

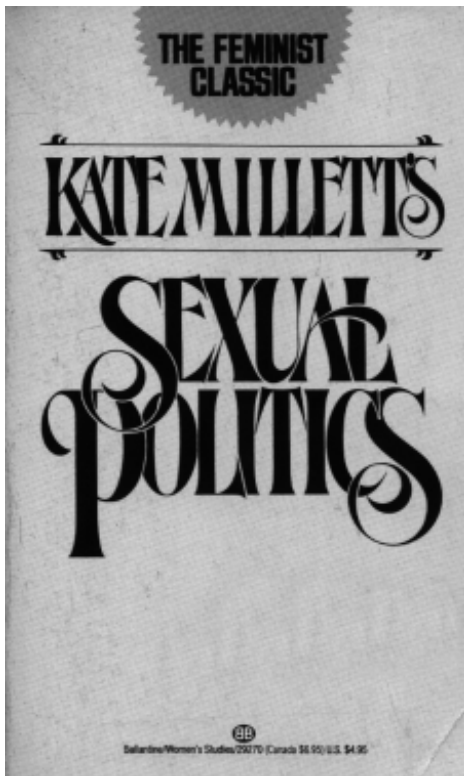
# The Feminist Time Forgot

In 1970, Kate Millett wrote *Sexual Politics*, a groundbreaking, bestselling analysis of female oppression. And what is she doing now?

Another season at the farm, not that bad, but not that good either: the tedium of a small community, shearing trees, so exhausted afterward that I did nothing but read. A season without writing or silk screening or drawing. Back to the Bowery and another emptiness. I cannot spend the whole day reading, so I write, or try to. A pure if pointless exercise. My books are out of print, even *Sexual Politics*, and the manuscript about my mother cannot find a publisher.

Trying also to get a job. At first the academic voices were kind and welcoming, imagining I am rich and am doing this for amusement, slightly embarrassed as they offer the new slave wages. I hear the guilty little catch in the administrative voice, forced maybe to make a big concession of \$3,000 in my case. But I couldn't live on that, I demur. "Of course, no one does," they chuckle from their own \$50-80,000 "positions." A real faculty appointment seems an impossibility, in my case as in so many others now. I have friends with doctorates earning as little as \$12,000 a year, eking out an existence at five different schools, their lives lived in cars and on the economic edge. I'm too old for that and must do better. "Oh, but our budget," they moan, "we really have no funds at all, much as we'd love to have you." "Surely I'm qualified?" I ask, not as a "celebrity" but as a credentialed scholar with years of teaching and a doctorate with distinction from Columbia, an Oxford First, eight published books. They'll get back to me.

But they never do. I begin to wonder what is wrong with me. **Am I "too far out" or too old? Is it age? I'm 63. Or am I "old hat" in the view of the "new feminist scholarship"?** Or is it something worse?

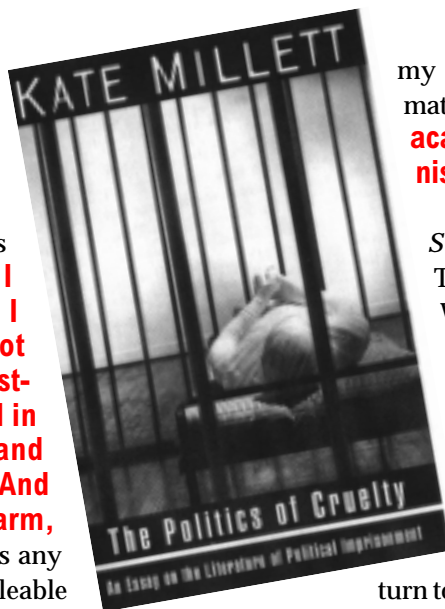


Have I been denounced or bad-mouthed? By whom? What is the matter with me, for God's sake?

Has my feminism made me "abrasive?" Surely my polite, St Paul manner should be reassuring. God knows I'm deferential enough to these people. **I begin to realize there isn't a job. I cannot get employment. I cannot earn money. Except by selling Christmas trees, one by one, in the cold in Poughkeepsie. I cannot teach and have nothing but farming now. And when physically I can no longer farm, what then?** Nothing I write now has any prospect of seeing print. I have no saleable skill, for all my supposed accomplishments. I am unemployable. Frightening, this future. What poverty ahead, what mortification, what distant bag-lady horrors, when my savings are gone? And why did I imagine it would be any different, imagine my books would give me some slender living, or that I could at least teach at the moment in life when every other teacher retires, having served all those long years when I was enjoying the freedom of writer and artist, unsalaried but able to survive on the little I'd been used to and to invest in a farm and build it into a self-sufficient women's art colony and even put a bit by. The savings might last 10 years, more like seven. So in seven years I should die. But I probably won't; women in my family live forever.

