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IN THE FAMILY WAY: THE POLITICIZATION OF MOTHERHOOD IN MERRILL DENISON'S *MARSH HAY* (1923)¹

Merrill Denison's 1923 play *Marsh Hay* explores how the pregnancy of an unwed teenager affects her destitute family in rural Ontario. This article offers a new reading of *Marsh Hay*, arguing that the play critiques and revises normative views about maternity from a liberal feminist perspective. Many of the ideas presented in *Marsh Hay* can be traced to the playwright's suffragist mother, Flora MacDonald Denison. There are also several moments in the play that address issues related to motherhood that were particularly topical in the early 1920s. Finally, this article examines the critical responses to the play's publication as well as to its three known productions to determine how *Marsh Hay* can provide access to evolving attitudes toward maternity in Canada.

La pièce Marsh Hay de Merrill Denison (1923) explore comment la grossesse d'une adolescente célibataire affecte sa famille défavorisée en milieu rural en Ontario. Cet article propose une nouvelle interprétation de Marsh Hay fondée sur l'idée que la pièce critique et revoit le point de vue normatif sur la maternité à partir d'une perspective libérale et féministe. Un grand nombre des idées présentées dans Marsh Hay peuvent être attribuées à la mère suffragiste du dramaturge, Flora MacDonald Denison. De plus, quelques-uns des moments de la pièce abordent des enjeux liés à la maternité qui étaient tout à fait d'actualité au début des années 1920. Enfin, l'article examine l'accueil qu'a réservé la critique à la pièce publiée ainsi qu'à ses trois productions connues afin de voir comment Marsh Hay nous permet de comprendre l'évolution des attitudes à l'égard de la maternité au Canada.



In 1923 McClelland and Stewart published *The Unheroic North*, an anthology of four plays by Merrill Denison. In *Marsh Hay*, the only full-length script included in the collection, Denison conveyed the squalor and desperation of the Serangs, a poor, rural family in Ontario trying to farm what the father, John Serang,

repeatedly refers to as “fifty acres of grey stone.” When one of John’s teenaged daughters, Sarilin, becomes pregnant, he tries to force a shot-gun wedding. Sarilin’s older sister, Tessie, recommends having an abortion. After an offstage encounter with a city woman who challenges the social stigma of unwed pregnancy and illegitimacy, Sarilin’s mother, Lena, rejects the pessimism of her family and becomes determined to improve her family’s situation. Her new-found hope is defeated, however, when Sarilin has a “fall” and miscarries. A sense of despondency pervades as the play ends.

One way to understand the bleak tone of *Marsh Hay* is to read the script as a treatise on motherhood. Denison’s play strips maternity of sentimentality. In its place, the play demonstrates the agency of theatrical texts to act upon the socio-political contexts in which they are created. *Marsh Hay* compiles and vocalizes conflicting opinions about unwed motherhood, and constructs arguments in support of actions that transgress 1920s social norms. Moreover, subsequent reactions to the playscript and its productions are useful in charting shifting ideological positions regarding maternity present in Canada at specific moments during the twentieth century.

Motherhood is an important and obvious entry point into Denison’s play: Sarilin’s pregnancy provides the crisis that propels the play’s plot, and her mother’s offstage conversion facilitates the onstage debates about morality and maternity. Yet, previous scholarly considerations of *Marsh Hay* have left the issue largely unexplored and instead have focussed on other concerns. Most notably, as the collection’s title suggests, the four plays in *The Unheroic North*, including *Marsh Hay*, undermine romantic stereotypes of the Canadian backwoods, which Denison, who had inherited Bon Echo, a rustic cottage resort on Lake Mazinaw near Cloyne, Ontario, called “a vast rural slum” (qtd. in Chapman, “Marsh Hay”). As a result, almost all published analysis about *Marsh Hay* notes that the play depicts what Alexander Leggatt has called the “futility and despair” caused by rural poverty (“Playwrights” 137).

Given that social commentary, environment and heredity are all central to naturalism, several writers have also examined how *Marsh Hay* enacts and disrupts the conventions of naturalist theatre and more generally compares to other modernist plays. Ric Knowles, for instance, classifies the play as “deterministically naturalistic” (117) and Alan Filewod suggests that the play’s strength lies in “the moments of biological naturalism” (73). Anton Wagner has noted that playwright and theatre innovator Herman Voaden believed Denison’s plays were worth considering as models for his

own work, thereby inviting further research on the extent peer awareness and influence were active in the Canadian modernist community.

Filewod has argued that Denison's plays have been co-opted "to argue Canadian cultural distinctiveness" despite the fact that the playwright repudiated attempts to affix national labels to his plays (70). Yet, perhaps because Denison *has* been claimed so vigorously by Canadians—he has been variously promoted as "Canada's greatest dramatist" (Milne 64), "Canada's first English-language dramatist of note" (Johnson 79), and as a man whose "contributions to Canadian literature cannot be overstated" (MacDonald, *Mugwump Canadian* x)—some researchers, including Richard Plant ("Leaving Home" 196, 202-203) and Terence W. Goldie ("A National Drama" 13, 17), among others, have commented on how *Marsh Hay* operates when examined under the rubric of "national drama."

Marsh Hay is rich enough to sustain a plurality of readings. The text supports reflection on its representation of rural deprivation. The modernist hybridity of European form and localized Canadian content in the play is another reasonable analytic project. Similarly, it is useful to position *Marsh Hay* within the Canadian literary canon. Yet, these approaches should not be mistaken as exhausting the play's interpretative potential. An examination of maternity in *Marsh Hay* is logical and potentially valuable because Denison chose motherhood as the focal point of his play.

