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## **Uncanny Repetitions in Lillian Hellman's *The Children's Hour***

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**KEYWORDS:** Sigmund Freud; Judith Butler; repetition; children; theatre studies methodology; performance; contextual reading

**ABSTRACT:** This article addresses Lillian Hellman's *The Children's Hour* in terms of "the uncanny," that is, as a play concerned with doubling and instability. In a reading informed by Sigmund Freud and Judith Butler, the article analyses the processes of retrospection, reiteration, and repetition within the play, claiming that the handful of critical accounts thus far produced have underestimated the extent to which these structures disrupt appeals to a stable meaning. Such disturbances have consequences for the field of theatre history, which relies on these concepts in its methodologies and conceptual understandings. What is at stake, finally, is the contextual frame of performance studies – its ability to offer a narrative untouched by the "corrosive" power of the uncanny.

In this article, I will be addressing Lillian Hellman's *The Children's Hour* (1936) in terms of the uncanny. I am not the first to approach *The Children's Hour* in this way, yet I will argue that the unsettling repetitions of the play can be understood to extend further than has been recognized in the previous critical accounts. As a point of departure, I find it helpful to turn to works by Sigmund Freud and Judith Butler, insofar as they can be understood to introduce the uncanny's radical potential. Early in Freud's 1919 essay "The Uncanny," the title is understood to refer to a term of unsettling ambiguity. Although the "German word 'unheimlich' is obviously the opposite of 'heimlich' ['homely'], 'heimisch' ['native']", and, therefore, "we are tempted to conclude that what is 'uncanny' is frightening precisely because it is not known and familiar," Freud notes that "[s]omething has to be added to what is novel and unfamiliar to make it uncanny" (220-21). This addition turns out to be the very term "the uncanny" has been positioned against: as Freud works through various definitions, he finds that "among its different shades of meaning the word 'heimlich' exhibits one which is identical with its opposite, 'unheimlich'" (224). What is *heimlich* thus comes to be *unheimlich*, and Freud's mission to locate the "definite form" of the experience results, at the very point of its success, in an acknowledgment of the impossibility of the enterprise (226). "Native" to "the uncanny" is all that is of necessity most foreign.

The irony of a disruption situated at the very point of fixity can also be found in the queer theory of Judith Butler, in which comforting and conventional notions of personal and sexual identity are understood to be compromised when they are most insistent in their claims to stability and separation. Take, for example, the process of "coming out." To declare "I am a lesbian" is, in a sense, unambiguous. For Butler, however, the certainty that is established is not secure:

To claim that this [“a lesbian”] is what I am is to suggest a provisional totalization of this “I.” But if the I can so determine itself, then that which it excludes in order to make that determination remains constitutive of the determination itself... In the act which would disclose the true and full content of that “I,” a certain radical concealment is thereby produced. (309)

According to Butler, fixing identity will always be an uncanny activity as a repressed other is inevitably involved. As a statement, “I am a lesbian” does not stand on its own but is positioned against being heterosexual, for example. A constitutive excess, unavailable but necessary, is required, with any fixing of identity demanding the repression of such others. It follows that identity is never fully present in a given instance. It is a difficulty that can be read in the very dynamics of “coming out,” insofar as “being ‘out’ always depends to some extent on being ‘in’; it gains its meaning only within that polarity. Hence, being ‘out’ must produce the closet again and again in order to maintain itself as ‘out’,” hence an “infinite postponement of the disclosure of ‘gayness,’ produced by the very act of ‘coming out’” (309). The closet might seem foreign to the liberation of being “out,” yet the one returns to the other.

For Butler, the irresolvable nature of an uncanny identity compels iteration:

[I]t is through repeated play of this sexuality that the “I” is insistently reconstituted as a lesbian “I”; paradoxically, it is precisely the repetition of that play that establishes as well the instability of the very category that it constitutes. For the “I” is a site of repetition, that is, if the “I” only achieves the semblance of identity through a certain repetition of itself, then the I is always displaced by the very repetition that sustains it. (311)

Rather than confirming the self, testifying to a hard-impacted identity that persists in every

instance, repetition defers, locating identity within a performative chain. For Freud, such repetition defines the condition of “the uncanny,” insofar as it is an “anxiety” that “can be shown to come from something repressed which recurs” (241). In such recurrence, there is not only an insistence upon structures that are unavailable to conscious thought but also an overruling even of the pleasure principle: something else, it seems, is at work.

