SOME MORAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES IN THE CHILDREN'S HOUR AND DAYS TO COME

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Although The Children's Hour and Days to Come are apparently different plays, and although the first was a great success and the latter a tremendous failure when first produced, they both treat very definite moral and social issues. The Children's Hour (1934) and Days to Come (1936) reflect the 1930's. Meredith Erling Ackley notes that "Many of the members of the Theatre Union, the Federal Theatre Project, the Theatre Collective and the Group Theatre looked forward to an American theatre whose stage would become a platform for agitation and propaganda promoting social awareness and reform".[1] Their plays are often artistically immature, demagogic and stereotyped. Miss Hellman, though not affiliated with any of these collective organizations is perhaps best thought of as one of the "Survivors of the Depression", together with Clifford Odets and Irwing Shaw.[2] These writers fought for social justice. Miss Hellman's particular fight is to rebel,[3] in her plays, against the social system where human relationships become objects for sale. Both The Children's Hour and Days to Come condemn those who cannot comprehend human motives, feelings, tenderness, and friendship. These plays are art, but they are also sociological documents. When The Children's Hour was revived in 1952 during the McCarthy purges, notes E. Ackley, "most of the reviewers concentrated on the relevance of the play" and its conclusion that shows "how calamitously the upright people of the world ... can blunder".[4] In Days to Come,

some characters are too naïve to understand the social and economic truths of their place and time. Unable to face the competition, they end in public and personal disaster. Such is the pattern for both plays.

The Children's Hour was Miss Hellman's first meaningful work. It ran for 691 consecutive performances in New York, toured the United States, and was quoted among the best plays of the 1934-1935 season. Its success in America and abroad caused Miss Hellman to adapt it to a film. She called the screenplay These Three and United Artists produced it in 1936.

The Children's Hour portrays the personal and social effects of gossip and maliciousness in the guise of righteous responsibility. This first work was a kind of exercise for Miss Hellman to learn how to write a play. Dashiell Hammett had found, in a book by William Roughead, an actual law case, which served as its argument. The true event took place in Edinburgh, in the nineteenth century. It concerned two old maid schoolteachers, the owners of a second rate boarding school, and a troublesome Indian girl, repeatedly punished for her naughtiness. As a revenge she brought charges of lesbianism against her educators. The girl's aristocratic grandmother had enrolled her there. They were both responsible for the defamation and destruction of the school. In an interview Miss Hellman has said that "The two poor middle-aged ladies spent the rest of their lives suing, sometimes losing, sometimes winning, until they no longer had any money and no school".[5] The play begins and ends in the school grounds, "a converted farmhouse"[6] close to Lancet, Massachusetts. The fact that it had once been a farm shows the changing interests of the local people.

Mary is one more little witch grown out of the rocky soil of New England. She, like her Salem female ancestors, slanders

her way to triumph: "Rosalie hates me" (p. 21), "It was Rosalie who saw them, I just said it was me so I wouldn't tattle on Rosalie" (p. 49). She accuses Karen: "You're always mean to me. I get blamed and punished for everything. (To Cardin) I do, Cousin Joe. All the time for everything" (p. 21). She also accuses Mrs. Mortar and Martha: "They were talking awful things and Peggy and Evelyn heard them and Miss Dobie found out, and then they made us move our rooms" (p. 32), "They're afraid to have us near them, that's what it is, and they're taking it out on me. They're scared..." (pp. 32-33). Mary uses both emotional and physical violence to achieve her aims. She says to Peggy: "I won't let you go if I can't go" (p. 22). She slaps Evelyn's face and twists Peggy's arm (pp. 26-27). Like Arthur Miller's Abgail Williams, Mary wins through cunning immoral means. Barrett Clark has considered her "almost a monster"[7] and Miss Hellman noted that playgoers see the girl as an "utterly malignant creature".[8] As a matter of fact Mary is a wicked and spoiled child raised by an old grandmother emotionally unable to discipline her. She says: "Grandma's very fond of me, on account my father was her favorite son. I can manage her all right" (p. 25).

