

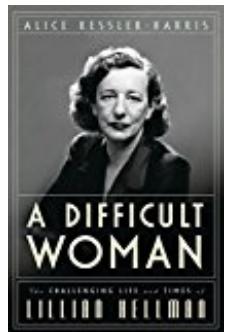
Bookslut

 www.bookslut.com/the_bombshell/2012_06_019041.php

Jenny McPhee

Blood on the Paper: The Barbed Legacy of Lillian Hellman

Filmmaker Elia Kazan, venting his fury against Lillian Hellman's memoir *Scoundrel Time* in which she skewers him and other liberal artists and intellectuals for their lily-livered performances during the McCarthy Era, raged against "this bitch with balls" who "went after what she wanted the way a man does." What Kazan once considered a vitriolic attack might now in our post-third-wave-feminist age be perceived rather as a compliment.



Historian Alice Kessler-Harris's intriguing new biography *A Difficult Woman: The Challenging Life and Times of Lillian Hellman* offers a reassessment of Hellman through the lens of "gender as an ideological force." Hellman's life is not examined chronologically but by theme, and Kessler-Harris's spiral structure produces a richly layered approach, despite suffering from repetition.

Hellman's literary, cultural, and political significance remains disputed, elusive, and of keen interest nearly thirty years after her death. Was she hero or traitor, artist or sell-out, truth-teller or liar? Unrepentant Stalinist, misogynist, and self-hating Jew? Or champion of civil liberties, feminist icon, and advocate of redemptive self-assertion?

Her long, highly successful career as a playwright, screenwriter, and memoirist brought her considerable fame and fortune. She spoke up for her beliefs: individual freedom and active commitment to upholding that right. For Hellman, asserts Kessler-Harris, "silence in the face of evil, the cowardly refusal to act when inaction will promote injustice, is the real sin."

Hellman is renowned for being demanding, greedy, ambitious, loud, bad tempered, ugly, and a sexual predator. Fiercely protective of her writing, she often refused to alter a word in her plays and rarely allowed her work to be excerpted. She insisted on being well paid for anything she wrote, and scrupulously monitored her royalty receipts, including those for reprints, permissions, performances, and readings. She developed, writes Kessler-Harris, "a range of qualities generally considered in the early and mid-twentieth century to be the province of men. These included a robust vocational commitment, the capacity to identify as a worker who made a living by the pen, and the self-confidence that she had something to say to the larger world."

For many Hellman's behavior seemed "a travesty of womanhood." She was often masculinized, lesbianized, or hyper-sexualized by her critics, supporters, and friends. Leonard Bernstein called her "Uncle Lillian." Referring to her unconventional, sexually non-exclusive

liaison with the writer Dashiell Hammett, the press dubbed her "She Hammett." A 1941 *New Yorker* profile described her as a "tough broad... who can take the tops off bottles with her teeth." Morris Dickstein saw her as "at once a perfect lady and at the same time... obscene." Jane Fonda, who played Hellman in the film *Julia* (based on her memoir *Pentimento*), told an interviewer, "Lillian is a homely woman and yet she moves as if she were Marilyn Monroe. She sits with her legs apart, with her satin underwear partly showing."

Her relationship to feminism was hesitant. She insisted she had never been held back in her career or otherwise because of her gender. She scorned the feminist movement as the conception of "well-heeled middle-class ladies" and blamed educated white women for women's bad name by failing to teach their daughters values like courage, loyalty, and integrity. She vigorously maintained that the only real issue for women was economic independence, dismissing as trivial "who takes out the garbage and who takes care of the children... who wears what brassiere." But in a 1976 Barbara Walters interview, Hellman stated, "I think [women's lib] is an excellent theory... It certainly should be fought for, probably on any ground one can fight it."

That Lillian Hellman was a member of the Communist Party for a time is undisputed, nor is it of great issue. What will forever haunt her is the fact that she refused to condemn Stalin's purge trials; in 1938 she signed a letter declaring her belief the defendants were guilty and the trials necessary for preserving progressive democracy in the Soviet Union. Furthermore, she would not denounce the Nazi-Soviet pact of 1939. She never publicly recanted these actions.

In 1947, as the Red Scare gathered momentum, she gave her full support to the Hollywood Ten, the actors who challenged the right of the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) to ask questions about their beliefs. When the Screen Writers Guild announced "No communists or other subversives will be employed by Hollywood," Hellman attacked Hollywood's power brokers: "Men scared to make pictures about the American Negro," she accused, "men who have only in the last year allowed the word Jew to be spoken in a picture, men who took more than ten years to make an anti-Fascist picture, those are frightened men and you pick frightened men to frighten first. Judas goats."

She refused to sign the Hollywood producers' loyalty oath and was blacklisted and denied work as a screenwriter. Then, in 1952, she gave her famous testimony in front of HUAC: "To hurt innocent people... in order to save myself is, to me, inhuman and indecent and intolerable. I cannot and will not cut my conscience to fit this year's fashions." She instantly gained a plethora of new fans. But those recalling her support for Stalin had difficulty with her statements -- especially given her unwillingness to admit her mistake.

Unable to leave well enough alone, Hellman in 1976 published her third memoir *Scoundrel Time*, which expressed her sense of betrayal and horror at the silence of the intellectual community during the HUAC hearings. She singled out for attack the *Partisan Review*, *Commentary*, Lionel and Diana Trilling, Irving Kristol, Elia Kazan, and others who "had sprinted to demean themselves, apologizing for sins they never committed," intellectuals who would not "fight for anything if doing so would injure them." Her haughty onslaught rankled those familiar

with Hellman's own compromised past, including the novelist, critic, and former Trotskyist Mary McCarthy who was openly hostile toward Hellman over the years. That much of Hellman's first two memoirs was fictional added fuel to the fire. Appearing on *The Dick Cavett Show* in 1979, McCarthy took revenge: "Lillian Hellman, I think, is tremendously overrated, a bad writer, a dishonest writer. Every word she writes is a lie, including 'and' and 'the.'" Hellman sued McCarthy and was vilified for her hypocrisy in trying to silence dissent. She died a month before the court date.

Speaking to the Union of Russian Writers fourth national congress in 1967, Hellman said: "All intellectuals believe in freedom and many of them have an honorable record of fighting for it. No medals need be given for that fight: freedom is the essence of thought, the blood on the paper. Without freedom the intellectual will choke to death and his country will gasp for air. Thus the demand for it is the measure of their patriotism."

A "bitch with balls" and a liar, Lillian Hellman also spoke the truth.

Jenny McPhee's most recent novel is A Man of No Moon. She lives in London, but mostly resides at www.jennymcphee.com.