The extent of the strange and disruptive effect of repetition can be glimpsed in the following celebrated formulation:

[the] uncanny is in reality nothing new or alien, but something which is familiar and old-established in the mind and which has become alienated only through the process of repression. This reference to the factor of repression enables us, furthermore, to understand Schelling’s definition of the uncanny as something which ought to have remained hidden but has come to light. (241)

The nature of the uncanny is that it has always been with us, yet as old news it can never lodge in the original position necessary to a history of continuum. Its familiarity, in other words, is premised on a repetition that speaks of a difference, and in this formative division an uncanny effect can be read. Just as the performance of “coming out” problematizes the relationship between an original “I” and the “lesbian” it now is and somehow always has been, the “daemonic” repetition of the uncanny settles the subject not only by locating a constitutive structure in her place but also through an understanding of that structure as impossible: repetition cannot be narrated on its own terms; the continuum is disrupted through retrospection, and thus so too is the subject (238). Narratives of repetition bring to light the division of the unitary trait, the alien quality of the familiar thing in its original condition, an example of the retrospective formation Freud terms *nachträglichkeit* or “afterwardsness.”

This structure, I will argue, can help us develop a reading both of *The Children's Hour* and recent attempts to locate the play in a wider history of performance. To arrive at the point where such issues can be worked through, however, I first read Hellman's work in relation to the uncanny notions of repetition, supplementarity, deferral, and performance introduced thus far.

### **Diffusion and desire**

*The Children's Hour* is concerned with a lie told by a child and its effect on the adults charged with her care. Karen Wright and Martha Dobie run a small school for girls, aided by Martha's aunt, Lily Mortar, who is more hindrance than help. A student, Mary Tilford, is found to have told a lie and is prevented by Karen from attending an upcoming celebration. She runs away from the school and, to avoid being forced to return, tells her grandmother, Amelia Tilford, who has considerable power in the community, that Karen and Martha have an "unnatural" relationship (52). As the lie gains acceptance and the case is taken to court, the relationships among Karen, Martha, and Joe Cardin, who is Karen's fiancé and Tilford's nephew, become increasingly strained. Joe eventually leaves, whilst Martha declares that she has come to understand that she has loved Karen "in the way they said" (104). Martha then commits suicide. Finally, Amelia Tilford arrives, having uncovered the lie, and asks Karen for forgiveness.

Mary Titus, in what is the most widely cited critical engagement with the play, argues that, although it is structured in terms of accusers and accused, there are deeper connections to be found between seemingly opposed characters. Thus, although Lily Mortar does not share Mary Tilford's insight or youth, and neither can claim Martha Dobie's ability to love, all three can be understood to be "abnormal," a condition that, in a more complex sense, is shared by Amelia Tilford (Titus 219). For Titus, the play, through such connections, "seeks simultaneously to

confirm and to 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" (216). In other words, whilst the "abnormal" identity is located on the outside of the condemned couple, leaving them scrupulously clear of moral taint, it touches all other characters in the play, thus suggesting the insidious spread of the "unnatural," an expression of "private" response insofar as the repetition of character is understood to reflect Hellman's own repressed yet addressed lesbianism; this avoidance is also an announcement, a suggestion that the "unnatural" is widely held, yet also a demand that the single character declared "unnatural" be punished (216). The reading offered by Titus returns *The Children's House* to a dualistic structure, insofar as two characters are understood to be set against the dangerous repetitions of the play. As Hellman writes in her preparatory notes, Karen and Joe are "normals," as opposed to the "abnormal" Martha, Lily, Mary, and Amelia (qtd. in Titus 219). Indeed, the play is problematic for Titus insofar as it holds up the hope of a heterosexuality that is not touched by the "abnormality" that infects all else (219-23).

Counter to this dualistic reading, and in keeping with the disruptions to self-presence introduced through the work of Freud and Butler, I suggest that the play is interested precisely in dissolving the certainties of character that would allow Karen, and heterosexual "normality," to be kept distinct. The shock of the lie in *The Children's Hour* is that it exceeds its proper place; it questions the possibility of a self-contained identity, a conventional psychology. To borrow a phrase from Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, there is a "corrosive" at work, one not limited to the collapsing of divisions among Martha, Amelia, Lily, and Mary (199). Instead, it seeps out beyond its given boundaries to implicate "normal" sexuality in the "unnatural" excesses it should

be defined against.

