Exile of the Homosexual “Deviant”
in Lillian Hellman’s The Children’s Hour

Xin ZHANG
Guangdong University of Foreign Studies

A Jewish American playwright, an adapter, and a memoirist, Lillian Hellman (1905—1984) accomplished her first success The Children’s Hour[1] in 1934, a story about two teachers accused by a privileged and spoiled student of being lesbians. The play was an enormous hit on Broadway and brought the young playwright instant recognition. From the 1934 stage original of C.H. to its two film adaptations, namely the 1936 film version disguised into These Three, and the 1961 screenplay of the same name, a conspicuous illustration of Hellman’s prudent presentation naturally emerges.

Hellman’s intelligent manipulation of the sensational subject at the time of the 1930s, with her tasteful and sensitive treatment, and with her emphatically depicted fraud libel of the school girl, leads to a critical view that the subject of homosexuality is “largely incidental”[2] to the tragedy of the play, rather than provide the major theme. 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 the deviant-phobic society.

This paper attempts to trace the evolving process of the artistic representation of lesbianism from the legal records of the Scottish lawsuit, to Hellman's 1934 play, and further to the two screen versions, in order to unveil Hellman's intentions of presenting the deformation of social acceptance of lesbianism.

I. Heteronormativity and Homophobia

The roots of heteronormativity can be traced back to those foundation works in gay and lesbian studies in the 1980s, including the groundbreaking deconstructive perspective of Michel Foucault, feminist arguments contributed by Adrienne Rich and anthropologist Gayle Rubin, to name only a few. All 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 with 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 feminist psychoanalytic explanation of female heterosexuality, provided by Nancy Chodorow, the Oedipal crisis comes 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 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.”

In C.H., Martha Dobie, the self-acknowledged and suicidal lesbian, presents as example of the formation of female homosexual inclination, with her drifting father-absent childhood and her independently struggling adolescence 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 a young girl, 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 but the potential for lesbianism, conveys the appalling implication of the infectiousness of lesbianism.

Different from homosexuality presented in many literary works as a suppressed or expressed homosexual inclination, the topic in Hellman’s C.H. appears as a rarely mentioned or depicted taboo, but at the same time, blasting fuse of all the conflict. Themes as vicious lies and manipulation, and even class differences and struggles, further cover up Hellman’s attitude and attempt of presenting homosexuality. More attractive to critics’ attention are the play’s unique background inspiration by an actual lawsuit, and its compromised revisions on its way from court to stage and further to screen. 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 (IH). 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.

II. From Court to Stage

The Roaring Twenties was a rich decade for the American theatergoers and the American theater, followed by a decade when the economic state of the country worsened. Though it would seem taken for granted that the Great Depression should have begun a decade of loss for artistic theater, it was actually a period of major transformation and growth of the American theater. It was in the late 1920s and early 1930s that American theaters presented several more or less controversial plays exploring the dangerous attraction of lesbianism, particularly to young women in all-female environments, among which C.H. is the best known. The story of C.H. of a boarding-school girl accusing her two headmistresses of having an inordinate mutual affection, is not entirely a fictional creation by Hellman, but Hellman’s re-creation of an infamous Scottish lawsuit of Miss Woods and Miss Pirie against Dame Helen Gordon in 1811. The impersonal Scottish lawsuit, offered Hellman a safe medium for exploring very personal issues, as she commented that “one thing that has struck me about C.H. is that anyone young ordinarily writes autobiographically. Yet I picked on a story that I could treat with complete impersonality.” Yet Hellman’s “impersonality” towards the original case is not in contradiction to her personal reconstruction of the case, with her strong emotional involvement into the young teachers, as if the accused and punished protagonist was she herself, who aged along with the author, gaining two years as she drafted the play. The historical event as a starting point, Hellman, while seemingly recovering a history, is alluding to the present by narrating anecdotes of the past.