While it is possible to suggest that the maternal strife in *Marsh Hay* is included simply to demonstrate the detrimental impact poverty has on families, historical contextualization allows for a more rewarding examination of the specific maternal issues Denison chose to include. That is, Denison not only denounced idealized representations of the Canadian backwoods, preferring to expose the economic problems of the area, but he also wrote a play that can be read as an ardent liberal feminist protest schooled in the political convictions of the playwright's mother, Flora MacDonald Denison, one of Canada's most progressive suffrage leaders of her day. *Marsh Hay* accesses many of Flora MacDonald Denison's ideas to critique the vulnerability and powerlessness that in the 1920s still defined the experience of many Canadian women—especially isolated, rural mothers.

Although the "woman movement"—the phrase used at the time to denote the campaign for women's rights—is never overtly mentioned in *Marsh Hay*, it is not surprising that Denison would

write a play that can be interpreted as a feminist critique of 1920s motherhood. One of the main subjects of naturalist theatre during the early twentieth century was gender inequality. It is unknown which, if any, of the plays by Henrik Ibsen, George Bernard Shaw, Harley Granville Barker, Elizabeth Robins or other proponents of naturalism, were a direct influence on Denison while he was writing *Marsh Hay*, but as a well-read, aspiring playwright, he was probably, if not presumably, familiar with these writers' works and the modernist theatre tradition of challenging gender stereotypes and discrimination that preceded him.

Beyond his literary ambitions, Denison had been attuned to the struggle for women's rights all of his life. During his youth, the family home and car were festooned with "Votes for Women" banners (MacDonald, "Interview" 9). As a young man, he occasionally gave speeches to suffrage organizations and attended numerous international suffrage rallies in his official capacity as the President of the University of Toronto's Men's League for Women's Suffrage in Canada, an organization he founded while an undergraduate ("Big Crowd"; "Wounded Ambulance Driver"; MacDonald, "Interview" 8; MacDonald, *Mugwump Canadian* 12).

The primary source of Denison's feminism was his mother, Flora MacDonald Denison, whose interest in improving the lives of women was, in part, due to her own unfortunate circumstances. Throughout her financially unstable and ultimately failed marriage to Howard Denison, Denison's American father, Flora MacDonald Denison had to work. She advertised her services as a dress-maker in Toronto and briefly managed the custom dress-making department at Simpson's before establishing her own company in 1905 (Gorham, "Flora MacDonald Denison" 52). As a consequence, she understood the gender inequality in pay, respect and power that limited female agency.

In addition to her business, between 1909 and 1913, Flora MacDonald Denison wrote a women's column for the *Toronto Sunday World*. Initially, she rejected suffrage militancy because she felt it was sensationalist and "unwomanly" (qtd. in Gorham, "English Militancy" 99).² However, after attending the International Woman Suffrage Alliance conference in 1906, she began to endorse the confrontational tactics of some of the British suffragists, specifically Emmeline Pankhurst, the co-founder of the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU), which tried to involve working-class women in the suffrage movement and to use social disobedience to bring attention to the struggle for female emancipation (Gorham, "English Militancy" 102-03; Roberts 155). In 1911, Flora

MacDonald Denison became President of the Canadian Suffrage Association (CSA). Two years later, she addressed an audience from a WSPU platform while in England and allegedly joined the organization. These gestures coupled with her increasingly radicalized views on several issues, including marriage and birth control, made many of her colleagues in the CSA begin to view her as a renegade and a dangerous liability (MacDonald Denison, "Women"). As a consequence, she was forced to resign from her leadership position in the autumn of 1914.

Though Flora MacDonald Denison's departure from the CSA highlights a schism within the woman movement, it also further points to how closely Merrill Denison politically aligned himself with his mother. Both mother and son subscribed to a belief in the inherent parity of women and men. Their liberal feminism was discernible when Flora MacDonald Denison wrote "Women's sphere should only be limited by her capabilities and I believe there is no sex in the human brain" (MacDonald Denison, "Notebooks"; Gorham, "Flora" 62). Denison echoed his mother's sentiments when he told an interviewer:

I had no illusions about the women being a secondary, inferior sex, because I had evidence [. . .] around me of great feminine capability, as thinkers, administrators, just as capable as given the same opportunity as men. I always had taken a dim regard of the polarization of the sexes. (qtd. in MacDonald, "Interview" 7)

Their insistence on diminishing differences between men and women placed them at odds with supporters of the woman movement who had no compunction arguing for equality while simultaneously advancing the view that women's maternal duties within the private sphere of the home were biologically prescribed and should be extended to the public sphere for the benefit of society (Prentice 190). The maternal feminism espoused by these women reinforced the idea that women were morally superior to men and, as nurturing care givers, they should be the caretakers of social morality (Lewis 16; Bird 12). In other words, many of these female reformers advocated social change, but upheld conventional gender roles. It is difficult to ascertain the degree to which maternal feminist arguments were simply rhetorical strategies intended to defuse the arguments of opponents who worried that an increased presence of women in the public sphere would be detrimental to traditional family values (Prentice 190). Yet, the temperance and public health movements that preceded and helped to form the

basis of several pro-suffrage organizations, and which were aligned with teachings of Christianity, perhaps indicate that at least some women saw their contributions to society as both biologically and religiously ordained (Kealey 8).

Flora MacDonald Denison lived long enough to see female suffrage realized by the federal government and most of its provincial counterparts, but the social attitudes that limited female agency and reaffirmed traditional gender roles—including those espoused by maternal feminists—survived her when she died unexpectedly in May 1921, at the age of fifty-four.

