Top Girls

REVIEW BY BRIGITTE FRASE

All the Available Light: A Marilyn Monroe Reader
Edited by Yona Zeldis McDonough
Simon and Schuster
238 pages, $13.00
ISBN: 0-684-87392-3

Athénaïs: The Life of Louis XIV's Mistress, the Real Queen of France
By Lisa Hilton
Little, Brown
358 pages, $26.95
ISBN: 0-316-08490-5

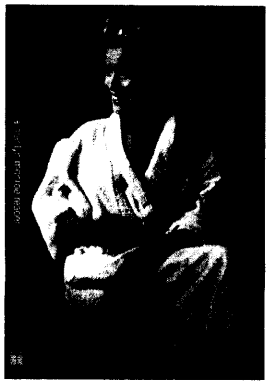
Fireweed: A Political Autobiography
By Gerda Lerner
Temple University Press
390 pages, $34.50
ISBN: 1-56639-889-4

Marilyn Monroe, Athénaïs de Montespan, and Gerda Kronstein Lerner would make up an extremely odd dinner party. What would they argue about, attack, or defend in each other's lives? British playwright Caryl Churchill could no doubt imagine their conversation. Her play *Top Girls* brings together Pope Joan, explorer Isabella Bird, a thirteenth-century Japanese courtesan who became a Buddhist nun, the obedient wife Griselda from Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, and the woman in a Brueghel painting who leads a female army against the devils in hell.

My trio of women, like Churchill's characters, raise 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, luck, 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 pin you to the wall.

The contributors to editor Yona Zeldis McDonough's *All the Available Light: A Marilyn Monroe Reader*, among whom are such cultural heavyweights as Marge Piercy, Joyce Carol Oates, Clare Boothe Luce, Gloria Steinem, and Catherine Texier, struggle to analyze the fascination Marilyn still exerts. In the end, though, each writer succumbs to her sexual spell, so potent in its combination of girlish sweetness with lush and unashamed sexuality. Like any guy looking at the famous *Playboy* centerfold that launched Marilyn's career (and got Hugh Hefner's publication off to a rousing start), all the writers, men and women, extol her creamy skin, her ripe figure, her ability to make love to the camera.

Marilyn had the makings of a fine comic actress but was allowed to go only so far, I believe. People wanted to see an unwitting sexpot, a blond bombshell who wouldn't be too sexually disturbing. They made her the first media bimbo. The public, the press, and the famous men she married or clandestinely bedded, patronized her. In their essays, Clare Boothe Luce and Sir Laurence Olivier, who appeared with her in *The Prince and the Showgirl*, both condescend to her. So, in a different way, do Steinem and Kate Millett, who see in poor Marilyn the iconic victim of the male gaze.



But Norma Jean Baker had a lousy life until she became Marilyn Monroe. She actively colluded with the marketing of herself as sex goddess. Fame and public adulation, though they couldn't compensate for her loveless childhood, were nevertheless an achievement, a significant triumph over all sorts of adversities and personal demons. And Marilyn, who reigns long after her allotted fifteen minutes, evades all efforts to pigeonhole her meaning, to tame or downplay her fantasy power. Her status has changed from bimbo to enigma; she's a serious subject now. Scholar Sabrina Barton suggests why that is. In looking for the real Marilyn, for her "inner depth," we're on the wrong track. The whole point to Marilyn is her performed femininity. It's no accident that her persona appeals to drag queens. (Madonna later pushed the Marilyn persona to an extreme of gender as artifice.) That glowing surface is what she made of herself, and it's all that's on offer. Rather than reduce her to a drug addict or a sex object or a victim, one can admire and respect the uncanny power of her teasing, smiling impenetrability.

