PILING ON: NORMAN MAILER'S UTILIZATION OF MARILYN MONROE

"What is it about Marilyn Monroe that obsesses you so?"

MIMI REISEL GLADSTEIN

IN A LENGTHY, SINGLE-SPACED, TWO-AND-A-HALF-PAGE TYPEWRITTEN CRITIQUE of the Actor's Studio production of *Strawhead,* Norman Mailer's fifth wife, Carol, tasks him with the above observation about this third appropriation of Marilyn Monroe as a focus for his creative endeavors. It is a salient question, something mentioned not only by someone who knew him intimately, but also by critics of the relevant works, *Marilyn, Of Women and Their Elegance,* and *Strawhead.* Mailer's biographers have also noted how beguiled he was with the topic. Robert Merrill calls it "a continuing obsession" (9). Barry Leeds introduces his book-length study, *The Enduring Vision of Norman Mailer*, with a chapter on Mailer and Marilyn, observing in his first sentence that for decades Mailer had been "fascinated with the life and death of Marilyn Monroe" (20), introducing the similarities between them, and concluding that they were both prisoners of sex. The issue calls for further exploration of both its enduring allure for Mailer and the unsavory aspects of his handling of his Marilyn mania.

It is hard to know exactly when this "obsession" began. Mailer claimed on a number of occasions that he had never met Marilyn Monroe. Not so, according to Shelley Winters, quoted in the "Hollywood Politics" chapter of Peter Manso's biography. She contradicts Mailer's claim that he never met Monroe. According to Winters, they met at a rally for Henry Wallace in

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Hollywood in 1948 (131). Both may be right according to their memories. It is possible that in 1948, the woman who would become Marilyn Monroe was still Norma Jeane and displayed little of that incandescent ability to exude sexuality as she projected herself to camera and fans.[1] The as-yet-unknown Norma Jeane may not have made enough of an impression on Mailer for him to remember it. Years later, once he began writing about her, the official story from him and a number of his biographers is that the only place they ever met was in his imagination.[2] Regardless of whether or not they met briefly in the forties or never met, once Mailer had fastened onto Monroe as a topic for his literary delectation, he had a hard time letting go. In addition, his fervor sometimes led to "piling on" and on occasion "late hits" or "low blows," to use football and boxing metaphors for Mailer's literary excesses.

Oddly enough for what became such an enduring interest, the initial impetus to write about Monroe was not Mailer's.[3] It came as part of a book project for a compilation of photographs of Monroe by famous photographers, principle among them Larry Schiller who had taken nude photographs of the actress in the last days of her life. Others included Milton Greene, Bert Stern, Eve Arnold, and Richard Avedon.[4] Mailer was a big name writer, whom they contacted to quickly deliver a ten-thousand-word preface for this photography book. However, as is often the case with addictions and/or obsessions, once started, they are difficult to abandon. The Preface was like an aphrodisiac appetizer for Mailer and once begun, the subject so enflamed his phallic pen, that eventually it produced more than ninety thousand words and, in the opinion of the *New York Times* reviewer, the "100 photographs . . . [were] reduced to serving the relatively minor function of illustrating his text" (Lehmann-Haupt 27). And while Marilyn was to serve as Mailer's muse on three separate occasions, it was this initial foray into the world of America's legendary sex goddess that first demonstrated Marilyn's variety of uses for Mailer. In this case, the publication of *Marilyn* was professionally valuable in the development of Mailer's career. Middle-aged, with his career in a "holding pattern," according to Mary Dearborn, "*Marilyn* put Norman's name before the public, where it had not been" for some years (324).

