

# Julia Revisited

## Coming Out as a Jew and a Lesbian Watching Lillian Hellman's Classic Story

by Bonnie J. Morris

**T**here never was another movie like *Julia*. There never was a moment more vulnerable, dramatic, and romantic than that scene where Jane Fonda, as Lillian Hellman, tells Vanessa Redgrave “I love you, Julia,” and Vanessa Redgrave, as the heroine Julia, sits proud and tall and wild in Jane’s adoring arms around the campfire.

During my last three years as a teenager (1978 to 1981) *Julia* was the only movie in my life, the sanctum sanctorum of my brooding adolescent lesbianism. The film is an adaptation of Lillian Hellman’s short story about her beloved childhood friend, who became an anti-fascist activist and was subsequently murdered by Nazi agents.

*Julia* is an extraordinary tribute to the friend whose convictions often baffled even Hellman. The impassioned Julia, as she did in real life, moves from their teenage games in America to medical studies with Freud in Vienna, then to radical socialism, and finally uses her family fortune to save Jews and political prisoners in Hitler’s Europe. Hellman, at first reluctant and frightened, is enlisted to assist her friend’s resistance work by playing courier, and though a Jew herself, travels by train through Nazi Germany with Julia’s money. Soon after their clandestine meeting to exchange the smuggled booty, Julia is murdered, and Hellman begins a fruitless search for Julia’s hidden baby—a baby named for Lillian.

I saw *Julia* for the first time when I was seventeen, with a friend whose father had survived the concentration camps at Bergen-Belsen. It was a period when I was awakening, pop-eyed, to the legacy of the Holocaust which was my own family’s history but had hardly been addressed in my schooling at all. An insightful adult friend, who saw me struggling to locate my identity as a Jew and as a woman writer, recommended seeing *Julia*. Thenceforth I lived on a steady diet of Jane Fonda and Vanessa Redgrave and their campfire embrace.

The adult Julia was portrayed by the unutterably gorgeous Vanessa Redgrave, and I learned that this casting choice had troubled many in the American Jewish community. Redgrave had recently caused havoc by supporting the PLO and denouncing Israeli Jews as “Zionist hoodlums.” Some Jews urged a boycott of *Julia*, and I—torn between Judaism and lesbianism—found I could not forego the power of the movie and its actresses, even while I was pining over an Israeli girl at my high school.

Like many young feminists I had been starving for a storyline about women’s political convictions and losses and intense love for one another, with male characters in the background. Jane Fonda and Vanessa Redgrave themselves declared to the

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press that *Julia* had no “aberrant” overtones, but we who read the original short story in Hellman’s book *Pentimento* knew the real score. Hellman had carefully written, in a paragraph never incorporated into the film’s narration, “In those years, and the years after Julia’s death, I have had plenty of time to think about the love I had for her, too strong and too complicated to be defined as only the sexual yearnings for one girl for another. And yet certainly that was there.”

“I love you, Julia,” says Lillian Hellman. In the film, Julia says nothing and does nothing in response, merely permitting the radiant Hellman to snuggle into her arms; but in the original story, Hellman wrote “She stared at me and took my hand to her face.” Simply knowing, when I was eighteen, that Hellman and Julia had lived these moments at eighteen themselves made possible a world of risk and woman-loving. And yet, the Hollywood film *Julia* denied this might be so. On screen, a drunken young man, Sammy, hints that

Hellman and Julia have been adolescent lovers. “The whole world knows about you and Julia,” he leers, and Jane Fonda, as Hellman, slaps his face so hard he falls backward, and she overturns the table and walks out.

The scene is powerful enough to have many interpretations. But at seventeen, the message I got was loud and clear: how dare anyone imply that women’s love for one another might contain an element of passion and desire! I reflected on this logic as a pimply, hormonal teenager in the dark. Every film I’d seen where a woman slapped a man or otherwise knocked him silly made clear that this was permissible if he had been “fresh.” Audiences everywhere went home reminded that to call a strong woman a lesbian is the ultimate insult, to be answered with violence.

I never once forgot that the movie was about Lillian Hellman, a Jewish woman writer and a role model for me, who, when called before Joseph McCarthy’s House Un-American Activities Committee declared “I will not cut my conscience to fit this year’s fashions,” and rather than naming names was blacklisted for years. I felt, in the slap delivered by Jane Fonda, all of Hellman’s rage that the innuendoes of smug men—like McCarthy and his minions—were all it took to silence women’s writing, women’s credibility as political agents.

When, confused and irritable, I finally re-read Hellman’s short story to see if she really had slapped Sammy’s face, I was surprised by what I found:

He said he rather liked his sister Anne-Marie, because he had slept with her when she was sixteen and

he was eighteen. Then, perhaps because I had made a sound, he said who the hell was I to talk, everybody knew about Julia and me...I leaned across the table, slapped Sammy in the face, got up, turned over the table and went home.

How different was this, the original version, from the movie's homophobic scene! In real life, Lillian Hellman took a whack at Sammy for comparing her romantic relationship to his incestuous knowledge of his sister. Yet in the film, Sammy declares it was his sister who initiated their sexual relationship. "My little sister gave me a look, she gave me a tender touch and within minutes..." Watching those scenes, audiences might believe that real women do not suffer being called lesbians, but willingly suffer, or even initiate, the crime of incest.

