CHAPTER III

THE LITTLE FOXES: HELLMAN'S DRAMATIC VISION
The Little Foxes is one of the finest examples of the craft of play-making combined with the qualities of excellent realistic drama. A "well-made play," it conforms to the canons of realism. As a drama it is continuously absorbing. In The Little Foxes, the theme of social degradation and moral decay is propounded with skill.

The entire first act is a fine example of dramatic exposition. The revelation of the past weaves naturally and unobtrusively through the opening dialogue. From the moment of Birdie's breathless, gay entrance and Oscar's sadistic smashing of her pleasure, the strains of personal antagonism become immediately clear. In front of their guest they display their ignorance, their hypocrisy and their greed. Marshall, the outsider, serves as a catalyst to bring out details the audience must know. The remaining acts maintain this well-built structure as each scene further intensifies that which has already been established.

The characters of The Little Foxes remain a natural part of the society in which they live, unattractive and repugnant as human beings, fascinating in their horror as snarling beasts. Outside influences
work on them with great strength. But there is no evidence of any compulsion or raw force of nature that has placed them where they are contrary to their own desires. Nothing around them in their physical or social world compels them to act as they do. As vicious opportunists without conscience, they proceed entirely on their own, make their own decisions, and have no one but themselves to whom they render account.¹

Hellman took great care in the preparation of The Little Foxes. The title, as suggested by Dorothy Parker, comes from the Song of Solomon, 2:15. The "foxes" who despoil the land of the south are the Hubbard family. Hellman makes the point that they are aggressive ones, but there had been, and would be, many others after them just as bad as they were - those who would stand by and watch them "eat the earth."

The Hubbards are Regina and her two brothers, Ben and Oscar. Their father left all his money to the two sons. Regina has married Horace Giddens, a banker, to recoup her financial losses. The Giddens have a daughter, Alexandra. All the Hubbards have a passion for money. Money is the basis of Oscar's marriage as well as of Regina's. Oscar married the sweet but helpless Birdie, to acquire her aristocratic family's plantation
for the Hubbards. He and Birdie have an immoral son, Leo, who works in Horace's bank, whom Oscar hopes to marry off to Alexandra. The elder and more powerful of the Hubbard brothers is the bachelor, Ben.

The place is a small town in the deep south; the time, the spring of 1900. Hellman did her homework on the rise of the southern industry, which was beginning at that time to compete with the industry of New England. The industrial revolution is the backdrop against which the "foxes" play their human or inhuman roles.²

Regina Giddens and her brothers, Oscar and Ben Hubbard, plan to build a cotton factory in partnership with Mr. Marshall, a Chicago businessman. Marshall has put up forty-nine per cent of the money, and the three Hubbards will add the remaining fifty-one per cent. Regina's of course, will come from her banker husband, Horace.

Regina: (Slowly) And what does that mean? (Ben shrugs, looks towards Oscar)
Oscar: (Looks at Ben, clears throat) Well, Regina, it's like this. For forty-nine per cent Marshall will put up four hundred thousand dollars. For fifty-one per cent (smiles archly) a controlling interest, mind you, we will put up two hundred and twenty-five thousand
dollars besides offering him certain benefits that our (looks at Ben) local position allows us to manage. Ben means that two hundred and twenty-five thousands dollars is a lot of money.

Regina : I know the terms and I know it's a lot of money.

Ben : (Nodding) It is.

Oscar : Ben means that we are ready with our two-thirds of the money. Your third, Horace's I mean, doesn't seem to be ready. (Raises his hand as Regina starts to speak). Ben has written to Horace, I have written, and you have written the answers. But he never mentions this business. ³

But Horace, who is being treated for a heart ailment in the hospital at Johns Hopkins, has not come up with his share of money. The brothers threaten to cut Regina out and find another partner if the money is not forthcoming, but Regina knows that they do not want to take in a stranger. When the brothers put pressure on Regina, she sends her daughter Alexandra to Baltimore to bring Horace home. She bargains with the brothers for a larger share. She and Ben agree that it will come from Oscar's share. When Oscar objects, they suggest to him that Alexandra may marry his son, Leo.
Oscar: I've asked before: where is this extra share coming from?

Ben: (Pleasantly) From you. From your share.

