

This Dr. Jill Biden debacle is right-wing conservative panic at its worst

Sexist gaslighting has no place in the White House. But a Dr. Jill Biden? Yes.



— For some reason, Dr. Jill Biden calling herself by her preferred title has been enraging and uncomfortable for some conservatives.

Anthony Souffle / Star Tribune via Getty Images file

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By Liz Plank, MSNBC Opinion Columnist

For reasons that remain mysterious (hint, it's sexism!) The Wall Street Journal decided to [publish a humiliating op-ed](#) from a guy whose main credential seems to be that he is a man. This man had some unsolicited advice for future first lady Jill Biden.

The essay carries the energy of a man at a bus stop you accidentally made eye contact with who is now sharing every opinion he's ever had with you as you silently point to your earphones, to no avail. For the analogy to really work though, add to the equation a major newspaper deciding to publish his ramblings.

These women are not here to fit the mold; they're coming at the White House to rebuild it for the generations of women who come after them.

"Madame First Lady – Mrs. Biden – Jill – kiddo: a bit of advice on what may seem like a small but I think is a not unimportant matter," Joseph Epstein, the author of the op-ed, wrote. "Any chance you might drop the 'Dr.' before your name? 'Dr. Jill Biden' sounds and feels fraudulent, not to say a touch comic." Epstein, who is committed to intersectionality even in the throws of misogyny, added that we should start using the phrase "rarer than a contemporary university honorary-degree list not containing an African-American woman" to "denote rarity."




After facing [mountains of backlash](#), The Wall Street Journal refused to apologize and instead doubled down, calling the backlash to the piece "[identity politics](#)." If misogyny is a former adjunct professor you've never heard of referring to a Ph.D.-holding future first lady as "kiddo," sexist gaslighting is the

male Wall Street Journal editorial editor Paul A. Gigot [standing by him](#), classifying the disregard for women’s accomplishments as a “relatively minor issue” and categorizing the Biden’s team’s request for an apology and a correction as “Trumpian.”





This honestly feels more offensive to Team Trump than Team Biden because Donald-[accused-by-26-women-of-sexual-misconduct](#)-Trump would hate to know his name is being used to describe anyone fighting to eradicate sexism, a core and defining part of [his brand](#).

And leaving no sexist stone unturned, the right-wing extremist Ben Shapiro, true to his well-documented trolling and misogynistic roots, piled onto possibly the most inarticulate argument of all time, [tweeting](#) that “only people with Ph.D.’s in hard sciences and medical doctors should be called ‘doctor.’”


**Ben Shapiro**  @benshapiro · Dec 13, 2020 



Replying to @benshapiro

The professor quickly replied, "If I have a heart attack right now, can you do anything about it?" The student demurred. The professor replied, "Then I'm not calling you doctor." This is basically my perspective on this asinine issue.

**Ben Shapiro**  @benshapiro

If you're at a dinner and somebody introduces himself as "Dr. Smith," you'd be rather upset to learn that he had a doctorate in musicology if you were to suffer a stroke at the table.

7:49 PM · Dec 13, 2020 

 8.7K  4.5K people are Tweeting about this

Wow. Where do we even begin? This absolute tidal wave of misguided men publicly documenting their sophomoric feelings about self-determined and defining women feels embarrassing. But it’s not original. What Epstein, the Wall Street Journal and Shapiro are doing is not unique; it’s conforming to a

culture that regularly diminishes or flat-out erases women's contributions.

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[Research](#) from linguists shows that women M.D.s are less likely to be introduced as doctors than their male counterparts, by a lot. The study found that when men introduced other men they referred to their title as doctor 72 percent of the time. When it was women, they referred to them as doctors 49.2 percent of the time. Female doctors are [paid less](#) despite [being better at their job and better at keeping people alive](#).

These attacks on female Ph.D. holders also come during a year where submissions of academic papers by women [have decreased by 50 percent, while they've increased by 50 percent](#) from men.