As presented in the published prints of the trial, the sexual orientations and desires of the two governesses remain mysterious and ambiguous in the actual case. Recorded unequivocal is the painful and dangerous nature of the proceeding that the involved judges had ever deliberated on. 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.” The dilemma confronted by the jury was revealed by their dancing around in circles
with their preconceptions and their attempt to grapple with the evidence leading to "reasonable" conclusions. On 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. On the other hand, the credibility of Miss Jane Cumming and the girls could not be shaken for the same intelligent impossibility, deduced from the young girls' age of sixteen, an age of presumable sexual innocence yet unfortunately involved into one of the most abominable conspiracies.

For Miss Cumming and the girls, their first-round victory had must be received with ambivalence, for it was believed that they had indeed witnessed indecencies, and the girls were cast beyond innocence prematurely and forever. In the next round of the event, namely the petition proposed by the losing teachers, the final verdict of the mistresses' innocence was settled, with assumptions about the corruption of exotic races raised and accepted as a convenient decision evidence. It was concluded that the mistresses were not guilty because in their part of the world lesbianism was a thing unheard of and impossible, and it was in the Eastern climate from which Jane Cumming came that such unnatural commerce between women could be imagined and fabricated. Unlawful and colored, Jane Cumming, by reason of her lack of the advantages of legitimacy and a European complexion, became a handy scapegoat for the emergence of the specter of lesbianism in this Scottish school for young ladies. This farce and its participants were sealed by time with this final judgment. What cannot be sealed, however, is people's curiosity that what would have been if the whistleblower had been one of the legitimate and white granddaughters from an aristocratic family like the Cumming.

Hellman, more than a century since the Scottish case, unearthed the disturbing memory and tried the bold hypothesis. What Hellman was adequately aware of and wisely dealt with, at the time of C.H. in the 1930s, was the fact that, after more than a century of development, the legal and public embarrassment of confronting lesbianism had never receded. The widespread lesbian-phobia was aggravated in the twentieth century by feminist successes in the political arena. 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 dependant females never could. 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
that time, on 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. 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.

*C.H.*** is set at a girls' boarding school, run by two long-time friends, Martha Dobie and Karen Wright. The two women teachers are assisted by Martha's aunt, Mrs. Lily Mortar, a former actress. Karen is engaged to a local doctor, Joseph Cardin, and the engagement appears to threaten Martha, who fears she will lose this important friendship. One of the students, Mary Tilford, addicted to lying and frustrated by discipline, builds on the suggestions of an overheard conversation and accuses Karen and Martha of having a lesbian relationship. Mary also coerces the other students into supporting her accusation. When Mary's grandmother, Mrs. Amelia Tilford, spreads the gossip, parents quickly withdraw their daughters from the school. Martha and Karen bring a libel suit against Mrs. Tilford, but lose partly because Mrs. Mortar refuses to appear in court. Finally, Karen breaks off the engagement, and Martha, in despair at the ruin of their lives, confesses that she has loved Karen in "the way they said" and then commits suicide. In the immediate aftermath comes Mrs. Tilford's plea in person for forgiveness because of her discovery of Mary's malicious lie.

The outline of the play resembles a vast majority of the legal case at first sight, but much more interesting and enlightening are Hellman's digressions from the history. In Hellman's alterations of the source material, the extremely significant changes include Martha Dobie's confessed lesbianism and her violent end of suicide. In the actual lawsuit, neither teacher acknowledged a lesbian relationship; but rather, both continued to appeal the lawsuit until poverty drove them to settle out of court. According to recorded documents, there was no suicide for a certainty. Hellman's another addition to the actual case is the young fiancé, Doctor Joseph Cardin to Karen Wright, which reinforces a heterosexual orientation of this surviving teacher. 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 wants to clarify the sexual orientations of her characters. Moreover, the unlawful and colored girl, Jane Cumming, is reconstructed into the white, legitimate girl Mary Tilford in Hellman's play, meeting the curiosity of
people intrigued by the chaotic accounts in the real case, wondering what would have been decided if it had been a white legitimate granddaughter who made the accusations against the schoolmistresses.

