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English 230-70

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Woolf's Judith Shakespeare an Everywoman Figure

In her famous series of feminist essays, known collectively as *A Room of One's Own* (1929), Virginia Woolf illustrates the plight of twentieth-century women by inventing a character of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Judith Shakespeare, the “wonderfully gifted sister” of the Bard himself (46; ch. 3). Via this fictional persona, Woolf demonstrates how a patriarchal society, like Great Britain's, responds to men and women so differently within similar scenarios. William Shakespeare, as the story goes, was born to a merchant-class family of modest means and received a typical sixteenth-century, English education before going to London as a teenager to make his way in the world as an actor and playwright. Had he been born female, things would have been quite different, according to Woolf's essay.

The differences in treatment regarding education would have begun early for young William and Judith. While William was taught to read classical Latin texts, Judith “had no chance of learning grammar and logic, let alone reading Horace and Virgil” (47). Woolf speculates that Judith would have tried to find time to read her brother's cast off books, but “then her parents came in and told her to mend the stockings or mind the stew and not moon about with books and papers” (47). Judith, like her brother, had an interest in writing; however, she had no opportunity or encouragement to develop this craft because she was expected to marry as soon as she reached the age of twenty. Woolf

writes, “She cried out that marriage was hateful to her, and for that she was severely beaten by her father” (47). Forced by her “gift” of creative genius, Judith, like her brother, stole away to London to pursue her “taste for the theatre,” but “[m]en laughed in her face” (47). Again, Woolf focuses on the inequity of educational opportunities, writing, “She could get no training in her craft [of acting]” (47). Ultimately Judith was forced to find a man for help and protection, and soon “found herself with child by that gentleman” (48).

Woolf conjectures that such a woman of genius (a woman similar to herself) would have been driven to mental illness: “[A]ny woman born with a great gift in the sixteenth century would certainly have gone crazed, shot herself, or ended her days in some lonely cottage outside the village, half witch, half wizard, feared and mocked at” (49). Woolf’s assessment is eerie foreshadowing to her own life as we know that she committed suicide in 1941 by drowning herself in the River Ouse. As far as access to education and the time and space to pursue one’s intellectual passions, the twentieth century was not much different from the sixteenth century for English females.

Work Cited

Woolf, Virginia. *A Room of One's Own*. 1929. Ed. Susan Gubar. Orlando, FL:
Harcourt, 2005.