Another possible source for Mailer's obsession with Monroe could be Mailer's competitive nature. A number of writers have suggested that his legendary ego might have been wounded by his lack of access to the era's

consummate sex goddess, as he considered himself the epitome of the macho man. The main men in her life were such that Mailer would want to measure himself against them. Husband number one was not a consideration. Mailer interviewed James Dougherty, but the man and his remembrances are summarily dismissed as possibly unreliable since they are those of a narcotics cop. For Mailer, in terms of possible competition, Dougherty qualifies at best as a neophyte, ignorant of the finer points of the contest. Husbands two and three are another matter. They were both significant figures in their different professions. Mailer, for whom boxing was an actual hobby and metaphorical trope, may have consciously or subconsciously regretted that he never even got the chance to get in the ring with either of these champions.[5] It was about this time in Mailer's life that Jose Torres began giving him boxing lessons in exchange for editorial assistance with the book Torres was writing about Muhammed Ali. In a contest with Monroe's second husband, Mailer is out of his class, division, or league, whichever metaphor works. Joe DiMaggio was a legendary sports hero, an icon of the masculine arena. DiMaggio had reached such mythic status that he was referenced in popular music and Hemingway's admired novella, *The Old Man and the Sea*.[6] Bouts are not scheduled between boxers who fall in different weight classes and, in the sports league, Mailer would not even try to get in the ring with DiMaggio. Instead, Mailer presents him in an almost complimentary manner, writing that during the years that Monroe was married to DiMaggio, she looked like she was fed on sexual candy (102). In his need to find sufficiently lusty language, Mailer invents the term "fucky" to describe how Monroe looked during the DiMaggio period. He also pays DiMaggio the high compliment of comparing him to Hemingway in terms of eminence in his art, pointing out the "consistent courage" it took to face thousands of fast balls, any of which could kill or cripple him (99). If there is a hero in this "novel," it would have to be "Jolting Joe." Mailer credits him with always being there for Marilyn "when she needs him, and is probably her closest friend in the months before she dies" (95). A photograph of DiMaggio at Monroe's funeral is one of the last images in the book and Mailer's last line reads, "Let us then take our estimate of her worth by the grief on Joe DiMaggio's face the day of that dread funeral in Westwood west of Hollywood" (262).

The competition begins in earnest when Mailer turns to Monroe's last husband, Arthur Miller. Miller is definitely in Mailer's class, division, and

league: both are literary heavy-weights. Miller was a dominant figure in the intellectual and arts arena. Both *Death of a Salesman* and *The Crucible* were prominent theatrical vehicles, winning a number of drama awards and becoming mainstays of university and community theatres all over the country. Mailer takes a number of jabs at Miller, labeling him a "failure" as Monroe's champion in her battles with Olivier in England and a "traitor" because he had written a note about how she embarrassed him, a note that devastated her when she read it (167). As if taking on the role of Marilyn's champion, Mailer pelts Miller with numerous pejoratives. Among them are "tight," "tied up" and "abstemious" (143). In addition, Mailer tries to land a knockout blow by characterizing Miller in the sexual arena as "an inhibited householder from Brooklyn" (167). In this metaphorically sexual bout, in addition to his below-the-belt punches, Mailer hits Miller with a glancing blow to the head with the assessment that he had "limited lyrical gifts, no capacity for intellectual shock" (142). Mailer is sure he could have beat Miller but he never did get in the ring with him because, as he complains, when they lived in close proximity he "waited for the call to visit, which of course never came" (19). He admits that a reason for the cut may have been the very fact of his competitive nature and the fact that stealing Marilyn had been his secret ambition. Convinced of his prowess in this arena, he suggests that Miller may have feared creating the opportunity. Of course that meeting with Marilyn never occurred, and as Mailer could not compete with either of these men in a real life *mano a mano*, he resorted to his most effective weapon. He created his own access—with his pen.

Returning to the subject of the many uses Mailer made of Monroe, *Marilyn,* as I argued in an earlier study, is, among other things, an exercise in creating a masturbatory fantasy about a woman who got away ("Norman"). It is also the initial volley in Mailer's campaign to possess his subject inside and out, first in his voice as a biographer and then assuming her voice as memoirist. From the onset of the first project, Mailer expresses his frustration with the time limitations imposed on his fantasy fulfillment. In "An Acknowledgment," Mailer proclaims his discontent with having to meet a publication deadline (*Marilyn* 257). This he was able to remedy in the future by creating his own projects, whereby he will be "master of his own domain." Because of the time checks in this case, he protests that he cannot write a proper biography, which he claims would take at least two years just to amass the materials needed for a suitable job. Therefore, he complains,

