct is clearly related to the concept of the female invert, a woman who showed masculine traits and who, in extreme cases, was considered a man trapped in a woman's body. Hellman shows how lesbianism was linked to social unrest—seemingly, making the play merely reflect the mainstream discourses on female homosexual desire and sexuality—by characterizing Mary for her talent to perform, manipulate and deceive others. Her acting qualities, and those of Mrs. Mortar, are opposed to Karen and Martha's (romantic) friendship and to former times in which middle-class women who decided to pursue a life together could do so without having to 'act' until discourses on feminism and female (homo)sexual desire challenged mainstream values.

If we take the boarding school as a social microcosm representing the socio-cultural pressures upon women in general, and upon female friendships in particular, then Mary's behavior is a critical view of the exercise of phallogocentrism. Such a representation of the girl's masculinist, phallic power is foregrounded in the opening stage picture in Act II Scene II when we see Mary playing with a puzzle once she has already triggered the scandal. She manipulates the pieces as she does facts, characters and knowledge, and it is the reader's and audience's task to deconstruct the puzzles that, out of such manoeuvres, are created around discourses on feminism, desire and power. From this perspective, Mary reflects the same power which later on in the play her grandmother, Mrs. Tilford, will exercise against Karen and Martha so as to prevent the further propagation of immorality and the social chaos it brings. Karen, ironically, also mirrors such a hostile attitude regarding friendship among the girls when she realizes it could lead to trouble and so separates the three – Mary, Peggy and Evelyn – and orders them to change rooms—they have been together “too long” to be socially acceptable (Hellman 1979: 23).

It has been argued that, from a dramatic point of view, *The Children's Hour* follows the pattern of the realistic, well-made-play, despite the flaws shown in Act III as a result of the abrupt ending: Martha's (surprising?) confession and her suicide (Spencer 2004: 48). Mary disappears altogether from this last act; the reader/audience is not provided with the satisfaction of witnessing her punishment, as they would in a realistic, moral play, in the Aristotelian sense. This underlines the fact that the text, despite Hellman's own words, is not so much about a lie but about the consequences of the relation between power and discourse, and its practical effects upon the lives of human beings (Hellman 1981: 4). However, the play, as we have been arguing throughout, points at the faultlines in mainstream ideology. This is seen in Cardin's failure to 'save' Karen. His doubts concerning her relationship with Martha underline the instability about his own masculinity—not being 'man enough' to break a love relationship between two women. Such a relationship, which provides them with economic independence and emotional satisfaction, makes men dispensable. Cardin's insecurity and doubts mirror the fallacy of the companionate marriage, just as Martha's words did at the beginning of the play. The bohemian arrangement, as Karen very well perceives, has no chance of working since it implies a reversal of Eve K. Sedgwick's concept of male homosocial desire (1985: 1, 25): Cardin's doubts make him feel that he is exchanging a woman for *another* woman, not a man, and therefore, male bonding and his masculinity cannot be reinforced. Furthermore, as woman is the phallus, that is, the reflection of what man is not, both women and their relationship emasculate Cardin: firstly, as independent professionals and, secondly, as purported lovers. They no longer represent what Man/Cardin is not, the patriarch of a heterosexual family (Butler 1990a: 43-47). This is so much the case that it is Karen who makes the final decision to break off their engagement, and what is finally proved is that “the masculine subject only *appears* (emphasis in the original) to originate meanings and thereby to signify. His seemingly self-grounded autonomy attempts to conceal the repression which is both its ground and the perpetual possibility of its own ungrounding” (Butler 1990a: 45).

As underlined by the omission of Portia's words in Act I, when Peggy is reciting the famous speech on 'the quality of mercy' at the end of *The Children's Hour*, it is proved

that "in the course of justice, none of us, /Should see salvation" (Shakespeare 1985: 111-12). As events develop and until the 'truth' of Mary's accusation is revealed, references to other truths concerning women's lives, hidden under the accusation of lesbianism, also come to light through faultlines in discourse. The play's final stage picture, showing Karen on her own sitting on the ledge of an open window, is not only an image of isolation and loneliness of the female condition; it is also an image of hope, of new possibilities, no matter how difficult or painful, opened up because these other 'truths' have been displayed.