Oscar: (Furiously) From me. Is it? That's just fine and dandy. That's my reward. For thirty-five years I have worked my hands to the bone for you. For thirty-five years I have done all the things you didn't want to do. And this is what I. (37)

Birdie, Oscar's aristocrat wife whom Oscar married for the cotton and the land, overhears this conversation. Horace comes home and is informed about the Hubbard machinations by the faithful servant Addie.

Horace: (Then slowly) Addie, before I see any body else, I want to know why Zan came to fetch me home. She's tried to tell me, but she doesn't seem to know herself.

Addie: (Turns away) I don't know. All I know is big things are going on. Everybody going to be high-tone rich. Big rich, You too, All because smoke's going to start out of a building that ain't even up yet ...

Addie: And, er- (Hesitates - steps to him) And - Well, Zan, she is going to marry Mr. Leo in a little while.
Horace : (Looks at her, then very slowly)
What are you talking about? (70)

He refuses to give Regina the money. With Leo's help, the brothers steal bonds worth $88,000 from Horace's safe-deposit box, bonds which are as negotiable as money, and Oscar takes them to Chicago to make up the missing third of the investment.

Ben : (Smiling) why not? Why not (laughs)
Good. We are lucky. We'll take the loan from Leo's friend - I think he will make a safer partner than our sister. (Nods towards stairs. Turns to Leo)
How soon can you get them?

Leo : Today. Right now. They're in the safe-deposit box and

Ben : (Sharply) I don't want to know where they are.

Oscar : (Laugh) we will keep it secret from you.
(Pats Ben's arm)

Leo : I'm entitled to Uncle Horace's share.
I'd enjoy being partner.

Ben : (Turns to stare at him) You would?
You can go to hell, you little - (starts towards Leo). (94-95)
Horace discovers the theft but prevents Regina's getting the upper hand by telling her he will say he lent the bonds to the Hubbard brothers. Regina will get only the bonds in his will. "But I won't let you punish me. If you won't do anything, I will now. (She starts for the door)" (121).

Regina is trapped; She will receive nothing from her brothers except as they choose. But the next move is hers. In the course of their quarrel, she and Horace go over their past. She tells Horace that she has always had only contempt for him. Horace has a heart attack, reaches for medicine, but spills it. He asks Regina to call the maid, Addie, to get the other bottle upstairs. But Regina just looks at him. He calls Addie in panic, then tries to climb the stairs, and collapses. When she is sure that he is unconscious, she calls the servants.

Regina: I told you I married you for something. It turned out it was only for this. (Carefully) This wasn't what I wanted, but it was something. I never thought about it much but if I had (Horace puts his hand to his throat) I'd have known that you would die before I would. But I couldn't have known that you would get heart trouble so early and so bad. I'm lucky, Horace I've always been lucky. (Horace, turns slowly to the medicine) ...
He reaches for the medicine, takes out the cork, picks up the spoon. The bottle slips and smashes on the table. He draws in his breath, gasps. (125)

The brothers arrive. Leo tells them that Horace knows about the theft. Regina tells them that she knows about it also. She confronts her brothers with the theft and threatens to send them to jail unless she gets the lion's share of the new business. Now she has the upper hand:

I'm smiling, Ben, I'm smiling because you are quite safe while Horace lives. But I don't think Horace will live. And if he doesn't live I shall want seventy five per cent in exchange for the bonds ... And if I don't get what I want, I am going to put all three of you in jail. (141-142)

She apparently wins, but at the end of the play Alexandra asks her mother, "What was Papa doing on the staircase?" (144)

The implications of her questions are not lost on Ben who threatens to use them eventually against her sister. But Regina is still the queen. Alexandra, refuses to stay with her, to watch the foxes "eat the earth." The only suggestion of vulnerability in Regina now is her invitation to Alexandra to sleep in the same
room with her. To this her daughter replies, "Are you afraid, Mama?" (153).