Mrs. Tilford, the manageable grandmother, functions as a catalyst who prompts the action. Hidden in her New England mask of righteousness she not only accepts her granddaughter's lies, but also spreads them around causing the school bankrupcy and its owners' destruction.

The other old lady of the play is Mrs. Mortar. She represents omission. Her sin is condemned by Alexandra in the Hubbard Plays (The Little Foxes and Another Part of the Forest: "I'm not going to stand around and watch you do it" (p. 199), and by Griggs in the Mood Plays: (The Autumn Garden and Toys in the Attic): "I've frittered myself away, Crossman" (p. 542).

When Martha asks Mrs. Mortar why she had refused to come back home to testify for Karen and for herself Mrs. Mortar answers: "Why, Martha, I didn't refuse to come back at all. That's the wrong way to look at it. I was on a tour, that's a moral obligation, you know. Now don't let's talk about unpleasant things anymore. I'll go up and unpack a few things, tomorrow's plenty of time to get my trunk" (p. 55).

Since Mary, Mrs. Tilford and Mrs. Mortar stand for evil, Martha and Karen, their antagonists, are good. However Martha's personality is far more developed than that of Karen. Although there is no actual proof of Martha's lesbianism, Miss Hellman provides evidence of at least a latent form of it. Martha does try to delay Karen's wedding:

> Martha. I had been looking forward to someplace by the lake — just you and me — the way we used to at college.
>
> Karen (cheerfully). Well, now there will be three of us. That'll be fun, too.
>
> Martha (after a pause). Why haven't you told me this before?
>
> Karen. I'm not telling you anything we haven't talked about often.
>
> Martha. But you're talking about it as SOON now.
>
> Karen. I'm glad to be able to. I've been in love with Joe a long time (Martha crosses to window and stands looking out, her back to Karen. Karen finishes marking papers and rises). It's a big day for the school. Rosalie's finally put an "I" in could.
>
> Martha (not turning from window). You really are going to leave, aren't you?
>
> Karen. I'm not going to leave, and you know it. Why

do you say things like that? We agreed a long time ago that my marriage wasn't going to make any difference to the school.

Martha. But it will. You know it will. It can't help it (p. 14).

Martha does admit her homosexual desires:

Martha. I love you that way — maybe the way they said I loved you. I don't know. (Waits, gets no answer, kneels down next to Karen) Listen to me!

Karen. What?

Martha. I HAVE LOVED YOU THE WAY THEY SAID.

Karen. You are crazy.

Martha. There's always been something wrong. Always — as long as I can remember. But I never knew it until all this happened.

Karen (for the first time looks up). Stop it!

Martha. You're afraid of hearing it; I'm more afraid than you.

Karen (puts her hands over her ears). I won't listen to you.

Martha. Take your hands down. (Leans over, pulls Karen's hands away) You've got to know it. I can't keep it any longer. I've got to tell you how guilty I am.

Karen (deliberately). You are guilty of nothing.

Martha. I've been telling myself that since the night we heard the child say it; I've been praying I could convince myself of it. I can't, I can't any longer. It's there. I don't know how, I don't know why. But I did love you. I do love you. I resented

> your marriage; maybe because I wanted you, maybe I wanted you all along; maybe I couldn't call it by a name; maybe it's been there ever since I first knew you — (pp. 62-63).

And Martha, in the end, commits suicide (p. 63).

The two last characters worth mentioning are Dr. Joseph Cardin and Agatha. The first is another in Miss Hellman's long list of weak males, and the latter one more example to reinforce the theme of the servant's superiority over his master. Agatha is kind to Mary, but firm. Unlike Mrs. Tilford, she can see through the child's pretense: "Don't think you're fooling me, young lady. You might pull the wool over some people's eyes, but — I bet you've been up to something again. (Stares suspiciously at Mary) Well, you wait right here till I tell your grandmother. And if you feel so sick, you certainly won't want any dinner. A good dose of rhubarb and soda will fix you up" (p. 29).

