Prussian Discipline and Lesbian Vulnerability: Christa Winsloe's *Children in Uniform* at the Gate

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On Easter Monday 1934, *Children in Uniform*, the English adaptation of Christa Winsloe's German play *Gestern und heute* [Yesterday and Today], opened at the Gate.¹ It was scheduled to run for a fortnight, but proved popular enough with Dublin audiences that it was extended for a week. Winsloe's play had started life in Leipzig in 1930 as *Ritter Nérestan* [Knight Nérestan]; within a year it had conquered Berlin under the title *Gestern und heute*, and been adapted for the screen as *Mädchen in Uniform* [Girls in Uniform] (1931). Hilton Edwards and Micheál mac Liammóir probably saw *Gestern und heute* in Berlin in 1931, but it was the film's London release that brought Winsloe's work to the attention of the wider Gate community: in the August 1932 issue of *Motley*, W.J.K. Mandy praised *Mädchen in Uniform*'s treatment of 'a difficult theme' with 'extraordinary subtlety, delicacy and psychological insight' (14). When Barbara Burnham's English adaptation of the original play

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was successfully staged at London's Duchess Theatre in 1932-1933, *Children in Uniform* became a serious candidate for the Gate's 1933-1934 season.

What Mandy calls a 'difficult theme' is love between women: a sensitive, motherless, teenage girl (Manuela von Meinhardis) is sent to a strict Prussian boarding school where she falls in love with one of the teachers (Fräulein von Bernburg). Her adoration is ripped out of the comfortable context of the schoolgirl crush – 'pashes' are rife among the girls – when a drunken Manuela, still dressed as a knight for the school play, declares publicly that she and Fräulein von Bernburg love each other, and that she is wearing von Bernburg's chemise as a token of that love. Manuela's passion is labelled sinful, perverse and morbid; ostracized by school administrators and facing a future without von Bernburg, she commits suicide.

Most scholarship on Winsloe's story is limited to the film version, *Mädchen in Uniform*,² but this chapter focuses on her play: on Burnham's translation of Winsloe's original *Ritter Nérestan/Gestern und heute*, on the genealogy and execution of the Edwards—mac Liammóir production, and on its reception among Irish critics. The (heavily annotated) prompt copy, lighting plots, foyer placard and photographs of the Gate production all survive and reveal an unflinching staging that used expressionistic lighting and sonic leitmotifs to underscore the authoritarian regime within which the tenderness of the relationship between Manuela and von Bernburg briefly flourishes. These materials reveal that Edwards's staging, through its persistent focus on the vulnerability of Fräulein von Bernburg and its reintroduction of a second lesbian love intrigue that had been expunged from Burnham's adaptation, exposed Dublin audiences to a queerer version of the play than had been seen in London's West End. By examining just how Edwards staged subversion in his production of Winsloe's play, my analysis will corroborate the contention of Meaney, O'Dowd and Whelan that *Children in Uniform* helped establish the Gate as a 'radical, subversive or dissenting space in the conservative 1930s' (213).

THE GENEALOGY OF *CHILDREN IN UNIFORM*

Christa Winsloe wrote a number of versions of her (semi-autobiographical) story of Manuela in the late 1920s and early 1930s (Iurascu 89-90; Puhlfürst 40-54; Stürzer 96-97). It was originally

produced as *Ritter Nérestan*, a title derived from the role of the knight taken on by Manuela in the play-within-a-play, Voltaire's *Zaïre*. *Ritter Nérestan* opened at the Leipziger Schauspielhaus on 30 November 1930 and met with modest success; but *Gestern und heute*, the slightly revised Berlin version directed by Leontine Sagan, really captured German audiences from the start of April to the end of June, 1931 (Stürzer 107-108). The change in title (from *Knight Nérestan* to *Yesterday and Today*) appears to signal the Berlin production's shift in emphasis from the love story to the theme of Prussian tradition, and the strict discipline needed to maintain its conservative values (embodied by the headmistress) in the chaos of Weimar's social democracy (embodied by Fräulein von Bernburg). Anne Stürzer has documented other differences between the Leipzig and Berlin productions: textually, Sagan appears to have softened von Bernburg by cutting her robust defence of tomboyishness, her announcement to the headmistress that she will resign her position to take care of Manuela, and a scene in which the girls gossip about von Bernburg's alleged assertion that she 'didn't want to be kissed' and 'thought men were disgusting' (103-105).³ In a bid to attract audiences, theatre manager Victor Barnowsky also added a new scene in which Manuela's fencing master, played by the handsome star Viktor de Kowa, declared his love for her – a subplot that had been dispatched by means of a simple love letter in the Leipzig version. Critics considered this scene a distraction, however, and it was soon cut from the Berlin production (100). These alterations notwithstanding – and *pace* Stürzer – the Berlin production did not in fact downplay the piece's queer content: Herta Thiele, who played Manuela in both productions, went so far as to say that 'the lesbian element was explicitly highlighted' in Berlin, that Sagan went 'all in with the lesbianism', whereas von Bernburg and Manuela had had more of a 'mother/daughter relationship' in Leipzig (Puhlfürst 44-45).