rather than the biography he desired to write, he has written a "novel biography." Since he can't do his own original research, he enumerates the other writers whose works he draws on, as well as Norman Rosten's manuscript for the as-yet-unpublished biography, *Marilyn—An Untold Story.* In addition, he cites what he calls "interviews in modest depth" (259). In this case, the Mailer braggadocio, his advertisements of himself, may have been uncharacteristically muted. In *Legend: The Life and Death of Marilyn Monroe,* Fred Lawrence Guiles, whose first biography *Norma Jean* is one of two cited by Mailer as the main sources for the facts in his book, returns the compliment, when he credits Mailer's "modest" interview with producing the "most thorough account" of the relationship between Norma Jeane (not yet Marilyn) and André de Dienes, a Hungarian born fashion photographer. A number of the fresh-faced, jeans-clad photographs by Dienes are in the book.

Marilyn was also to serve Mailer as a vita-enhancing publication. Robert Merrill argues for "serious reconsideration" of *Marilyn* as he contends that its excellences as a biography have been overlooked (142) and, though one of Mailer's "minor" works, it still contributes to the overall "imposing output of serious and original works" (212). Carl Rollyson considers it a "significant achievement in American letters with which biographers must reckon" (261). Jennifer Bailey reads it as an "unmistakable achievement" (140). And, indeed, when one gets beyond the leeringly salacious element, there is much to admire about the book, both as biography and as a novel. A charming element about it is Mailer's tone, which is wonderfully self-deflating in places. One such instance is when he acknowledges his peevishness about not being invited to meet Marilyn as he was sure that "no one was so well suited to bring out the best in her" (*Marilyn* 20). Then, in the next line, he concedes that some failed marriages later, he is better equipped to understand that what he was probably responding to at the time was the same thing that some fifty million other men felt as a result of what he calls "the foundation of her art," which was an ability to "speak to each man as if he were all of male existence available to her" (20). He admits that not only would he probably have failed her, but that she might well have "damaged" him. In another instance of uncharacteristically revealing candor, he admits, in a discussion of Monroe's purported lack of self-assurance about sex, that "we all reveal our innocence about sex in a candid remark" (75). This from the writer who had, on occasion, positioned himself as a "sexpert." To a certain extent the tension between the macho writer taking lusty virtual possession of his sub-

ject and the self-revelatory hesitations he expresses creates a correspondence between him and Monroe as they both projected a blatant forward sexuality that overlays an undercurrent of vulnerability.

Another service Marilyn/*Marilyn* performs for Mailer is facilitating his joys of linguistic excess.[7] Given the spectacular and extravagant nature of his subject and her reputation, he allows himself a surfeit of verbal high-wire acts. On occasion the result is fun as when he catalogs the list of Monroe's early Hollywood relationships: "Snively, Schenck, Karger, and Hyde! If she had been a bargirl looking to sue an ex-lover in a raunchy case, she would have picked her law firm out of the yellow pages with a name like that" (89). But at other times his unmonitored metaphors and imagery are definitely in need of a discerning editor.[8] In one jarring instance he writes of Monroe's final moments when "the wings of death lay wet feathers across her face" (86). "Wet feathers" is a clumsy image whereby to communicate the dark eminence of death. Rather than a sense of awe, what is evoked is annoyance; wet feathers would tickle or make one want to sneeze. Mailer's choice of metaphor to describe Monroe's inability to escape her past is to describe her behavior "as sluggish as a dinosaur's tail" (126). This metaphor is equally inept. The image conveyed is awkward rather than apt. Experience that repeats itself "with the breath of a turnip" is another of his odd images (143). Wet feathers, dinosaur tails, and the breath of a turnip—surely a wordsmith like Mailer could do better. In his explanation of why the "detritus of the insignificant" films she played in early in her career so damaged any good will she may have accumulated as a young woman and led to "retaliations" he describes as "nihilistic," Mailer pulls out more over-the-top verbal imagery (89-90). He calls Monroe "a sly leviathan of survival, and, Faust among the Faustians" (90). In addition to the linguistic abandon, he also allows himself such salaciously voyeuristic flights of the imagination as an invented dialogue after the discovery by studio executives that their newest sensation had posed in the nude. Mailer excuses himself by pointing out that "a novelist has a right to invent the following dialogue" (92). He then devises such questions as cannot help but inflame the imagination: "Did you spread your legs?" "Is your asshole showing?" "Any animals in it with you?" Lest he miss the opportunity to use every profanity he knows, Mailer includes the statement, when trying to describe the divided character of Monroe's personality, that while she could be an angel, she was also "one hard and calculating

computer of a cold and ambitious cunt" and then underlines his linguistic choice by stating parenthetically "(no other English word is near)" (97).[9]

