Top Girls

REVIEW BY BRIGITTE FRASE

All the Available Lights: A Marilyn Monroe Reader
Edited by Yona Zeldis McDonough
Sternberg/Secker
238 pages. $13.00
ISBN: 0-8070-8879-3

Athénaïs: The Life of Louis XIV's Mistress, the Real Queen of France
By Linda Lurie
Little, Brown
358 pages. $26.95
ISBN: 0-316-04849-3

Foreclosed: A Political Autobiography
By Gerda Lerner
Temple University Press
380 pages. $34.50
ISBN: 1-56639-889-4

Marilyn Monroe. Athénaïs de Montespan, and Gerda Lerner made up an extremely odd dinner party. What would they argue about, or defend in each other's behalf? British playwright Caryl Churchill could no doubt imagine their conversation. Her play Top Girls brings together Pope Joan, the benevolent and virtuous Charo, Isabella Bud, a thirteenth-century Japanese courtesan who became the madame of the brothel for Galda from Chaucer's Canterbury Tales, and the woman in a broughel painting who leads a female army against the devils in hell.

My own women, like Churchill's characters, pose questions of female power and control—or lack of it—in their lives. But lives, unlike some feminist theories, are made and lived through circumstance, happenstance, lack, will, resilience, and the pragmatic ability to make something of the random materials you're given. And sometimes, as Gerda Lerner experienced over and over, politics and history will push you into the wall.

The contributors to editors Yona Zeldis McDonough's All the Available Lights: A Marilyn Monroe Reader argue that, among whom are such cultural heavyweights as Francis Bacon, Terry Gross, and N.J. Reilly, Gerda Lerner, Claire Boch-Laug, Gloria Steinem, and Catherine Truitt, struggle to analyze the fascination Marlin still exerts. In the end, though, each viewer necessarily has to decide for herself what role is present in the combination of goddess-sufficiency with lack and unresolved sexuality. Like any gaze looking at the famous Playboy centerfold that launched Marlin's career (and got Hugh Hefner's publication off to a roaring start), all the writers, men and women, exult her creamy skin, her ropy figure, her ability to make the camera love to.

Marvin had the makings of a fine co-star, but was allowed to go only so far. I believe. People wanted to see an unwitting siren, a blond bombshell who wouldn't be too sexually disturbing. They made her the first media bimbo. The public, the press, the famous men she mar- ried and clandestinely bedded, patron- ized her. In their essays, Claire Boch-Laug and Sir Laurence Olivier, who appeared with her in The Roman Spring of Mrs. Stone, both concede to her talent. So, in a different way, do Sharon and Kate Miller, who gave her poor Marilyn the iconic victim of the male gaze.

But Norma Jean Baker had a lousy life until she became Marilyn Monroe. Bizarrely colluded with the market- ing of herself as sex goddess. Fame and public adulation, though they couldn't compensate for her lovelessness, childlessness, were nevertheless an achievement, a significant triumph over all sorts of ad- versities and personal demons. And Marilyn, who reigns after long a re- turned fifteen minutes, vows all efforts to piggle this over, to return to her show when her show was over. Her status has changed from bimbo to, well, a serious subject now. Scholar Sabina Barton suggests why that is. In her book Marilyn, Marilyn, her "inner depth," she is on the wrong track. The whole point to Mar- lin is her performance femininity. It's no accident that her persona appeals to drool queens. (Maderon later pushes the Marilyn persona to an extreme of gender as archi- tecture.) That glowing sur- face is what she made of herself, and it's all that's on offer. Rather than re- ducing her to a drug addict or a sex ob- ject or a victim, one can admire and respect the uncanny power of her being, her beauty, her skill, her sexuality, her ability to make the camera love.

Marilyn had the makings of a fine co-star, but was allowed to go only so far. I believe. People wanted to see an unwitting siren, a blond bombshell who wouldn't be too sexually disturbing. They made her the first media bimbo. The public, the press, the famous men she married and clandestinely bedded, patronized her. In their essays, Claire Boch-Laug and Sir Laurence Olivier, who appeared with her in The Roman Spring of Mrs. Stone, both concede to her talent. So, in a different way, do Sharon and Kate Miller, who gave her poor Marilyn the iconic victim of the male gaze.