On the strength of the critical and financial success of the Barnowsky production, Sagan and Winsloe worked with Carl Froehlich over the summer of 1931 to create the now-famous film version, *Mädchen in Uniform*, which premièred in November. The plot of the play was altered in some key ways for the cinema: in all of the stage versions, Manuela commits suicide at the end of the piece, but in the film she is saved by her friends; and the cross-dressing role she plays for the big screen is not Voltaire's obscure knight Nérestan but Friedrich Schiller's Don Carlos, a character who was already something of an icon to German

gay audiences (Tobin 159-61). Despite having a scriptwriting credit on the film, Winsloe was forced to accept Froehlich's decision to have Manuela saved at the end of the film. Frustrated by the erasure of lesbian suffering in Froehlich's film, Winsloe reworked the same material one final time to produce *Das Mädchen Manuela* (1933), a novel that gives a fuller description of Manuela's childhood and restores the tragic ending. Barbara Burnham's English translation, meanwhile, was based neither on the film nor on the novel: the script of Berlin's *Gestern und heute* served as the basis for her Duchess Theatre production, and *Children in Uniform* retains such original plot features as Manuela's portrayal of Knight Nérestan and her ultimate suicide.⁴ Thus – remarkably, if we consider the international success of *Mädchen in Uniform* – the Gate production of Burnham's translation hews closer to the Berlin play than it does to Froehlich and Sagan's better-known film.⁵

BURNHAM'S ADAPTATION OF *GESTERN UND HEUTE*

Burnham characterizes her translation of *Gestern und heute* as an 'adaptation' because she intervenes substantially in the structure and dialogue of the original. Instead of twelve 'Bilder' [tableaux], Burnham divides the play into three acts with a total of ten scenes, and she often rearranges the sequence of events within a scene. This results in fewer sets, new dialogue to allow for smoother transitions, and an admirable tightening of the play's pacing. Some of her reworked dialogue is also welcome – jokes are reframed, for instance, to appeal to a British audience – but many of her interventions serve to tone down aspects of sexual and gender non-conformity in the play and emphasize instead the dangers of Prussian authoritarianism.

In terms of gender expression, von Bernburg in Berlin's *Gestern und heute* exemplifies female masculinity. She is described in the stage directions as 'tall, straight, [...] noble, masculine, stern ['streng']' and having a 'steady gaze' (Winsloe 1930, 25). Berlin production photographs of Margarete Melzer as Fräulein von Bernburg show a woman in the modern dress and with the severe haircut of a Weimar New Woman – worlds apart from the elegant femininity of Dorothea Wieck in *Mädchen in Uniform*.⁶ Barbara Burnham's von Bernburg is also 'tall' and 'straight' but is now 'strong' rather than 'stern' and is certainly not 'masculine' (Winsloe 1934, 34); and production photos from the Duchess Theatre show a feminine

Joyce Bland in a full-length, simple, elegant dress just like the one worn by von Bernburg in the film (1933a, 26-27). Where the Berlin Manuela, in the early stages of her infatuation, declares to her friend Edelgard that 'if [von Bernburg] were a man, she'd be such an amazing gentleman – don't you think – I'd like awfully to ... get her to like me' (1930, 34; ellipsis in original), Burnham's Manuela makes a more conventionally romantic declaration: 'She's like one of the knights of the Round Table! Oh, Edelgard, I do want her to like me!' (1934, 40) Manuela herself is thought to 'look' boyish by the headmistress in *Gestern und heute*, but when she hears of this from Ilse, Manuela corrects what she sees as a misapprehension: 'I *want to* be a boy, I want to be a man, I hate my curls, I hate my tenderness.' (1930, 58) Burnham's Manuela is less defiant, replying simply 'I'd like to look like a boy.' (1934, 57)

The sexual tension between the teacher and the student is also much more muted in Burnham's adaptation. The school's French mistress is barely described in *Children in Uniform*, but in *Gestern und heute*'s stage directions she is shown to be jealous of von Bernburg's intimacy with the girls, and at the same time 'erotically excited' by it (1930, 35-36). Manuela is depressed when she arrives at the school, and so the French mistress encourages von Bernburg to help the child be more resilient, not by means of discipline, but by 'taking her in your strong arms, protecting and warming her' (37). This exchange is sanitized by Burnham: her Mlle Alaret simply remarks that von Bernburg is 'strong' and that 'the strong should comfort the weak' (1934, 41). When *Gestern und heute*'s Manuela finds out that she'll be in von Bernburg's dormitory, that von Bernburg's bedroom door opens onto the girls' room, and that she kisses each girl goodnight in turn, she is beside herself with anticipation. She tells Edelgard that it will be wonderful to be kissed by someone

like a mother – or no, wait a minute – differently. [...] Oh God – now I can only ever think of Fräulein von Bernburg and now I can't remember how mother kissed me and it must be the same, Edelgard – mustn't it, it *must* really be the same, but really it is different, I never wanted it as much as I do now and I'm actually afraid that something will happen this time. (1930, 45)

Burnham removes the confusion from this almost incoherent outburst and makes the prospect of being kissed all about Manuela's loss of her mother:

it must be just like a mother. I remember quite well how my mother kissed me. [...] Now I shall only be kissed by Fräulein von Bernburg. I won't know anymore how my mother kissed me. I wonder, will it be different? It must be, mustn't it, and yet I never wanted it to be the same as much as I do now, but I don't know how I can wait. (1934, 46)

This sets the tone for the rest of the play and allows London audiences to read the affection between von Bernburg and Manuela as filial. When bedtime arrives, and the ritual is actually performed, then, it is hardly surprising that where, in Berlin, von Bernburg picks up a fainting Manuela and kisses her firmly on the mouth, in London she picks up a fainting Manuela and does not kiss her at all (1930, 50; 1934, 50).

