

# “Did those girls know what they were doing?” Agency, Anxiety and the Adult Gaze in *Het Hamiltoncomplex*

Laoise Murray

*Content Note: This essay deals with the topic of the sexuality of young women and girls, and in correspondence with that, the consumption by adults of such material.*

This essay discusses the discomfort of adult audience members in viewing depictions of female sexuality by young performers in HETPALEIS's *Het Hamiltoncomplex*. I deconstruct the 'Adult Gaze' that which dictates the programming of children's theatre based on what adults deem 'appropriate', allowing us to punish female children for our own anxieties, under a facade of adult protection. Referencing Foucault's theory of sexuality 'confessional' societies, vulnerability studies, and Freudian definitions of taboo, I posit that our unconscious guilt surrounding the infantilisation of women and the sexualisation of girls leads to a desire to 'protect' that is often more harmful than helpful.

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“Are there any paedophiles in the audience?”<sup>1</sup>

The above line was spoken by one of the thirteen thirteen-year-olds involved in devising and performing HETPALEIS's *Het Hamiltoncomplex*,

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1 HETPALEIS, *Het Hamiltoncomplex*, Unicorn Theatre, London, 30 June 2016.

directed by Lies Pauwels, which explored young women's experiences navigating the period between childhood and adulthood, or more specifically, girlhood and womanhood. A show that takes its name from photographer David Hamilton and his career-long focus on the nude teenage body as well as his controversial book, *The Age of Innocence*, it explores the sexualisation and agency of young womanhood.<sup>2</sup> Under the watchful gaze of one adult male bodybuilder, the girls dance, sing, scream at and flash the audience, and dress up in costumes inspired by caricatures of femininity and youth: school uniforms, Lolita-style dresses and wigs, and Red Riding Hood capes. Audience reactions were divided, with many members uncomfortable with the depiction of conscious female desire projected onto such young bodies. I argue that this discomfort reveals more about our own social anxieties than it does about teenage sexuality: as Megan Reid points out, "dominant heteronormative culture is responsible for constituting human sexuality as essentially reproductive."<sup>3</sup> This focus on reproduction, along with what Michel Foucault describes as a scientific, confessional culture around sex and sexuality, has allowed pleasure to remain a taboo.<sup>4</sup> Female pleasure, which is largely based on clitoral stimulation and therefore does not necessitate intercourse, can be placed in the same category as homosexual sex, in that it is non-reproductive, 'other', and deviant. Our fear of expressing desire leads to a culture of shame, in which we blame girls for the discomfort or confusion they arouse. Sexuality is experienced through the gendered body, which means that women's early exploration of sexuality sits firmly within a cultural context and awareness of rape culture and power imbalance.<sup>5</sup> I find, therefore, the questions raised by audience members as to whether these girls 'knew what they were doing', or whether they were being manipulated, to be presumptive and contrary to common female experience. In this essay, I aim to explore, through the concepts of taboo, agency, and vulnerability, the existence of a gaze connected to the patriarchal, but of a much more specific nature: the Adult Gaze. Furthermore, I will argue that the Adult Gaze is a product of socially constructed power and if it is not interrogated or reassessed, it can be a tool

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2 David Hamilton, *The Age of Innocence* (London: Aurum Press, 1995).

3 Megan Reid, "Keep Out of Reach of Children: Sex Positivity in Theatre for Young Audiences," (Master's thesis, Utrecht University, 2016), 2.

4 Michel Foucault, "Scientia Sexualis," in *The Will to Knowledge: The History of Sexuality Volume 1*, trans. Robert Hurley (London: Penguin Books, 1998).

5 Megan Reid, "Keep Out of Reach of Children: Sex Positivity in Theatre for Young Audiences," (Master's thesis, Utrecht University, 2016), 19.

used to punish and restrict children.

