

# Shakespeare's Sister

from *A Room of One's Own*

Virginia Woolf

## BACKGROUND

In 1929, Virginia Woolf published a collection of essays called *A Room of One's Own*, from which this essay is taken. In it, Woolf uncovers forgotten women writers and reveals how gender affects subjects, themes, and even style.

Woolf begins this essay by asking questions about the lives of women in sixteenth-century England, when Elizabeth I was on the throne, a period known as the Elizabethan Age. It was also the age of Shakespeare, when men were writing some of the most important plays and poems in the English language. Why then, asks Woolf, were women not writing poetry, too?

### IDENTIFY

Re-read lines 1–14. Underline the facts that lead Woolf to conclude it would have been “extremely odd” (line 9) for women to have written the plays of Shakespeare.

### INFER

What belief is implied in the “old gentleman’s” statement that it is “impossible for any woman . . . to have the genius of Shakespeare” (lines 12–14)?

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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 Trevelyan<sup>1</sup> 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

1. **Professor Trevelyan:** G. M. Trevelyan, author of *The History of England* (1926).

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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 Horace—and the elements of grammar and logic. He was, it is well known, a wild boy who poached 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 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

#### ANALYZE

Re-read lines 14–20, in which Woolf discredits the opinions of the bishop. How would you describe the **tone** of this passage? (*Grade 9–10 Review*)

#### INTERPRET

Re-read lines 21–25. Underline the statement in which Woolf agrees with the bishop in one respect. Then, based on the facts you underlined in the first paragraph, tell why Woolf agrees.

#### IDENTIFY

Pause at line 27. What imaginary person does Woolf conjure up? Circle that information.

#### COMPARE & CONTRAST

Re-read lines 41–48. How did Judith's education compare to her brother's? Underline that information. Circle the jobs that her parents would have expected her to do.



winter's night and lies buried at some crossroads where the omnibuses now stop outside the Elephant and Castle.<sup>3</sup>

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 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, **servile** people. It was  
90 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 Brontë or a Robert Burns  
100 blazes out and proves its presence. But certainly it never got itself onto paper. When, however, one reads 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<sup>4</sup> Jane Austen, 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,<sup>5</sup> I think, suggested who made the ballads and the folk songs, crooning  
110 them to her children, beguiling her spinning with them, or the length of the winter's night.

3. **buried . . . Elephant and Castle:** Suicides, who were for years not permitted church burials, were commonly buried at a crossroads as a kind of punishment, perhaps to ensure that their souls would wander forever. The Elephant and Castle is a pub at a busy crossroads in south London.
4. **mute and inglorious:** allusion to line 59 of Thomas Gray's poem "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard."
5. **Edward Fitzgerald (1809–1883):** English translator and poet.

## Notes

### VOCABULARY

**servile** (sər'vīl) *adj.*: like or characteristic of a slave; submissive; yielding.

**suppressed** (sə-prest') *v.* used as *adj.*: kept from being known.

### INTERPRET

Pause at line 98. Woolf mentions the English novelist and poet Emily Brontë and the Scottish poet Robert Burns (line 97), who was a farmer. What belief of Woolf's do these two examples support? Underline that information.

### WORD STUDY

*Anon* (line 107) is an abbreviation for *anonymous*, which comes from the Greek *an-*, meaning "without," and *onyma*, meaning "name." Works of literature for which the name of the author is unknown or withheld carry the word *anonymous* to designate unknown authorship.

### FLUENCY

Read the boxed passage aloud twice. Woolf's style in this informal essay is easier to understand when you hear it aloud. Note the long, conversational sentences that contain side remarks set off by dashes or commas. Try to capture Woolf's biting, critical **tone** as well as her meaning. (*Grade 9–10 Review*)

### PARAPHRASE

What does Woolf say is "true" in her story (lines 112–127)? Restate it in your own words.

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### IDENTIFY

Re-read lines 134–138. If a woman in the sixteenth century had survived and written, what two things does Woolf say would have been true of her writing? Underline them.

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 nonetheless inevitable. Chastity had then, it has even now, a religious importance in a woman's life, and has so wrapped itself round 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. It was the relic of the sense of chastity that dictated anonymity to women even so late as the nineteenth century. Currer Bell, George Eliot, George Sand,<sup>6</sup> all the victims of inner strife as their writings prove, sought ineffectively to veil themselves by

6. **Currer Bell, George Eliot, George Sand:** male pseudonyms for the female writers Charlotte Brontë, Mary Ann Evans, and Amantine-Aurore-Lucile Dupin.

using the name of a man. Thus they did homage to the convention, which if not implanted by the other sex was liberally encouraged by them (the chief glory of a woman is not to be talked of, said Pericles,<sup>7</sup> himself a much-talked-of man), that publicity in women is detestable. Anonymity runs in their blood. The desire to be veiled still possesses them. They are not even now as concerned about the health of their fame as men are, and, speaking generally, will pass a tombstone or a signpost without feeling an irresistible desire to cut their names on it, as Alf, Bert, or Chas. must do in obedience to their instinct, which murmurs if it sees a fine woman go by, or even a dog, *Ce chien est à moi*.<sup>8</sup> And, of course, it may not be a dog, I thought, remembering Parliament Square, the Sieges Allee,<sup>9</sup> and other avenues; it may be a piece of land or a man with curly black hair. It is one of the great advantages of being a woman that one can pass even a very fine negress without wishing to make an Englishwoman of her.

160 That woman, then, who was born with a gift of poetry in the sixteenth century, was an unhappy woman, a woman at strife against herself. All the conditions of her life, all her own instincts, were hostile to the state of mind which is needed to set free whatever is in the brain. But what is the state of mind that is most **propitious** to the act of creation, I asked. Can one come by any notion of the state that furthers and makes possible that strange activity? Here I opened the volume containing the Tragedies of Shakespeare. What was Shakespeare's state of mind, for instance, when he wrote *Lear* and *Antony and Cleopatra*? It was certainly the state of mind most favorable to poetry that there has ever existed. But Shakespeare himself said nothing about it. We only know casually and by chance that he "never blotted a line." Nothing indeed was ever said by the artist

7. **Pericles** (c. 495–429 B.C.): Athenian legislator and general.

8. ***Ce chien est à moi*** (sə shē-en' āt ä mwä): French for "This dog is mine."

9. **Sieges Allee** (zē'gəs ä-lä'): busy thoroughfare in Berlin. The name—more commonly written as one word, *Siegesallee*—is German for "Avenue of Victory."

#### ANALYZE

Pause at line 159. What impulse in regard to "fame" does Woolf attribute to men but not to women?

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#### VOCABULARY

**propitious** (prō-pish'əs) *adj.*: favorable.

#### IDENTIFY

Pause at line 167. Draw a box around the questions that Woolf now begins to explore.

#### WORD STUDY

"Never blotted a line" (lines 172–173) refers to the use of pens filled from ink wells. Back in Shakespeare's day, people made corrections not by erasing but by covering mistakes with blots, or globs, of ink. What does this reference tell you about Shakespeare's writing process?

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