Françoise de Rochechouart de Mortemart de Montespan (1640–1707), who changed her first name to Athénaïs after she made her debut at the court of Louis XIV in 1660, understood the power of artifice and used it to capture a king and keep his attention for more than twelve years. She was close to thirty when she became *maîtresse en titre* in 1668, replacing Louise de La Vallière in this semiofficial role of chief consort/hostess/courtesan to the king. His wife, the timid Spanish princess Marie-Thérèse, had neither the inclination nor the gifts for the theatrical life-as-performance that was the court of the Sun King. Athénaïs, beautiful, sexy, sharp-witted, and good at rapid-fire conversational repartee, excelled on that royal stage. She was a good dancer, a talent Louis prized; she was an inventive deviser of entertainments and became a patron of the arts to Lully, Corneille, Racine, Molière, and many other artists. Given that Louis, still in his vigorous thirties, apparently had as enormous an appetite for sex as he did for other pleasures, Athenais must have been superb in bed. When she came to live at court, she had already given birth to two children. With Louis, she had seven more, although three died young.

As Lisa Hilton's *Athénaïs: The Life of Louis XIV's Mistress* demonstrates, the lot of "the real queen of France," despite its opulence, was not an enviable one. She had always to be amusing, never sad or indisposed. Advanced pregnancy didn't excuse her from accompanying Louis on his military campaigns, bouncing over rough terrain in cramped carriages, sleeping on straw. Getting Louise, the first mistress, to leave Versailles for good took her years of scheming effort. The king rather liked the system of overlapping mistresses, as he showed later when the Marquise de Maintenon began to make inroads on Athénaïs's influence. Hilton wonders if Athénaïs had any inkling of the toll the coming years would take, "the prospect of all the plotting and intriguing, lovemaking and quarreling, cajoling and charming that lay ahead of her."

Hilton, in her first outing as a historian, is a confident guide to the intricate 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 nobles busy at playing status musical chairs—quite literally as there was a hierarchy of seating rules and protocols about who got an armchair as opposed to a stool—and other frivolous pursuits in order to hold them in his sight where they couldn't plot against the monarchy, as the previous generation of landed nobility had done.

But what Hilton can't do is give us any sense of her characters' inner lives. They all wrote letters, but neither they nor Mme. De Sevigné and the Duc de Saint-Simon, famous contemporary chroniclers of court life, are reliable. They were literary stylists who took liberties with the facts; they also had to disguise names and opinions because the king's spies read all their mail.

It is endearing, though not thoroughly professional of Hilton, that at the end of her chronicle, she becomes an advocate for Athénaïs against her successor, Mme. de Maintenon. Athénaïs had brought her to court as governess to her royal bastards. The former Françoise Scarron was the young widow of the satirist Paul Scarron, and a commoner who in the end proved more adept at plotting than her friend and employer. She was the ant to Athénaïs's grasshopper, slowly kindling the king's trust and friendship while Athénaïs indulged in gambling and tantrums and lost her good looks. Increasingly shut out of the king's life, and probably unaware that Louis had married Maintenon in secret in 1684, Athénaïs was banished from the court for good in 1691 through the plotting of Maintenon, her ally Bishop Bossuet, and Athénaïs's own son, the Duc du Maine, a slimy and venal little sycophant. Maintenon brought a sanctimonious and vindictive Catholicism to bear on Louis's court. It's possible her influence helped persuade him to revoke the Edict of Nantes, inaugurating a second wave of witch hunts against French Protestants.

Maintenon sounds like a prig, but there must have been quite a lot to a woman who, past forty, got the Sun King to marry her and stay faithful for more than thirty years. Another biographer will have to do her justice. Athénaïs in banishment turned from sinner to would-be saint. She founded schools and hospitals, had searching correspondences with clerics, wore a hair shirt under her gowns. A conflicted Catholic all her life, she wanted sincerely to repent, or she was afraid of punishment in the afterlife, or she was staging a classy last act. Probably all of the above.

If sinners indulge their desires, and saints try to rise above them to gain a broader vision of how one should live, then Gerda Lerner, strong-willed, intelligent, astoundingly self-disciplined, and rigorously ethical, is a kind of secular saint. Not that *Fireweed: A Political Autobiography* is preachy or self-serving. In this book, as in her life, Lerner's fundamental belief is that "lying to oneself is the worst of all sins, because one can then no longer trust one's own judgement." She writes a clear-eyed vigorous prose that can handle political analysis as well as heart-pounding narrative.