The exact date Denison began writing *Marsh Hay* is unclear. Therefore, it is not possible to assert that the play was written specifically as a tribute to his mother, though his close relationship with her is widely acknowledged and further supported by his decision to dedicate *The Unheroic North* to her. Despite the uncertainty of when Denison wrote the play, there is evidence that early in 1922 he sent *Marsh Hay* to various theatre agents and companies throughout the United States (Kausler). It is conceivable, and even probable, that he worked on the script in some capacity shortly before sending it out for review during a period when he was mourning the loss of his mother. Therefore, it is not surprising that many of the play's ideas about maternity can be traced back to Denison's mother.

One of the ways Flora MacDonald Denison's presence is felt in *Marsh Hay* is in the play's critique of domesticity and the implicit maternal feminist position that female agency draws its strength from women's maternal realm—the private sphere of the home. Flora MacDonald Denison had challenged the home as the sanctuary of women, charging that “those sacred institutions we call home are too often sweat shops where the bodies and souls of women are ground under” (qtd. in Roberts 155). Rejecting the idealization of the private sphere, Denison's mother urged her contemporaries to abandon the myth of domestic bliss that had shackled them to tradition:

[T]here is a great deal of maudlin sentiment written about the home, for we see on all sides, women whose lives are dull and monotonous, if not tragic, just on account of this wonderful talk of the sacredness of the home. The only sacred spot is the place where human beings are so circumstanced that they can live up to their own ideals to the end of attaining happiness, and too long have the four walls of a kitchen crushed the lives of the mothers of the race kept there with the idea that her duty was in the home. (“Under the Pines”)

As men returned from military service at the end of World War I, women faced increased pressure to submit to the narrative of domesticity as the site for female fulfillment that Flora MacDonald Denison had previously denounced. Most notably, post-war women were encouraged to have more babies to increase the nation's population (Prentice 249). Publications like the Canadian Reconstruction Association's document *What Shall I Do Now? How to Work for Canada in Peace* (1919) declared that "no other work that a woman can do is as important to Canada as making a home and taking care of children" (7). Girls were inculcated with the "appropriate" gender roles they were to play as part of their formal education: both elementary and secondary school curricula included vocational classes to train girls for their future roles as wives and mothers (Prentice 280). Portrayals of unfulfilled, childless women appeared in Canadian literature (Prentice 282; Vipond 118-24). Even the National Council of Women of Canada advocated motherhood and the sanctity of the home as central to social well-being (Prentice 308).

The federally distributed educational pamphlets known as the *Blue Books* (so named for their blue covers) dispensed advice for new parents by Dr. Helen MacMurchy, the first director of the federal Department of Health's Division of Child Welfare, which was established in 1920. MacMurchy had served as Ontario's inspector of the "feble-minded" from 1906 to 1919 before becoming the head of the Division of Child Welfare. She was one of Canada's most committed advocates of eugenics as well as a proponent of "scientific motherhood" —a belief that scientific and medical research should supplant traditional knowledge in order to raise healthier babies. MacMurchy specifically called for more social respect for the job of raising children and managing a home, and she argued that men should participate in looking after children (Dodd 214, 216). Yet, her directives also implicitly emphasized that child care was the primary responsibility of women (Dodd 214, 223). In her position as a government-sanctioned authority on maternity, MacMurchy also stressed that motherhood was a national duty and the fulfillment of every woman's life. She reinforced this longstanding belief in her *Blue Books* by naturalizing the connection between motherhood and domesticity:

Children are the security of the home and the nation. When children come you know that your home will not pass away with your generation. It will last for another generation [. . .]. A home without children is a sad

contrast. It lacks the highest happiness and reality. Its end is in sight. It has not the greatest loveliness, interest, and usefulness of the normal home. (7)

Against this social backdrop and before any of the characters even speak, *Marsh Hay* counters the romanticized stereotypes of the home that MacMurchy and many of her contemporaries advanced. The first Act of the play is set in the quintessential site for maternal nurturing, the kitchen. The set is physically chaotic and emotionally barren—a dramatization of the grim environment Denison's mother wanted to expose. In early drafts, the stage directions at the beginning of the play simply note the floor plan for the dramatic action (*Marsh Hay*. Ms.). Yet, in subsequent revisions, Denison developed the "squalid and dirty" set to reflect symbolically the turmoil of the characters' lives: "A twisted lithograph, hanging on the side wall, gives a hint of the indifference, the tragic futility of the lives lived here" (103).³

These introductory stage directions include descriptions of the characters who are onstage as the curtain rises. Denison provides only the most cursory comments about the children, Tessie, Sarilin and Jo, including their birth order, locations at the dinner table and the fact that all eat "hurriedly and silently" (103). Even Sarilin, who will become a central character in the play because of her unwed teenaged pregnancy, is simply and vaguely described as "much less in development" than her older sister (103).

In contrast, Denison supplies a detailed rendering of their mother:

Lena, the wife, bends over the stove. She is a woman of forty-two, tired, crushed and worn out. She puts a stick of wood in the stove, turns and watches the children for an instant, hopelessly, and goes to the rear door, which she opens. The children pay no attention to her. (103-04)

Like the kitchen, Lena is used, shabby, damaged. She is a slave to her stove and her children, for whom she cooks. Lena's children elicit despair from her when she looks at them, but they are apathetic toward her as they are to their immediate surroundings. In this way, the playwright's paralleling of home and mother in the opening stage directions suggests that *Marsh Hay* will present a desolate portrait of maternity.

As with the set, Denison also revised the character of John Serang in successive drafts to make him more ominous in the eventual published version. In an earlier handwritten draft, the

play begins with the entire family around the table as John bullies his wife and children (*Marsh Hay*. Ms.). While this scene remains in the final draft, Denison inserted another scene just prior to it for the published script. As a result, in the version circulated in print, John has not yet returned home when the play begins. Instead, the other family members debate whether or not to wait for him and discuss his temper. Their conversation ostensibly creates an atmosphere of suspense and foreboding about John's character. Consequently, even when he is physically not in the home, John's oppressiveness dominates.