In a key scene establishing the mutual attraction between Manuela and von Bernburg, Winsloe has von Bernburg call Manuela into her private study to discuss the poor state of Manuela's underwear. (The laundress has brought it to von Bernburg's attention; von Bernburg sees it as evidence that the child has no real mother-figure in her life.) Von Bernburg offers Manuela one of her own chemises to replace the worn-out one, and Manuela covers von Bernburg's hands with kisses by way of thanks (1930, 66). She then kneels and puts her arms around the teacher's hips, and confesses that she is jealous when von Bernburg kisses the other children because 'I love you, I love you, like my mother, but more, much more, differently.' (70) After the teacher has calmed Manuela, she confesses that she knows she is not allowed to treat pupils differently, and so Manuela should tell no-one, but 'I think about you an awful, awful lot, little Manuela. I see more than you know. [...] Do you understand? Little one? (She kisses her.)' (70) Burnham desexualizes this scene somewhat by minimizing the characters' physical contact: she places a table between teacher and pupil, and retains the teacher's confession but deletes the kiss that follows it. She does not entirely jettison the erotic potential of the scene, however: Burnham's Manuela may not kiss von Bernburg, but she does kiss her chemise (1934, 70-72).

While there are many other instances of Burnham's obscuring the gender and sexual dissidence of the two main characters, the most significant occurs in the climactic scene that marks Manuela's affection as 'perverse' rather than just another example of *Schwärmerei*: her drunken public speech in praise of von Bernburg. In *Gestern und heute* it is long, with Manuela claiming that the teacher loves her, and kisses no-one else as she kisses her, 'softly, lingeringly, sweetly' (1930, 85). Burnham shortens

the speech and deletes this reference to kisses, making it possible for an audience to imagine that the love is one-sided and perhaps only in Manuela's head (1934, 77). Similarly, in the final scene where von Bernburg and the headmistress clash over the best way to handle Manuela's case, the headmistress begs not to be reminded of the 'abominable' sight of 'the lost child, Manuela, in her silver chain mail, as she roared out her sinfulness, her perversity' (1930, 121). Von Bernburg counters that it was her 'longing' that she was crying out about: 'you call it perversity and I – I call it the great spirit of love, which has a thousand faces' (121). Burnham builds up a dramatically powerful confrontation between the two women, but shortens it, and omits this specific defence of 'perversity' (1934, 103).

In short, Burnham's adaptation disguises the lesbian content that had been so clear in German versions of the play that a reviewer for the Berlin lesbian magazine *Die Freundin* [The Girlfriend] could exclaim:

But that's – that's our destiny, surely. That's our life, surely, that is being played out here; surely this is about the arena of lesbian love. [...] Ladies! This play speaks to us. All of you have to see this play. All of you will feel that what is represented here is the destiny of us all, the fate of all of us. (qtd in Puhlfürst 44)

But the finger can hardly be pointed at Burnham for her unwillingness to portray love between women more openly. The level of censorship to which plays in London were subjected in the early 1930s was unknown in a German republic that had not yet fallen to the Nazis. Excerpts from the readers' reports to the British censor on Burnham's initial 'literal translation' (Shellard 113) of *Children in Uniform* show concerns about the nature of Manuela's affection. One reader finds that the 'intention of the original was to criticise the stupid and unimaginative discipline of a Prussian aristocratic girls' school, and that the unhappy passion of one of the girls for a mistress is subsidiary' (113). He does not believe that the play deals with 'real Lesbianism'; it is simply 'unfortunate' that the headmistress 'treats it as a grave perversion' (113). Another reader advises that the play be passed after 'the references to perversity and sin' have been excised (114); and a third agrees, adding that – to be clear that such things do not happen in England – productions must set the play in Germany. Fears that a 'bad production could introduce a different atmosphere' led to a final decision to grant the play a license as long as

some language was changed, there was 'strict supervision in the production', and the setting remained 'strictly GERMAN' (115). These were not conditions that would apply to the Edwards – mac Liammóir production.