The publication of *Marily*n was a boon to Mailer both personally and professionally—and then as a bonus benefit unexpectedly, it was to serve him as a tool for seduction. In *A Ticket to the Circus,* Norris Church Mailer writes of its role in their first encounter and subsequent courtship. In 1975, in anticipation of meeting the famous author, Barbara Norris—her name when they met—brought her copy of the book for him to sign. He did not sign it until February of 1976 when a relationship had already begun. Addressing it to Barbara Mailer he writes, "Because I knew when I wrote this book that someone I had not yet met would read it and be with me" (89). The Mailer chutzpah is in full force here.

Of Women and Their Elegance, Mailer's second appropriation of Marilyn Monroe, came some seven years after the first. Like the first, it is heavily reliant on the visual. Here, however, rather than pictures only of Marilyn, there are pictures of other women and their elegance. The photographs by Milton H. Greene run the gamut from Marlene Dietrich to Grandma Moses. In *Marilyn* Mailer claimed to be writing a "novel biography" and he routinely referenced the biographical works of Maurice Zolotow, Fred Lawrence Guiles, and Norman Rosten, also often citing what he called "factoids." Here he baldly states in a note before the text that he "does not pretend to offer factual representations."

Obviously foreseeing much of the kind of criticism that this book would engender, Mailer anticipates his detractors in a make-believe trial published in *New York* magazine. Deftly titled "Before the Literary Bar," besides his own voice he creates the parts of the Prosecutor, the Defense, and The Court. The charge is "criminal literary negligence" and Mailer himself characterizes the work as a "false autobiography" or "an imaginary memoir" (27–8). The thrust of his main argument about his fast-and-loose treatment of the facts is that what he portrays in the book, "whether factual or not . . . [could] reasonably have occurred in Miss Monroe's life" and that they are therefore "aesthetically true" if not literally so (34). Mailer assumes the variety of voices, both pro and con, in an adroit manner, convincingly developing the arguments of his detractors. In some spots he even demonstrates a delightful sense of self-irony. An example is when, after having been instructed numerous times to reply only to the questions asked of him, he has The Court remark, "Maybe Mr. Mailer thinks he is being paid by the word" (34). In another instance he

has The Court assure him, after a question of whether or not he would like it if someone made up facts about him when he is dead, that they "do not wish to rush that occasion" (45–6).

Mailer's self-defense in "Before the Literary Bar" is that the made-up parts of his fictional autobiography can be justified as having reasonably occurred in Monroe's life. However, his creation of the Bobby de Peralta character pushes the boundaries of a reader's willing suspension of disbelief. Mailer claims to have made him up to try to explain the tragic ambiguities in Monroe's character, attributing them to buried matters in her psyche. He rationalizes that something in her unrecorded years in Hollywood must contain a "psychic cyst" or memories so bad that she could not face them (45).

Mailer's rationalizations are unconvincing and this sordid and sensational section of *Of Women and Their Elegance* is a prime example of Mailer's "piling on." To demonstrate the appropriateness of this football metaphor, at the point in her life at which Mailer claims to need a defining episode, like a downed quarterback, Marilyn's background of illegitimacy, foster homes, absent father, family insanity, and a remembered attempted strangling in her crib have effectively already left her "sacked." Any one or any combination of the events of her childhood could more than adequately explain why she would be the unhappy and disturbed person Mailer portrays. Dumping more excrement on her can serve little purpose other than to warrant the author's desire to give license to his lascivious imagination. The pictures he paints are almost cliché in their pornographic purpose. For Marilyn's first Hollywood party Mailer evokes rooms of filthy pictures filled with naked people and the imaginary Bobby "naked except for cowboy boots and a Stetson hat," walking a Doberman named Romulus who tries to get in on the sexual action of the lustful couples (130).