Much as I tire of a life without purpose or the meaningful work that would make it bearable, I can't die because the moment I do, my sculpture, drawings, negatives and silkscreens will be carted off to the dump. The Feminist Press, in its first offer last fall (it took them 12 months to come up with this), suggested \$500 to reprint the entire text of *Sexual Politics*. Moreover, they couldn't get around to it till the year 2000, since they'd need to commission one or two fancy prefaces by younger, more wonderful women's studies scholars. My agent and I were happy to refuse this offer, and the next, for \$1,000.

The book also fails to attract interest from the powers that be at Doubleday, who have refused to reprint it, even though another division of the company is celebrating *Sexual Politics* with a long excerpt in an anthology of the 10 most important books the house has published in its 100 years. A young female editor at Doubleday gave my agent to understand the work of more recent feminist scholarship had somehow rendered



my book obsolete in the "current climate." **I am out of fashion in the new academic cottage industry of feminism.**

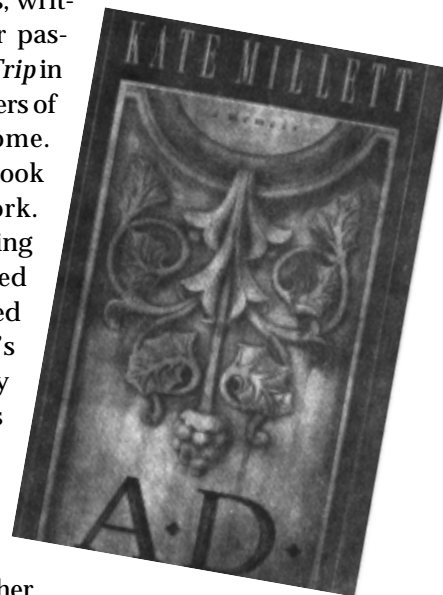
Recently a book inquired *Who Stole Feminism?* I sure didn't. Nor did Ti-Grace Atkinson. Nor Jill Johnston. We're all out of print. We haven't helped each other much, haven't been able to build solidly enough to have created community or safety. Some women in this generation disappeared to struggle alone in makeshift oblivion. Or vanished into asylums and have yet to return to tell the tale, as has Shula Firestone.

There were despairs that could only end in death: Maria del Drago chose suicide, so did Ellen Frankfurt, and Elizabeth Fischer, founder of *Aphra*, the first feminist literary journal.

Elizabeth and I used to run into each other at a comfortable old hippy cafe in Greenwich Village that I visited in the afternoons, writing some of the darker passages of *The Loony Bin Trip* in public to avoid the dangers of suicidal privacy at home. She'd just finished a book that was her life's work. Probably it wasn't getting the reception she'd hoped for in the already crowded new market of "women's studies" texts written by sudden specialists in this field. Elizabeth and I would eat an afternoon breakfast and chat, carefully disguising our misery from each other.

Feminists didn't complain to one another then; each imagined the loneliness and sense of failure was unique.

Consciousness-raising groups were over by then. One had no colleagues: New York is not a cozy town. Elizabeth is dead and I must live to tell the tale, hoping to tell another generation something I'd like them to know of the long struggle for women's liberation, something about history and America and censorship. **I might also hope to explain that social change**