CHILDREN IN UNIFORM'S ROUTE TO THE GATE

It is entirely possible that Edwards and mac Liammóir saw Barnowsky and Sagan's Berlin production of *Gestern und heute*, as they spent the summer of 1931 in 'two square, bare, glistening rooms' overlooking the Kurfürstendamm – then at the heart of Berlin's gay neighbourhood – enjoying the 'blue water and brown flesh' of Wannsee, staying out all night to see 'dawn breaking over the Brandenburger [*sic*] Tor', and soaking up all the drama and nightlife that the city had to offer (mac Liammóir 115, 118-19). 'Every night we were at the theatre', mac Liammóir recalls, 'and I think I learned more about design that summer than ever before' (119). His list of theatres visited does not specifically include Barnowsky's Theater in der Stresemannstrasse, where *Gestern und heute* ran nightly for the months of April, May and June; but given both men's interests, mac Liammóir's German proficiency, and the positive critical responses the play was garnering, it is more likely than not that they did see it. They were in the queer capital of the world, the Berlin of Magnus Hirschfeld and Christopher Isherwood and of their friend Hubert Duncombe – even when imagining Berlin, mac Liammóir pictured people sitting in cafes discussing 'die Psychologie des Geschlechtslebens' [the psychology of the sex life] (113) – so it seems highly unlikely that they would have passed up the opportunity to see the most sexually daring hit of the season when they were in town for so long.

But even if 'the Boys' did not see *Gestern und heute*, they would have been aware of its box office potential from their stay in Berlin and would have been reminded of that when its film version was mentioned in the August 1932 issue of *Motley*. Jimmy Mandy's 'Letter from London' describes 'Leontine Sagan's *Mädchen in Uniform*' as one of the few 'good' films currently having a 'successful run' in London. 'The film', writes Mandy,

deals with the emotional complications of life in a Prussian girls' school. This difficult theme is treated with extraordinary subtlety, delicacy and psychological insight. The particular excellence of the film lies in the

perfect adaptation of technique to narrative. The camera work is always adequate and never obtrusively clever. (14)

Mandy's Dublin audience had no way of confirming this assessment, however, as the film would not be released in Ireland. Still, five months later Owen Sheehy Skeffington, *Motley's* reviewer in Paris, makes the mistake of presuming his readers must know *Mädchen in Uniform*, as he refers to it in passing while reviewing a different German film (11). Between these two *Motley* reviews, Burnham's *Children in Uniform* had passed the British censor and opened at London's Duchess Theatre on 7 October 1932; it would run to full houses until 27 May 1933 (Wearing 235). Oddly, there is no mention of the London run of the play in *Motley*, but this is because the 'Letter from London' was in practice a very irregular feature. The next – and final – mention of *Children in Uniform* in *Motley* is a simple notice in April 1934 that the play is opening at the Gate and 'runs till the 14th April' (Manning 2). As this was the final issue of *Motley*, there was no follow-up report on the production in that magazine.

THE SCRIPT OF *CHILDREN IN UNIFORM* AT THE GATE

Edwards had two sources for his production script: a full edition of Burnham's adaptation that had just appeared in the volume *Famous Plays of 1932–33* (Winsloe 1934), and French's Acting Edition, which was slightly shorter and reproduced photographs from the Duchess production (Winsloe 1933a). This latter edition provided Edwards with his prompt copy, and he amended it by hand, adding and revising stage directions, re-inserting a few lines that had been stripped out of *Famous Plays* for French's Acting Edition, and sometimes adding lines or interjections of his own.⁷ The prompt copy allows us to trace two major interventions in Edwards's production: despite having no access to the physical script of the Berlin production, he restores a Berlin subplot that has Edelgard fall in love with Manuela, and he adds stage directions that depict Fräulein von Bernburg as a much more vulnerable figure with deeper feelings for Manuela than was evident in the London staging.

Edelgard Comtesse Mengsberg is initially introduced to Manuela as 'the Saint' of the school: 'Whenever we want to make a good impression – we produce Edelgard.' (Winsloe 1933a, 11) Burnham's translation offers few stage directions for Edelgard in this early scene: she enters the set

'quietly', 'stands a little apart', then 'comes close to' Manuela and introduces herself 'softly' (11). Edwards's supplemental blocking notes give her more attention than any of the other girls in the scene: he has her walk to the front of the stage, cross over to Manuela, and 'slip' into position beside her to introduce herself. In the stage direction 'MANUELA warms to her at once', Edwards draws an emphatic box around the words 'at once', showing his particular interest from the start in the interactions between these two girls (11). By the end of this first scene, Edelgard has taken Manuela under her wing (13); she soon becomes a confidante who laughs at Manuela's bad jokes (20); and in times of anxiety or sadness, the two encourage each other (28, 33-34, 39). Manuela tells Edelgard of her dream of a life with von Bernburg, a dream which Edelgard does not understand, but does not spurn (35). During the scene where von Bernburg privately gives Manuela her chemise, Edelgard waits patiently for her friend in the hallway outside the teacher's study; this is another scene where Edwards intervenes to add extra colour to Edelgard's feelings for Manuela. In all other versions of the play Manuela simply leaves the study, crossing the hallway to exit stage left, and all dramatic attention is focused on von Bernburg. As the curtain falls on the scene, in *Gestern und heute* the teacher is expressing her own inner turmoil by putting her head in her hands; in Burnham's adaptation she is silently looking after Manuela; but in the Gate production Edwards focuses his audience as much on Edelgard as on von Bernburg. Edwards's teacher 'watches [Manuela] exit [her study]. Looks at her hand' – a hand that Manuela has just kissed twice in Edwards's staging – and pauses for some time. She then starts writing, but suddenly stops, and 'looks front' (1933a, 42), openly exposing her conflicted feelings to the audience. Simultaneously, Manuela runs past Edelgard, drops her old, torn chemise and exits as Edelgard 'rises', calls out 'Manu-', 'looks round, picks up chem.', and follows Manuela (42). The implication is that Edelgard feels as strongly about Manuela as von Bernburg does.

