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Making Ignorance Chic

By MAUREEN DOWD

HOLLYWOOD

Casanova's rule for seduction was to tell a beautiful woman she was intelligent and an intelligent woman she was beautiful.

The false choice between intellectualism and sexuality in women has persisted through the ages. There was no more poignant victim of it than Marilyn Monroe.

She was smart enough to become the most famous Dumb Blonde in history. Photographers loved to get her to pose in tight shorts, a silk robe or a swimsuit with a come-hither look and a weighty book — a history of Goya or James Joyce's "Ulysses" or Heinrich Heine's poems. A high-brow bunny picture, a variation on the sexy librarian trope. Men who were nervous about her erotic intensity could feel superior by making fun of her intellectually.

Marilyn was not completely in on the joke. Scarred by her schizophrenic mother and dislocated upbringing, she was happy to have the classics put in her hand. What's more, she read some of them, from Proust to Dostoyevsky to Freud to Carl Sandburg's six-volume biography of Lincoln (given to her by husband Arthur Miller), collecting a library of 400 books.

Miller once called Marilyn "a poet on a street corner trying to recite to a crowd pulling at her clothes."

"Fragments," a new book of her poems, letters and musings, some written in her childlike hand with misspellings in leather books and others on stationery from the Waldorf-Astoria and the Beverly Hills Hotel, is affecting. The world's most coveted woman, a picture of luminescence, was lonely and dark. Thinking herself happily married, she was crushed to discover an open journal in which Miller had written that she disappointed him and embarrassed him in front of his intellectual peers.

“I guess I have always been deeply terrified to really be someone’s wife since I know from life one cannot love another, ever, really.”

Her friend Saul Bellow wrote in a letter that Marilyn “conducts herself like a philosopher.” He observed: “She was connected with a very powerful current but she couldn’t disconnect herself from it,” adding: “She had a kind of curious incandescence under the skin.”

The sad sex symbol is still a candle in the wind. There’s a hit novel in Britain narrated by the Maltese terrier Frank Sinatra gave her, which she named “Maf,” for Mafia, and three movies in the works about her. Naomi Watts is planning to star in a biopic based on the novel, “Blonde,” by Joyce Carol Oates; Michelle Williams is shooting “My Week With Marilyn,” and another movie is planned based on an account by Lionel Grandison, a former deputy Los Angeles coroner who claims he was forced to change the star’s death certificate to read suicide instead of murder.

At least, unlike Paris Hilton and her ilk, the Dumb Blonde of ’50s cinema had a firm grasp on one thing: It was cool to be smart. She aspired to read good books and be friends with intellectuals, even going so far as to marry one. But now another famous beauty with glowing skin and a powerful current, Sarah Palin, has made ignorance fashionable.

You struggle to name Supreme Court cases, newspapers you read and even founding fathers you admire? No problem. You endorse a candidate for the Pennsylvania Senate seat who is the nominee in West Virginia? Oh, well.

At least you’re not one of those “spineless” elites with an Ivy League education, like President Obama, who can’t feel anything. It’s news to Christine O’Donnell that the Constitution guarantees separation of church and state. It’s news to Joe Miller, whose guards handcuffed a journalist, and to Carl Paladino, who threatened The New York Post’s Fred Dicker, that the First Amendment exists, even in Tea Party Land. Michele Bachmann calls Smoot-Hawley Hoot-Smalley.

Sharron Angle sank to new lows of obliviousness when she told a classroom of Hispanic kids in Las Vegas: “Some of you look a little more Asian to me.”

As Palin tweeted in July about her own special language adding examples from W. and Obama: “‘Refudiate,’ ‘misunderestimate,’ ‘wee-wee’d up.’ English is a living language. Shakespeare liked to coin new words too. Got to celebrate it!”

On Saturday, at a G.O.P. rally in Anaheim, Calif., Palin mockingly noted that you won’t find her invoking Mao or Saul Alinsky. She says she believes in American exceptionalism. But when it

comes to the people running the country, exceptionalism is suspect; leaders should be — as Palin, O'Donnell and Angle keep saying — just like you.

In Marilyn's America, there were aspirations. The studios tackled literary novels rather than one-liners like "He's Just Not That Into You" and navel-gazing drivel like "Eat Pray Love." Walt Disney's "Fantasia" paired cartoon characters with famous composers. Even Bugs Bunny did Wagner.

But in Sarah's America, we've refudiated all that.