Nothing in the contemporary reviews indicated that the audience found The Little Foxes funny. On the contrary, reviewers used words like "grim," "mordant," and "morbid" to describe the tone of the play. Hellman said that in Alexandra, Regina's daughter, she meant to "half-mock (her) own youthful high-class innocence" and that she "had meant people to smile at, and to sympathize with, the sad, weak Birdie," adding, "Certainly I had not meant them to cry."6

John Gassner, attempting a describe the tone of the play, uses the phrase, "dark comedies":

The play exists, indeed, on many levels — as character drama, melodrama and comedy. This is so decisely the case that it is less easy than one would imagine to define the nature and ultimate effect of the play ... For an equivalent type of writing in the older drama one may have to go back to the dark comedies of Shakespeare.7

One must remember that in Hellman's work the "tone" is all important. The Little Foxes is ironic in the way Birdie and Horace pass judgement on themselves. In the choral comments of Zan and Addie, and in the gathering of the clan for dinners and for Horace's
homecoming, we notice the ironic tone. The Little Foxes is also ironic in the revelation of the story in terms of a number of people, rather than a single protagonist. In fact, in no Hellman play is there a single protagonist. Hellman's titles are either thematic or symbolic references to a group of characters. In addition, the plot conflict in The Little Foxes revolves not so much around whether the foxes will defeat the decent people but around who among the foxes will get the upper hand.  

In a note book in which Hellman kept background notes, plot outlines, and tentative character descriptions, she describes Ben as "rather jolly and far less solemn than the others and far more dangerous." Full of false joviality and platitudes which mask the shrewdness with which Ben operates, he blandly tells Zan goodbye before Alexandra's trip to bring Horace home from Baltimore. When Horace arrives unexpectedly in the middle of the Hubbard's breakfast, only Ben can mask his surprise and irritation at the late arrival. Deciding that it would be politic to leave the agitated Horace alone with Regina, Ben return to his breakfast, saying "never leave a meal unfinished. Fine to have you back."(75). Ben and Regina find each other amusing, even when one is being outwitted by the other. Oscar often has to interpret
Ben to the not-too-quick-witted Leo. In turn, Ben interprets their sister to Oscar, much to his own and Regina's amusement.  

The characters in *The Little Foxes* are much more sharply differentiated by their speeches than are characters in *The Children's Hour* or *Days to Come*. Hellman accomplishes this difference by the subtle manipulation of rhythm and idiom. Oscar's speech is jerky in rhythm, whiny in tone. Ben's is more expansive, more public in tone. Birdie, the lost alcoholic Southern lady, is more lyric and repetitive than the others: "I remember. It was my first big party at Lionnet I mean, and I was so excited, and there I was with hiccoughs and Mama laughing" (109). As Birdie drinks wine and continues to reminisce in that leisurely scene with Horace, Addie and Zan, she ceases to repeat herself as she realizes what has become of her life and warns Zan not to commit the same mistake. "And that's the way you be. And you 'll trail after them, just like me, hoping they won't be so mean that day or say something to make you feel so bad" (113).

The plot employs an irony which boomerangs. The stolen bonds which temporarily free Ben and Oscar from Regina put them in her control when Horace dies. And
Regina, apparently freeing herself completely by allowing Horace to die, is left at the end with the threat of disclosure when Alexandra's question "What was papa doing on the stairs?" (144) arouses Ben's suspicion. Even Horace's effort to outwit Regina boomerangs. His threat to make a new will leaving only the bonds to Regina causes his death.

Returning to the Hubbard motivation, one may feel that money rather than sex as a driving force is comic. In fact, envy and greed replace the desire for sexual satisfaction in Ben and Regina. Envy and greed are anti-social vices and lend themselves to comic treatment. Obviously, envy, along with greed, motivates the Hubbards. We learn that they have always been snubbed by "good families." Regina is also envious of Ben and Oscar who inherited their father's money. She envies Mrs. Marshall and the attractive ladies in Chicago who do the things Regina wants them to do. Regina was forced to marry Horace because her father left all the money to the boys. She has as good a head for business as Ben, but in 1900 in Alabama, there was no outlet for ambition in a woman, except through her husband, who in Regina's case was not successful enough. He did not have enough drive. Regina despises Horace for his weakness and for his "fancy women." Regina is almost
masculine in her drive for power. Before women's liberation, Regina would have been considered masculine. If anything, she is, like Lady Macbeth, unsexed.  