When John does arrive, he co-opts the kitchen through his tyrannical aggression. Lena, his main target, attempts to diffuse his temper, but everything about their home fuels his anger. The food she serves him "aint a fit meal for a man" (108). The farm, which Lena's father gave them as a wedding present, is "too poor to raise a good crop of weeds" (108). The kitchen is "a pig sty" (110).

The subject of motherhood is included in John's litany of complaints. He blames Lena for "[b]ringin along another mouth to feed, year by year" (112). After giving birth to his twelve children, she is nothing more than "a damned sow" to him (112). Sarilin's unwed teenaged pregnancy later in the play exposes social hypocrisy, but by accusing Lena of being responsible for his difficulty providing for their family, John not only adopts sexist language to minimize his part in procreation, he quickly establishes that motherhood in *Marsh Hay* is a miserable undertaking devoid of joy.

Those offspring still living at home clearly see their father as the authority figure; Lena has little or no power over her own children. When Jo, one of the sons, wants to go outside to play, John forbids him from leaving the house. The stage directions call for Lena to step between father and son. "Go on, Jo," she tells the boy. Jo edges out the door, but still needs his father's consent, asking "Can I go, paw?" Jo only leaves after John dismisses him with a retort—"Oh, go on. Stay out all night if you want" before turning his back to the boy (109). Moreover, John appears happy to expel the children from their home and refuses to acknowledge his wife's anguish over his actions. After Tessie, the eldest daughter still living at home, runs off with Tom Roche, the son of a local man John despises, Lena tries to shame her husband for banishing their child from the family home:

LENA. It's your fault. You'd never let any of the young ones have a bit of play or fun. You'd never let nobody

come to the house. Mary went the same way . . . next Sarilin'll go. One by one they've all gone . . . boys and girls. And they never come back. (*she breaks down and weeps*) (114)

John dismisses her, but when she persists with the issue, he snaps back:

JOHN. Oh, shut up. What if she has gone? If she can get Tom Roche or anybody else to feed her, we're better off. She's gone and that's the end of it. Quit blubberin about it. (114)

In short, John expects Lena to raise his children, but she ultimately has no say in their lives.

As Denison conveys within the opening scene of *Marsh Hay*, the private sphere of the Serang home is neither the cozy sanctuary nor the base from which mothers can exert the so-called moral authority that maternal feminists promoted. Instead, the home is the place where fathers wield their authoritarian ire unabated. For many women, the play suggests, domesticity equates with patriarchal dominance.

Denison's examination of maternity extends beyond the private sphere of the home to explore how motherhood was regulated in the public sphere during the 1920s. Specifically, in addition to challenging the assumptions advanced by a large number of proponents of the woman movement, *Marsh Hay* confronts the social stigma of children born out of wedlock.

Once again, Denison appears to have given voice to his mother's ideology. Flora MacDonald Denison wrote passionately about illegitimacy, objecting to the fact that "a woman may have a child by the man she hates and that child is clothed with the mantle of respectability, while too often the child of love is branded with illegitimacy" (Letter to Peter Silver).⁴ Such "man-made laws" were an abomination for her. She especially despised the word "illegitimacy," calling it "a cause for indignation" and arguing that "Not a child born under all of nature's wisest regulation, the mutual desire for sexual embrace, should be branded with the blackest word in our vocabulary" (Letter to Peter Silver).

Like the romanticization of the home, during the 1920s the situation for unwed mothers and their children had not improved much since Denison's mother had written about illegitimacy. Unwed mothers in the 1920s were still ostracized by society. Occasionally family and neighbours rallied around an expectant woman who was

not married, but more likely, unwed pregnancy led to social rejection and humiliation (Light and Pierson 145). To preserve their family's honour, many women had to leave their hometowns for the duration of their pregnancies or even permanently. Children born out of wedlock were labelled with derogatory terms like "bastard," which not only served to shun their single mothers, but to remind other women of the derision that awaited them if they strayed from accepted social behaviour (Arnup 14). Authorities like Dr. Helen MacMurchy went so far as to argue that unwed mothers belonged in the category of "feeble-minded" because they were "sexual deviants" whose children diluted the genetic health and mental hygiene of Canadian society (Dodd 210).

Tellingly, Sarilin does not appear on the stage at all during her pregnancy. Instead, *Marsh Hay* examines her family and the community's reactions, presenting a range of responses to the issue of children born out of wedlock. Act Two is set in a general store where the locals gather to gossip. As the curtain rises, the topic is the economic hardships faced by backwoods residents, but talk soon turns to Sarilin's pregnancy. The storekeeper claims that if Sarilin were his daughter he would shoot Walt Roche, the boy accused of seducing her. Mrs. Clantch, a customer, blames John Serang, saying his rigidity has made his daughter rebel. The group marvels that, instead of shame, Sarilin's pregnancy appears to have given Lena a sense of pride and purpose. She has accumulated a large bill at the general store by purchasing high quality, expensive food as well as several home improvement items. She has forced her husband to press charges against Walt and refused conciliatory gestures from Walt's mother. As a result, Walt Roche is on trial for seducing Sarilin because she is not yet sixteen.