But the party is only the destination point for the heart of this imaginary episode. Traveling to this party, Mailer indulges his fantasy by having Marilyn engage in a brief fling with a fictional "Rod" (the double entendre is almost funny). They ride to the party on his motorcycle, all the while having sexual intercourse at eighty miles an hour. Making the most of his imaginary license, Mailer has Marilyn explain how she had only "to lean up on the handlebars a little, and he was in the proper place, if from behind, my dear. I could have become an addict" (129). The situation only gets more sordid after that.[10] As if picturing Marilyn as so dissolute that she rides to the party on a motorcycle having sex with the fictional Rod, after which she gives him

a "blow-job" only to spend the night in an orgy with Bobby is not enough, Mailer also gives her murderous inclinations. When the nefarious Bobby suggests they go over and cut his wife's throat, Mailer's Marilyn creation responds with "excitement." The prospect of murder stimulates her to the declaration that "I was nearer to myself than I ever wanted to be" (137). She relishes the idea that "everyone would talk of me," seeing it as "beautiful" (137–8). She acknowledges that she is "ready to commit murder" (138). Murder is so appealing to her that it vanquishes her headache. If Mailer's excuse for this sensationalism is that he had to create something awful in her past to explain her future bad behavior, his is a sharply flawed argument. In this fictional episode, Mailer's Marilyn is already so lacking in any moral compass that she goes through all the motions of participating in murder, only prevented from the act because it turns out that the designated victim is not there. She is willing to commit murder with a man who does not even know her "phone number or my address, or even my last name" (142). Logically, whatever brought her to this morally bankrupt state had happened earlier and Mailer's invention should be flagged by the referee as unnecessary roughness. Two days after this imaginary episode, Mailer adds the information that she has an abortion. Cleverly, in his self-defense before the imaginary literary bar, Mailer has the Prosecutor question him about the factual basis for Bobby de Peralta and the murder plot. He acknowledges that he has none and even allows his Prosecutor creation to describe his actions as "outrageous" ("Before" 40). And I would add self-indulgent.

Even on his own terms, with himself as judge and jury, Mailer's defense rings hollow. He claims that without such an episode the reader would be left with a characterization of Marilyn that presents only her "sweet, charming, madcap" side, thereby unable to understand why one so attractive would end so badly. Acknowledging what might have been "a failure of invention," he concedes that it is difficult "to conceive of one powerful dramatic episode that will substitute satisfactorily for the sum of a thousand smaller episodes" (45). And that is, I would argue, because the thousand smaller episodes are more than sufficient explanation by themselves. Mailer, on the basis of what he calls "general knowledge" about the life of a Hollywood starlet (33), gives Marilyn the kind of demeaning and humiliating experiences that, along with her genetic and childhood history, could adequately explain her later behavior. Mailer has her remember being sent to perform fellatio on three executives in a row, on the half hour, before going to acting class. He even

remarks to the prosecutor's question about the episode that "the scars" of that period in her life explain why a woman with her "angelic appearance" came to be so difficult to work with and inconsiderate of co-stars, directors and crew. Calling the excerpt "factual" he quotes both Lee Strasberg and Arthur Miller to verify the "call girl" and "chewed and spat out" quality of Monroe's early Hollywood days (33).

Mailer's sly manipulation here is blatantly self-serving in an additional manner. By making this particularly egregious episode Exhibit B in the trial, he can enjoy his imaginary voyeurism again. Not only are the offensive events in the book, but in case the reader of *New York* does not buy the book, Mailer has the opportunity to present his self-indulgent imaginings for a different audience—those who might pick up the magazine. He has the prosecution make him read the whole episode to the court as Exhibit B. The titillation quotient is high.

