

# The Formidable Friendship of Mary McCarthy and Hannah Arendt

By [Michelle Dean](#) June 4, 2013

In the new film “Hannah Arendt,” the political theorist’s friendship with the novelist and critic Mary McCarthy gets its first cinematic treatment. The results are not good. McCarthy, played by Janet McTeer, is blowsily silly—and though she could be wicked and subversively funny, McCarthy was far from silly. Nearly every exchange between the two women is about men and love. It is symptomatic of a trend, I think. We are in a moment of unprecedented popular interest in the matter of female friendship, and this has been greeted as a triumph for feminism. But what we get, for all that, is rather flat portraiture: women giggling about crushes before finding real fulfillment in heterosexual romance and the grail of marriage. It’s a shame, because many women hunger for models of intellectual self-confidence, and female friendships can be rich soil for them. McCarthy and Arendt’s “love affair”—as their friends described it—was a union of ferocious minds, but it was hardly unusual. Women talk about ideas among themselves all the time. It would be nice if the culture could catch up.

To give just a sample of the subjects McCarthy and Arendt talked and wrote to each other about: George Eliot, Cartesianism, Eldridge Cleaver, Kant, G. Gordon Liddy, and Sartre. Both women were members of the *Partisan Review* crowd, who spent much of their time talking about Stalin and Trotsky. It was at a party at an editor’s house that the friendship hit a snag. McCarthy said she felt almost sorry for Hitler; that he seemed to want the citizens of occupied France to *like* him struck her as ridiculous. It took four years for Arendt, who’d only narrowly evaded Nazi clutches, to forgive the remark. To her, pity for Hitler was not just absurd but offensive. A truce was

struck on the Astor Place subway platform, where Arendt approached McCarthy after a meeting and said, "Let's end this nonsense. We think so much alike."

"We think so much alike." In [this magazine](#), in 1995, Claudia Roth Pierpont called the statement a "richly productive lie." These days, McCarthy is not recalled as a thinker at all. She's been portrayed as the woman who insulted Lillian Hellman, on "The Dick Cavett Show"; for people who watch "Mad Men," she's the author of the novel ("The Group") that Betty Draper was reading in the bath. (Larissa MacFarquhar once referred to McCarthy's novels as "[strange failures](#).") A [recent article in the Times](#) claimed that she was all style. She's remembered (when she's remembered at all) as a woman whose talent for insult ultimately did not amount to much, literarily speaking. McCarthy made herself a target of sexist condescension, the thinking goes, by writing primarily of inconsequential things, by being "minor" in her choice of subject. Even those who defend her style as elegant and forceful concede that what she actually said and wrote was, at best, of secondary importance.

Many of McCarthy's contemporaries suggested, or said flat out, that they didn't know what Arendt saw in her. But Arendt didn't find her friend's intellect so obviously minor. She sent McCarthy manuscripts to consider and edit; their letters are laced not only with gossip and household reports but with arguments about what constitutes fiction, about the reach of Fascism, about individual morality and common sense. In other words, Arendt thought there was more to McCarthy than pure cocktail-party style. And Arendt, as they say, was no dummy.

The friendship had an element of social strategy to it. It seems no accident, for example, that the subway-platform reconciliation was cemented when

Arendt read McCarthy's novel "The Oasis." (The novel has long been out of print, but Melville House [will reissue it on June 11th.](#)) The book, typical of McCarthy, is a lightly veiled parody of the circles she and Arendt frequented. In it, a group of urban intellectuals starts a utopian colony in New England, which is promptly torn apart by the kind of esoteric infighting that seems to happen when people are united by little but ideology. (In "The Oasis," the opposing camps are called Purists and Realists.) Frances Kiernan, one of McCarthy's biographers, has noted that the novel is a bit like "Animal Farm."

As usual, though, not everyone found McCarthy's ridicule funny. Some of her friends were good sports about the fun she had at their expense—Dwight Macdonald, in particular, was unruffled. But Philip Rahv, who had been McCarthy's lover before she married Edmund Wilson, threatened to sue to stop publication (he later backed off). Diana Trilling, the wife of Lionel and another of the small number of women admitted to the circle, went around calling McCarthy a "thug."

But Arendt liked the book. She said that it was "pure delight...a veritable little masterpiece." Arendt was not a literary critic, and her opinion might not be convincing to those who find the novel deficient as a work of art. But it can't be an accident that she was amused by the satire, that she saw herself as standing enough apart from this crowd to make fun of them. And, indeed, Arendt had had her clashes with men, too. As David Laskin's "Partisans," a history of New York intellectuals, observed, though she was welcomed as refreshingly "European," many men thought Arendt was imperious; she was not much concerned with coddling her co-interlocutors. Even to ostensible friends, like Alfred Kazin, she conducted herself in conversation "as if she were standing up alone in a foreign land and in a foreign tongue against powerful forces of error."

Some referred to her as “Hannah Arrogance.” Others tried to make her out as the silly female they thought McCarthy to be, including Delmore Schwartz, who called Arendt “that Weimar Republic flapper.” Saul Bellow, in particular, was caustic; he told Kiernan that Arendt “looked like George Arliss playing Disraeli.” (Actually, Arendt was considered a great beauty in her youth.) His hostility hardly went unnoticed—“I have the impression he avoids me, and let it go at that,” Arendt remarked after trying to see Bellow in Chicago.