The introduction of the legal system in *Marsh Hay* is significant. In the 1920s, there were changes to Ontario legislation that attempted to address the plight of unwed mothers and their children. The *Ontario Mother's Allowance Act* was enacted in 1920 to offer financial assistance to "worthy" single mothers, although it was initially restricted to needy widows (Little xviii). The following year the Ontario legislature passed the *Legitimation Act*, which deemed children born out of wedlock were "legitimate" once their parents married (Arnup 14; Murray 267). Also in 1921, Ontario enacted the *Children of Unmarried Parents Act*, which was intended to force delinquent fathers to fulfill their financial obligations (Murray 267). At the time Denison wrote *Marsh Hay*, it was illegal in Canada for a person over the age of eighteen to seduce a girl between sixteen and eighteen who had a "previously chaste

character” (*Criminal Code* 1906, 1920, 1927). Proof that the alleged victim had had a prior illicit relationship with the accused was not to be considered evidence as to the issue of chastity (*Criminal Code* 1920).⁵

Despite these legal measures, *Marsh Hay* asserts that the written law and its application were not always synonymous. Specifically, the Canadian *Criminal Code* does not necessarily extend to pregnant teenagers like Sarilin who are trapped in rural poverty. A local justice of the peace, not a judge, rules on Sarilin’s case of statutory rape. Friends of the boy who allegedly fathered her child testify that they also had been involved with Sarilin. With Sarilin’s virtue and the paternity of the child in question, the justice of the peace advises the two parties to find a solution themselves. Justice appears elusive until one of the characters, an elderly man with legal training, suggests that the Serang family is entitled to a real trial in a larger town. The trial never happens, however, because Walt Roche offers to pay Sarilin’s medical expenses and to marry her once he realizes he could be incarcerated.

Act Three returns to the Serang home where Lena has been busy redecorating. There are curtains on the window. The stove has been cleaned. A potted geranium has replaced the stack of dirty dishes on the table. Lena’s new-found confidence and determination, like the play’s critique of domesticity and illegitimacy, can be traced to Flora MacDonald Denison. *Marsh Hay* was allegedly inspired by the predicament of a rural family Denison’s mother met after her car blew a tire while she was driving through the Ontario backwoods, possibly on her way to Ottawa (Goldie 22; Leggatt, email; Leggatt, “Plays” 336; Plant, emails).⁶ In an offstage scene in *Marsh Hay*, a city woman similarly punctures a tire while driving by the Serang’s farm (157). The city woman counsels Lena not to be ashamed of Sarilin’s pregnancy, but to provide the baby with the best chance possible. Lena becomes the onstage surrogate for the city woman when she relates this advice to other characters. Thus, within Lena’s comments is the voice of the city woman and the city woman’s advice likewise contains several of Flora MacDonald Denison’s beliefs. For instance, in the play Lena echoes Flora MacDonald Denison’s abhorrence of the word “illegitimacy” by recounting the city woman’s advice: “[S]he told me people is ruled by laws . . . just like a tree is . . . and she says no one was to blame. [. . .] She says to call a baby illegitimate . . . was an awful thing” (160).

As the play continues, Denison narrows his censure of social contempt for unwed mothers and their children by focussing on

moral righteousness. When Mrs. Clantch visits the Serang home, she becomes Lena's foil in a debate about virtue. Mrs. Clantch tells Lena that the city woman promoted "sinful ideas" (157). Lena counters by declaring that she is not going to let her daughter Sarilin feel ashamed about having a baby out of wedlock, despite the disapproval of the local minister, whom she had thrown out of her house. Unconvinced, Mrs. Clantch fears that the city woman has converted Lena to some "heathen religion" (158) or "creed" (159) after Lena tells her that the city women claimed that an illegitimate baby "was as good as a young one born in holy wedlock, to man and wife" (160).

Pointedly, Denison did not include the character of Mrs. Clantch in some of his earlier drafts, but instead assigned her criticisms to male characters. Thus, by incorporating Mrs. Clantch into the published version of the play, Denison appears to have deliberately stressed that women are often complicit and even eager participants in spurning other women who transgress gender, social and religious norms.

Most importantly, Lena's conviction allows her to stand up to her husband with dignity. John's reaction to the change in Lena is not one of violence and intimidation, but awe as he grudgingly acknowledges "Whatever it is, you got me half believin in it too" (164). At her insistence, he has found a job off the farm. When he queries her actions, she responds with an unabashed frankness, acknowledging their shared culpability as parents:

Whatever I am I aint ashamed, anyways. And Sarilin aint goin to be ashamed neither. She's in bed in there. She's just as able to be up as you or me. But she's been cuffed and beaten and set upon her whole life by you . . . yes and by me, too. She's drudged, that's what she's done, John. Drudged. Her whole life. And now . . . she's goin to be a mother . . . I ain't goin to have her hate her baby . . .like I've hated mine. And I ain't goin to have her ashamed John. Do you hear me? She's goin to want her baby and be proud . . . (164-65)

By making Lena stand up to her neighbours and her husband, Denison uses *Marsh Hay* to deflate the destructive power of illegitimacy. Even more daring, he offers alternative and defiant ways to deal with social stigma. When one of the characters argues that if Sarilin does not marry the father of her baby, it will not have a "name," Lena claims that the baby will have her name – Serang (169). John is in favour of a shot-gun wedding and tries to assert

his authority by warning his wife that she cannot remain in his house if she does not abide by his word. Instead of relenting, Lena fiercely refuses to let the ceremony occur. "Then I'll leave your house and your fifty acres of grey stone," she retorts. "I'll take her and I'll go out front. And whatever I do, that baby is goin to be born into the world with the best chancet I can give it" (170).

In the end, despite her determination, Lena's progressive vision of motherhood is ultimately rejected. Sarilin never shows the same enthusiasm for her prospective maternity that Lena does. As Lena claims that the city woman told her that "a baby that wasn't wanted by its mother ought never to be born. Sarilin'll want her baby . . ." she is interrupted by a piercing scream (170). Sarilin has had a "fall" that ends her pregnancy.