### The “corrosive”

One could begin to chart this “corrosive” effect through a reading of the “faints” initially employed by Mary to gain sympathy and deflect accusations. Joe Cardin, in his role as school doctor, dismisses these with the insistence that “I could have managed a better faint when I was six years old” (27). In one sense, this declaration works to differentiate the characters: unlike Mary, Joe can offer a retrospective account, yet the retrospection on offer problematizes the opposition it constitutes, producing Joe as both remembering adult and youthful performer, knowing subject and object of knowledge, judge and sharer.

A comparable move can be seen in an early exchange between Karen and Mary, when Karen says, “I don’t say that I’ll always agree that you should do exactly what you want to do, but I’ve had feelings like that, too – everybody has – and I won’t be unreasonable about yours” (13). The move to familiarize the behaviour of the seemingly “strange” girl once again works against itself, constructing Karen in terms of the “abnormality” she should oppose. As the play progresses, Karen’s position as “normalized” adult becomes further problematized. Take, for example, the following response to a question from Martha:

**Karen:** [*as a child would say it*] Isn’t there anywhere to go? (103)

According to the stage direction, it is not the words that make this question “as” that of a child but rather the way they are said. Speaking in this way, Karen is not speaking as herself; her question is haunted by the saying of another. As such, the “child” other shares with Karen a lack of certain self-identity; it is a generalized subject whose saying can be predicted, even though it is yet to occur. Indeed, the appeal to “a child” is limited to Karen saying “as” it. In other words,



if Karen's agency is undermined by its construction as the potential saying of another, so too is this other saying understood only in terms of its fidelity to Karen's saying.

The final act reveals again this questioning of "normality" through the appeal to the child, with Amelia's servant Agatha declaring, on seeing Karen: "You poor child. You look like you've got a pain somewhere" (109). The play begins with Mary understood as "child" and declaring she has a pain (although no cause can be found) and moves towards Karen understood as "child," one who seems to be harbouring a pain that cannot finally be located. It can be suggested that this position – which might be termed "the child with the hidden pain" – is one that Mary must vacate:

**Karen:** [...] Why, she's a child.

**Martha:** She's not a child any longer.

**Karen:** Oh, my God, it all fits in so well now. That girl hated us for a long time.

We never knew why, we never could find out. There didn't seem to be any reason

–

**Martha:** There wasn't any reason. She hates everybody and everything.

**Karen:** Your Mary's a strange girl, a bad girl. There's something very awful the matter with her. (72)

For Martha, childhood has little to do with age. An alteration has occurred, resulting in a "she" who is something other than a child. Karen's idea that the "girl hated us for a long time" problematizes this understanding, however, as the subject is a "girl," and thus still a "child" in some sense, and her hatred is not new, but extends back in time. A "child" is not the same thing as "that girl," however, as it is only the gendered term that can be modified by appeals to the strange and the bad. A crisis of identification occurs, with the ever more elaborate attempts to pin

Mary down to a precise semantic term resulting in a slippage of reference, a repetition of the failure to finally secure the “something very awful” that is “the matter with her.” It is a confusion that we see, too, in this earlier exchange:

**Martha:** [...] we still haven't got the faintest idea what goes on in her head.

**Karen:** She's a strange girl.

**Martha:** That's putting it mildly [...] There's something the matter with the kid.

That's been true ever since the first day she came. She causes trouble here; she's bad for the other girls. I don't know what it is – it's a feeling I've got that it's wrong somewhere –. (16)

The idea that it is Mary's “abnormality” that places her beyond knowledge is not sustained, however. Indeed, the failure to understand Mary is elsewhere taken to be the root of the problem with Amelia's relationship with her, with Karen declaring “She's too crazy about Mary to see her faults clearly – and the kid knows it” (15). “The kid” is known by Karen at this stage, and the position of “not knowing,” occupied elsewhere by the teachers, is taken up by Amelia. This “not knowing” is a form of being “crazy” for another. Martha is less secure in her lack of knowledge, having a “feeling,” at least, of that which is “wrong somewhere.” But this does not, I think, make her less invested in Mary than Karen is. Rather, as Titus suggests, it indicates a “lesbian desire ... diffused throughout the text” (221). Titus claims this diffusion “touch[es ...] every character except Karen Wright” (221). But one difficulty in this formulation is that the not knowing, which somehow secures Karen from “abnormality,” is, uncannily, at another stage, indicative of an “abnormal” investment. What might be taken as structuring oppositions do not keep to their appropriate place, each position in relation to knowledge one of implication as much as separation.