Some critics targeted negative criticism towards the last act of play, in which most aggressive adaptations appear. It is in this last act that Hellman adds Martha’s acknowledgment of lesbian desire, Martha’s suicide, and Mrs. Tilford’s confession. Critics mocked Martha’s admission of her once unconscious homosexual feelings towards Karen as a “rule-of-thumb confession” which caters to the audience pleasure of melodramatic suspense and hence damages the structure of the play. The criticism of the last act remains a longstanding disturbance and the dearest creation for Hellman. Hellman’s uneasiness is due to the longstanding reservation of the critical field with the third act, due to the chief suspect of the melodramatic inferiority of the play, and highly probably, due to her pain of being misunderstood. Unaware of the true intention Hellman persists in the last act, many reviewers and critics are devoted to an examination of thematic development with an expectation of nonsexual themes. The themes discovered include the viciousness of scandal and gossip, a lonely disturbance of abnormal psychology, and even class warfare against the tyranny of the wealthy over the poor, most typical among which is “the curse of scandal mongering and the whispering campaign, the kind of vicious lying that may easily wreck the lives of innocent persons.” The subject of homosexuality, they believe, is largely “incidental” to the tragedy in C.H., best serving the theme of nonchalant dismissal by society of anything it does not understand, rather than providing the major subject matter.

The exclusion of the study of sexuality, homosexuality to be more specific, from Hellman’s writing purpose, sounds plausible in view of the 1934 stage version in isolation, but indefensible when reviewing succeeding adaptations, with Hellman’s active involvement taken into account. With adaptations of the original play continuously exhibited before the audience, the veiled theme of homosexuality surfaces from its obstruction. Excavating and murdering the lesbian, Hellman has never treated lesbianism a cheap stage prop for melodramatic or erotic effect.

III. From Stage to Screen

The elusory intelligibility of lesbianism in C.H., from its stage version to its two screen versions, These Three and C.H., forms a traceable clue of Hellman’s strategic management of the sensitive topic. Her active participation in the first
screen adaptation completely hiding the original topic, and her implicit criticism of the second one seemingly faithful to the original, aroused contradictory interpretations among critics. An enduring tale of the two mistresses, as C.H. does, is an analysis of its evolving history on screen is hopefully providing a worthwhile perspective.

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 PCA’s[13] fear that the fame of C.H. had spread. Though forced to rid 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.

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.”[14] 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.”[15]

The 1961 film adaptation of C.H., also directed by Wyler, who felt that the American public was prepared to accept a faithful film version, was released under its original title. For Hellman, the freely produced 1961 C.H., a return to the original, should have been more flattering than the substantially revised version of These Three. However, surprisingly, when comparing the two film adaptations, Hellman expressed her reservations about the second adaptation, commenting that “the first Children’s Hour was better than the second.”[16] 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 on the top of the list. Despite the intact lesbianism in the 1961 screenplay C.H., the changes made by Wyler actually reinforced the moral perspective of CPA, an unobjectionable condemnation and discipline of lesbianism and deviance behaviors.

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 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 has been 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 as "unnatural, just as unnatural as it can be"[17], 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"[18] whispers to her grandmother. 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."[19]

Mary's accusation 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. Karen in the play rids herself of a heroic image by sneaking into the pervasive homophobic atmosphere. No wonder that Karen enjoys the suggestive surname “Wright”, which indicates her “right” sexual orientation and her “right” decision. The play is not a play of the two mistresses, but a play of Martha, whose individual tragedy is brought by her fatal flaw of an unacknowledged and unaccepted desire.

The changed plots and minor arrangements in the 1961 film, at first seeming to have enhanced the original intention of Hellman, make a big unfaithful change in the thematic interpretation of the play. The first minor but important change is the stage locations of the two characters in the last act. Rather than assigns Martha kneeling beside Karen, the director arranges a positional balance between Martha and Karen, with each of them occupying one side of the screen. 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.” 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.”

