

from *A Room
of One's Own*

VIRGINIA WOOLF

Here am I asking why women did not write poetry in the Elizabethan age, and I am not sure how they were educated; whether they were taught to write; whether they had sitting rooms to themselves; how many women had children before they were twenty-one; what, in short, they did from eight in the morning till eight at night. They had no money evidently; according to Professor Trevelyan¹ they were married whether they liked it or not before they were out of the nursery, at fifteen or sixteen very likely. It would have been extremely odd, even upon this showing, had one of them suddenly written the plays of Shakespeare, I concluded, and I thought of that old gentleman, who is dead now, but was a bishop, I think, who declared that it was impossible for any woman, past, present, or to come, to have the genius of Shakespeare. He wrote to the papers about it. He also told a lady who applied to him for information that cats do not as a matter of fact go to heaven, though they have, he added, souls of a sort. How much thinking those old gentlemen used to save one! How the borders of ignorance shrank back at their approach! Cats do not go to heaven. Women cannot write the plays of Shakespeare.

Be that as it may, I could not help thinking, as I looked at the works of Shakespeare on the shelf, that the bishop was right at least in this;

it would have been impossible, completely and entirely, for any woman to have written the plays of Shakespeare in the age of Shakespeare. Let me imagine, since facts are so hard to come by, what would have happened had Shakespeare had a wonderfully gifted sister, called Judith, let us say. Shakespeare himself went, very probably—his mother was an heiress—to the grammar school, where he may have learnt Latin—Ovid, Virgil and Horace²—and the elements of grammar and logic. He was, it is well known, a wild boy who poached³ rabbits, perhaps shot a deer, and had, rather sooner than he should have done, to marry a woman in the neighborhood, who bore him a child rather quicker than was right. That escapade sent him to seek his fortune in London. He had, it seemed, a taste for the theater; he began by holding horses at the stage door. Very soon he got work in the theater, became a successful actor, and lived at the hub of the universe, meeting everybody, knowing everybody, practicing his art on the boards, exercising his wits in the streets, and even getting access to the palace of the queen. Meanwhile his extraordinarily gifted sister, let us

1. **Professor Trevelyan:** George Macaulay Trevelyan, English historian (1876–1962).

2. **Ovid, Virgil and Horace:** Latin writers whose works are usually included in a classical education.

3. **poached:** hunted illegally.

suppose, remained at home. She was as adventurous, as imaginative, as agog to see the world as he was. But she was not sent to school. She had no chance of learning grammar and logic, let alone of reading Horace and Virgil. She picked up a book now and then, one of her brother's perhaps, and read a few pages. 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. They would have spoken sharply but kindly, for they were substantial people who knew the conditions of life for a woman and loved their daughter—indeed, more likely than not she was the apple of her father's eye.

She made up a small parcel of her belongings, let herself down by a rope one summer's night and took the road to London.

Perhaps she scribbled some pages up in an apple loft on the sly, but was careful to hide them or set fire to them. Soon, however, before she was out of her teens, she was to be betrothed to the son of a neighboring wool stapler.⁴ She cried out that marriage was hateful to her, and for that she was severely beaten by her father. Then he ceased to scold her. He begged her instead not to hurt him, not to shame him in this matter of her marriage. He would give her a chain of beads or a fine petticoat, he said; and there were tears in his eyes. How could she disobey him? How could she break his heart? The force of her own gift alone drove her to it. She made up a small

parcel of her belongings, let herself down by a rope one summer's night and took the road to London. She was not seventeen. The birds that sang in the hedge were not more musical than she was. She had the quickest fancy, a gift like her brother's, for the tune of words. Like him, she had a taste for the theater. She stood at the stage door; she wanted to act, she said. Men laughed in her face. The manager—a fat, loose-lipped man—guffawed. He belted something about poodles dancing and women acting—no woman, he said, could possibly be an actress. He hinted—you can imagine what. She could get no training in her craft. Could she even seek her dinner in a tavern or roam the streets at midnight? Yet her genius was for fiction and lusted to feed abundantly upon the lives of men and women and the study of their ways. At last—for she was very young, oddly like Shakespeare the poet in her face, with the same gray eyes and rounded brows—at last Nick Greene the actor-manager took pity on her; she found herself with child by that gentleman and so—who shall measure the heat and violence of the poet's heart when caught and tangled in a woman's body?—killed herself one winter's night and lies buried at some crossroads where the omnibuses⁵ now stop outside the Elephant and Castle.⁶

Why does Woolf imagine that this would be Judith's fate?

infer

That, more or less, is how the story would run, I think, if a woman in Shakespeare's day had had Shakespeare's genius. But for my

4. **wool stapler:** one who buys wool from sheep owners to sell to manufacturers.