Elsewhere in the play, the ethics of knowledge seem more stable. Certainly, according to Joe, Amelia's fault is a failure of empathy, an inability to know the other:

**Cardin:** Righteousness is a great thing.

**Mrs. Tilford** [*gently*]: I know how you must feel.

**Cardin:** You don't know anything about how I feel. (70)

It is a failure satirized in the opening scene of the play, with the selfish and untalented Lily Mortar offering up a theory of empathy for her uninterested students: "Peggy, can't you imagine yourself as Portia? Can't you read the lines with some feeling and pity? [*Dreamily.*] Pity! Ah! As Sir Henry said to me many's the time, pity makes the actress" (5). In one sense, Lily is expressing her self-delusion and the hypocrisy that condemns Martha and Karen: there is a dearth of pity in New England. The "pity" being appealed to here is complex, however. In one sense, it maintains the distinctions between the subject positions it is tasked with overcoming. Peggy is never "as" Portia; she is asked only to "imagine yourself" being so, and, even without this appeal to imagination, the "yourself" is understood to maintain its identity even when "as" another. It is the "you" that is imagining "yourself" as that other identity, Portia. The "feeling and pity" are limited to the manner in which the lines are performed; "pity" is not internal to the subject but a supplement to the act of reading. As such, the subject can, it would seem, remain unaffected by "pity."

There is, however, a counter sense in which "pity" is threatening to the self. Peggy is, after all, asked to imagine herself "as" another. Rather than a flexible identity able to tolerate another being "as" her, Portia can be understood as that which is most determined, with Peggy and the "you" having nothing in them that might resist the process of being "as" her. The final declaration – that "pity makes the actress" – further problematizes the notion of a discrete

identity. The ability to understand the other, exemplified by Karen's "reasonable" fellow-feeling for Mary, appears as acting, and thus, in a sense, with the kind of dissembling the play critiques. It is performance that requires feeling for and empathy with the other. The "you" that successfully reads with pity would not be "Peggy" or "Lily" but an identity retrospectively defined by its actions as a performer, one both commendably singular, yet disturbingly generic: "the actress."

We began with a simple notion that *The Children's Hour* decries a loss of pity, yet, rather than being opposed to a society corrupted by the lie, pity is taken to be mendacious. Moreover, the appeal to pity questions the very separation of individual subjects it is elsewhere called upon to maintain. It is also curiously supplementary: rather than intrinsic to the subject's identity, it is what the "you" reads "with," even as a successful reading will retrospectively take itself to be the work of "the actress" (6). As such, the stage directions that "*She recites hammily, with gestures*" – which seem only to condemn Lily – can be taken to uncannily repeat the desired condition of pity. In a repetition of the reading of identity offered by Judith Butler above, pity is a kind of inauthentic exteriorization.

### **"We don't talk like people anymore"**

The uncanny problematic of pity, the appeal to a self that is and is not itself through being as another, makes an appearance in the play's climatic scene, the argument between Karen and Joe that leads to the termination of their relationship:

**Cardin:** My God, we can't go on like this. Everything I say to you is made to mean something else. We don't talk like people anymore. Oh, let's go out of here as fast as we can.

**Karen** [*as though she is finishing the sentence for him*]: And every word will have a new meaning. You think we will be able to run away from that? Woman, child, love, lawyer – no words that we can use in safety anymore. [*Laughs bitterly.*] Sick, high-tragic people. That’s what we’ll be.

**Cardin** [*gently*]: No, we won’t darling. Love is casual – that’s the way it should be. We must find that out all over again. We must learn to live and love like other people. (97)

In this exchange, Joe and Karen might be read as caught up in the expansive scheme initiated by Mary. The horror of the lie is that it spreads, corrupting even the everyday language between “normals.” Karen and Joe can still be understood as set apart by their commentary on and anger at this process, however unable they are to escape it. But the certainty of “normal” identity is questioned. Joe’s insistence that “[w]e don’t talk like people anymore” mourns a lost sense of normality, thus differentiating the speaker from those others that revel in the disruption of the lie. It marks a change, insofar as we did once talk like people, yet it also necessitates that, when all was good, “we” were not people but only ever “like” them, a similarity constituted through “talk.” It is an oddly performative construction, comparable to Lily’s notion of pity as constituted through the act of reading, rather than, say, in terms of intention or thought. “We” were never really ourselves, the question of our identity turning always on our actions, never our essence.