In a later scene, Edwards repeats this move of letting Edelgard's unspoken feelings mirror the spoken ones of von Bernburg. It is the day after Manuela's scandalous speech, and she has been isolated from the others, but the headmistress (played by Ria Mooney) is forced, for the sake of appearances, to let Manuela be part of the welcoming party for a special visitor to the school. As von Bernburg is discreetly telling

the French mistress that she plans to come to Manuela's defence, the pupils start arriving to greet their guest. The children are all milling about, waiting for the guest, but Edwards adds special stage directions for one of them: 'Edelgard R comes down & up .. pacing' (1933a, 59; emphasis in original). Manuela finally joins the assembled crowd 'amidst a tense silence' (61). She stands beside Edelgard, and, in Edwards's staging, 'Edelg. pts hand on M.'s shoulder' (61). All three versions of the play include a follow-on scene in which Edelgard quietly watches over Manuela and defends her to a vice-headmistress who sees Manuela as 'lost', 'morbid' and – in the German original – guilty of something 'very ugly' (1930, 105-107; 1934, 93-94). But in the play's final scene, only Edwards has Edelgard and von Bernburg, the two women who have loved and defended Manuela, share the stage alone one last time: everyone who has crowded onstage in the immediate aftermath of Manuela's suicide files off slowly, following the vice-headmistress. Edwards strikes the line that has von Bernburg rush off stage calling 'Manuela' in Berlin and London and instead has the broken-hearted teacher 'collapse' as the last person exits the stage. That last person, at the Gate, is Edelgard (1933a, 73; Fig. 8.1).

These Edelgard vignettes spring wholly from the imagination of Edwards, but they express a subplot of the Berlin version that was almost completely excised by Burnham. In *Gestern und heute*, Edelgard's love of Manuela becomes clear in the scene following her theatrical triumph: Edelgard 'flies to Manuela' and throws 'both arms around her neck', crying 'You! You were sweet, you were beautiful, you are just so magnificent, I have to—' and she kisses Manuela (1930, 76). Later she also dances with her (82); and once the scandalous speech has been made, a drunken and disgraced Manuela collapses into Edelgard's arms in Berlin (85), while there is no-one to catch her in Burnham's version (1934, 78). Finally, only in the Berlin version do we learn that Manuela's separation from the rest of the girls is causing Edelgard to weep into her pillow all night (1930, 97). If Edwards and mac Liammóir saw the play in Berlin, they would have come away with the impression that this character was in love with Manuela; without access to the German original, they inserted new material into Burnham's sanitized script quite possibly to recover that subplot.

In some of the scenes described above, it is already clear that Edwards also went out of his way to make the figure of von Bernburg more

Fig. 8.1 Edwards's stage directions for the final moments of *Children in Uniform*: at left is von Bernburg at her desk, about to collapse; the vice-headmistress, 'K', exits the study into a hallway full of pupils who line up to 'follow her slowly out. Edelgard last' (Winsloe 1933a, 73). See the bottom left image in Fig. 8.4 for a photo of the set. Gate Theatre Archive, Northwestern University (Copyright of the Edwards – mac Liammóir Estate)

vulnerable than Burnham had left her. By having von Bernburg unable to write at the end of the chemise scene, or collapse alone on stage as the final curtain falls, rather than run off calling Manuela's name, Edwards draws attention to her passive, private suffering, rather than her active, potential heroism (1933a, 72). Her sighs and especially her silences – usually marked by a *fermata* in the prompt copy – matter to Edwards, who shows her inner struggle by contrasting firm words with ambivalent body language and hesitant speech (see Fig. 8.2). The strength of her feelings for Manuela is indicated as early as Act II, scene 2 by Edwards. When Manuela confesses her constant longing to creep into von Bernburg's room at night, the teacher tries to brush it off with the affectionately dismissive words 'You really are a baby, little Manuela.' (1933a, 41) Burnham's stage directions suggest she should say this '*as lightly as possible*', but in Edwards's staging she 'clutches chest & looks away' as she says it (41). In the wrong hands, such a stage direction risks slipping into melodrama; but Edwards was working with a talented

Fig. 8.2 Edwards's stage directions for the meeting between von Bernburg and Manuela in Act III, scene 3 of *Children in Uniform* (Winsloe 1933a, 69). Note the pauses (indicated by the *fermata* symbol) and stage directions that add hesitancy to von Bernburg's attitude, and belie the firmness of her words. Gate Theatre Archive, Northwestern University (Copyright of the Edwards – mac Liammóir Estate)

actress in Coralie Carmichael, whose performance as the troubled teacher reaped high praise from Dublin critics. Her ability to silently convey inner suffering is captured in the press photo released for the production: a close-up of her holding a limp Betty Chancellor (as Manuela) appeared in the *Evening Herald* and *Irish Independent* of 17 April 1934 (Fig. 8.3) and was included in the Gate's foyer placard for the run of the play (Fig. 8.4). Edwards's reintroduction of von Bernburg's personal anguish, of her marked confusion about her feelings for Manuela, allows the (willing) spectator to see this relationship as something other than filial.