### 3. '[T]he lie with the ounce of truth': Lesbianism as discursive product in *The Children's Hour* (Acting Edition, 1953)

The 1953 edition of Lillian Hellman's *The Children's Hour* is usually referred to as the 'Acting Edition' because it is the revised version of the text which the playwright edited before its highly successful re-staging in 1952. The very existence of the two versions of *The Children's Hour* begs the question of why a dramatic piece written in 1934 would be revisited by its author and, moreover, become a huge success eighteen years after its first performance in American theatres. Many scholars have deemed the answer a simple one: the play is structured around Mary's slander of Karen and Martha on the grounds of lesbianism, the power of unproved words to destroy two people's teaching careers and, by extension, their lives. The parallelism with the thriving House Un-American Activities Committee's persecution of Communists and homosexuals during the early 1950s, at times based on outright defamation, has been noted by critics time and again (Wertheim 1982: 218; Adler 1999: 125; Spencer 2004: 52). This hypothesis seems to be further supported by the preface to the widely distributed Dramatists Play Service Inc. 'Acting Edition' which consists of a reprint of an article by Harry Gilroy first published in the *New York Times* in 1952. The piece is significantly entitled 'The Bigger the Lie' after Hellman's statement in interview that "[i]t's the results of her lie that make her [Mary] so dreadful – this is really not a play about lesbianism, but about a lie. The bigger the lie the better, as always" (Hellman 1981: 4).

While the fact that the play is not about lesbianism but about a lie has hardly been contested, the lie to which Hellman referred has been unequivocally interpreted as Mary's false indictment of Martha and Karen's relationship as a homosexual one (Dolan 1990: 47; Spencer 2004: 53). However, much is gained by entertaining the possibility that the lie around which the play is structured is, in fact, the intensely homophobic (mis)construction of lesbianism at the time of the play's production when psychiatrists such as Dr. Frank S. Caprio described homosexual women as willing and able to seduce "a young innocent girl" because they were "essentially sick individuals" (Caprio 1954: 304). The relevance to Hellman's play of such a stereotyping of lesbians as women who hold the ability to seduce young girls and transform them into younger members of their 'perverted ranks' is quite evident. In the text, the potential disseminators of same-sex desire are in fact teachers who have a direct influence upon their boarding school's young female pupils. Notably, in his seminal work *Female Homosexuality: A Psychodynamic Study of Lesbianism* (1954), Dr. Caprio singled out the

importance of *The Children's Hour* as a text which had "done much to enlighten thousands of American women regarding a problem that affects more women than is generally supposed" (Caprio 1954: 54). Although the influence of Dr. Caprio's theories and 'literary reviews' could be devalued by arguing that they are only those of one professional, it is important to point out that his study on lesbianism was the only one of its kind to be published and widely distributed throughout the 1950s (Adams 1990: 266).