As a sidelight, it can be said that still another use Mailer made of his writing about Marilyn is payback or appreciation to Milton and Amy Greene. Whatever the realities of their behavior in their relationship with Monroe, in both *Of Women and Their Elegance* and *Strawhead*, Mailer casts them in a very positive light and puts complimentary language in Marilyn's mouth when she speaks of them. Milton Greene's particular charm is portrayed with Marilyn's initial reaction at their first meeting: "You're just a boy" (34). Her expectation, given his fame as a fashion photographer, was for an older man. Mailer also tries to make him appealing in a scruffy kind of way when he has Marilyn describe him as looking like a young John Garfield if Garfield had been chewed a bit by a toothless lion (34). He is portrayed as the only man who did not take advantage of Marilyn and she blames Arthur Miller for ruining their relationship. Besides the direct compliments, such as when Marilyn tells Amy her eyes are like stars (28) and compliments her performance during the Edward R. Murrow interview as "truly scintillating" and done with "real poise" and "real vivacity" (126), Mailer also portrays Amy Greene as a mentor to Marilyn in matters of fashion, introducing her to the fashions of Norman Norell.[11] Marilyn lauds Amy's organization down to her color coordination of her underwear with her clothing. Of course, the Greenes are his co-authors in a way as they provided the reminiscences and the photographs that make up the bulk of the book. Milton Greene's ethics are also presented in a most favorable light when the break-up of Marilyn Monroe Productions occurs. With the comment, "It was not my idea to make

money on Marilyn Monroe," Greene explains why he takes only $100,000 for his share when all had expected him to hold out for five times that much. The irony is not lost that Mailer, who *is* trying to make money on Marilyn Monroe, chooses this vindication for Greene. One might also say that Mailer uses this opportunity to pay the Greenes back by telling their stories along with Marilyn's. We learn a lot of their histories and talents. One of the last things Mailer has Marilyn do is recall how beautiful Milton's photographs are and remember, "Oh, how exquisite he could be" (235).

The reception of *Of Women and Their Elegance* was mixed. The exploitive nature of Mailer's use of Monroe did not go without notice. Although David Marshall considered it a "wonderful treasure," mainly because of the photographs, he also remarked that Mailer was "squeezing the last dollar out of a woman he never met." Lawrence Wright's *Texas Monthly* article that explores the connections between fact and fiction, particularly in what is called the "new journalism," compares Mailer's *Of Women and Their Elegance* unfavorably to *The Executioner's Song.* Wright terms the former "reader abuse" and concludes that Mailer's depiction of Marilyn is unconvincing as he is "trying to fill the unexplored spaces in her personality with his own" (202). In addition, beyond the critiques of the text of the book, it has the dubious distinction that the 1999 *Esquire* Book Awards named *Of Women and Their Elegance* as Worst Title.

It took Mailer a few years to get back to "piling on" Marilyn. This time, the medium was theatre. Although *Strawhead* is often categorized as a dramatization of *Of Women and Their Elegance,* there are a number of variances, probably occasioned by the differences in media and perhaps by Mailer's desire to emphasize the imaginary truth aspect of his take on Marilyn. Richard Hannum is listed as the co-author of the play. Among the number of drafts housed at the Harry Ransom Center is a bound copy that emphasizes the "staged" quality of the production.[12] It begins with the ACTRESS, the DIRECTOR, and the PLAYWRIGHT discussing the issue of whether or not the ACTRESS should take the part and whether she feels up to it. She names her boyfriend, her agent and her consciousness-raising group as reasons not to take the part. In terms of the latter, Mailer's cognizance of previous feminist reactions to his "Marilyn" works may be in play. The ACTRESS names feminist indecision about whether to consider Marilyn a martyr, a victim, or a collaborator with the enemy.

Further removal of the distance between audience and subject is accom-

plished by the way, when the play is ready to begin, the audience watches as the Marilyn character is created. The actress draws a small black mole on her cheek and puts on a blonde wig. In addition, Mailer uses the timeworn theatrical technique of the aside to indicate that the "mirror of her mind" is being reflected to the audience. These he identifies as D.A.—Direct Address. There are many occasions for this. Much of the action begins at Marilyn's dressing table as she remembers. Stage directions call for the "actors who play varying roles in Marilyn Monroe's life [to] appear . . . like 'cat calls.' "They are verbal memories for Marilyn" (1.1).