For many Canadian women, Sarilin's severe action would have been all too familiar. In the 1920s, abortions, as well as the distribution of family planning literature and birth control items, were still outlawed (Arnup 14; Prentice 293). Illegality, however, did not deter women from contacting abortionists who placed ads in various print publications using euphemistic language to describe their services, or ordering abortifacients, which were advertised in magazines and papers (McLaren 91-93). Others concocted homemade herbal "remedies." In some cases, women, like the character Sarilin, resorted to more extreme and often dangerous measures to miscarry deliberately. They engaged in vigorous exercise, or consumed large quantities of alcohol, or "accidentally" fell down stairs.

Sarilin's termination of her pregnancy does not solve the family's problems. In the final Act of *Marsh Hay*, the air of desperation that permeated Act One returns to the Serang household and is once again conveyed symbolically. Four months after Sarilin's fall, towers of dirty dishes sit precariously on the soiled tablecloth. The curtains are ripped. A calendar Lena bought to decorate the wall has fallen to the unswept floor. The four months Denison omits between the action of Act Three and that of Act Four effectively allows him to avoid directly addressing the contentiousness of intentionally terminated pregnancies. The scandal has passed; local gossip presumably has moved on to other topics. In fact, the only mention of Sarilin's miscarriage in Act Four occurs when a local man inquires about Sarilin's health and John responds contemptuously: "You don't need to waste no worry on her. [. . .] Tessie put her up to it. (*sneers*) I don't know but what she showed pretty good sense, too" (178-79). This statement about Sarilin ends a conversation in which John bemoans his economic situation and discloses that he is no longer working

at the job he took when his daughter was pregnant. In this way, the end of the pregnancy parallels the family's aborted opportunities to improve their lives.

Family relations have also devolved. In an attempt at affection Lena asks her husband, "We must've been kinda fond of each other to stick together all these years, John?" Her husband, however, sharply rebuffs her: "Fond? Fond be damned. We stuck together because we couldn't get away from each other. [...] We're chained here" (182). In a coda of futility, after the family goes to bed, Sarilin sneaks out of the house to meet a man. The last image of the play is of the couple in silhouette. The unknown seducer grabs Sarilin's arms roughly. He pulls her towards him and "kisses her viciously, her head bent far back" (183). This is the same image Denison used at the end of Act One, thereby visually underscoring the endless cycle of loveless encounters and desperate consequences.

It is possible to read the play's ending as a warning against following Lena's acceptance of unwed pregnancy; the reestablishment of the family's desperate circumstances could be interpreted as moral justice reasserting the status quo. Yet, given Denison's personal politics, the lack of a simplistic and happy resolution for the play more likely points to his concern for the social ills that continue unabated when the kind of progressive change attempted by Lena is resisted. In this way, *Marsh Hay's* spiralling structure points to more than the pattern of Sarilin's actions. The visual repetition of Sarilin in silhouette with a man serves as a reminder that Sarilin's older sister, Tessie, also sought relief from her family in the arms of a boy. Moreover, Denison provides dialogue that suggests the girls are repeating their parents' mistakes. In talking with a local man, John describes the ruinous impact of marriage, but because he only uses pronouns, it is possible to interpret his comments as applying either to one of the boys who have been involved with Sarilin and Tessie, or to himself as he increasingly begins to sound as if he is recounting his own embittered life with Lena: "he'll have to marry her"; "while he's young enough to go, she won't move"; and "[w]hen she's ready to go, he'll be sour, sour like milk after a thunder storm. And there'll be young ones . . . one a year . . . and then he wont [*sic*] give a damn" (120). Lena also appears aware her children are emulating her and John when she states that she does not want Sarilin to "hate her baby . . . like I've hated mine" (164) and this knowledge could explain why the city women's comments had such a strong effect on her. In these ways, Denison emphasizes that the perpetuation of unhappiness is the unavoidable result of

forced marriages and unwanted parenthood.

When Denison sent *Marsh Hay* to agents and theatre companies in 1922, reactions were encapsulated by an agent in New York who found the play too bleak for the tastes of contemporary theatre patrons (Kausler). MacMillan of Canada and Houghton Mifflin in Boston both rejected *The Unheroic North* (Eayres; MacMillan). When McClelland and Stewart in Toronto eventually published the play anthology in 1923, sales were disappointing (*Macbeth*). Furthermore, *Marsh Hay* was the only script in *The Unheroic North* not staged in the years immediately prior to or following the publication of the anthology. In fact, to date there have been only three known productions. The first occurred when Richard Plant directed a student production at the University of Toronto's Hart House Theatre on 21 March 1974, as part of the "Canadian Theatre Before the Sixties: A Celebration and an Exploration" conference co-hosted by the University of Toronto and York University ("Canadian Theatre" 1). Three months later, the Playwrights' Workshop Theatre Company in Montréal honoured Denison on the occasion of his eighty-first birthday. The tribute included a performance of *Marsh Hay* (Playwrights' Workshop 1-2; Cercle 1). The play was not staged again until in 1996 when it was presented at the Shaw Festival in Niagara-On-The-Lake.⁷

The publication of Denison's playscript and the three known productions of *Marsh Hay* are important because the critical responses they elicited convey the complex and shifting attitudes towards motherhood in Canada during the twentieth century. For instance, initial reactions to *Marsh Hay* in the 1920s were polarized. At one end of the spectrum is the anecdote about a young domestic servant in Toronto who spied a new anthology of plays in the sitting room of her employer's home. The title, *The Unheroic North*, piqued her interest. She read the entire volume and then told her mistress that *Marsh Hay* was the story of every small community near her hometown of Kingston, Ontario. It was, the maid declared, an "awful true tale" (Goggin). Similarly, the painter and Group of Seven member Lawren Harris praised *Marsh Hay* as "inescapably true" (Harris 44). Although general comments like these do not specifically reference the issue of motherhood, given that there were 2,164 children born to unmarried mothers in Ontario in 1928, unwed pregnancies were an undeniable part of Canadian society and so it is not surprising that some readers might acknowledge this fact in their responses (Murray 268).