Bearing in mind the popularity of Dr. Caprio's study foregrounds two relevant facts in order to understand the success of Hellman's text in post-war America: firstly, *Female Homosexuality* must have reproduced the circulating discourses on lesbianism which were largely believed by average American citizens and which *The Children's Hour* ostensibly exemplified; secondly, lesbianism was an issue which worried the nation and, thus, a matter of cultural debate. Robert J. Corber argues in his article 'Cold War Femme: Lesbian Visibility in Joseph L. Mankiewicz's *All about Eve*' (2005) that "[i]t is often emphasized that during the anti-homosexual witch hunts of the 1950s, more lesbians and gays lost their jobs in the federal government than did suspected communists and fellow travellers. Although this view of the 1950s is not unfounded, it glosses over the inconsistencies and contradictions in Cold War ideologies . . . Cold War anxieties about the instability of heterosexual identities" (3-4). Corber's statement adequately describes the cause underlying the heterosexist scenario which Cold War America turned itself into after the Second World War. The necessity of (re)defining identity categories such as *woman*, *feminine* and *heterosexual*, after the destabilizing of the meaning of these terms during the conflict, foregrounded the fact that they were, in fact, constructs which could shift with time. The possible disruption of the equation of femaleness to femininity and to desire for the opposite sex was thus in the air. As Corber further argues, the fear of a possible subversion of the heterosexist status quo led the feminine lesbian, who could pass as heterosexual, to be homophobically constructed as a menacing figure for the very fabric of American society, solidly founded on nuclear family life (2005: 4). The feminine homosexual woman, usually referred to as *femme*, questioned the feasibility of defining *woman* as feminine and as heterosexual. Interestingly, in *The Children's Hour* Karen tells her fiancé Cardin that the accusation of lesbianism which she and Martha have withstood has led her to realize that "every word has a new meaning. Child, love, lawyer, judge, friend, room, woman – . . . There are not many safe words any more. That we can't move away from" (Hellman 1981: 62).

If the characters in *The Children's Hour* cannot escape the instability of linguistically-articulated identities, it is because, having become victims of prejudice themselves, they cannot believe in the main discourse which structured Cold War American heterosexism: homophobia. Seeking to stabilize heterosexual desire as normative meant that homosexuality was constituted into a homophobic fantasy in mainstream American culture. This process is described by Judith Butler in her article 'Imitation and Gender Insubordination' (1991) as the transition from homosexual practice to homophobic fantasy (20). As she further argues, homophobia may become a constituting fiction for heterosexual men and women, a way to define themselves as

seamless subjects with a stable identity against "a domain of unviable (un)subjects" (Butler 1991b: 20).

Such a proposition is highly relevant to Hellman's play since the foregrounding of homophobia as a founding fiction enables the dramatic plot to develop. Actually, the only description of lesbianism included in the text is the one Mary whispers to her grandmother, Mrs. Tilford – a description the audience never hears and which is solely constituted by the following stage directions: "Leans over back of Mrs. Tilford's chair and begins whispering. At first the whisper is slow and hesitant, but it gradually works itself up to fast, excited talking" (Hellman 1981: 38). This wordless articulation is preceded by Mary's repeated claims that she has seen and heard things she doesn't understand, an exalted monologue peppered with the adjectives *awful*, *unnatural* and *funny* (Hellman 1981: 36-38). Clearly, Hellman relies on the audience's implicit understanding of the 'things' Mary is referring to as homosexual acts. This indicates that the very silencing of lesbianism as the epitome of unnameable desire, which heterosexism imposed in Cold War America, made same-sex desire between women become a haunting issue for mainstream citizens. The lesbian's 'awfulness', 'funniness' and 'unnaturalness' would only corroborate the role which homophobia played in constructing the homosexual woman as an invisible, but nonetheless threatening, presence. As Castle argues in the introduction to her volume *The Apparitional Lesbian: Female Homosexuality and Modern Culture*, "seeming obliviousness should not deceive us. Behind such silence, one can detect an anxiety too severe to allow for direct articulation" (1993: 6).

Despite the fact that Hellman's textual reference to lesbianism is indirect, examining the play within the lesbian literary framework of the 1950s sheds light on the extent to which *The Children's Hour* may be reappraised as a contribution to lesbian visibility. After all, one should bear in mind that female homosexuality was not only a taboo subject in Cold War America but also a censored topic for publishing houses, which had to tailor the contents of explicitly lesbian works to avoid their banning. As Marijane Meaker explains in her introduction to the 2004 re-edition of *Spring Fire*, her lesbian pulp fiction novel originally published under the pseudonym Vin Packer in 1952, there were harsh restrictions placed on writers who wanted to broach lesbianism: namely, the works had to reproduce the homophobic discourses circulating on lesbians at the time. That is why they could not have a happy ending; homosexual women had to voice a rejection of their same-sex desire, on account of its "perverted nature", and lesbians had to be described as either sick or crazy (Packer 2004: vi). Interestingly, Hellman's play caters to all of these editorial requirements: the end is anything but happy, with Martha having shot herself after her voicing of her love and desire for Karen (Hellman 1981: 67) – a desire which she rejects because, in her own words, it makes her feel "sick and dirty" (Hellman 1981: 67). Should there be any doubts about lesbianism being equated with sickness, Karen's fiancé, Cardin, makes the relation between both elements explicit when he tells his girlfriend that "I wanted to be a doctor because I don't like sick people . . . I'm not going to be a sick man, and I'm not going to let you grow sick, either" (Hellman 1981: 62). It could therefore be argued that Hellman's play was a natural choice for American theatres during the 1950s since the text reproduces all the homophobic fantasies on lesbians which mainstream audiences accepted as a matter of