The film possesses disparate plotting and characterization from the play with, most prominently, Martha’s manner of suicide as well as 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. 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 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.”[23] 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. 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.[24] If not victims, lesbians were depicted as villains or morally corrupted, or even predators and vampires.[25] 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 the lightly mentioned veiled complaint by Hellman of Wyler’s “over-respectfulness” to her original, is a tactful criticism of his distortion.

Conclusion
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 C.H., 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.
Notes:

[1] This paper henceforth will use the abbreviation C.H. instead of the full name The Children's Hour of the play.

[2] Burns Mantle, Best Plays of 1934/1935 (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1935) 33.

[3] Works include Foucault's The History of Sexuality (1976), Rich's “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence” (1980), and Rubin's “Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality” (1984).

[4] Teresa Lauretis, The Practice of Love: Lesbian Sexuality and Perverse Desire (Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data, 1994) 183.

[5] Alan Malyon coined the concept of Internal Homophobia in his article “Psychotherapeutic Implications of Internalized Homophobia in Gay Men” (1982), basing upon research and clinical data derived from samples of gay men only. But with careful extrapolation, the result would lead to meaningful parallels in lesbians.

[6] Between 1926 and 1933, for example, New York saw productions of The Captive (1926), Winter Bound (1928), and Girls in Uniform (1933).

[7] The first published print of the case is the chapter entitled “Closed Doors, or The Great Drumsheugh Case,” in Bad Companions recounted by William Roughhead (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 dissertation is the 1994 edition published by Columbia University Press.

[8] Jackson Bryer, ed. Conversations with Lillian Hellman (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1986) 25.

[9] Hellman told an interviewer 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.” [Jackson Bryer, ed. Conversations with Lillian Hellman (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1986) 96.]

[10] Lillian Faderman, Scotch Verdict (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994) 255-7.

[11] Brooks Atkinson, “The Children’s Hour: A Review”, The New York Times (2 Dec., 1934) 35.

[12] Burns Mantle, Best Plays of 1934/1935 (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1935) 33.

[13] PCA refers to Production Code Administration, a division of the Motion Picture Association of America.

[14] Bernard F. Dick coined the phrase to describe the score of These Three, which he believed
“lacks the hopeful, romantic character of the music associated with Karen and Joe,” which is often heard when Martha appears.

15 Bernard Dick, *Hellman in Hollywood* (New Jersey: Associated University Presses, Inc., 1982) 39.

16 Jackson Bryer, ed. *Conversations with Lillian Hellman* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1986) 197.

17 Lillian Hellman, *Four Plays by Lillian Hellman* (New York: Random House, 1942) 21.

18 Lillian Hellman, *Four Plays by Lillian Hellman* (New York: Random House, 1942) 42-3.

19 Floyd Dell, *Love in the Machine Age: A Psychological Study of the Transition from Patriarchal Mores* (New York: Octagon Books, 1973) 309.

20 Lillian Hellman, *Four Plays by Lillian Hellman* (New York: Random House, 1942) 84.

21 Lillian Hellman, *Four Plays by Lillian Hellman* (New York: Random House, 1942) 86.

22 Mrs. Tilford is with no exception a victim of the scandal too, or even more victimized, as Karen says in the play “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” [Lillian Hellman, *Four Plays by Lillian Hellman* (New York: Random House, 1942) 85.]

23 Tom Head, *Civil Liberty: A Beginner’s Guide* (New York: Oneworld, 2009) 81.

24 An example is the death of Sandy Dennis’s character at the end of *The Fox* in 1968.

25 Examples include the portrayals of brothel madams by Barbara Stanwyck in *Walk on the Wild Side* in 1962, Shelley Winters’ *The Balcony* in 1963, women’s prison films like *Caged* in 1950, and *From Russian, With Love* in 1963, lesbian vampire films like *Dracula’s Daughter* in 1936, *Blood and Roses* in 1960, etc.

---

Xin ZHANG, Ph. D. in Literary and Cultural Studies. She is currently associate professor of English at Faculty of English Language and Culture, Guangdong University of Foreign Studies (Guangzhou, P.R.C.). Her research interests include studies of American drama and English female writers.