The characters of The Children's Hour are listed in two main groups — the good and the evil — recurrent in almost all the plays. These characters are related to recurrent universal themes. Miss Hellman's choice of Massachusetts, of New England, as the setting of such a bitter play, brings Nathaniel Hawthorne and his sardonic studies of a moral law and universal guilt to mind. The Children's Hour, as well as Hawthorne's The Scarlet Letter, deals with symbols of emotional tension or coldness, of secrecy, of guilt and of isolation. This isolation results from pride. The doubts raised in the minds of the audience and of the characters about Martha's sexual perversion reminds us of Hawthorne's device of multiple choice or the formula of alternative possibilities, a technique often used by novelists and playwrights. The ambiguity derived from this

technique adds depth and tone to Miss Hellman's work. Another New England play in this class showing the effects of maliciousness and gossip is Arthur Miller's The Crucible. The Children's Hour points out the subjective as well as the objective existence of man and is rather a psychological and social drama than a local color one. However Miss Hellman's choice of the New England setting serves to relate it more closely to such works as The Scarlet Letter and The Crucible. This device is of course highly suggestive and artistically opportune.

Critics and public were anxiously expecting the opening of Days to Come, Miss Hellman's second work, produced in 1936. They were disappointed. It played only six performances in New York and closed. The press reviews were bad and quoted it among the weakest plays of the season. Richard Moody says that "the more abundant comments centered on the lack of a central idea, on her concessions to melodramatic sensation, on her inability to make a spiritual tragedy out of a labor impasse".[9] Miss Hellman also recognized its deficiency: "I spoiled a good play. I turned to the amateur's mistake: everything you think and feel must be written this time, because you may never have another chance to write it"[10], "the confusion in the script confused the best director in the theatre, who, in turn, managed to confuse one of its most inadequate casts".[11]

Days to Come, called Miss Hellman's "one effort to dramatize immediate social forces"[12], focus on the struggle between capital and labor, a theme connected with the revolution of ideas and attitudes resulting from the quick industrial development of the North. It parallels the Hubbard Plays and its study of a similar struggle between the newly rich and the aristocrat, the two economic opposing forces of the South. Although some critics have affirmed that Days to Come is written

more from the industrialists' point of view than from that of the Unions, as I shall show later, Miss Hellman does not really seem to take any side but that of the moralist.

The play set in Callom, Ohio, a town not far from Cleveland, exemplifies what can happen when an industrial population grows rapidly. It tells about the efforts made by Andrew Rodman, one of the owners of a brush factory, to keep it operating in spite of a strike for higher salaries, which he cannot afford to pay. Henry Ellicott, the lawyer of the firm, echoed by Cora, Andrew's sister, has persuaded him to hire strikebreakers from Cleveland, under the command of a certain Wilkie, unknown to Rodman. The men who come are professional killers meant to provoke the workers into starting a fight and so to use "legal" force to squelch the strike. Whalen, the Union organizer, controls the situation for some time, but when Joe (one of the strike breakers) kills his partner, Mossie, Whalen is arrested on suspicion of murder. Violence starts and the workers are forced back into the factory. A subplot develops parallel to this main plot. It portrays the anxieties, hatred, illusions and frustrations of the Rodmans. The two stories are interwoven since Julie, Andrew's attractive wife, falls in love with Whalen. Miss Hellman has repeatedly used this technique of relating the private life of her characters with larger social, economic, political or moral concerns. In the Hubbard Plays, the characters' unrestrained ambition for money and power motivate a family discord which, in national proportions, symbolizes a struggle of classes. Like Regina in the South, Julie represents the Northern liberated woman. She is the most developed character in Days to Come and very different from a Birdie, a Lily, a Lavinia. Liberation is often falsely interpreted as self-certainty, but Julie is as lonely and insecure as the others. She is independent in

proportion to her not obeying pre-established or conventional rules and so Miss Hellman's counterpart. Her calm and gentle attitude hides an inner battle. She is "a brooding, melancholy woman, who conducts a continuing dialogue within herself about herself".[13] Cora is her antithesis. Like Mrs. Mortar she belongs to Miss Hellman's cast of neurotic women. These two old ladies represent selfishness, omission and deceit. They both contribute to the downfall of their relatives and supporters: Martha and Andrew respectively.