course at the time. In doing so, the text avoided any possible banning of the production or censoring of publication.

Notwithstanding all this, Hellman's 'Acting Edition' of *The Children's Hour* offers much more than mere historiographical proof of the pervasiveness of homophobia in Cold War America. The playwright noted that she had wanted to operate a greater change in the text than she had accomplished by erasing the final dialogue of the work when Mrs. Tilford shows herself to be contrite because she has found out that her granddaughter's accusations of lesbianism are, in fact, lies. However, in Hellman's words, "I finally decided that a mistake was as much a part of you as a non-mistake and that I had better leave it alone before I ended up with nothing" (Bryer 1986: 111). Whether the passage was truly a mistake or not is beside the question; more interesting is considering how it provides a counterbalance to the deeply homophobic indictment of lesbianism which the play seems to support up to the very end. Having found out that Mary's slander "wasn't true", Mrs. Tilford explains: "I've talked to Judge Potter. He has made all arrangements. There will be a public apology and an explanation" (Hellman 1981: 69). While Mrs. Tilford's attempts to sanitize Karen and Martha's reputation and her own conscience continue to dramatize homophobia, since Mrs. Tilford seeks redemption only because she believes Karen and Martha are not lesbians, the reader is left to wonder what Mrs. Tilford would have done if Mary's accusations had been based on facts. Precisely because the answer that comes most readily to mind is that the old lady would have done nothing, and would probably not have grieved as much over Martha's suicide, Hellman's decision to keep this final dialogue in the 'Acting Edition' provides a powerful comment on the notorious cruelty of a society which bases its morality on hate and prejudice. Revealingly, a fragment of the last conversation between Karen and Martha also provides some room for hope: the former remarks that "it isn't a new sin they tell us we've done. Other people aren't destroyed by it" while Martha answers that "[t]hey are people who believe in it, who want it, who've chosen it for themselves. That must be very different" (Hellman 1981: 65). The possibility of the play's being an indictment of homophobia, and not of lesbianism as a conscious choice is thus embedded in the text, whose lack of clarity with respect to the condemnation of female homosexuality is undoubtedly deliberate.

Hellman's play can also be read to include a statement on the power of literature as nurturing and even fostering otherness, creating an awareness of lesbianism which might not have originally been there. Martha's assertion that "[t]here's something in you and you don't know anything about it because you don't know it's there. Suddenly a little girl gets bored and tells a lie – and there, that night, you see it for the first time, and you say it yourself" (Hellman 1981: 66-67) places Mary's lie at the origin of her self-identification as a lesbian. Mary's lie in turn is based upon the reproduction of her clandestine reading of Théophile Gautier's *Mademoiselle de Maupin* (1835). Hence, the reproduction of literary discourses on lesbianism is the very fabric of Mary's slander and, eventually, leads to Martha's self-discovery. The role of literature as a tool to enable awareness, a means of identification and refuge from the impending homophobia of the 1950s, is well documented in Lee Lynch's article 'Cruising the Libraries', where the author states that "I had to find reflections of myself to be assured that I was a valuable human being and not alone in the world. . . . These are the words

which taught me who and what I was" (1992: 42). If *The Children's Hour* can be read as an indictment of homophobia and an affirmation of the possibility of feeling and sharing same-sex desire despite social prejudice, it is feasible to consider the play as Hellman's contribution to such an enabling body of literary work. Paraphrasing Martha's words, *The Children's Hour* may be summed up as a play representing a homophobic lie with an ounce of lesbian truth (Hellman 1981: 67).