As much as McCarthy and Arendt are retroactively lodged within this circle of men who explain things (the “boys,” in the vernacular of the women’s correspondence), they both understood a more complex reality. They saw that the men’s admiration for them, such as it was, was laced with hostility. To be fair, they didn’t have much good to say about most of the men, either. Of Bellow, for example, McCarthy wrote to Arendt:

I hear that Saul is in poor shape again, attacking what he calls the American Establishment, meaning his critics. He gave a lecture in London and the audience was asked to stay in its seats for ten minutes (or five?) after the lecture was over, so that no one would approach him for his autograph on the way to his getaway car.

Of Kazin, who’d written an attack on McCarthy, Arendt wrote:

These people get worse as they get older, and in this case it is just a matter of envy. Envy is a monster.

For Arendt and McCarthy, their alignment, and their shared position as outsiders, became clear in 1963, when “Eichmann in Jerusalem” (Arendt’s report on Adolf Eichmann’s trial in Jerusalem, which appeared as a five-part series in this magazine) and “The Group” (McCarthy’s novel about eight Vassar graduates making mistakes in New York) were published. The two

very different books caused very similar levels of fuss in the literary and intellectual worlds. Both women felt betrayed by hostile reviews in publications run by people they considered friends—Arendt was mauled by Lionel Abel in the *Partisan Review*, and McCarthy was parodied by Elizabeth Hardwick (using the pen name [Xaiver Prynne](#)) in the *New York Review of Books*, then pilloried *again* in that publication, [by Norman Mailer](#). They sent each other palliative letters. “That the ‘boys’ have tried to turn against you seems to me only natural,” Arendt wrote, “and I think it has more to do with ‘The Group’ being a best-seller than with any political matters.” McCarthy responded, “It occurs to me that a desire to make a sensation has taken precedence in New York over everything else. The literary and intellectual world is turning into a series of Happenings, like the one at the Edinburgh Theatre Conference where a naked girl was introduced into the auditorium.”

The two women were certainly not the first to enjoy this kind of close intellectual bond. But the particular shape theirs took, that of a bulwark against their naysayers, is worth considering, particularly when so many women still struggle to assert critical authority, to make men listen to their claims about the workplace, art, literature, and politics.

It would be a mistake to think of Arendt and McCarthy’s alliance as the result of some shared sense of “sisterhood,” in the parlance of the second wave. Neither was particularly sympathetic with what they called “women’s lib.” A graduate supervisor of mine, Jennifer Nedelsky, of the University of Toronto, was a student of Arendt’s in the nineteen-seventies. She remembers riding in an elevator to a seminar with Arendt. On Nedelsky’s coat was a button for the Chicago Women’s Liberation Union. Arendt noticed it, pointed, and, drawing her finger around in slow, disdainful circles, said to Nedelsky, “This is not *serious*.”

McCarthy was slightly less disdainful, though she said that Arendt's views influenced her, and that she was not a feminist. In a 1986 lecture, she admitted, "There are so many kinds of feminists. I'm sort of sympathetic with the wrong kind. That is, with Betty Friedan, and so on. I happen to like her." (In a letter, she called Germaine Greer "an absurd Australian giantess.") And she periodically conceded to having felt under siege by men, although she insisted that she didn't feel unfairly targeted as a woman.) It seems clear that McCarthy and Arendt thought of whatever sisterhood they had as a personal affinity, not a political affiliation.

In any event, there is proof that personal affinity triumphed over strategic alliances. Arendt and McCarthy didn't much like the other women they'd run into in their social world. Diana Trilling complained that they were rude to her, primarily because they classified her as one of "the wives." Indeed, McCarthy wrote to Arendt that Trilling, who had written to the *N.Y.R.B.* criticizing McCarthy's report on Vietnam, "is such a fool, if she didn't occupy her absurd place in the New York establishment, they would have thrown her letter in the wastebasket."

And then there was Susan Sontag. When she appeared on the scene, in the early nineteen-sixties, Sontag was immediately enamored of Arendt, who read Sontag's first novel and enjoyed it. But, later, something soured. "And what about her?" McCarthy teased Arendt in a 1967 letter. "When I last watched her with you at the Lowells', it was clear that she was going to seek to conquer you. Or that she had fallen in love with you—the same thing. Anyway, did she?" According to Renata Adler, Arendt never cared for Sontag, though history doesn't record why, not yet.

But you can make too much of Arendt and McCarthy's feeling no special obligation toward other women. The problem with sisterhood—the idea of a sunny alliance on the basis of a shared feminine fate—has always been that

it deprives women of all individual taste, history, and temperament. In short, it can insist that women not be human beings. And if you are like Arendt and McCarthy, if you like to write and argue and criticize, the only basis for the importance of your general claims—those beyond your particular experience—is the fact that you are human, like everybody else. And humans, after all, need friends to act as sounding boards for ideas as much as for gossip. The trick, as Arendt and McCarthy knew, is simply finding the right person for it.

*Michelle Dean is a writer and journalist at work on a book about female intellectuals.*

*Top: Mary McCarthy in Paris in 1971. Photograph by Enrico Sarsini/Time & Life Pictures/Getty. Portrait of Hannah Arendt, 1944. By Fred Stein Archive/Archive Photos/Getty*