Lerner was born in 1920 to a middle-class Viennese family and her critical and political instincts developed early. Her parents, preoccupied with their own difficult marriage, showed their daughter little affection. She found comfort in books but also learned to see through the invidious class distinctions and cruelties that passed as the natural order of things. When her grandmother accused the egg woman of cheating her with no-longer-fresh eggs, Gerda ran out of the room, "struck dumb by the violence of my anger. The skin-and-bones woman pleading with my grandmother over a few pennies—if that was Jewish charity, if that was what God approved, then I had to get out."

She refused to go through with her bat mitzvah: "By the time I was fourteen, I had become a political person." She became a left-wing activist, joining a group of like-minded young people who distributed underground newspapers and pamphlets.

In March 1938, German troops occupied Austria and promptly began arresting people. The implementation of ever harsher measures against Jews, which had taken five years in Germany, spread through Austria in weeks because Lerner reports matter-of-

factly, "Violent anti-Semitism came naturally to Austrians who had a long history of anti-Semitic political parties and movements. The Germans had to be educated in violent anti-Semitism; the Austrians erupted with it spontaneously. . . . [Their] treatment of Jews was improvised on the spot; its versatility, ingenuity and brutality were then unprecedented."

When in April her father escaped to Liechtenstein, where he'd had the foresight to establish a branch of his pharmacy business, Gerda and her mother were arrested but kept in different cells in an effort to force him to return. Her descriptions of the physical and psychological consequences of being confined to a stinking hole with three other women are harrowingly vivid. Gerda pleaded to be let out in September because her final *Gymnasium* exams were coming up. Amazingly enough, she was released, through one of those odd coincidences that life occasionally plays as a joke. The Gestapo interrogator noticed that she had written her thesis on the German ballad. This man in his black SS uniform had been a high school teacher with a special interest in the ballad, whose structure jailer and prisoner proceeded to discuss as if they were somewhere else altogether.

Gerda's rich and difficult life took a new turn once she made it, on her own and with great difficulty, to New York. Her father remained in Liechtenstein. Her mother moved to the south of France to pursue painting; she spent time in a concentration camp and died in Switzerland in 1948.

Lerner has nothing good to say about the bureaucratic obstacles the United States erected against the desperate tide of refugees, most of them Jewish. The government let in famous artists and scientists, but never changed the "racist and anti-Semitic quota system built into the 1924 Immigration Act."

She married and divorced, worked at menial jobs, and learned English, partly by attempting to write poems in it. Her second marriage, to film editor Carl Lerner, was a happy one (he died in 1973).

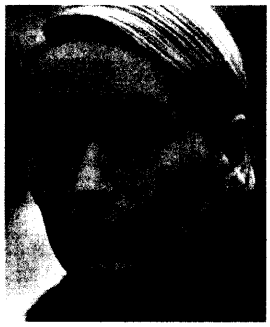


PHOTO: RODERICK SELIGMAN

Lisa Hilton

Lerner became a U.S. citizen in 1943, terrified to the last moment that some arcane rule would condemn her to remain a stateless person, "cast outside the civil contract."

Her paranoia about the government proved only too reasonable after she and Carl moved to Los Angeles and started a family. By the late forties, red-baiting had begun, and both Lerners had joined the Communist Party, not out of love for the Soviet Union, but because the party seemed to be the only "international movement for progress and social justice."

What followed is the familiar but still riveting and shocking story of the spreading anticommunist propaganda poison. The Lerners avoided being caught in the snares of the House Un-American Activities Committee but decided early on and quite easily that they would never "name names." In another of those real-life jokes, they evaded the FBI because their landlord, Tony, wouldn't betray them. He didn't like them much, but as a Mafia member, he liked the FBI even less.

Over the years, Lerner was active in grassroots politics, working for better schools, integrated housing and other local, pragmatic issues, while raising two children and trying to write a novel.

Disillusioned with the Communist Party's refusal to deal with women's issues such as equal pay, child care, and the unrecognized labor of housewives, Lerner became active in the Congress of American Women. This involvement led her eventually to Ph.D. in history from Columbia and an academic career in women's history, a discipline she helped found.