In his writing on taboo within indigenous cultures, Sigmund Freud defines taboo as something going in two contrary directions: that of the sacred and consecrated, and that of the uncanny, dangerous, forbidden and unclean.<sup>6</sup> It represents the unapproachable, “what may not be touched,” and is expressed only through prohibition, which is deep-seated, completely unquestioned and often unconscious.<sup>7</sup> The revulsion we experience when faced with taboo has a powerful effect on us, but we can rarely articulate why. This can be seen in the ‘Lolita scene’ of *Het Hamilton* complex, where the teenage girls are dressed up in infantilising, Victorian-inspired, ‘Lolita’ costumes (complete with wigs) and introduce themselves by telling the audience their names: ‘Chastity’, ‘Eternity’, ‘Prudence’, ‘Precious’ and ‘Beauty’.<sup>8</sup> Rather than depicting virtues of traditional femininity indirectly, they have pointedly re-named themselves, creating a juxtaposition between the idealised and the real, breathing, complex human. The performance style hovers between innocent and seductive, with the performers displaying a deliberate coquettishness, by twirling their wigs and speaking in soft, giggling, girlish voices. This evokes the ‘sexy schoolgirl’ trope, which many adult audience members would be familiar with due to popular pornography, which arguably leads to a feeling of guilt that is largely misread as paternalistic discomfort. By subverting this trope (which is usually enacted by adult women masquerading as underage girls – something that has crept its way into our contemporary lexicon with the persistent use of the term ‘girl’ to describe adult women) by having real, human schoolchildren performing this role, the adult viewer is forced to recognise just how young these girls are, and to reassess their complicity in the infantilization of women, and the sexualisation of girls.<sup>9</sup>

Furthermore, just as the ‘sexy schoolgirl’ trope relies on sex appeal, it is also founded on a performed innocence and ignorance of said sex appeal.

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6 Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo: Some Points of Agreement Between the Mental Lives of Savages and Neurotics*, trans. James Strachey (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd., 1950), 18.

7 *Ibid.*, 25; 21.

8 Anoop Nayak and Mary Jane Kehily, “Gender Relations in Late Modernity: Young Femininities and the New Girl Order,” in *Gender, Youth and Culture: Global Masculinities and Femininities* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 84.

9 Mayim Bialik, “‘Girl’ vs. ‘Woman’: Why Language Matters.” YouTube video, 4:04. Posted 23 March 2017. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qHH3lhYwqcY> (accessed 28/4/17).

Rooted in its 'unintentional nature' and facilitated by a performative naivety, this kind of sex appeal is unique to the 'sexy schoolgirl' and to the way in which we sexualise girls. Young girls must be sexual, but not know it; they must be sexy, but also virginal. Young girls are expected to be surprised at the thought of their own appeal. The tongue-in-cheek nature of this scene is potentially most disturbing to our patriarchal visions of 'appropriate' female sexuality. These girls know what they are doing - what they are evoking - and this makes them dangerous.

A similar theme is addressed when the thirteen-year-old performers, in school uniform skirts, flash the audience their underwear while screaming at them. Echoes of Frank Wedekind's novella *Mine-Haha*, or *On the Bodily Education of Young Girls* (London: Hesperus Press Ltd., 2010), in which prepubescent girls are raised to perform in erotic shows for adults, the nature of which they don't quite understand, can be identified here. The girls of *Mine-Haha* are trained to walk on their hands, so that their skirts fall down over their heads: something they do not understand as sexual, but from which their audience nevertheless derive voyeuristic pleasure. Although the scenes seem similar, with the pastoral, Classical stage set of *Het Hamiltoncomplex* mirroring the quasi-utopian world of *Mine-Haha*, there is an important distinction: the girls of *Het Hamiltoncomplex* choose to raise their skirts. It is a definitive action, carried out consciously as an act of defiance. It is this knowledge, and suggested independence, that disrupts our image of these girls, and our perception of the position of children in society: as that of pure, dependant, unconditionally-loving hopes for the future.<sup>10</sup>

Adult discomfort is problematic due to the unwillingness to name it or to interrogate where it comes from, which can lead to a culture of shame. As Kate Millet describes it:

*"Shame, invented by adults and laid upon children, is still pervasive and continues to colour adolescence, particularly that of female children. Their lives are a continual apology for something they probably haven't done and do not really understand. But they might. They might. And this possibility of sexual activity is what adults guard relentlessly against."*<sup>11</sup>

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10 Kate Millet, "Beyond Politics? Children and Sexuality," in *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality*, ed. Carol S. Vance (London: Pandora Press, 1989), 223.