As Lisa Hilton's Athénaïs: The Life of Louis XIV's Mistress demonstrates, the lot of "the real queen of France," despite its allure, was not an enviable one. She had always been too amusing, too never had so much power. Aphrodite didn't succeed in accom- plishing Louis on his military campaigns, bouncing over rough ter- rain in cramped carriages, sleeping on straw. Getting Louise, the first miss- true to leave Versailles for good once she had the year of her scheming effort. The king rather liked the system of overlapping mistresses, as he showed later when the Vonck de Montespan began to make French on Athénaïs's tobacco. Hilton wonders if Athénaïs had another inkling of the toll the coming years would take: "the prospect of all the plotting and intrigue, love making and quarreling, nagging and fraying that lay ahead of her.

Hilton, in her first outing as a histo- rian, is a confident guide to the insti- tutional rituals of Louis's court, and she does a heroic job of sorting out the principal players, whose names pile up like Tolstoy's characters. Louis kept the idlebly busy at playing status music- al chairs—quite liberally as he was a hierarchical of setting rules and pro- tocols about who got an armchair as scepter to a bread and other such pursuits in order to hold them in his sight, while they couldn't plot against the monarch, as the proper govern- ments of unmodified men had done. But what Hilton can't do is give us any sense of her characters, inner lives. They, all written letters, but rela- tively sober. De Sigeire and the Duc de Saint-Simon's contemporaries, the contemporary chroniclers of court life, are reliable. They were literary stylists who took liberties with the facts, they also had to disguise names and opin- ions because the king's spies read all their mail.

It is enervating, though not thor- oughly professional, fixation of Hilton, that at the end of her chronicle, she becomes an advocate for Athénaïs against her successor, Mme. de Maintenon. Athénaïs had brought to her court as govern- or to her royal bastards. The for- merly Francis Simon was the young widow of the scientist Paul Scarron, and a commoner who in the end proved more adept at plotting than her friend and employer. She was the antithesis of Athénaïs's grander, more noble spirit. Unlike the king's trust and friend- ship, while Athénaïs's instinct was to play bling and tantrums and lose her good looks. Increasingly shut out of the king's life, and probably all, that she had married Maintenon in sec- ond in 1689, Athénaïs was banished from the court for good. In 1691, through the plotting of Maintenon, her ally Bishop Besouat, and Athénaïs's own son, the Duc de la Mothe, a clan and vast number of ministers maintained a running battle with the Catholic Church to beat on Louis's court. It's possible her influence helped persuade him to provoke the Diet of Nancy, inaugurating a second wave of violent anti-Protestantism.

Maintenon sounds like a pig, but the men must have been quite a woman who, paid forties, got the Sun King to marry her and stay faithful for more than thirty years. Another biogr- apher will have to do her justice. Athénaïs in burnout turned from woman to be love sick. She founded schools and hospitals, hunted searching correspondences with clerics, wore a blue dress under her black coat. Conflicted Catholic all her life, she was dead to reports, or she was afraid to have her child, a daughter. When, in 1694, she was staging a classy act. Probably all of the above.

If women indulge their desires, and slaves try to use them to gain a freer version of how one should live, this book is for you. It's an illustrated, startlingly self-disciplined, and rigorously ethical, is a kind of sec- ular saint. Not that Fincher: A Political Autobiography is preachy or self- serving. In this book, as in her life, Lerner's fundamental belief is that "lying is necessary in the worst of all sins, because one can then no longer trust one's own judgment." She writes a clear, vivid, vigorous prose that can handle political analysis as well as heart-pounding narrative.
Interview with the S. S.

By Gerd Lerner

"I'll take nothing off," I said as firmly as I could. "You'll have to force me." I jumped up and stood my back to the wall.

He looked at me angrily and I stood back at him, willing and ready to make him fight with me. Since he had a pistol in his belt, this was quite foolish, but I did not consider my odds at all.

"Oh, sit down," he said disgustedly. "You're seen too many movies." I've never been arrested without reason and I've been charged with anything. I've been in a straining overcrowded cell for five weeks and been given half rations so I'm starved. They put breadm in the soup and the coffee to douse us up. Are there laws here?

"There are laws," he said. "Of course there are laws. I'm trying to get your motion stopped up. Go to the x-ray department and have your hair cut.

I sat down and put my glasses on. He pushed a cigarette case toward me and I took a cigarette. "I need some food," I said. "I haven't had anything since five o'clock yesterday."

"That's too bad. But we don't run a hotel here. You better answer your questions—i can send you back to jail, you know, or I can send you to the hospital if I don't care where you send me. I said, and I meant it, too. I've been asking for five weeks to be allowed to take my Matura exam and today in the day and here I am while the exam's going on. So I don't care."

He looked at his papers. "Ah, yes, you're the 'crazy one' with the exam."