I saw *Julia* for the last time at age 19, when I was immersed in Judaic studies and reading *Pirkei Avot*. This Talmud selection contains Hillel's famous proverb "If I am not for myself, who will be for me? And if I am only for myself, what am I and if not now, when?" I was studying that passage when I saw *Julia* again and heard Julia say to Lillian Hellman, "We can only do today what we can do today, and today you did it for us."

That line is in Hellman's original short story; it is the greatest modern parallel to Hillel's quote that I have found. It is a mantra of feminist action and interdependence. The we in it, of collective action, is also a smaller we of two strong women loving each other across the chaos of the twentieth century. And it meant, for me, the sliding of my Jewish consciousness over my lesbian consciousness in perfect bonding, at long last; which is a lot to be grateful for, from one imperfect movie. ■

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## TIES THAT BIND

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The six of us who compose today's *chevra* group form pairs holding either end of the set of ribbons. We wind, counting in Hebrew, our prescribed number of turns and form a half-bow. All the closures are done, except one.

The plain pine coffin is ready. Sprinkled inside is a handful of soil from the land of Israel. We lower the body of our friend into the wooden box that will cradle her into the earth. We make final adjustments—straightening a crease, patting a mittened hand. The coffin cover is placed but not fixed. The *chevra* is still. Tears spill over as we recite a brief prayer asking forgiveness for any indiscreet word, thought, or gesture any of us may have committed during our task.

Pallbearers now, we wheel the coffin into the crowded entry where a *shomer*, a watcher, sits, reciting Psalms. The body has been attended this way since the moment of death. Two women from the family of the deceased await us. We move the pine cover over so they can perform a last tender gesture, a final intimate rite for their sister. Holding hands, they wind and tie the ribbons of the open bootie. Ties of love, ties that bind the anguish of broken hearts so that healing can begin. ■

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# TIES THAT BIND

BY MICHELLE E. FRIEDMAN

## PREPARING THE BODY FOR BURIAL

It is early morning when the call I dread but expect comes. Hastily, I dress in somber, practical clothing and rearrange my work schedule for the day. I know the routine—as a member of my synagogue’s *chevra kadisha*, burial society, I have been through this sad drill before. But this time a cloud of disbelief hangs over me. I am going to prepare a friend for her grave.

As I hurry up Amsterdam Avenue to the funeral home, the roar of the street disorients me. I feel disconnected from such vitality, such an embrace of the day. The sight of the five other women *chevra* members who gather at the side door of the chapel with their stricken faces comforts me. We all knew the woman whose cancer-ravaged body lies below. We lived in the same neighborhood, watched our children tumble together in the playground, shared countless conversations.

Bypassing the old-world lobby with its regal moldings and marble floor, we descend a narrow staircase into a morbid basement emporium where the grim purpose of this place is all too clear. I try not to look, but my eye is invariably drawn to the tiny coffins; the delicately adorned, ivory-toned ones that could be jewelry boxes but I know await the death of a baby.

Just a few steps take us onto cement flooring and we enter a small room whose function seems janitorial. It is dominated by a white slab of a porcelain table. The *mais*, the body, is wheeled in on a gurney and positioned next to the table. Carefully and tenderly, the six of us lift the body of our friend onto the cold, hard surface and begin our work.

The procedure is a supremely respectful one. The *mais* is kept covered at all times. We make a drape of sheets before cutting off the hospital gown. Next, we remove all stigmata of final illness, indignity or unnatural intervention. The body will be returned to nature, delivered to the ground, without bandages or catheters. We, in the women’s *chevra*, frequently perform half-manicures, taking off chipped nail polish and swabbing grime from beneath stiffened fingernails. We do not

pass materials over the *mais*—all necessary items are handed around the side of the table. This body once housed a living spirit and our ritual honors that sanctity.

Conversation is minimal. Each of us hovers on the brink of tears. We rely on the ceremonial practicality of our task and the group’s complicity to maintain composure. We confine speech to the practical; requesting materials, shifting limb positions, agreeing that we can go on to the next step.

We wash the *mais* in a cascade of water poured in a continuous stream from buckets held, for the first time, overhead. Now we must dry and dress her. We pat the body with cloth, change the drape, and shake out the package of coarse linen burial shrouds, the *tachrichim*. Blouse, trousers, bonnet, face covering, booties, belt, and apron—they are all here. I feel the hint of a smile as I imagine the workshop where this clothing is sewn. A macabre fashion endeavor perhaps, but not without a sense of style, for the women’s *tachrichim* are trimmed with lace.

The job of dressing the *mais* is difficult. We struggle with the body’s dead weight as we pull on each garment and then wind and tie the closing ribbons. Ironic how these shrouds fasten with the same bows as the miniature kimonos used to dress newborns in hospital nurseries.

I remember how I was recruited for this task. A dozen years before, at the end of a synagogue service, one of the women who works alongside me today tapped me on the shoulder. “Michelle,” she said. “We need people for the women’s *chevra*. You’re a doctor—you can do it.” True, I had seen death during my professional training but still I harbored countless terrors of the grave. This was a different opportunity to confront and explore my fears. I agreed to try it out.

*Chevra kadisha*. Literally translated, sacred fellowship. The ancient religious obligation of burial derives from spare biblical verses concerning the proper disposition of dead criminals. Some *chevras* can trace their histories back hundreds of years. Each evolves its own rituals and customs. One of ours is the knotting style we use to fasten the drawstrings.

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