Timothy Wiles observes that Lillian Hellman's analysis of American society is essentially Marxist. It emphasises environmental conditioning and conflict among classes. Hellman came to admire Bertolt Brecht as the master dramatist of the century. A number of resemblances in technique and attitude can be noted between some of her later works and certain of Brecht's plays. Hellman shared with other Thirties' writers a belief in collective action and the socialist ideal. Marxists say that her work's manifest content is the same as theirs — strikes, industrial expansions, class warfare, opposition to fascism. A simple list of her plays when compared with their Thirties counterparts, however, would indicate to the readers familiar with this literature how much more complex are Hellman's variants of these popular forms. For the strike play, her *Days to Come* presents a truer social history than *Stevedore*, *Black Pit*, *Marching Song*, or even *Waiting for Lefty*. All her plays indict the dominant social structure. But the Hubbard plays, *The Little Foxes* and *Another Part of the Forest* along with *The Autumn Garden*, are matched only by *Awake and Sing!*
and *Paradise Lost* in respect of artistic maturity. These plays demonstrate that political art is both a product of its age and a force of innovation, one which can lead to wider speculations about the genre.¹²

*The Little Foxes* is a play which seems reduced when its essential politics are isolated and the politics seem reductivist when they are listed as tenets within the Marxist doctrine: the conflict of base and superstructure, the exposure of social Darwinism, the condemnation of capitalist self-interest, the view of an alternative world sought by some of its characters in rebellion against their harsh surroundings. Any bold recital of such social theses needs immediately to be corrected by a thorough account of how Hellman puts those notions into the passing comments and mundane behaviour of vivid characters who are caught up in their own drama of life and who never betray an awareness that they are expounding any particular dogma. What is original in Hellman is that she locates these theories in people who were new to their time and are still new to our own. They particularly refuse our pity, and by their interactions especially within the female sphere, they block our habitual sympathies (and each other's) and demand of each other and of us that we look at their predicament with critical vision.
"Don't love me" (113) Birdie demands of Alexandra. And we should take her literally, for she gives a key to the subtle technique employed in this political drama as well as to its original depiction of characters caught in a moment of social transition and crisis. By arguing against our empathy, Hellman intuited a major thrust in Brecht's theories of political art, in a play which in its surface construction seems mired in naturalism and enslaved to suspense, to cite two dramatic gambits Brecht opposed. Putting it another way, the elemental Marxist doctrine in Hellman's play would seem to be executed with technical process.

Hellman's women take the centre of the stage of ideas only at the play's conclusion, although their longings and needs govern the play from its inception. The spectator may be impressed by Ben's mordant wit and may feel a stock sympathy for the pieties. Horace speaks from his conventional podium, the sick-bed. He provides paternal support for Alexandra's idealism only through proxies like Addie. It is only after the spectator learns all the complications of these people's interrelationships and their business dealings that he sees a complex double mouse-trap plot in the dramaturgy of this play.
It is the men in *The Little Foxes* who do business and extol it as the business of America. They speak the lines that ironically serve to offer a Marxist analysis of early Capitalist expansion. In fact, Ben and Oscar would not be uncomfortable with the first passages in *The Communist Manifesto* which portray the succeeding orders of social and economic organisation as civilization evolved from feudal aristocratic dominance to the age of the bourgeois mercantile class. These new southerners apply that same reading to their usurpation of the plantation gentry's lands and women. They are filling a new niche with their entrepreneurial innovation of bringing the mills to the cotton, as they had done earlier by loaning money to blacks at lethal rates. Ben boasts to Marshall it is because "the southern aristocrat can adapt himself to nothing" (14).

The Hubbards are thorough materialists in a way that Marx would find at least realistic. One primitive tenet he shared with nineteenth century capitalists was the fundamental separation between material sources of biological survival called by Marxists the base, and the superstructure of ideas and beliefs and artistic expressions that man erects about his base as a rationalisation for it. The Hubbards dismiss the immaterial realm accordingly, or employ it as a flag of convenience.
In the war of all against all, man's chief weapon is unwavering self-interest. Economic life is a battle (people like Ben "struggled and fought" to bring northern-style prosperity to the South, which he calls "patriotism") (15) in which the decisive weapon is innovation. Ben's real toast to Marshall, delivered behind his back, holds that "God forgives those who invent what they need" (23). Hellman renders this more than as a tract. Actually she makes us admire the chief manipulators for their skill and wit, and impresses on us the ironic dictum that for their time and situation, these protocapitalists represented the most highly developed social species whose greed, for them, constituted a life force. Even Oscar gains momentary sympathy when he tells his son "it's every man's duty to think of himself" (57) though this means spying into Horace's strong box. They are merely supporting their existence while the weaker men around them uphold the values of a dying class, or seek to die economically or developmentally.