**Liz Plank, MSc. PhD in adhd & depression** 
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And it's not like academia was an equal playing field before the pandemic caused women to [lose their jobs way more and to work inside the home way more](#), too. Data consistently has [shown](#) that female researchers are far less likely to be credited in academic papers than men. Women are also [half as likely](#) to be called by their last names than their male peers. This infantilizes women and belittles their accomplishments, making them less likely to get the awards and accolades they need to advance in their fields.

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But of course, male discomfort with Dr. Biden calling herself by her preferred title is even more enraging to those against progress because she'll be first lady, a role that requires women to obey some of the most archaic conceptions of womanhood.

First Ladies are still expected to play a subservient and supportive role rather than an emancipated one.

First ladies are still expected to play a subservient and supportive role rather than an emancipated one. When Hillary Clinton had the audacity to try to bring America's health care system to the standards of the industrialized world by crafting a health care policy that would later inspire Obamacare, a policy that revolutionized our health care system, she became the [subject of so much violence](#) that she needed extra security and ended up having to [give up on the project](#).

Michelle Obama faced [misogynoir](#), a vicious and specific kind of racialized sexism targeted at Black women, and received [mountains of criticism](#) for simply asking people to (gasp!) “move” when she traveled around the country doing controversial things like planting gardens, improving school lunches and having a [dance-off with Big Bird](#).



The current first lady, Melania Trump, couldn't better fulfill the outdated feminine stereotype, as a version of female empowerment that's palatable, especially to men: a conventionally attractive woman who appears to be ornamental to her husband, launching shallow and ineffective programs like “Be Best” and traveling to Africa dressed in [colonial cosplay](#). Trump's daughter Ivanka arguably had much more enterprising projects.

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so much. While they value independence and entrepreneurship in their daughters, male subjects in the study weren't as welcoming when it came to their wives. As [Tracy Moore](#) of Jezebel put it: "For them, a wife is a reflection ON you, while a daughter is an extension OF you. ... A daughter ... is a direct extension of your genes. Caring about your daughter's smarts over her looks likely ensures that the legacy that you, Man Filling Out Survey, have been socialized into wanting for yourself: intelligence, capability, rather than beefcake-itude."



I saw the unique treatment reserved for first ladies firsthand when I reported from Trump's inauguration in 2016. I'll never forget when Melania Trump came on the big screen right after the camera panned to Hillary Clinton. Naturally, as I expected, the crowd booed Clinton. But instead of going from boos to cheers for Melania, it went from boos to catcalls and whistles from the men in the crowd. It was like they couldn't be happier to have a woman whose value appears to be attractive and silent rather than ambitious and pioneering.

We've seen right-wing conservatives panic at the idea of [losing](#) a parody of their definition of masculinity in Trump, and now we're seeing them panic at the idea of also losing their definition of femininity in a first lady. While Melania Trump may have tried (and very much [failed](#)) to keep her frustrations about some of the frivolous and domesticating duties of a first lady, Jill Biden won't be ornamental – she'll be self-determining. And she'll be the first first lady [to keep her day job](#).

Just like Vice President-elect Kamala Harris, whose name conservatives have deliberately [fumbled](#) to discredit her, these women are not here to fit the mold; they're coming to the White House to rebuild it for the generations of women who will come after them. These scared men better learn how to say their names. History books certainly will. 

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Liz Plank, an MSNBC columnist, award-winning journalist and author, was the host of "Positive Spin." Her book, "[For the Love of Men: A New Vision for Mindful Masculinity](#)," was published in 2019.

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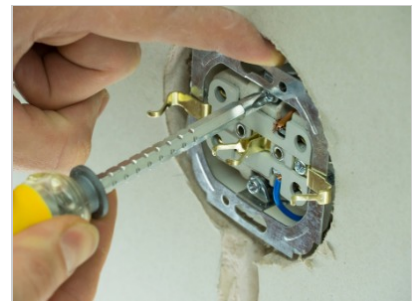
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