5. **omnibuses:** buses.

6. **Elephant and Castle:** a pub, or tavern, in London.



INTERIOR OF A BEDROOM Édouard Vuillard Phoenix Art Museum Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Donald D. Harrington.

part, I agree with the deceased bishop, if such he was—it is unthinkable that any woman in Shakespeare's day should have had Shakespeare's genius. For genius like Shakespeare's is not born among laboring, uneducated, servile⁷ people. It was not born in England among the Saxons and the Britons. It is not born today among the working classes. How, then, could it have been born among women whose work began, according to Professor Trevelyan, almost before they were out of the nursery, who were forced to it by their parents

and held to it by all the power of law and custom? Yet genius of a sort must have existed among women as it must have existed among the working classes. Now and again an Emily Brontë⁸ or a Robert Burns⁹ blazes out and proves its presence. But certainly it never got itself onto paper. When, however, one reads

7. **servile**: Here, the word does not mean, as it usually does, "slavelike." It refers only to class status.

8. **Emily Brontë**: English novelist and poet (1818–1848), sister of Charlotte Brontë.

9. **Robert Burns**: Scottish poet (1759–1796).

of a witch being ducked, of a woman possessed by devils, of a wise woman selling herbs, or even of a very remarkable man who had a mother, then I think we are on the track of a lost novelist, a suppressed poet, of some mute and inglorious Jane Austen,¹⁰ some Emily Brontë who dashed her brains out on the moor or mopped and mowed about the highways crazed with the torture that her gift had put her to. Indeed, I would venture to guess that Anon, who wrote so many poems without signing them, was often a woman. It was a woman Edward Fitzgerald,¹¹ I think, suggested who made the ballads and the folk songs, crooning them to her children, beguiling¹² her spinning with them, or the length of the winter's night.

clarify

What evidence of women's genius in the sixteenth century does Woolf suggest?

This may be true or it may be false—who can say?—but what is true in it, so it seemed to me, reviewing the story of Shakespeare's sister as I had made it, is that any 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. For it needs little skill in psychology to be sure that a highly gifted girl who had tried to use her gift for poetry would have

been so thwarted and hindered by other people, so tortured and pulled asunder by her own contrary instincts, that she must have lost her health and sanity to a certainty. No girl could have walked to London and stood at a stage door and forced her way into the presence of actor-managers without doing herself a violence and suffering an anguish which may have been irrational—for chastity may be a fetish invented by certain societies for unknown reasons—but were none the less inevitable. Chastity had then, it has even now, a religious importance in a woman's life, and has so wrapped itself around with nerves and instincts that to cut it free and bring it to the light of day demands courage of the rarest. To have lived a free life in London in the sixteenth century would have meant for a woman who was poet and playwright a nervous stress and dilemma which might well have killed her. Had she survived, whatever she had written would have been twisted and deformed, issuing from a strained and morbid imagination. And undoubtedly, I thought, looking at the shelf where there are no plays by women, her work would have gone unsigned. That refuge she would have sought certainly. ❧

10. **Jane Austen:** English novelist (1775–1817).

11. **Edward Fitzgerald:** English poet and translator (1809–1883).

12. **beguiling:** whiling away.

e x p l a i n

Responding to Reading

First Impressions

1. What were your thoughts after reading this selection?

Second Thoughts

2. Why do you think Woolf created an imaginary sister of Shakespeare to illustrate the obstacles faced by a talented woman in the sixteenth century?

Think about

- the remarks of the "old gentleman"
- the "force of [Judith's] own gift"
- Woolf's occupation

3. How convincing is Woolf's explanation of why Elizabethan women did not write poetry and plays?

Think about

- the lack of education for women
- women being held to work "by all the power of law and custom"
- how women writers might have been treated by society at the time

4. Do you agree with the last two sentences in this excerpt? Why or why not?

Think about

- the struggles that a talented woman might have experienced
- the possibility that many anonymous works were written by women

5. Compare and contrast the role of fate in the lives of the main characters in the first three selections of this subunit with the role of fate in the life of Shakespeare's imaginary sister.

6. Earlier in *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf writes that "a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction." Explain what you think she might mean.

Broader Connections

7. Woolf wrote *A Room of One's Own* in 1928. What obstacles do women and other groups face today in trying to realize their potential?