11 *Ibid.*, 219-220.

It is this 'might' - this idea of early female autonomy that so disrupts our society and worries us. Good intentions to protect children from harm are what feeds this cycle of shame and patronisation. These intentions may be genuine and noble, but they must be reassessed if we are to move into an age where women, of all ages, are listened to and respected.

In her essay on sexual politics, Gayle S. Rubin outlines this cycle of good intention succinctly: "For over a century, no tactic for stirring up erotic hysteria has been as reliable as the appeal to protect children."<sup>12</sup> Vulnerability is known to be intertwined with dependency, and so it is reasonable to say that, with the least agency of any demographic, children are hugely vulnerable.<sup>13</sup> However, all too often, stifling sexist restriction and punishment can operate under the guise of 'concern' for children, and in particular, for girls. This 'concern' may come from a place of love, but it can be unhelpful and even harmful to the receiving party by being so:

*"Theorists of vulnerability need to be alert to the danger that notions of vulnerability and protection can be, and historically have been, used to justify coercive or objectionably paternalistic social relations, policies and institutions, which often function to compound rather than ameliorate the vulnerability of the persons or groups they are designed to assist."*<sup>14</sup>

We can see evidence of Catriona Mackenzie's assertion throughout contemporary society: Sinead O'Connor's 2013 open letter to Miley Cyrus, for example, which condemned the singer for "prostituting herself" in her Wrecking Ball music video, and informed her that her "body is for you and your boyfriend," all while claiming to be writing "in the spirit of motherliness and with love."<sup>15</sup> On the extreme end of the scale, an increase

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12 Gayle S. Rubin, "Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory on the Politics of Sexuality," in *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality*, ed. Carol S. Vance (London: Pandora Press, 1989), 271.

13 Catriona Mackenzie, Wendy Rogers, Susan Dodds, eds., *Vulnerability: New Essays in Ethics and Feminist Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 4.

14 Catriona Mackenzie, "The Importance of Relational Autonomy and Capabilities for an Ethics of Vulnerability," in *Vulnerability: New Essays in Ethics and Feminist Philosophy*, eds. Catriona Mackenzie, Wendy Rogers and Susan Dodds (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 34.

15 Guardian, "Sinéad O'Connor's open letter to Miley Cyrus," <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2013/oct/03/sinead-o-connor-open-letter-miley-cyrus> (accessed 28/4/17); MileyCyrusVEVO, "Miley Cyrus – Wrecking Ball." YouTube video, 3:41. Posted 9 September 2013. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=My2FRP>

in child marriage was seen among Syrian refugees in Lebanese refugee camps, in an attempt to protect young girls from rape: under the guise of being 'protected' from being raped by a stranger, girls are confined in their childhood to the marital rape of an adult husband.<sup>16</sup>

This paradigm is dealt with in *Het Hamilton* complex in the manner in which the male bodybuilder, acting as a kind of security guard, interacts with the girls in a scene reminiscent of 1960s 'Beatlemania'. The performers scream excitedly and dance around, while the bodyguard gently but firmly attempts to remove them from the stage. His touch is respectful, as the girls hug and climb on top of him flirtatiously, but there is an underlying theme of silencing women 'for their own good' or simply 'because they don't know any better'. The references to 'fangirl culture' are well placed in addressing the condescension in pop culture of anything with a predominantly young female fan base.<sup>17</sup> While bands with adult male audiences, like the Rolling Stones, are accredited 'objective' merit and are to be appreciated by everyone, groups like One Direction are perceived as decidedly low culture. This is no coincidence: there are few positions in our society as patronised and reviled as that of the teenage girl. What we are seeing in the security guard figure is an obsessive need to control female excitement and bubbling sexuality, dressed up as a concern for safety: it may indeed be done with gentle kindness, but its basis in control and restriction remains unchanged.

