

Setting the Record Straight on Second-Wave Feminists

A recent article in *The Federalist* uses my work out of context to defame feminists like Kate Millet and blame them for the recent transgender movement

by Phyllis Chesler

On April 19, conservative publication [*The Federalist*](#) published an article titled "Second-Wave Feminists Pushed The Sexual Revolution To End America, And It's Working." The think piece by Carrie Gress, a Catholic, anti-abortion theologian, blames a group of 12 women, led by Kate Millett, for the rise of the trans movement and the general degradation of American culture. To do this, Gress cherry-picks some paragraphs from my 2018 book, [*A Politically Incorrect Feminist*](#), in order to damn and defame Second Wave feminism.

I do not usually read *The Federalist*. Google Alerts sent it my way because I was cited in one of their articles. I find that while many conservatives are compelling thinkers and good allies on many issues, when it comes to feminism, they often lower their standards and allow a complete outsider, an anti-feminist, and someone who just happens to have been born female, to condemn feminism in the most superficial and ignorant of ways.

Trust me: If you want a hit job on a feminist work or on a feminist herself, hire a real feminist to do it. She'll know where the important bodies are buried. An outsider? She'd miss the tree for the forest.

I must strongly protest most of what Carrie Gress has written. I stand by my work in *A Politically Incorrect Feminist*, every line in it is true—but Gress has taken my work out of context, twisting it to suit her own narrative. Her piece has

purposefully missed my admiration for the intellectual and visionary power of Second Wave feminism, our courage, our originality, our just demands for sex-based equality and freedom from violence—goals we have not yet obtained.

“Millet, her minions, and the other grandmothers of second-wave feminism set the diabolical narrative that has affected nearly every woman on the planet,” Gress writes. “These broken women are responsible for the 50-year-old narrative that says female empowerment can only be achieved through promiscuity, abortion, and the destruction of the family.”

Radical feminists opposed rape, domestic violence, pornography, prostitution, incest, sexual harassment, and commercial surrogacy. We still do. Some of our positions were shared by conservatives. Only some of us were preoccupied with the destruction of the “heterosexual nuclear monogamous patriarchal family” but many of us were concerned with the incestuous or the domestically violent father-headed family.

Gress has used my work, and Mallory Millett’s [unending campaign](#) to defame her sister Kate, to prove that feminism or feminist leaders were all Marxists (so not true!); or cult members (oh, we were major contrarians, individualists); or that we conspired to achieve the destruction of America. Some of us may have envisioned this but most of us wanted to expand the American dream to include all women and in that we did not succeed.

In her article, Gress believes that a coven of 12 women, allegedly led by my dear friend, Kate Millet, hexed America, in a “type of litany from the Catholic Church... but this time it was Marxism, the church of the Left.”

According to Gress, perhaps based on conversations with or on the writings of Mallory Millett, the women chanted their way to a “cultural revolution.” To that end, Gress quotes what must be a hallucination.

To the best of my knowledge, twelve feminists, led by Kate Millett, never chanted totalitarian nonsense at Lila Karp's apartment. Mallory Millett, a practicing Catholic (all good as far as I'm concerned), is a fanatic anti-abortion advocate and thus, sees feminism, feminists, and particularly her sister Kate as devils, witches, perhaps responsible for famine, impotence, climate change, and death. She and Gress seem to have taken a page from the *Malleus Maleficarum*, the document which led to the burning of so many women as witches in Europe.

Gress is a Catholic theologian with a doctorate in philosophy from Catholic University of America. She has written for many Catholic publications and authored multiple books including *The Anti-Mary Exposed: Rescuing the Culture From Toxic Femininity*, in which she argues that motherhood, mother-child bonding, patriarchal family stability, and mental health were all destroyed by "a small group of elite women."

I actually agree with her point about [motherhood and mother-child bonding](#), which is one of the reasons I oppose [commercial surrogacy](#) and automatic father's rights in terms of custody. Historically, fathers always received automatic custody of their children; mothers, never.