Horace has human reasons for resisting the new cotton development. He argues about this with Ben and Regina in Act 2 in speeches exposing the social misery their project will yield. He denounces exploitative wages, and class warfare between poor whites and unlanded blacks.
The Hubbards' opposition to unions and their dividend-derived incomes are all themes that make this play's Thirties' context explicit. But the Hubbards will not heed these higher values, partly because they float above the economic base of self-interest. Regina localizes the attitude by perceiving that Horace's refusal to let her join the mill development constitutes his revenge against her schemes. The social theory has been embedded dramatically in confrontations about thievery, confessions of lost dreams and calls to resistance at the immediate level. Even Addie's credo about the active ones who eat the earth while the others stand around watching (her biblical association refers us back to the play's title) springs from her desire to protect Alexandra and help her resist her family.

Not surprisingly for a political play, Alexandra undergoes a conversion as a result of promptings from her mummy, aunt and father. This is particularly so because she observes how to Hubbards' plots have extended to designs against her freedom, mutual aggression and murder. But her ultimate decisions come within a context of female awakening, one which she does not directly undergo herself. The play lets her proclaim the awakening at the end and articulate it as a collective and social goal. Her intention is to oppose the earth's devouring and not "stand
around and watch you (Regina) do it" (153). The author never tells us what course Alexandra might take. This withheld outcome for Alexandra, along with the denial of any probable opposition to Regina's final triumph, constitutes the major gesture Hellman makes in transferring the solution to this play's problems to the audience. This constitutes the core of the play.

Hellman's refusal to depict the resolution for Alexandra's predicament makes her drama closer to Brecht's dramaturgy than we find in other Thirties plays. Hellman herself called attention to the audience's persistent inability to accept the inconclusive ending for Alexandra. As political theatre, The Little Foxes preserves by means of its dramaturgy the struggle that Hellman knows is still being waged. But she also remains Marxist in her ideals by implying that this general struggle will yield a progressive outcome.13

It is the women who make The Little Foxes a complex classic. Alexandra's socialist conversion at the end helps bear Hellman's visionary message. Her aunt and mother serve as female foils to her awakening, but they paradoxically put it in partial shadow. Ultimately they show that awakening is not something that only women ought to have, but it is the goal of the race.
Birdie's contribution is somewhat stereotypical, since the abuse heaped on her repeats conventions about the fate of ineffective women. Hers is the plight of those who depend too much on their weak position and good breeding when they oppose ruthless aggressors of either sex. What is fresh about this battered woman is her self-awareness and the degree of positive spirit that she has kept alive. When she is sober, she delivers Alexandra her most important insight in Act 3. Here Birdie insists that Alexandra not love her, if the result is that Alexandra will grow to resemble her, and suffer the same abuse. She condemns a pity that renders the sympathizer impotent. This is a lesson Alexandra applies directly in her final confrontation with Regina, when she rejects her mother's appeals to sympathize with her own stifled desires and refuses to seek or offer solace. This Brechtian gesture made before Hellman had heard of Brecht's antiempathic theories is certainly her own hallmark, one that clarifies the uneasy tone maintained in most of her drama.  

Assuming the play to be an expression of Hellman's political views, critics have considered it as an attack on capitalism. When The Little Foxes was revived, the Time reviewer wrote thus:
Its angle of vision is the leftism of the '30s. A 1939 audience would have understood the play as an attack on predatory capitalist morality. A 1967 audience is more likely to relish it as an indictment of greed, hate, and the lust for power at any time, in any place.15

As Barret Clark observes, *The Little Foxes* is a very mature play in which "the artist is nearly always in command of the moralist, or shall we say that the moral backbone of the play is completely fused with the skeleton of the plot."16
REFERENCES:


13. Ibid., p.102.