The Rodmans' unsettled lives, like those of the Hubbards, interfere with their business, which, in turn, reflects the family bewilderment. The general dissatisfaction, both private and social, portrays those years between the Civil War and the First World War when the big industries of the North divided the market among them and destroyed the smaller ones by price cutting. America saw her economy controlled by a small number of huge trusts and conglomerates, the Northern paraphrase of the big plantations of the South, tending to find its center in itself and fighting to be an independent social unit. The unrestrained growth of a few industries produced rough edges in the relations between the workmen and employers, as the quick rise of the newly rich had also produced problems between servants and masters. In the North, labor established national organizations and fought for social reform. In the South, plantation had introduced distinctions of wealth and rank between the aristocrat, the newly rich and the common white, and between the white man and the black. The Rodmans' situation in the North parallels that of the aristocratic Bagtrys in the South. Andrew's simplicity and good faith, like that of Birdie, had made him an easy victim to financial speculation. He was in the process of losing his capital and his credit because he could not adapt his moral principles to the new economic

demands. Here Miss Hellman renews Lionnet's situation, synthetized in Birdie's words: "The truth is, we can't pay or support our people, Mr. Benjamin, we can't —" (p. 346), "Forgive me. Would you, I mean your father and you, would you lend money on our cotton, or land, or —" (p. 346). Rodman's brush factory likewise stands among the victimized industries, unable not only to better working conditions but even to operate without the help of unscrupulous financiers. He tries to explain the situation to his friend, Tom Firth, one of the factory workers:

> Andrew. Tom, I've tried to explain. I tried from the first day you came to me. (Touches a paper on the desk, looks at it). The figures are here. They're as much yours to see as they are mine.
>
> Firth. I don't have to see them again.
>
> Andrew. You don't. But I have to see them again and again and again. We've got to sell the brushes we make.
>
> Whalen. Some places make what they can sell.
>
> Andrew (sharply). Yes. They make them cheaper because they cost less" (p. 55).

Julie, as well as Tom, reminds Andrew of his duty and his honor. Julie, Tom and Andrew form a triangle of antagonic combines united by an idealistic quest for truth. In her despair she asks her husband to take a firm stand, to explain his position:

> Julie (suddenly, violently). Why didn't you stop it? Why did you let it go on like this? They talked you into it. Why did you let them?

> Andrew (smiles). You make me sound like a child. And you're right.
>
> Julie. You didn't want any of this. Why did you ever have to start it? Then why didn't you stop it?
>
> Andrew. There are a lot of reasons. The reason I tell myself is that I couldn't stop anything. I owe money. A lot of money. I've been borrowing it for a long time. I've borrowed on the factory and on this house and on how many brushes I thought I could make in five years —" (p. 117).

Andrew feels his inability to control the family situation, to find an appropriate answer for the workers' demand, to face his financial problems. Like the aristocratic Ragtrys he is good but weak and so an easy prey to the Hubbards and the Marshalls. Like Crossman and Griggs, he illustrates the evil consequences of uncertainty and inaction. Miss Hellman deliberately creates Tom Firth to function as his working-class counterpart: "And so I gave the leading characters their counterparts: Leo Whalen is the good Wilkie; Firth the simple Andrew Rodman; Cora the sick Hannah. I played this theme all alone: a solitary composer with a not very interesting note".[14] The strong character is Whalen, a man of action: idealistic but practical, simple but clean, calm and secure, righteous, noble, attractive, self-reliant. He belongs to the small group of people Miss Hellman most admires — that of "men who work for other men".[15] It is here that Miss Hellman's symbolism becomes dubious and too ambiguous. She is at the same time for and against the victimized industrialist typified by Andrew. Her indecision weakens the play and clears the way for both literary and social reproach. Richard Moody comments: "Even the left-wing press complained. The New Masses (December 29, 1936) noted the duality of focus in her attempt