However, Gress's idealized father-dominated family also included incest, domestic violence, child abuse, philandering, absence, and abandonment. The so-called sexual revolution (which is what she is or should be talking about), which profited from a woman's right to birth control and abortion—was essentially a patriarchal male revolution that did not empower most girls and women.

Gress writes that these twelve women or perhaps the entire Second Wave feminist movement are responsible for the "43 million abortions procured by women worldwide in the year 2021."

I don't know how she gets this estimate. Her entire argument is situated within the context of the transgender debate, for which she also blames second-wave feminists:

"The trans movement is the biggest fulfillment yet of the second-wave ideal of erasing gender, and is perhaps the final battle before Kate Millett's vision is complete," she writes.

The radical feminists with whom I work, oppose the trans cult as yet another aggressive men's rights movement.



Kate Millett (left) and Phyllis Chesler (right), 1976. This image was reproduced in "A Politically Incorrect Feminist" with no credit as we cannot remember who took it.

Gress also uses my work to smear all second-wave feminists as mentally ill in an attempt to discredit them.

She quotes one section of my book where I discuss mental illness suffered by prominent feminists, such as Kate Millett:

"Kate had a shitload of charm and, in the beginning, a commanding presence, but she also had periods in which she

didn't sleep, raged at others, attempted suicide, and exploited her groupies – all the while feeling victimized by them (which she was). She couldn't be counted on to remain lucid at a press conference. She also fell in love, and tried to have her way, quite aggressively, with woman after woman (including me)."

She must have missed the part where I specifically laid out the point of my discussion of Kate's illness:

"The point is that Kate wrote despite her mental illness; she kept going, she never stopped working, not even when other illnesses laid her low."

Using my historical account of how feminist activists suffered, often made worse by their treatment as feminists in society, to attempt to discredit their work and ideas is not only cruel but intellectually dishonest. As I wrote:

"Activists and artists are an at-risk population. Feminists are human beings. Some are normally competitive; some are bullies; some hide their viciousness by operating only in mobs, and a few are sociopaths."

Despite the burden of such a stigmatized illness, feminists such as Kate and Shulamith Firestone produced important and world-changing work. Unfortunately, madness is common among many of our greatest male artists e.g. Byron, Ernest Hemingway, Edvard Munch, Edgar Allen Poe, Mark Rothko, Dylan Thomas, and Vincent Van Gogh. Alcoholism, wife battering, promiscuity, pederasty, and drug addiction plagued even more male artists and intellectuals of note—simply too many to list. This is not why we care about them. It is their work that matters.

Gress has penned a cheap shot when we really need a more serious evaluation of the gains, losses, achievements, and mistakes of the American feminist movement—and the obstacles that we faced and still do.

Please allow me to quote briefly from my obit for Kate, contained in *A Politically Incorrect Feminist*:

"Kate Millett (1934–2017). Kate: You took your last breath on Earth in the city you loved most: Paris, the city that once welcomed the ex-patriates Gertrude, Alice, Pablo, Ernest, and Sir James of Dublin, and where the early morning aroma of fresh bread was reason enough for you to rise, too.

You were the most cosmopolitan, the most continental, the most European identified of our feminist intellectuals (well, Andrea Dworkin was, too). You believed that ideas matter and that intellectuals must lay their bodies down for the sake of revolution.

You were always broad-minded (in both senses of the word); you would not have disapproved of my exposing you here, given how routinely you exposed yourself and everyone else in book after book, and you did so in such a fine, stream-of-consciousness prose, one that was underestimated by critics but never by me. I admired it; no, I adored it...

Katie: I want to thank you for your generosity, for always trying to include me, and for suggesting that others do so, too. You introduced me to extraordinary women. As you know, some of these women became very dear to me.

It was a privilege to be your friend. I will never forget you."

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