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Remembering Kate Millett [by Catharine R. Stimpson]



Kate Millett, sculptor, author and feminist, on her booted stool by her useless piano, two-headed bed and bachelor chest at Judson Memorial Church in New York, March 1st, 1967. Photograph: Neal Boenzi/The New York Times

Kate Millett died on September 6, 2017, in Paris, eight days before her 83rd birthday. We met in the mid-1960s when we were doctoral students at Columbia University and part-time lecturers in English at Barnard College. For years, we were close friends, and then, without any quarrel, without any design, we met with less and less frequency. However, I never lost touch with my feelings of love, some concern, and respect. She was streaked with genius. Now, I must be one of her sorrowing mourners.

The first time I heard her voice was over the phone in 1963 or 1964. I was living over an Irish bar in an apartment with a Pullman kitchen and a pink-tiled bathroom at 1254 Lexington Avenue in the Yorkville District of New York. I was experimenting with the contours of my adult life. I had begun teaching at Barnard. I was going through one of the transitions of that period, from a putative heterosexuality to a precarious bisexuality to a settled if partially secretive lesbianism. When a women's sports magazine later satirically selected me for its Hall of Fame, my sport was "Hide and Seek."

That first conversation with Kate was professional and correct. She had been told to call me for advice because she was in a situation that was similar to mine. She had a B.A. from Oxford. I had one from Cambridge. She had gone to Japan for a while,

but she was now back. She was entering the doctoral program at Columbia. I was already there. What was it like? I am, I said, truthfully, an indifferent and probably irritating graduate student, but here is how I managed the situation with credits from an English university. She also inquired about teaching at Barnard. The students are wonderful, I answered. .

We ended up with adjacent desks, two of the four in an office on the 4th floor of Barnard Hall. We were urgently earnest, enthusiastic teachers, who adored literature and learning, and who marked student papers with zeal. We once calculated that with our classes and our attention to student writing and our conferences, we were earning \$.81 per hours. We seemed to understand each other, a balance of seriousness and irony. Soon we became known as the “two Kates.” All the pictures in her current obituaries, whether of the young or the aging Kate, show her with long hair, but in the office, her hair was in a bun, and she wore long skirts and shoes with wooden heels. She seemed to be emulating a stereotype of a female Oxford don. I, on the other hand, danced around in mini-skirts and ran my hands through my curly black locks.

Soon I met Fumio Yoshimura, the artist, whom she had met in Japan. She had helped him through the death of his wife there. He came with her to America. Kate would say that they married because of immigration. She also murmured, muttered once about pleasing her family. But it was also a marriage of love, support, and shared devotion to making art. Sexual Politics is dedicated to him. Their marriage was no dash to City Hall, but in a church, albeit a progressive one. After the wedding dinner the night before, we were all hung over, but I could still notice that she was wearing a white bridal gown, and Fumio was ceremoniously dressed, and Kate’s brother-in-law walked her down the aisle. An officer in the military, he wore his dress uniform.

Kate and Fumio were living on the Bowery, and Kate persuaded me to move downtown. I found my loft at 352 Bowery. We were neighbors at home and work. Then, in 1966, she walked in the office, holding a piece of mimeographed paper. “Stimps,” she said, I could be either Stimps or Stimpson, “there’s this meeting about a civil rights organization for women. We should check it out.” She was already a fervent supporter of black civil rights. The meeting took place in a church office on Morningside Heights, a few rows of folding metal chairs. Instantly, it made sense to be there. Like starfish, we suddenly grew back missing limbs. She became chair of the Education Committee, I of the Image Committee. Competition for these posts was minimal.

In Changing the Subject: How the Women of Columbia Shaped the Way We Think of Sex and Politics (2004), Rosalind Rosenberg writes ably about these days on Morningside Heights. For Kate and me, moving back and forth from Downtown to uptown, from politics to scholarship, was a seamless journey. Sexual Politics, famously her doctoral dissertation, embodies this. I still remember, with some chagrin, sitting on a beach with Kate. She, Fumio, Ruby (my partner at the time), and I were on vacation. I was reading a draft passage about D.H. Lawrence. “Kate,” I said, “you can’t say that about Lawrence. He’s a great writer.” In the sun, on the sand, she was non-committal.

Looming behind Sexual Politics, and perhaps insufficiently recognized, were two formidable intellectual forces: Simone de Beauvoir and the Second Sex, translated into English only a few years before, and Steven Marcus, the Columbia scholar who was her

adviser. Kate was scrupulous about her intellectual debts. In her "Preface," she writes, "I am particularly grateful to Steven Marcus who gave the manuscript the most careful reading and could always find time and patience to insist rhetoric give way to reason."

Kate was an artist. One of my most treasured possessions is her sculpture of a diner at a table, with fork and knife pointing in the wrong direction. I bought this representation of frustration, paying \$15 per month for a period of two or three years. Kate had a passionate imagination. Yet, she was a scholar, a woman of research and reason. She was proud, legitimately, of her first at Oxford. Later, when we looked at each other, we saw paths not taken. We were, of course, mildly competitive, and I was wildly jealous of her portrait on the cover of Time magazine in 1970. In Flying, she gave me two names, Emerson and Morgan, both a sly reference to certain of my tastes. Was I the woman who lived downtown but who did not take up the rugged rigors of the artist's life? As for Kate, she should have been a tenured professor of literature who wrote burning books and made art, an outlier in the profession who would have become an icon.

As her obituaries point out, the Barnard English Department did not renew Kate's contract, a terrible wound for her. It was not only her politics, not only her presence. Polite though she could be, her direct gaze could be discomfiting. Some members of the Department, now dead, were narrow prigs. One woman thought a passage from Lawrence, on a syllabus, was too bald and bold for Barnard undergraduates. One man harrumped to me that she had not written him a thank-you note after she taught his course in Victorian literature when he was on leave. Kate did stay on at Barnard for a little while. Powerful members of the faculty, such as Mary Mothersill, then the chair of the Philosophy Department, helped to arrange a position as director of the Experimental College (new, of course). Perhaps, after Sexual Politics, Kate did not need the academy, but she would have been an astonishing professor.

I have all of Kate's books, including her early pamphlets, except for my inscribed first edition of Sexual Politics. I often wonder who nicked it. After I heard about her death, I ran my hand over them. I thought that I must write about them all, because her cultural reputation cannot be reduced to Sexual Politics. The books have a consistent spine. They are about the suffering of the powerless, about the hell into which the powerful cast the powerless. Kate urges us, forces us, to look into hell and then dares us to put out its fires. In her cosmology, ethics, sense of martyrdom, ferocious capacity for hard work, and anguish, she was, I believe, radically Roman Catholic, the rebuked church of her youth.

One headline in an obituary called Sexual Politics a "Bible of Feminism." Another named her a "'high priestess' of second-wave feminism." Perhaps their writers knew more than they knew. I have imagined us together in Medieval times, before Protestants so rubbished women's convents. We would have been in a convent, a place for women who relished holding books and manuscripts open before them. But, like some of those irrepressible and renegade saints, she would have been difficult. She would dispatched her disruptive messages, written in both impeccable Latin and in the vernacular, and she would have walked out into the countryside, perhaps in sandals, perhaps in her bare feet, founding new communities of yearning believers.

Dear Kate, I believe this fantasy would have amused you.

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