THE SIGHT AND SOUND OF *CHILDREN* IN *UNIFORM* AT THE GATE

Mac Liammóir's sets and Edwards's lighting and sound design provide an ominous environment within which the story unfolds, and accentuate the defencelessness of most of the girls and the staff in the face of the school's Spartan regime and Prussian authoritarianism. A glance at the foyer poster for the production (Fig. 8.4) suffices to suggest the mood of the piece: in two images we see the oversized shadow of the headmistress descending the stairs into the reception hall, first to preside over

Fig. 8.3 Coralie Carmichael as von Bernburg comforts Betty Chancellor as Manuela. This image appeared in the *Evening Herald* and *Irish Independent* of 17 April 1934. It was also chosen by Richard Pine and Richard Cave to represent Carmichael in their 1984 slide-show history of the Gate (27; slide 5) (Copyright of the Edwards – mac Liammóir Estate)

Fig. 8.4 The 'Poster of Photographs' that served as a foyer placard welcoming audiences to the Gate production of *Children in Uniform*, April 1934. Gate Theatre Archive, Northwestern University (Copyright of the Edwards – mac Liammóir Estate)

daily prayers (Fig. 8.4, second row from top), then to interrupt a conversation between two teachers (Fig. 8.4, fourth row, left). This silhouette technique, referred to as the 'stair shadow' in the *Children in Uniform* lighting plot (Edwards 1), represents the oppressive system of surveillance that dominates life in this school or, indeed, any authoritarian regime. The technique is borrowed from German expressionist film and theatre, and in this case seems to pay homage to F.W. Murnau's 1922 horror classic, *Nosferatu* (Fig. 8.5). This is one of the films Siegfried Kracauer cites to support his (tendentious) claim that those works of Weimar film and theatre (including *Mädchen in Uniform*) that portrayed weak men and women in the thrall of powerful personalities paved the way for the Nazi dictatorship (Kracauer 226-29). A stronger case could be made,

Fig. 8.5 An iconic scene from F.W. Murnau's Weimar expressionist film *Nosferatu* (1922)

however, that Edwards and mac Liammóir were attempting a critique of Nazi authoritarianism in their play. It was staged over a year into the Nazi seizure of power, and whereas in Berlin in 1931 mac Liammóir could dismiss the Nazi movement as 'a mildly Gaelic League-ish affair on a large scale concerning itself mainly with a revival of Lederhosen, attractive or not according to the wearer' (mac Liammóir 118-19), by 1934 he was beginning to recognize that their 'marching and saluting and shouting' was in fact 'bloodcurdling' (118).

Ian R. Walsh has shown how Edwards used this German expressionist silhouette technique in early Gate productions like *Peer Gynt* and *Hamlet* to capture 'the isolation and alienation of modernity felt by characters in modernist plays' (42). In *Children in Uniform*, however, it is not the alienation of the isolated heroes that this technique captures, but rather the closing off of the potential of (three-dimensional) affective self-determination in the face of looming (two-dimensional) emotional subjugation. *Children in Uniform*'s 'stair shadow' is associated with a sonic leitmotif, too: the 'tap, tap, tap' of the headmistress's walking stick, a prop which can be seen in several of the images. This tapping is noted in the stage directions for all versions of the play, but Edwards choreographs

it quite precisely in the Gate production. When the headmistress arrives to hear the end of Manuela's scandalous speech, for instance, Edwards has everyone 'look at her stick' as the headmistress starts to speak (see Fig. 8.4, top) and take their cues from its tapping: '2 stick. Count 2. All curtsy form into Double file exit up L.' (1933a, 52) At the end of the play, Edwards has the headmistress rhythmically repeat the word 'an accident' several times as she exits, '[pulling] herself together' and reasserting order to the beat of her stick (1933a, 72; Fig. 8.6).

Another ominous presence dominating mac Liammóir's set and tied to a sonic regime is the bell pull in the reception hall, visible in three of the images on the foyer poster (Fig. 8.4). In the (realist) Duchess Theatre production, a small school bell had hung in an arch at the back of the stage (1933a, facing page 5); mac Liammóir's more expressionist production replaced it with a bell pull that looked more like the perch of a caged bird – or even a stylized hangman's noose – and let it hover above these scenes, out of control of the women standing below, rendering them servile (see Fig. 8.4, row 2). This bell sounds out across the school regularly, and along with an electric doorbell, a ringing phone, a grandfather clock (Edwards reinserts a line in which Manuela complains about its tick [1930, 6]), a drumbeat with which Edwards opens and closes almost every scene, and the recurring sound of 'marching' or 'tramping' feet – especially a long marching sequence before the curtain even rises⁸ – it renders the regimentation of Prussian boarding school life inescapable. The result is that the tender feelings of von Bernburg, Edelgard and Manuela are even more vulnerable, under constant threat of interruption or exposure within the disciplined scopic and sonic regime of the school.