Among the changes from text to stage is a different initial setting. Whereas *Of Women and Their Elegance* begins with an excerpt from a *Life* magazine interview shortly before she died and then moves to a Waldorf Towers suite, all of *Strawhead* takes place in Marilyn's mind. Added sound effects contribute to the wistful and tragic tone of the piece. In a number of scenes there are claps of thunder heard and in one version, "Smile Though Your Heart is Aching" is played at the end of the play as Marilyn Monroe and Charlie Chaplin walk off together.

Although *Strawhead* was never produced on Broadway, it did receive some attention before going "kerflooie" in Mailer's words (Letter). In 1983, The American Repertory Theatre at Harvard had a staged reading for alum of Mailer's spec script. That same year, Provincetown Playhouse also produced a version. Mailer's sexual obsession was blatantly evident in the early script that began with a fantasy interview wherein the Marilyn character gives a blowjob to the Mailer-interviewer character. Shelley Winters had such a negative response that it resulted in a Mailer rewrite. The 1986 Actor's Studio production was attended by many of Mailer's friends, some of whom, such as Kitty Carlyle wrote that she found herself "enormously interested." Less complimentary is a letter from Elia Kazan who diplomatically writes, "Your play is worth more work. You can and should improve it."

On three occasions, Norman Mailer made use of Marilyn Monroe and I choose my language advisedly. He "used" her shamelessly. In an earlier study, I argue that Mailer, in *Marilyn*, creates an auto-erotic fantasy to satisfy his actual inability to consummate a sexual relationship with her. Obviously, the illusion was not fulfilling enough and so he was to attempt satisfaction two more times—again through photograph and text and finally, when those did not suffice, by bodying forth his imaginative vision with live actors in a theatrical production of his script *Strawhead*.[13] Barry Leeds has a less cyni-

cal take on the subject of Mailer's repeated return to the subject. In his biographical study *The Enduring Vision of Norman Mailer,* he suggests other reasons for Mailer's repeated return to the subject. Leeds rhapsodizes on what he considers the many similarities between NM and MM. *Au contraire*, I would counter, if there is a oneness of the two, I would invoke the Yin/Yang oneness, the oneness of opposites: in this case, I would suggest, the user and the used. However, Mailer's uses were progressively less effective. *Marilyn* was a critical and financial success, *Of Women and Their Elegance* less so, and finally, *Strawhead* was never published and after a two week run at the Actor's Studio, it had no further production.

Lest I be accused of piling on Mailer, a few lines about his success in writing in Marilyn's voice are called for. Among her other attributes, Mailer gives his Marilyn a sensitivity to color, a trait that escapes many male writers who create female characters. She describes the colors of the furniture and walls in her Waldorf Tower apartment, using the word "buff" to describe the walls. Buff is not a word men often use; gradations in color tones are definitely a predominantly feminine bent. *Strawhead* also captures the terrible sense of loneliness Marilyn felt by staging her as the only person onstage, all the others being her remembrances. Among the bits printed in *Fragments* are the lines "*Alone!!!!!/ I am alone*—I am *always/ alone/ no matter what*" (35). Unfortunately, he gets little of her poetic side, her fears of aging captured in lines such as those written on hotel stationary in Surrey. "Where his eyes rest with pleasure—I / want to still be—but time has changed / the hold of that glance. / Alas how will I cope when I am less youthful—" (*Fragments* 119). Finally, the issue divides itself into two conflicting parts. On the one hand, Mailer cannibalizes Marilyn for his own purposes, be it fantasy, financial, or ego-maniacal. On the other hand, his writing imagination is sometimes so spot-on as to create a viable portrait, first through biography and then autobiography. Michael Glenday also suggests that there is a certain pleasure associated with "encountering not just the memoir, but also the vitality of interaction between Mailer's imagination and his subject" (350). In addition, if the commonplace is that a man can't write from a woman's perspective, in *Of Women And Their Elegance*, although Mailer's Marilyn voice is totally fictional and does not fully capture Marilyn, it is certainly a plausible creation.