It is important to acknowledge when addressing the vulnerability of certain groups that, as Robert Goodin points out, while vulnerability is common to all humans, it is not innate, but rather relational: "Any dependency or vulnerability is arguably created, shaped, or sustained, at least in some part, by existing social arrangements. None is wholly natural."<sup>18</sup> To assume that girls have an innate vulnerability would be to essentialise the concept, along with passivity, gentleness, and weak-mindedness. Rather, it is more helpful to analyse vulnerability as a relational state, as something that arises due to the action or neglect of others.<sup>19</sup>

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16 The Atlantic, "Child Marriages Rise Among Syrian Refugee Girls," <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2013/05/child-marriages-rise-among-syrian-refugee-girls/276287/> (accessed 28/4/17).

17 Pop Matters, "Rags to Riches: The Fangirl Phenomena," <http://www.popmatters.com/feature/117926-rags-to-riches-the-fangirl-phenomena/> (accessed 28/4/17).

18 Robert Goodin, *Protecting the Vulnerable: A Re-Analysis of our Social Responsibilities* (London: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 191.

19 Amy Mullin, "Children, Vulnerability, and Emotional Harm," in *Vulnerability: New*



Mackenzie uses a woman suffering from domestic abuse as an example: the woman is not inherently vulnerable or 'at risk' because of her femininity, or whatever traits supposedly are attached to that femininity, but because of her proximity to an abuser.<sup>20</sup> Essentialised vulnerability is a common weapon used in the discourse of rape culture, which dictates that all women are potential prey to male attackers and therefore should take responsibility for their own safety, and be paternalistically scolded when they do not.

The question to the audience "are there any paedophiles in the audience?" by child performers directly tackles this issue. By doing so, they pinpoint the dangers of child abuse as residing in the abuser, and not in explicit female sexuality. It is an accusatory question, as the paedophile is, in essence, adult, and turns the Adult Gaze back onto those who are looking. It has been proven that the 'stranger danger' rape narrative serves to spread misinformation in society and erases the reality of much more common familial abuse<sup>21</sup>, and so suggesting that a paedophile could be in the room amongst an adult audience refocuses adult 'concern' onto the deserving target.

Our responsibility to protect and nurture the young in our society is what sets children's theatre apart from other theatre forms. It is the only theatre form that is not at all mediated by the predominant watcher, receiver, and, in the case of *Het Hamilton* complex, performer, which makes it susceptible to a moralising and didacticism that can be harmful.<sup>22</sup> It is adults who programme children's shows, buy the tickets and allow or prohibit children to see or participate in children's theatre. The political correctness, safety and artistic worth of a piece is entirely dictated by the Adult Gaze, rendering children powerless in decisions regarding what kind of theatre they want to see and create. The content of Theatre for Young Audiences reflects their position in our society and how they are viewed, which is why it is so troubling that it is almost entirely constructed by adults.

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*Essays in Ethics and Feminist Philosophy*, eds. Catriona Mackenzie, Wendy Rogers and Susan Dodds (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 267.

- 20 Catriona Mackenzie, "The Importance of Relational Autonomy and Capabilities for an Ethics of Vulnerability," in *Vulnerability: New Essays in Ethics and Feminist Philosophy*, eds. Catriona Mackenzie, Wendy Rogers and Susan Dodds (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 38.
- 21 Erica R. Meiners, "Offending Children, Registering Sex," *Women's Studies Quarterly* Vol. 43 Issue 1 (Spring/Summer 2015): 257.
- 22 Tony Graham, "Children Grow Up Not Down," in *The Young Audience: Exploring and Enhancing Children's Experiences of Theatre*. Staffordshire, ed. Matthew Reason (Trentham Books Limited, 2010).