Fig. 8.6 Edwards's stage directions for the end of *Children in Uniform*: the headmistress taps her stick as she repeats her lie to herself (Winsloe 1933a, 72). Gate Theatre Archive, Northwestern University (Copyright of the Edwards – mac Liammóir Estate)

THE CRITICAL RECEPTION OF THE GATE PRODUCTION

The *Irish Times*' 'Irishman's Diary' of 9 April 1934 lavishes praise on Edwards's sound design, in particular 'the eerie effects obtained by [...] the use of the drum *motif*'. Having its 'note of doom' echoed in 'the sound of the [...] walking stick is a touch of real genius' (Clippings 8). But the oppressive soundscapes of the production do not appeal to all critics: the reviewer for the *Irish Press* complains that 'the marching of the children in heavy military step was more prolonged and emphasised than was necessary' (7). There are also concerns about slow scene changes on opening night, but on the whole the critical reception is positive. The acting (by an all-women cast, many noted) is universally praised: Manuela is 'superbly played by Betty Chancellor', Carmichael 'played the part [of von Bernburg] with unusual tenderness and depth of feeling', and 'Ria Mooney lent an added strength to the grim headmistress' (7) in the *Irish Independent*'s assessment, which typifies the Dublin opinions. Unsurprisingly, the critics build their reviews around the play's critique of authoritarianism, with only some referring to the love story thwarted by that system. According to the *Irish Times*, the 'first fifteen seconds [...] gives the key to the whole play before a word has been spoken. [...] An iron, almost a prison-like discipline is the note of the scene, and it is carried all through the drama'; the play 'is nothing but an indictment of Prussianism in education' (7). The *Evening Herald* of 7 April does not mention the love story at all: this is simply 'the tragic story of the child's [...] reaction to the iron discipline enforced in the Prussian Girls' School' (7); the *Sunday Independent*, similarly, refers only to the play's 'indictment of conditions in a Prussian girls' school' (7). Critics do not see the production as a representation of indoctrination or authoritarianism specifically in Nazi Germany: they imagine, rather, that Winsloe (through von Bernburg) is taking aim at the unyielding Prussian militarism that led to the Great War.⁹

When the source of Manuela's suffering is mentioned, the story of romantic love is erased and Manuela's feelings are pathologized, even by apparently sympathetic reviewers. On 11 April, the critic for the *Irish Independent* notes that 'the play would be more convincing had the girl crushed by the system been a more normal type'. Chancellor is superb in the role, but the 'sensitive, imaginative child' is 'morbid', and her downfall is due to this 'weakness in her character' (7). The *Irish Times*

agrees: Manuela gives her teacher ‘the love which can find no expression elsewhere. That love, warped, as it is, because it can find no normal outlet, does not run a normal course, and the affection almost becomes a perverted affection. Thus, the play is not a study of normal people, but an essay on the neurotic’ (7). Later in 1934, Bulmer Hobson sounds the same note in his retrospective study of the Gate’s first five years when he praises Betty Chancellor’s ‘subtle study of hysteria as Manuela in “Children in Uniform”’ (47). The language of these reviews indicates that the writers recognized the lesbian content of the play, but could not bring themselves to name or defend an affection they considered taboo. Not one of the reviewers takes the easy road of characterising Manuela’s passion as the misplaced need for motherly affection, though: Manuela feels as she does because she is not ‘normal’ – because she is ‘morbid’, i.e. diseased. Film critic Richard Dyer has declared himself astounded by the fact that many viewers of *Mädchen in Uniform* do not see the love story in the film: ‘*Mädchen*’s lesbianism is so obvious that it is hard to believe anyone could downplay it.’ (44) Reviewers of the Gate production of *Children in Uniform* were clearly not that oblivious: they may not have used the word lesbian – and if they had they would not have used it in a positive sense – but they certainly did recognize sexual dissidence in the Edwards – mac Liammóir production.

CONCLUSION

When it comes to the critical reception of the Gate’s *Children in Uniform*, then, we are not dealing with what Tamsin Wilton and others have characterized as lesbian invisibility, but with the pathologization of lesbian desire in 1930s Dublin. The Gate production did not invite these negative readings: it was sensitive not only to the genuine – if sometimes excessive – feelings of Manuela but also to the older woman’s more tightly controlled feelings of love for the younger woman. This is hardly surprising: ‘the Boys’ had created a haven in the old Rotunda Assembly Rooms for queer expression, living openly as a couple themselves and staging plays that depicted – if only tangentially – love between men (Mary Manning’s *Youth’s the Season*–? or Oscar Wilde’s *Salomé*). Ria Mooney, who played the tyrannical headmistress in Winsloe’s play, had also spent several years steeped in the lesbian culture that surrounded Eva Le Gallienne’s Civic Repertory Theatre in New York, where Mooney had worked as an actress, teacher and director before returning to Dublin to

join the Gate in 1933 (McGlone 30-55; Mooney 68-99; O'Dowd 191-222).¹⁰ In the case of *Children in Uniform*, this Gate ensemble produced a play that was sympathetic to the fate of women-loving women. Script emendations, blocking, sets, lights and sound effects all combined to make plain that the restraint and oppression of love was what produced pathological symptoms ('morbidly', 'hysteria', 'neurosis' in the language of the day), not the passion itself. If, in the spirit of Heather Love's *Feeling Backward*, we 'take impossible love as a model for queer historiography' (24), the depiction of vulnerability, passivity and abjection in the character of von Bernburg, the multiple failures of Manuela in the face of social norms, and the tragic denouement itself are features of the play that also help make the story a recognizably lesbian one. What lesbian theatre-goers made of the production we cannot say without further evidence (from diaries, letters, or other memoirs that may come to light), but it cannot be far removed from what the contributor to *Die Freundin* saw in *Gestern und heute*, 'That's our life, surely, that is being played out here', for 'it is the fate of us all to be "cast out of human society."' (qtd in Puhlfürst 44)