Positioned against this strangely empty and deferred past identity is a future threat. The danger is one of novelty: in the world to come, words will be granted meanings additional to those they have now. Safety, it would seem, requires containment. Without semantic limitation, “we” will be “sick, high-tragic people.” Just as words will have meanings beyond themselves, “we” will be “people” other than ourselves. It follows that both past security and future threat are

uncannily marked by a being as the other. Against the future identity is set a further possible existence, one that privileges the “casual.” A refusal of the neurotic over-determined identity elsewhere on offer is revealed, but only through a repetition of its characteristic division: “[w]e must learn to live and love like other people.”

However, if the “casual,” for Cardin, stands in opposition to an obsessive self-reflection, earlier in the play it was caught in heavy, deliberative circuits that signify, rather than oppose, the “sick.” After all, Mary, who for her teachers has “something very awful the matter with her” (72), does not carefully scheme but thrives precisely on casual improvisation. As she declares, “Oh, who cares? I’ll think of something to tell her. I can always do it better on the spur of the moment” (37). As Mary Titus suggests, Mary’s “actions seem to bubble up out of her formlessness, generated in the confusion, disorder, or incompleteness she represents” (219). Indeed, this lack of volition allows her to exert control even when she is not there, with, for example, Martha stating that her “influence is abroad even when she is unconscious” (29). Unlike Joe, Martha and Karen, hemmed in and terrorized by the contemplation of their own fate, Mary is happy to relinquish control, sure of her ability to respond when response is required, able to act, indeed, in the absence of consciousness. And “casual” is thus caught up in Mary’s capacity to be unknowable, and thus irresolvable, just as “casual” is positioned, contrarily, in opposition to an uncontainable and neurotic future.

It would seem that sickness is and is not casual, whilst to be authentically oneself is to talk “like” another. In their crisis of faith, Joe and Karen find themselves as much in an uncanny valley as in the Slough of Despond. It is not that difference has no place there: conversations turn on oppositions between sickness and health, self and other, the casual and the obsessive. Rather, it is that each part of the opposition is uncannily constituted, at one stage, through its other.

### *Nachträglichkeit*

Something of what I termed the *nachträglich* structure of the play can be read in the way in which the ideal past identity is understood always to have been implicated in the corruption to come. It is to the question of “afterwardsness” in *The Children’s Hour*, and its relation to “the uncanny,” that I turn now in detail.

After Karen and Joe have parted in the third act, Martha remains dismissive of the accusations levelled against her, yet her conversation with Karen leads to her final declaration:

**Martha:** I have loved you the way they said.

**Karen:** You’re crazy.

**Martha:** There’s always been something wrong. Always – as long as I can remember. But I never knew it until this happened. (104)

In “Sex, Lies, and Revisions: Historicizing Hellman’s *The Children’s Hour*,” Jenny S. Spencer’s groundbreaking, contextualizing reading of the play, there is a discussion of the critical move that reads this scene in terms of “Martha’s sexual identity ...being constituted at the moment of her confession, as one more result of the lie” (49). As Spencer suggests, this account is homophobic insofar as it is premised on the idea that there is no prior lesbianism, with such a sexuality linked to the notion’s degeneracy. As she writes: “The power of lies to corrupt is ... demonstrated through the very thoughts and questions that these two sympathetic characters are driven, however shamefully, to voice” (49). As Spencer also suggests, there is a more complex possibility, one that this present article, with its interest in Judith Butler’s theories of performativity, might be understood to repeat:

[a] present-day audience familiar with Judith Butler’s analysis of hate speech might suggest an even more nuanced reading: that Mary’s injurious speech in *The*

*Children's Hour* is both traumatizing and enabling, the “lie” producing a possible reality that neither Hellman nor her characters can fully accept [although this interpretation] remained unavailable to earlier audiences who quite literally saw a different play. (53)

This reading necessitates a meaning in excess of intention – a sexual identity that is not necessarily tied to a specific moment, one that is both known and not known. But I would suggest that the constitutive tensions undergirding this line of engagement are not fully worked through, thus blunting the radical edge of Butler’s project.

