

# A Quite Literary Catfight

by Con Chapman

In January of 1980 on *The Dick Cavett Show* the host asked guest Mary McCarthy, the novelist and critic, which writers she considered overrated. McCarthy mentioned Pearl Buck, John Steinbeck, John Hersey (her judgment seems to have been vindicated in these cases) and Lillian Hellman, a playwright and memoirist whom McCarthy said was “tremendously overrated, a bad writer, a dishonest writer.” Cavett, in his puckish way, probed deeper; what, he asked, was overrated about Hellman? McCarthy—never one known to mince words—replied “Everything. (. . .) every word she writes is a lie, including ‘and’ and ‘the.’”



*Mary McCarthy*

The remark was funny and provocative in the way that good talk show *repartee* should be, but it wasn't improvised; McCarthy (as she said at the time) had previously made the comment in an interview, and she had been prompted that Cavett would ask her the question before she went on the air. Just as Oscar Wilde

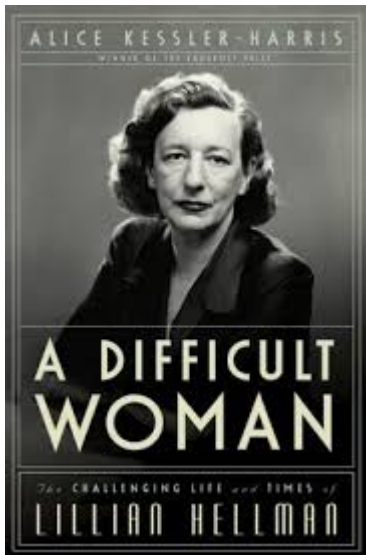
rehearsed his apparently spontaneous epigrams like an actor playing before an opening night crowd, McCarthy knew what she wanted to say and she said it.

*Lillian Hellman*

What might have passed unnoticed in a literary magazine or at a cocktail party was broadcast to member stations of the Public Broadcasting System, however, including one playing on the television of the object of McCarthy's derision. Hellman was incensed and called Hersey, suggesting that they join forces and sue McCarthy. Hersey tried to persuade Hellman not to take legal action, but Hellman went ahead, suing McCarthy, Cavett and PBS for damages she claimed totalled \$2.25 million. (Note to non-lawyers: There is no necessary relationship between damages claimed and injuries actually suffered.)

Thus began a legal battle over a flip remark intended to wound a long-time rival that turned the American popular literary scene—back when there was such a thing—into a Civil War battlefield.

Hellman at the age of seventy-five was the older of the two by seven years, the author of a number of plays that had met with varying degrees of success (one ran for 691 performances, another closed after just seven). She was a far leftist, which in those days meant a defender of Josef Stalin and a critic of Leon Trotsky. It is difficult at this late date, long after the fall of the Soviet Union, to understand the fierce antipathies that the various schisms of Marxism held towards each other then, but in present-day terms it would not be too far off the mark to say that the counterpart of a Trotskyite might advocate for the U.S. to get out of the middle east, while a Stalinist would have no problem with bombs from Iran bursting in air over Tel Aviv.



McCarthy, like Hellman, had achieved a popular yet highbrow literary success that is hard to imagine today. Her 1963 novel *The Group* follows the post-college careers of eight graduates of Vassar, then an all-women's school, as they navigated uncharted waters where birth control—and thus sex—were still uncertain propositions. For a coed of the mid-sixties it was the sexual equivalent of the Fannie Farmer cookbook as a basic introduction to what lay ahead.



McCarthy was the more attractive of the two by a long shot; not movie-star beautiful, perhaps, but the sort of face and features and

demeanor that, when combined with a piercing intellect, reduces college boys to drone bees buzzing around a queen. Hellman, by contrast, can charitably be described as plain, and more accurately as homely. Hellman was the lover of detective fiction writer Dashiell Hammett, or more precisely one of many; Hellman was home base in a game of tag that Hammett, a compulsive womanizer, played with her over three decades.



*Hellman and Dashiell Hammett*

McCarthy, on the other hand, held the whip hand in her relationships; she dumped Philip Rahv (according to one wag's view) for Edmund Wilson because the latter's prose outshone the former's. (*Editor: Dream on, writer, dream on.*) One source suggests that McCarthy developed an enmity towards Hellman after Hellman slept with, or at least made a pass at Rahv.

By the time of the Cavett show, Hellman's reputation exceeded McCarthy's based on her three volumes of memoirs that began to appear in 1969 with the publication of *An Unfinished Woman* and ended in 1976 with *Scoundrel Time*. It was these works that McCarthy probably had uppermost in her mind when she made the crack about "and" and "the."

McCarthy was said to have thought the news of the lawsuit against her was a joke when she first heard it, but she became deeply concerned once she understood the gravity of the situation; she had accumulated very little money as a result of her writing, while Hellman held the copyrights to Hammett's works, which are still in print and are likely to remain so for a long time. Hellman was loaded for bear, and McCarthy was low on ammo.

But as McCarthy began to research her defense against Hellman, it turned out she was right, more correct than she imagined. Just as Hammett was a compulsive womanizer, Hellman was a compulsive liar. Hellman, the proud witness before the House Un-American Activities Committee who defied her inquisitors with her own memorable line—"I cannot and will not cut my conscience to fit this year's fashions"—lied as other people breathed. It was second nature to her, part of her personality as a dramatist; she made things up, borrowed and blended events to suit her narrative—she never let the facts get in the way of a good story in the manner prescribed by the old newspaper reporter's aphorism. In her own words, "Everyone's memory is tricky, and mine's a little trickier than most."

Most famously, the incident involving a woman named "Julia" recounted in Hellman's memoirs, a tale subsequently made into a movie featuring Jane Fonda and Vanessa Redgrave, was disputed by the very woman on whose life it was based.



*Jane Fonda in "Julia"*

The case dragged on for years, ending only with Hellman's death in 1984 as her estate decided not to pursue it any further. McCarthy felt cheated out of a victory she knew would be hers had the case gone to trial.