Marsh Hay's depiction of Lena as a mother who risks social

and marital ostracism in order to defend her beliefs, was particularly popular with the University of Toronto independent student newspaper *The Goblin*:

In the emotional excitement surrounding the sexual tragedy of the youngest daughter, the mother, Lena Serang, receives the spark of an inspiration that burns brightly in her breast long enough for her to make a splendid but futile stand against convention and is then extinguished forever. There are few heroics in this play. It is unpleasantly shocking. It is satisfyingly virile. ("Books")

The progressiveness expressed in *The Goblin* perhaps reflected the youthful orientation of the publication because, at the other end of the spectrum, *Marsh Hay*'s bold unromantic treatment of unwed pregnancy generated the recalcitrant views regarding motherhood that the play sought to redress. In this way, the critical responses help identify the limits of social acceptability that existed among the play's initial readership. The most extreme of the negative responses appeared in a review that unequivocally assigned culpability to the city woman and Lena: "The meddling of a city woman leads the girl's mother to pamper her and go about the village with a chip on her shoulder" ("*The Unheroic North*").

Other writers at the time sympathized with Lena's attempts to prepare for her grandchild, but were more ambivalent about Sarilin. One reviewer stated: "The weakness of this drama, or so it seems to us, lies in the fact that it places too much emphasis on the fleshly experiences of Sarilin, who might easily be dismissed with a very ugly name [. . .]." ("Talk About Books"). Similarly, another commentator claimed:

[Denison's] sympathetic study of the mother is the centre of the play. Her abortive attempt to raise herself out of her stagnant squalor for the sake of her unborn grandchild is admirably contrasted with Sarilin's success in averting the struggles of shame and *unhonoured* motherhood and remaining in her own little world of hectic excitement. [Emphasis added.] ("Drama and Verse")

That reviewers in the 1920s did not linger on the fact that *Marsh Hay* includes an offstage miscarriage apparently provoked by the prospective mother was perhaps due the explosiveness and taboo nature of the subject.⁸

When the first production of *Marsh Hay* was staged in 1974, Canada was in the midst of the second wave of feminism. Governmental initiatives intended to address gender inequality in Canada signalled a willingness by political leaders to discuss—if not immediately enact—a variety of social changes that would inevitably anger socially conservative voters. The *Royal Commission on the Status of Women* (1970), for instance, recommended that abortions be available upon request to all women before the twelfth week of pregnancy. (The Supreme Court of Canada eventually struck down the abortion law in 1988.)

Cultural activity similarly acts as a barometer of changes in social viewpoints. In response to the stage debut of *Marsh Hay*, Herbert Whittaker, who reviewed the University of Toronto production for *The Globe and Mail*, wrote: “A free-thinking visitor converts the wife to inspired maternalism when one of the girls is seduced by a local lout [...]” (31). Though irony can be difficult to discern on the printed page, there is nothing in the context of Whittaker’s review to tinge his comment about the city woman, Lena, and Sarilin with disapproval. On the contrary, he affixes blame to the boy who impregnates Sarilin.

The press coverage of the Montréal production a few months after the Toronto production focused primarily on Denison, hailing the playwright as “a women’s libber long before it was fashionable” (“What’s On”).

None of the reviewers who commented on the 1996 Shaw Festival production blamed Sarilin for being pregnant. Instead, Kate Taylor, then a theatre critic for *The Globe and Mail*, explored the complexity of Lena’s character by stating, “[Corryne] Koslo [who played Lena] captures the flashes of pride and compassion behind a personality as mean as her husband’s, a woman who can give as good as she gets.” Taylor’s refusal to see Lena as a victim invites speculation. Is her statement ideologically aligned with the earlier reviews that condemned Lena? Or is it simply an acknowledgement that Denison’s text includes moments where Lena admits she is partially responsible for her family’s destitution, which the actor playing Lena convincingly conveyed? Taylor clearly liked the play because she also wrote in her review that *Marsh Hay* “deserves to be a Canadian classic,” so it is arguably possible to assume that she was not offended by the city woman’s advice and Sarilin’s actions. Therefore, it appears that Taylor’s comments about Lena point to a willingness to query the issue of female victimhood – comments that likely would have been criticized if they had been written during the second wave of feminism

in Canada. Writing for the *Ottawa Citizen*, Jamie Portman was more unequivocal than Taylor, claiming that “Denison is merciless in depicting the climate of social disapproval and male hypocrisy unleashed by such a situation.” This sentiment was echoed by the *Toronto Star*’s Geoff Chapman: “[John] Serang, constantly whining about 20 years of profitless toil, can’t shake off his boorish patriarchal role and eventually the cycle of despair is renewed” (“Brutish”).

As the reviews for the three productions of *Marsh Hay* indicate, the responses from the 1970s and 1990s are generally more cohesive than those of the 1920s and arguably reflect that, at least in the mainstream press, condemnation of unwed pregnancy was no longer politically correct. Aborted pregnancies, however, were still contentious. Although the word “abortion” appeared in two articles about Denison’s play, there was a conspicuous absence of comment on the topic in the newspaper reviews (“What’s On”; MacDonald, “Return” 88).