Within the confession, the appeal to a stable identity is undermined by its own terms: a revelation concerning the self is articulated through the words of another. There is an additional complication at work here, however. To gain an understanding of how it operates, one might begin with the seemingly straightforward aspect of the exchange, the statement that “[t]here’s always been something wrong.” The declarative mode constructs this statement as a general truth, not owned by a specific subject, yet the “always” is limited to what the “I” can remember, and the stage directions indicate that this is spoken by “Martha.” Nevertheless, there is a sense in which the “I” had not known of this “something” until “this happened.” The “I” that remembers is one located at the point of knowledge. This account is retrospective, in other words, its prior condition being memory, which is other than knowledge. An alternative reading might locate the tension between the “something wrong” and the “it” that is the fact that “I have loved you the way they said.” This confession does not escape the problem of retrospection, however. This love is one that is located in the past, with “I” engaged in this love then, rather than an identity retrospectively producing it. The “I” (and its love) is in the position elsewhere impossibly constituted by a lack of subject, the declarative condition in which “[t]here’s always been



something wrong.” This subject is also constituted in terms of a “way” of loving that has been “said.” According to this revelation, the unannounced, silent, subjectless love is also the love pertaining to a subject that is spoken: a love rigorously private yet formed as public address. As I have suggested above, however, the declaration of identity necessitates its division. In Butler’s formulation of the confession, “sexuality requires a certain performance and production of ‘self’ which is the constituted effect of a discourse that nevertheless claims to ‘represent’ that self as a prior truth” (309).

The challenge to identity that the confession introduces is only increased by reading the way characters other than Karen and Martha have understood their “love.” Martha, for example, speaks of “what the judge called [our] ‘sinful sexual knowledge’ of one another,” whilst Karen declares to Martha that Joe “thought we had been lovers” (101). In what sense can Martha be thought to have loved Karen in this way? The silent something, remembered always to have been, yet never known, must be both “sinful sexual knowledge” as it is announced by another, and the mutually realized physicality of lovers. Moreover, the repetition here does not simply point to the separation between the early and the late; it problematizes even the possibility of such a distinction. As in the construction of uncanny memory offered by Freud, the initial form is one that can and cannot be separated from the later. It follows that the love is spoken and not spoken, remembered and never originally known, a “something” that is other than love.

The appeal to “what the judge called ‘sinful sexual knowledge’ of one another” can be complicated still further. In the confession scene, Martha explicitly constructs her relationship with Karen in terms of a lack of knowledge. Karen fails to understand Martha, hence the need for repeated explanation, whilst Martha fails to understand herself: “I don’t know. It all seems to come back to me. In some way I’ve ruined your life. I’ve ruined my own. I didn’t even know”

(105). We could follow the play's critics and take this statement as simply self-delusion on Martha's part or an actualization of something unknown, yet genuinely inside, the self. There is an alternative reading, however, in which this "sexual knowledge" is not necessarily misidentified: if sexuality is unconscious, then a subject's "sexual knowledge" is not necessarily known to them. In this reading, what counts is not some internally held knowledge on the part of the subject but rather the position through which the subject is constituted, and the claims and repressions – the "concealment" – this position necessitates. It is helpful to turn once more to Butler:

[a] psychic excess is precisely what is being systematically denied by the notion of a volitional "subject" who elects at will which gender and/or sexuality to be at any given time and place. It is this excess which erupts within the intervals of those repeated gestures and acts that construct the apparent uniformity of heterosexual positionalities, indeed which compels the repetition itself, and that which guarantees its perpetual failure. (315)

For Butler, sexual identity is neither contained within the subject nor the material of the confession but extends, being determined by what it is not, divided within, sustained, and constituted through retelling. It is an uncanny iteration, repetition without pity, a retrospective formulation; it is a challenge to the discourse of "character" to which critics of Hellman – even those who question notions of "volition" – subscribe.

I now turn to this notion of the formation of discrete identities through repetition and retelling – and the repressions and impossible divisions this formation entails – for my conclusion. My interest lies less with "character," however, than the identity of the play *The Children's Hour* and the challenges that attend the critically vital move of placing it within a

history of performance.

— **“Nothing, of course, begins at the time you think it did” (Hellman, *Unfinished* 96)**

Jenny Spencer suggests that critical studies of *The Children’s Hour* are limited in the readings they can offer, as they tend to focus on the “literary artefact” (usually the 1936 version of the play) rather than its subsequent production history (44). Such a critique might be made of the present article. In reading only the 1936 edition, my argument ignores what can rightly be regarded as its constitutive excess: the many revisions and productions that make up the cultural text that is *The Children’s Hour*.