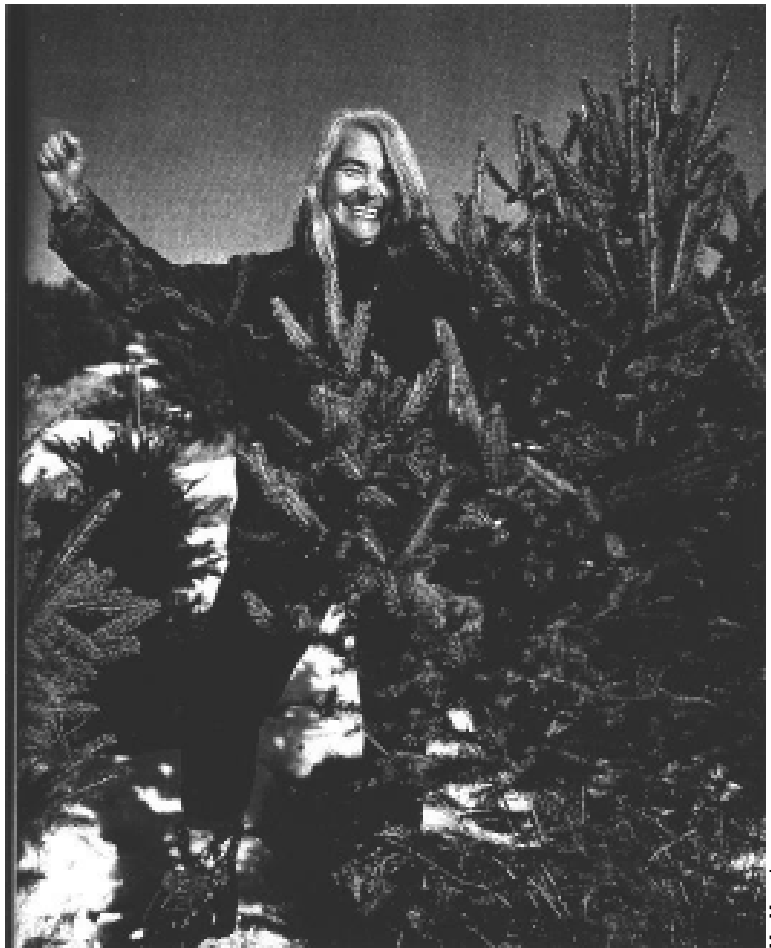


does not come easy, that pioneers pay dearly and in unnecessary solitude for what their successors take for granted. Why do women seem particularly unable to observe and revere their own history? What secret shame makes us so obtuse? We did not create the community necessary to support each other against the coming of age. And now we have a lacuna between one generation's understanding and that of the next, and have lost much of our sense of continuity and comradeship.

But I have also spent 40 years as a downtown artist habituated to the existential edge and even as I proclaim that all is lost, I am planning a comeback . . . imagining a sinecure in human rights for extreme old age, matched editions of my collected works, and final glory.

Just last week, after a good dinner and a good play (Arthur Miller's *American Clock*), I lay awake scheming, adding up the farm rents and seeing the way to a summer of restoration, figuring to replace the slate roof on the farmhouse, to paint every building, the lavender house, the blue barn. Bundling my sums together, ecstatic that I have finally paid off my credit cards, scribbling at three in the morning that I will plant roses again, the ultimate gesture of success. I will have won out after all. Living well is the best revenge.

And then a trip to see my elder sister, the banker/lawyer, caps my determination. The Elder has a computer program that guarantees you survival on your savings at five percent interest if your withdrawal rate does not exceed seven percent - a vista of no less than 30 years. **My savings plus my rat's turd of social security: the two figures together would give me a rock-bottom, survival existence. Thanks to the magic of programmed arithmetic, I am, at one stroke, spared the humiliations of searching for regular employment, institutional obedience, discretion or regimentation. Looks like I can stay forever footloose and bohemian, a busy artist-writer free of gainful employment. Free at last—provided I live real close to the ground.**



Ms. Magazine

Kate Millett takes pride in her field of young Christmas trees at her farm in Poughkeepsie, New York.

#### **Kate Millett's life**

Born 1934 in St Paul, Minnesota. Educated at University of Minnesota, St Hilda's, Oxford, and Columbia, New York. Moved to Japan in 1961. Married fellow sculptor Fumio Yoshimura in 1965; split up in the 70s.

Published *Sexual Politics* (1970); *The Prostitution Papers* (1973); *Flying*, her autobiography (1974); *Sita* (1977), about her doomed love affair with another woman.

Active in feminist politics in the late 60s/70s. In 1966, became committee member of the National Organization for Women. In 1979, went to Iran to work for women's rights and was expelled.

In 1990, she published *The Loony Bin Trip*, about her mental breakdown, and then in 1994, *The Politics Of Cruelty*.

Source: *The Guardian* (London), Tuesday, 23 June 1998  
Copyright Guardian Media Group plc.1998