In this year's Baboró International Arts Festival for Children, Muireann Ahern, a leading practitioner in the field of Theatre for Young Audiences, spoke about how, when discussing taboo or adult themes, the question is often not how much a child can handle, but rather, how much the adult programmers can handle.<sup>23</sup> The Adult Gaze sets the standard for what is 'appropriate', something children have no say in: a standard that often reflects our anxieties, not theirs. In recognising this, it is imperative that we take responsibility for the incredible power we hold over children and their wellbeing. Cultures that shame discussions or displays of sexuality too often become cultures of silence, which are exactly the cultures that facilitate the type of abuse we are so desperate to shelter children from.<sup>24</sup> The long history of clerical abuse in Ireland could not have operated without the facilitation of cultures of shame, sexual repression and silence: a sobering fact to remember for those of us who have children's best interests at heart.<sup>25</sup> Our discomfort around child and teenage sexuality is much more dangerous than we would like to admit.

Child sexuality, particularly female child sexuality, is something that deserves our recognition. It has been scientifically proven that the sexual response system (independent of the reproductive system) is active from birth in humans.<sup>26</sup> Any ideas that sexuality manifests only at puberty are largely outdated, as is the concept that one can comprehend certain topics only over an arbitrary age, or that "children are fragilely innocent until the moment they step over some line, at which point they become instantly, irredeemably wicked."<sup>27</sup> While it is reasonable to feel uncomfortable when faced with child sexuality such as is presented in *Het Hamilton* complex, it does not give us a right to condemn, restrict or claim child manipulation. Our discomfort is real and deserves attention, but does not negate the

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- 23 Baboró International Arts Festival for Children, "Something for the Grown Ups: What is taboo?," <http://www.baboro.ie/festival/programme/something-for-the-grown-ups-what-is-taboo> (accessed 28/4/17).
- 24 Kate Millet, "Beyond Politics? Children and Sexuality," in *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality*, ed. Carol S. Vance (London: Pandora Press, 1989), 217.
- 25 Claire McLoone-Richard, "Say Nothing! How Pathology within Catholicism Created and Sustained the Institutional Abuse of Children in 20th Century Ireland," *Child Abuse Review* Vol. 21 Issue 6 (November/December 2012): 401.
- 26 Mary S. Calderone, "Above and Beyond Politics: The Sexual Socialisation of Children," in *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality*, ed. Carol S. Vance (London: Pandora Press, 1989), 134.
- 27 Judith Levine, quoted in "Keep Out of Reach of Children: Sex Positivity in Theatre for Young Audiences," Megan Reid (Master's thesis, Utrecht University, 2016), 15.



reality of its source. We may be uncomfortable with child masturbation, for instance, but that does not give us the right to withhold the information and punish the expression to which children are entitled. Our prudishness does not excuse shaming young people, and calls for an evaluation of an Adult Gaze that is born of patriarchal value systems.

*“When we came together, most of these girls had never been onstage before. Now they own it, and they are so lovely with each other. We talk about a lot of very hard and difficult things in the performance, but they do it with love and tenderness, and they are so responsible. People talk about it being my show, but it’s really their show. It belongs to them. We made it together. Everything in it came from them.”<sup>28</sup>*

Lies Pauwels, the director of Het Hamiltoncomplex, outlines clearly the benefits of providing children with safe spaces within which to discuss and explore their sexualities and embodied experiences. The confidence with which these thirteen young women perform, and the warmth with which they interact, is indicative of the non-judgemental, encouraging environment within which they created this show. In interrogating the Adult Gaze and its basis in taboo, fear, and mistrust, we can begin to build a theatre tradition that is founded on respect of young people. In recent history, our society has begun to move toward respecting women, and expanding their position in society. A dismantling of the Adult Gaze could serve to do the same for young people. What we need, ultimately, is to trust girls.

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28 Lyn Gardner, “How to evoke a world in chaos? Let 13 teenage girls storm the stage,” <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2016/jun/28/the-hamilton-complex-teenage-girls-stage-unicorn-theatre-lift> (accessed 28/4/17).

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