For Spencer, “[a] number of things happen when we suspend the question of what the play is about” and focus on its successive revisions and stagings (44). Readers can, for example, “observe” more “clearly” the dramatic difficulties surrounding the play’s final scene, one with which Hellman was never satisfied despite her numerous revisions (60). Readers can also gain an understanding of how these difficulties have changed over time, and how such changes “prefigure and subsequently document a major change in American drama of the 1930s to the 1950s,” namely a move from “political overtures to audience action” towards “an inward-focused drama in which social issues must be read through the complex ... relationships between the characters onstage” (44, 60). In other words, studying revisions to *The Children’s Hour* allows one to perceive changes in critical and audience understanding of the politics of theatre, from the overtly didactic to that based on character interaction. Spencer offers a nuanced reading in which, crucially, historical research “proves as slippery and open to interpretation as the script alone” (60).

The issue of repression can stage a return here, however, insofar as additional “things” can “happen” as we “suspend the question of what the play is about” (44). And thus results a challenge to the claim that a contextual reading can secure Hellman’s work in its self-divided and non-repressed state. Spencer certainly does question discourses of simple, reductive objecthood, arguing that “historical research into this play amply demonstrates that ‘meaning’ is not simply ‘there’ to be discovered but is something to be constructed from the materials at hand” (60). Even within this quotation, however, the questioning of the discrete physical unit only goes so far, with the “materiality” that is taken to define the resistance to context simply relocated at an earlier stage in the process of meaning-making. For Spencer, contemporary reading can use discrete “materials,” thus separating the contemporary and original in a narrative of “evolving” meaning. The 1936 text is taken to be problematic insofar as it is a “literary artefact” (44); engagement with this text alone cannot be dynamic, in Spencer’s view, as it is an object only, lacking the shifting quality of a context that is, in my reading of her argument, ironically grounded in a stationary materialism. I am interested in the 1936 text as readable and thus something other than “artefact.” I have read in the play an uncanny construction of the process of remembering, one that can offer a challenge to the notion of the individual unit necessary to a stabilized history: the past event is one that must stem from, yet be prior to, Martha’s confession. In other words, my appeal to the structure of “afterwardness” in the play questions a sequential and developmental history of discrete performances.

It follows that the act of “suspension” is not simply a neutral operation, enabling the return of a production history that would otherwise be repressed. Rather, it is itself a problematically repressive move, requiring the very hiving off of meaning that the 1936 text can be read to question. There is a tension between the historicizing reading and the meaning that is

to be temporarily evaded. For the contextual account, textual meaning is an excess that can be safely removed from play, and, as such, there is no need to discuss, for example, Hellman's specific construction of Martha's confession. Amongst all that is lost in this removal is the inevitability of return, the sense in which the repressed will always come back to disrupt the neatened narrative. On these terms, the contextual account cannot achieve the separation it requires; its constitutive act of repression is already a concern of the 1936 text. The play follows Butler in suggesting that what is "exclude[d] in order to make that determination remains constitutive of the determination itself" (309), with this repressed term always coming to light. For *The Children's Hour*, the unspoken is repeated in speech, and what is remembered remains unknown.

There is an additional sense in which context and text are caught up in an uncanny narrative of repetition. Despite calling for meaning to be "suspended," Spencer's analysis of production history begins with an account of the structure of the earlier text: *The Children's Hour* is discussed in terms of repetition and escalation, with Spencer claiming that "one ... manipulative deception breeds another in Hellman's play" (45). If there is a sense of breached boundaries in this formulation, with "breeding" suggesting that each new deception gestates within the last, it is also a narrative of origins, of birth, with each lie a distinct entity. In this precise sense, then, the structure can be understood to repeat that of subsequent "context": in both, a succession of objects form a narrative of escalation. Even as boundaries are shored up between the 1936 text and its later history, with each instance of production isolated, there is also a repetition set up, with the 1936 text required to conform to the structure granted the extended history. I suggest that there is a tension between the notion of the lie in *The Children's Hour* and Spencer's reading of the performance history of the play and the deception represented within it.

Whereas I track an iteration that undergoes transformation whilst impossibly remaining the same, Spencer claims a linear development formed from reassuringly discrete instances.