NOTES

1. I would like to thank the librarians and archivists at the Charles Deering McCormick Library of Special Collections, Northwestern University Libraries; the National Library of Ireland; and the Deutsche Nationalbibliothek in Leipzig for expertise shared and assistance rendered as I researched this chapter. My especial thanks go to Northwestern's Jason Nargis for his generosity with time and advice. Travel to these archives was funded by the Department of Languages, Literatures, and Cultures and the Richard L. Walker Institute of International Studies at the University of South Carolina, for which they also have my grateful thanks.
2. Most recently, the German studies journal *Seminar* dedicated its spring 2019 issue to *Mädchen in Uniform*, giving us a timely and important reconsideration of the film and its legacies; but see also Dyer, Fest, Kracauer and Rich.
3. Unless otherwise noted, all translations from the German are my own.
4. Alexander and Georg Marton published typewritten copies of the play solely for staging purposes. Their text is that of the Berlin production, *Gestern und heute*, although they include the play's original Leipzig name as a subtitle (see Works Cited). Regardless of when they were typed up, copies of this (scarce) edition all bear the publication date of 1930. It is this actors' edition of the Berlin script that was used by Burnham.
5. Despite not having been shown in Ireland, the film was so well known that most Irish reviewers of the Gate production refer to it. The *Irish Times*,

for instance, notes that ‘as a film in New York it appears to have made the greatest impression’ (Clippings 7); the *Evening Herald* reports that the play ‘has been filmed under the title of “Madchen [*sic*] in Uniform,” which has not yet been seen in Dublin’ (7); and in the *Evening Mail* we read that it was ‘in the film version of this remarkable modern play by Christa Winsloe that the beautiful German actress, Dorothy Wieck, made her name’ (7).

6. For an image of Melzer as von Bernburg and Gina Falkenberg as Manuela in the Berlin production, see Stürzer 104. A simple search on Getty Images brings up a second photograph of the two in costume.
7. Edwards’s personal copy of *Famous Plays of 1932–33* is at the Gate Archive at Northwestern University; it is not marked up in any way, but must have been the source of his emendations to the prompt copy. A typical example of Edwards’s editing can be seen in that prompt copy in an early scene when the pupils are about to converge on the new girl, eager to meet her. Whispers offstage include the line ‘Like a lost lamb ... as usual!’ in *Famous Plays of 1932–33* (Winsloe 1934, 24) but this is missing from French’s Acting Edition (Winsloe 1933a, 10). Edwards adds it back in by hand, along with his own new interjection, ‘Where is she?’ (10).
8. John Finegan describes a similar moment in Edwards’s staging of Denis Johnson’s *The Old Lady Says ‘No!’* as the ‘most arresting opening to any Irish drama that I know. While the curtain is still down there is heard the approaching tramp of marching feet, and voices chant the “Sean Bhean Bhocht”. The tramping and the singing continue for some minutes before gradually dying away. Then the curtain rises.’ (24)
9. See, for instance, the opening lines of the *Irish Independent* review of 11 April: ‘During the Great War we came to attach a certain meaning to the word Prussianism. In “Children in Uniform” we see it at its worst and its stupid best.’ (Clippings 7)
10. Thanks to Ciara O’Dowd’s groundbreaking work on Mooney, we now have a fuller picture of her place in bohemian circles in 1920s New York. Her network included not only Le Gallienne and her lover Josephine Hutchinson, but also the lesbian icon Alla Nazimova, who acted at the Civic Repertory Theatre and was supportive of Mooney’s career. O’Dowd speculates that in New York Mooney developed an ‘intimate’ relationship with Rita Romelli, ‘a dancer, an actress, teacher and later a key figure in the Harlem Renaissance’ (214). Previous accounts of Mooney’s life have focused mainly on Mooney’s love affairs with unavailable men; O’Dowd complicates this heteronormative narrative, concluding that ‘Romelli and Mooney had a loving and intimate relationship that lasted their whole lives. There is no evidence it developed from friendship to a sexual relationship, or indeed is there anything to suggest that it was only platonic. Their relationship was intimate, loving and vital to Mooney’s happiness’

(215). Mooney would go on to dedicate her memoirs to Romelli. Unfortunately, Mooney does not specifically discuss *Children in Uniform* in those memoirs; she merely notes that ‘the headmistress in *Madchen [sic] in Uniform*’ was one of the characters she played ‘[carrying] my clothes the way I might have done, had I actually lived in that particular period’ (106).

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