Denison’s difficulty in finding a publisher and the dearth of productions raise the issue of the play’s success as literary activism – an issue that was of importance to the playwright. In 1972, three years before his death, Denison attempted to rescue *Marsh Hay* from literary obscurity, claiming that the drama had been the catalyst for real social change. Referring to a 1927 program initiated by the Ontario provincial government to reforest land it felt was unsuitable for agriculture, Denison stated that *Marsh Hay*’s “publication in *The Unheroic North* prompted the Ontario government to move a number of settlers on worn out Haliburton farms to the clay belt of Northern Ontario” (“Memo”). It is true that, as part of this plan, agricultural settlers were to be relocated at the province’s expense (“Creation of Forests”; “Minister Will Inspect”; “Moving Old Settlers”; “A Northern Migration”; “Reforestation Policy”). The first farmer, William Toye, moved in the autumn of 1927 (“First Haliburton Man”). The Minister of Lands and Forests at the time and a supporter of the relocation program was the Honourable William Finlayson, who allegedly was a frequent visitor to Denison’s Bon Echo resort (MacDonald, “Interview” 36-37; Savigny 24). Denison asserted that through this connection, Finlayson read his play, was moved by the plight of the Serang family and swayed by Denison’s personal advice. Denison’s recasting of *Marsh Hay* as an example of successful literary activism is questionable or, at the very least, strategically reductive in its omission of the other factors that contributed to the provincial government’s decision to reforest and relocate settlers. Nevertheless,

Denison's desire to promote *Marsh Hay* signals its importance for him as one of his most political and personal works that allowed him to revisit his mother's feminism shortly after her death. Therefore, it is not surprising that its place within Canadian theatre history was of consequence to him.

Yet, just as Denison's situating of *Marsh Hay* at the heart of Ontario land reform must be challenged, it is equally necessary to acknowledge that the play did not re-energize the post-emancipation fight to improve women's rights. *Marsh Hay* might have resonated with young domestic servants like the one who read the play and told her employer that its depiction of familial crisis was both familiar and pervasive, but for the most part—as *The Unheroic North's* poor sales and the lack of productions indicate—the rigorous critique and rethinking of maternity it offered were ignored.

Marsh Hay's failure to influence direct and quantifiable social change does not diminish its significance, however. The importance of the play is more accurately located in its articulation of injustice. As such, it provides access to 1920s artistic commentary on the status of Canadian women, particularly rural mothers, and enumerates many of the hardships maternity exerted on women even after equality allegedly had been achieved through emancipation. The critical responses to the play in performance are likewise valuable because they demonstrate the unwitting testimony of attitudes that cultural artifacts are capable of disclosing.

It remains unclear whether Denison's script would have been produced at the time of its publication if the more progressive commentary undermining the romanticization of maternity had not been included. What is certain, however, is that *Marsh Hay* is lauded as a Canadian classic, but has received only three productions in the eighty years since it was first published. In this respect, it remains a child of our neglect. ❁

NOTES

- 1 The genesis for this paper was the "Staging Motherhood: Text, Context and Performance in Contemporary Theatre and Culture" seminar at the 2005 American Society for Theatre Research conference. I would like to thank Sheila Rabillard for inviting me to participate in this seminar. I would also like to thank Anton Wagner and Richard Plant for reading earlier drafts of this article, Ted L. McDorman for helping me to locate the relevant legal statutes and the journal's anonymous referees for their helpful comments. This paper was researched and written with the financial support of a Social Sciences and Research Council of Canada Post-Doctoral Fellowship.

- 2 It is worth noting that, although by the outbreak of World War I, female “militancy” involved acts of vandalism and physical altercations, early in the suffragist movement, simply asking a question at a public meeting was defined as an act of female “militancy.” See Gorham, “English Militancy” 88.
- 3 All citations are from the original edition of Merrill Denison, *The Unheroic North: Four Canadian Plays* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1923).
- 4 Peter Silver was a fictitious character that Flora MacDonald Denison and her sister invented in a series of epistolary dialogues they wrote as a means to formulate and articulate their feminist beliefs. One sister would pretend to be a young and handsome man named Peter Silver while the other corresponded as a married woman who had fallen hopelessly in love with Peter. See Roberts 153.
- 5 However, it was within the purview of a trial judge to instruct the jury that if they decided the evidence did not demonstrate that the accused was “wholly or chiefly” at fault for the seduction, they could acquit. See *Criminal Code*, 1920.
- 6 Richard Plant recalls Denison telling him that the incident that served as the catalyst for the play occurred while his mother was on a trip to Ottawa. When Denison returned to the area several years later, the family that had inspired *Marsh Hay* was the “pillar of the community” and financially stable. In other words, he had based the play on an actual situation, but had extrapolated and adapted the facts to suit his dramaturgical needs. It is also possible that Denison conflated his mother’s story with that of another incident. In one of his notebooks, Denison wrote the following about a trip he had taken: “Lad from Pembroke talks about his love affairs. Told of girl he was going with – had a fight with her – She starts going with another man – a bad egg – girl gets knocked up. Father comes to my friend and asks him to marry girl. Threatens him. – Chap won’t do it. He said that if she hadn’t got knocked up he would have married her and also that if she hadn’t got knocked up but had tried to marry another man he would have beaten him up.” The date of the entry appears to be 1925, which was after the publication of *The Unheroic North*. However, the handwriting is not entirely clear and the date could be earlier. See Denison, Black Notebook.
- 7 The Playwrights’ Workshop and the Shaw Festival productions each have been called the first professional production of *Marsh Hay*. See Kapica; Chapman, “Brutish.”
- 8 Thirty years later, the topic was still highly contentious, even for fictional depictions. In 1950, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation aired Lister Sinclair’s radio play *Hilda Morgan*. Sinclair’s play told the story of a pregnant woman whose fiancé is killed in a car accident. Hilda, the main character must decide whether she will terminate her pregnancy. Although the word “abortion” was never used in Sinclair’s play, the propriety of airing on the public broadcaster a radio drama

about a woman who deliberates whether or not to end her pregnancy sparked consternation and debate in the House of Commons.

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FMDF Flora MacDonald Denison Fonds, University of Toronto Archives, Toronto, Ontario.

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