Any account of theatre history that is dependent on such a model will necessarily stand in opposition to *The Children's Hour*, insofar as the play questions a notion of history constituted by discrete units placed within an evolving narrative. The child, as read above, for example, is not a self-sufficient subject, subject to development and differentiated from others, but an identity rooted in self-contradiction. Mary, as a child, is also something other than a child, whilst the adult is identified as the child it elsewhere opposes. Indeed, in Spencer's account this disruptive, contrary child emerges even within the articulation of discrete iterations: the claim that "one ... manipulative deception breeds another in Hellman's play" places "deception" within a narrative of reproduction, of gestation and birth, in which the producer and produced are one. In this way, the contextual reading enacts the slippage it seeks to contain. It is implicated in what I take to be the play's "meaning," even as "meaning" is "suspend[ed]" through a focus on purely formal elements. This understanding of the materials, structures and discreet experiences of performance as evidence at its most self-evident can be further questioned, as *The Children's Hour* is not neutral on the question of evidence. If evidence simply communicated its truth, Mary would not have the power to continue to deceive, and the lie would not escalate. As it is, Martha and Karen find that they are "standing here defending ourselves – and against what? Against a lie. A great, awful lie" (70). Their defence cannot rest precisely because what it faces is not a stable truth, but "whisper[ed]" evidence that begins "slow and hesitant" before "gradually work[ing] itself up to fast, excited talking," (70) at first something "I can't tell," then something spoken privately (54), then seen through a keyhole (77), then heard by another (78); evidence that never rests, flying from the questions asked of it by Joe, Martha, and Karen, leaving them

struggling to keep up. Evidence in *The Children's Hour* is discursive, that is inevitably positioned and thus divided: readable, always, in some sense, elsewhere.

The corrosive effect of the uncanny is such that, even here in the play's questioning of evidence, at least one more destabilization can be found. The play regards uncertainty of meaning as the central problem that besets its characters, with, for example, Martha regretfully claiming that if "you stay around kids long enough you won't know what to take seriously either" (28). The uncertain is not even afforded this certain status, however. Take the following exchange:

**Karen:** [...] I'm sorry.

**Mrs Tilford** [*clings to her*]: Then you'll try for yourself.

**Karen:** All right.

**Mrs Tilford:** You and Joe.

**Karen:** No. We're not together anymore.

**Mrs Tilford:** [*looks up at her*]: Did I do that, too?

**Karen:** I don't think anyone did anything anymore (113).

Here, at the end of the play, Karen finds that she cannot attribute blame. She is confused, and she is numb, to be sure, but as the final scene comes to a close only a few lines later with a glimmer of hope (on being asked about the weather, Amelia observes that "it has been cold [...] It seems a little warmer, now" [114]), hope is a difficulty. Hope, it would seem, rests upon forgiveness, would seem to require the inability to attribute agency, the inability, indeed, to "think" about anyone and anything with any degree of certainty. It follows that the worst storm of madness and the forgiveness that must follow are not necessarily distinct. In the sense that the child is the best and worst the play has to offer, so the problematization of self-evidence is also, uncannily, both

poison and cure: the dissolution of the subject is validated, yet it is there only as a reaction to a prior dissolution that is taken to be repressive; the lie invalidates the certainty of the self-evident, which order and morality must also put aside in order to re-emerge.

*The Children's Hour*, I am suggesting, is uncanny indeed – always able, it would seem, to double back on itself, to question even those structures that are necessary to comprehension. As such, it calls into question the kind of historicizing reading proposed by Spencer, with its necessary appeal to the fullness of meaning, its faith in the possibility of discrete division and stable sequence. Certainly, it is a kind of contextual reading that has cause to claim it promotes the greatest destabilization, thus offering the most faithful reading of this resistant work. In taking up a position in relation to the play, however, some of its uncanny meaning must be repressed, with these repressions escaping the light of the reading yet nonetheless returning to destabilize the position they initially secure. To follow the line of Hellman, Butler, and Freud, all positioning will result in such destabilization, whether that of the subject, character, category, or criticism. Once called upon, the uncanny is not to be trusted. It is neither faithful companion nor convenient tool. It will betray even those who seek to fix its difficulty, as it guarantees an excess that will not be mastered or exhausted, even by a framing discourse that celebrates its unsettling force. I do not understand the tracing of the corrosive spread of the uncanny in *The Children's Hour* to require a retreat from history: my critique is not rooted in a simple rejection of context or a disinclination to engage with the limited or material. Rather, in reading the disruption that attends each moment of capture, I aim to open up the possibility of a different kind of history, one necessarily turned upon itself, other than itself, retrospectively constructed: an uncanny history of the uncanny in the American theatre.





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