'to give dramatic life to the twin phenomena of capitalist society, the outbreak of class strife and the decay of human relations in the burgeois stratum'. The Daily Worker (December 18, 1936) deplored her treatment of the struggle from the point of view of rotting capitalists. Even a sympathetic audience could not enjoy 'the pallid and vexatious mutterings of these disgusting people'. She could have made a great play with a chorus of workers who reminded the audience that workers must sacrifice everything to attain victory".[16] What Miss Hellman must have wanted to show is that both groups — the workers and the capitalists — are neither good nor bad. The real villains of the play are such hateful, selfish and insensitive people as Cora, Ellicott, and Wilkie, who only see life in terms of profit. She had already focused on this thesis in the Hubbard Plays by suggesting that Marshall, the Northern capitalist, had brought from Chicago the seed of self-centered ambition and of unfair competition. The terms are the same, but Miss Hellman makes it clear that for each Marshall who reaches the South there are many Coras, Ellicotts and Wilkies in the North.

Although Miss Hellman's message in Days to Come is sometimes more obscure than that, her characters are in turn well defined Northern types: the labor leader, the strikebreaker and the "emancipated woman intent on breaking out of conventionality"[17] and seeking "her fulfilment ... regardless of the consequences".[18] These Northern qualities of the characters do not interfere in their classification as either good or evil, active or inactive, neurotic, insecure, lonely. Andrew, like Birdie, is a victim of financial speculation. Hannah, like Addie and Coralee, shows the servants' influence over their masters. Wilkie is an opportunist like Ben and Oscar. Days to Come presents the same themes recurrent in the other plays and deals with the same recurrent types. It could have been a good

play if Miss Hellman had managed to clarify her aims. She tried to say too many things at the same time. The result was a poorly constructed play. Miss Hellman failed: this time complexity and melodramatic morality compromised depth.

NOTES

[1] Meredith Erling Ackley, "The Plays of Lillian Hellman" (Ph. D. diss., University of Pennsylvania, 1969), p. 1.

[2] Allan Lewis, "The Survivors of the Depression — Hellman, Odets, Shaw" in his American PlayWrights of the Contemporary Theater (New York: Crown, 1965), pp. 99-115.

[3] John Hersey, "Lillian Hellman, Rebel", The New Republic (September 18, 1976), 25.

[4] Ackley, pp. 14-15.

[5] John Phillips and Anne Hollander, "The Art of the Theatre: Lillian Hellman; An Interview, Paris Review 33 (Winter—Spring, 1965), 70.

[6] Lillian Hellman, The Children's Hour in her The Collected Plays (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1971), p. 5. All the quotations from Miss Hellman's plays are taken from this edition. Subsequent references are cited parenthetically in the text.

[7] Barret H. Clark, "Lillian Hellman" College English (Vol. 6, nº 3, December 1944), 128.

[8] Quoted in Richard Moody, Lillian Hellman: Playwright (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, Pegasus, 1972), p. 56.

[9] Moody, p. 69.

[10] Hellman, "Introduction", Six Plays by Lillian Hellman (New York: Modern Library, 1942), p. IX.

[11] Hellman, p. IX.

[12] Lewis, p. 107.

[13] Cynthia D. M. Larimer, "A Study of Female Characters in the Eight Plays of Lillian Hellman" (Ph. D. diss., Purdue University, 1970), p. 53.

[14] Hellman, "Introduction", Six Plays by Lillian Hellman, p. IX.

[15] Hellman, p. IX.

[16] Quoted in Moody, pp. 69-70.

[17] Moody, p. 66.

[18] Moody, p. 69.