#### 4. Conclusions

In her article 'Sex, Lies, and Revisions: Historicizing Lillian Hellman's *The Children's Hour*' (2004), Jenny S. Spencer argues that "[g]iven its specific, and fairly well-documented, historical transformations . . . *The Children's Hour* provides a model site for thinking about the questions and methods of historical theatre research and their relation to the processes of social change" (45). Indeed, as has been argued above, the two versions of Hellman's text do provide a historical chronicle of social processes intimately related to the liberation of women's social and sexual desires: while in the original 1934 edition of the play female homosexuality is drawn upon as a metaphorical tool to achieve ultimate feminine liberation from patriarchal constraints, the 1953 revised version of the text takes a further step in pointing towards the feasibility of structuring women's actual lives around same-sex desire.

The extent to which both editions of Hellman's *The Children's Hour* are subversive can be appreciated when one considers the negative connotations with which lesbianism was imbued during the 1930s and 1950s. If during the 1930s female homosexuality was socially constructed as a notorious consequence of feminism, thus becoming a homophobic fantasy meant to discredit the ideological advocacy for women's rights, the 1950s were an especially ripe era for lesbian scapegoating, since American national ideology was equated with heterosexism. In the light of these historical backgrounds, we contend that Hellman's use of lesbianism as an imaginary construction becomes a motif in both versions of *The Children's Hour*, the use of which reveals its author's wilful transgression of social mores regarding female homosexuality. In the original text, lesbianism has been argued to provide the means by which one of the main characters, Karen, realizes the potentially liberating possibilities of choosing to live beyond patriarchal expectations of womanhood. After revision, the play has been noted to validate same-sex desire between women as a feasible means to achieve feminine fulfilment. Hence, both versions of the text advocate lesbianism as a liberating fantasy for women in each specific historical context. By highlighting the role literature may play in enabling female readers' awareness of lesbian love as a possibility, Hellman makes a statement on the importance of both reading and writing as active tools against women's submission to patriarchal domination and against homophobia.

Hence, while the 1934 and 1953 versions of *The Children's Hour* offer divergent points of view on the liberating potential of lesbianism – the former text impinging on the metaphorical dimension of female same-sex desire, the latter making a far more explicit case for female homosexuality – both texts draw on love between women as an imaginary site from which to resist the patriarchal containment of women's social and

sexual options. Such a figuration of lesbianism as a liberating imaginary site beyond normative social discourses is described by Annamarie Jagose as the ‘lesbian utopias’ which characterize patriarchal ideology, and thus as an ideological fault in the mainstream social imaginary. As she points out, “[t]his space held by ‘lesbian,’ at once liberatory and elsewhere, is a utopic space. . . . [G]iven the utopic site’s disavowed dependency on those very economies from which it distinguishes itself, all these spaces converge in the impossible dream of exteriority” (1994: 2). The relevance of Jagose’s theory to Hellman’s play cannot be underestimated since *The Children’s Hour* articulates female homosexuality as the imaginary projection of a child’s mind which has been stimulated by fiction. Thus, Mary’s construction of lesbianism is represented throughout as exceeding the limits of realism but, paradoxically, is also shown to be grounded on an accurate perception of facts. That is why female same-sex desire becomes, in the text, a site which negotiates the wavering limits between the condemnatory fantasy of social homophobia and the laudatory imagination of individual liberty. Focusing on the latter aspect of Hellman’s play opens the possibility of rereading both versions of *The Children’s Hour* (1934, 1953) as brave attempts to vindicate the positive potential of same-sex desire for women, instead of dismissing them as versions of a text which “plays into homophobic rules” (Fleche 1996: 26).

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