To date, the obsession with Marilyn does not seem to have abated.[14] Nor is it limited to Mailer. In a 2010 article, Maureen Dowd lists a number of current "Marilyn" projects. One is a biopic starring Naomi Watts, based on

Blonde, the novel by Joyce Carol Oates. Another movie is in the works about the conspiracy theory that Marilyn was murdered and not a suicide. A recent novel in Britain uses the trick of having "Maf" (short for Mafia), the Maltese terrier gifted to her by Frank Sinatra, as narrator. Still another film with Michelle Williams is titled *My Week With Marilyn* (18A). The dress Marilyn wore in the famous subway grate scene of *The Seven Year Itch* brought a record $5.6 million at Debbie Reynolds' movie memorabilia sale in June, 2011. And, finally, a bittersweet footnote about the Marilyn/Mailer connection: A recent *New York Times* article about the sale of Mailer's last home includes a reference to, among other items, a framed original print of Milton Greene's photograph of Marilyn Monroe. "Mailer's obsession and the subject of two affectionate books" is the identifying phrase for the picture, one among the many eclectic possessions left when Mailer died. One might conclude that Marilyn was with him to the end.[15]

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NOTES

1. Guiles spells it "Jeane" in *Legend: The Life and Death of Marilyn Monroe*, as does Leaming in *Marilyn.* Mailer spells it "Jean".
2. This holds true for the make-believe trial he created to forestall the criticism of his second Monroe book. When his is asked in an imaginary court scene, Mailer answers the Prosecutor's question about whether he had ever met MM, by saying, "No, but I sat behind her once at Actor's Studio" ("Before" 33).
3. I am not unmindful of the earlier references to Monroe or the Marilynesque characters in previous Mailer works, but here I mean Marilyn as the main subject.
4. Milton Greene's photographs would be featured in Mailer's second Monroe project *Of Women and Their Elegance.*
5. Hemingway also used the boxing metaphor, famously evaluating his writing in relation to other writers in terms of staying in the ring with them.
6. A Simon and Garfunkel lyric for a song in the Academy Award-nominated film, *The Graduate,* positions DiMaggio as a national hero, one whose return the nation longs for: "Where have you gone, Joe Dimaggio / A nation turns its lonely eyes to you." Santiago, the heroic fisherman in Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea,* tells the boy about "the great DiMaggio."
7. I do not mean to imply that Mailer's linguistic virtuosity is sparing in other works, only that this work allows him even more occasion for unmonitored verbal hijinks.

8. My colleague Robert Gunn suggests that Mailer's prose flaunts a lack of monitoring, that in its "gleefully exhibitionistic (and highly erotic)" display demonstrates "not an absence of artistic control, but rather a deliberate choice to refuse propriety and proportionality."
9. I am reminded of an old graffiti: "Profanity is the crutch of the inarticulate mother-fucker." I can think of a number of words that would work as well. I am sure Mailer could too, but he liked to shock and as I argue throughout, he gives himself full license with this topic.
10. Stephan Morrow writes of Shelley Winters getting up and objecting when he played that scene in *Strawhead.*
11. Although Norell's fashions are given prominence in Mailer's writing, he is ignored in many of the biographies. An interesting sidelight is that Michelle Obama wore a vintage Norell dress during the 2010 Christmas season.
12. There are numerous drafts in the Mailer collection, reflecting pre- and post-production rewrites.
13. Several writers have skirted around the quirky choice of his daughter Kate to play Monroe in the production, noting the Freudian associations. Stephan Morrow comments on the "various and delicious Oedipal" implications, especially during one rehearsal where Mailer demonstrated how he wanted the "blowjob" scene between Marilyn and Rod played. Kate got so disgusted that she refused to go on with the "tabloid bullshit" (278).
14. As far back as 1974 the obsession was in full flower. In his biography, Robert F. Slatzer noted that over forty books had already been written about Monroe. Mailer was not the only famous novelist to write about her. Joyce Carol Oates tried her hand at it in *Blonde,* also labeled as a novel, published in 2000. Gloria Steinem is another celebrity biographer.
15. My thanks to my colleagues Robert Gunn and Ezra Cappell who read the first draft of this article and made several useful suggestions.

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