Fireweed, which ends at the point where Lerner's academic life begins, is a humane and beautifully written example of the personal as political. Nothing here is abstract. Her self-training in poetry and fiction enables her to convey to us the drama and pathos of the truly felt life. For example, her account of her ever-changing relationship with her parents, especially her mother, and her efforts to do them justice, is a nuanced, rich, and ultimately heartbreaking story any novelist would be proud of. As a person, an intellectual, and a writer, Lerner is the very best kind of American. We need a lot more of them, now that we're again facing all too interesting times.

Brigitte Frase is critic at large for *Ruminator Review*.

Marilyn: Evolution of a Legend

By Alice Elliott Dark

We didn't know much. We didn't wonder much, either, or ask too many questions. We were children, and knew it. When sex broke into our world—and it did, of course—we watched it as if it were Eve drawing close to hear the message of the snake. The facts made it sound disgusting, but what about how it felt to have the ocean pound against our bodies, or the comfort we got from sitting with our heels pressed in the hollow between our legs? What about what it was like to discover chiffon and the way it slipped across our skin? Or the sensation of strawberry juice dribbling down our chests. The longing to climb higher and higher into a thrusting tree. The inkling that there was something out there for us, something that would make us wild and giddy and nuts and willing. The sense that we could open up, and that the opening would be deep, endlessly deep. That we were more than our parts, more yet than the sum of them, even as we were also our strong, vigorous bodies. We weren't inside and outside, but one. Girls. Souls incarnate. Our childhoods were sensual and thoughtful. We were waiting to be ourselves, all of a piece.

Pin up. Arms up. Breasts up. The white dress, blowing up.
That breathy "Mr. President."

And then it was over. We snuck a look at the pictures in *Life* magazine and heard words from the adult world—misery, suicide, drugs, affairs. Peter Lawford. Bobby Kennedy.

Jack—Mr. President. The names swirled beyond us, above our heads. We were kept from the truth, protected, but it breezed around us anyway. She was dead, naked, on a bed with silky sheets. Out in California, where the movie stars lived, she was dead. It was sad, tragic even, but also not so surprising, considering. We understood that there was something about her that was destined for such an end. We got that she was too sexy, and that she'd died because of it.

Somehow.

Excerpted from "Too Sexy, Sexy Too," by Alice Elliott Dark, in *All the Available Light: A Marilyn Monroe Reader*, edited by Yona Zeldis McDonough (Simon and Schuster). Reprinted with permission.

Interview with the S. S.

By Gerda Lerner

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

He looked at me angrily and I stared 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've seen too many movies."

"I've been arrested without reason and I've not been charged with anything. I've been in a stinking overcrowded cell for five weeks and been given half rations so I'm starved. They put bromide in the soup and the coffee to dope us up. Are there no laws left?"

"There are laws," he said. "Of course there are laws. I'm trying to get your case cleared up. So sit down and cooperate."

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 my questions—I can send you back to jail, you know, or I can send you to Dachau."

"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 is 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." His voice was a little more relaxed and natural now. "You really care so much about it?"

"I do."

Again, he looked at my papers. "I see you did an essay on the German ballad. Now that's a strange topic for a Jew." This did not seem to call for a reply on my part. "What can you possibly understand about the spirit of the German ballad?"

"I've read German ballads all my life," I said. "I've studied them for two years. I probably know more about it than you do." I realized as soon as the words were out that being impertinent to this man was not smart, but by now I really did not care what happened after.

"Let's see," he said. "What ballads did you write on?"

I named four and he knew them all and had an opinion of merit. I responded to him as though we were sitting in a living room having a friendly chat. "This subject," he said finally, "happens to be my special interest. I'm a high school teacher."

My eyes went to his black uniform, the SS insignia, the pistol. "Well," he said, "under more normal circumstances."

Excerpted from *Fireweed: A Political Autobiography*, by Gerda Lerner (Temple University Press). Reprinted with permission.