

Anonymity runs in their blood. [...] 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 into it.

Should the women of the past be commemorated in a different manner to their male counterparts? Explain.

There is a memorial called the Witch's Stone in Dornoch, Scotland, commemorating the last burned witch. It is a humble thing, standing at around two feet tall, eroded and blotched with lichen despite occupying the top spot in visitdornoch.com's "Ten Things to Do in Dornoch" list. (VisitDornoch) The victim was an elderly woman by the name of Janet Horne, whose crime was having her daughter transformed into a pony and shod by the Devil, evidenced by the girl's limb deformities. The witch was paraded through the town of Dornoch in a barrel, naked, smeared with tar, and so the story goes, she "warmed herself at the very fire which was about to consume her." (HistorylinksMuseum) We would later find that Janet was showing symptoms of dementia. (Niell 1923, 218)

Janet Horne's memory lives tenuously on with only an engraved "1722" on the stone, the incorrect date, her name unknown to any oblivious beachgoer stumbling across her memorial. And perhaps this is just as well – Janet Horne was almost certainly not her name, but rather "the generic one given to witches in the far north." (Henderson 2016, p.238) A tide of history comes to an end with this woman, and yet she is reduced to almost complete anonymity. Little more remains of "Janet Horne" than a folk tale, a disputed date, and a forgotten name. No "irresistible desire" (Woolf 2019, p.60) is felt when passing the Witch's Stone to cut her name into it, because no one would know what to carve. Countless women have been lost to history like Janet, though she could be seen as one of the lucky few – at least a name was recorded, albeit the wrong one. The influences and accomplishments of women so frequently go uncredited. When women of the past are anonymous, and their male counterparts are not, how can they be commemorated in the same manner?

Commemoration is a nuanced concept, implying respect, but not necessarily praise, recognition rather than glorification. For me, what comes to mind when hearing "commemorate" is Remembrance Sunday. Loss is common ground for commemoration. We commemorate the lives of prominent figures who have passed away and other tragic losses of history, like the burning of the Library of Alexandria. Much like the loss of the greatest archive of knowledge in history, (Thiem 1979, p.507) the suppression of women's contributions is the loss of a massive repository of wisdom, the scale of which will never be known, and which deserves commemoration.

In *A Room of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf explores the idea of lost women, the Judith Shakespeares of this world. She asserts that "it is unthinkable that any woman in Shakespeare's day should have had Shakespeare's genius," because genius and the achievement that follows is facilitated by social circumstance. In his time, any woman with ability potentially equivalent to Shakespeare's was robbed in the womb of the chance to exercise it, the moment they were conceived with XX chromosomes. The genius was present – one only has to read the exceptions provided by Woolf (Jane Austen, the Brontës, and George Eliot, for example from the literary canon). But, at every turn, women were thwarted by the patriarchy. Though struggling with a lack of published research – "the life of the average Elizabethan woman must be scattered about somewhere, could one collect it and make a book of it" – Woolf was correct in her theory that a woman, no matter how "extraordinarily gifted" she was, (Woolf 2019, pp.54-61) would likely never penetrate the first barrier in becoming an acclaimed genius. A study of literacy in early modern England concludes that at the time of the Civil War, 90 per cent of women were illiterate, compared to 70 per cent of men. (Cressy 2006, p.176) Women's education remained minimal, designed to increase their value as future wives. Though education between classes varied (middle and upper class girls had the funds to receive extensive teaching in more genteel subjects, whereas working class girls had lessons in the basics of reading, arithmetic, and domestic skills, if that) the motive was always to educate women as "decorative, modest, marriageable things." They were discouraged from

academia for fear of losing their fertility, or contradicting the Bible which, or so it was claimed, stated that it was against their nature. (NewnhamCollege) To view gender disparity in education as an issue of the past is of course profoundly Eurocentric – a third of countries have not yet reached gender parity in primary education enrolment, particularly in South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East, (Unicef 2020) and in countries affected by fragility, conflict and violence, girls are 2.5 times less likely to be in education than boys. (Unicef 2017)

There are real Judith Shakespeares. Fanny Mendelssohn, sister of Felix, was a talented composer, but was told by her father that “music will perhaps become [Felix’s] profession, while for you it can and must be only an ornament.” (Mendelssohn 1820) Her *Easter Sonata* was attributed to her brother until 2010. Marianne or “Nannerl” Mozart was regarded as a musical prodigy possibly surpassing her younger brother, touring Europe as a small girl, called “one of the most skilful players in Europe.” After turning, Nannerl never performed again; it was inappropriate for a young lady to sell herself. (Milo 2015) Dorothy Wordsworth, sister to William, was a gifted writer, yet her work went unpublished until after her death. She lived with her brother, who would rely on the observations written in her diary for his own poetry. These are literal examples of the “the genius’ sister,” and while their obscurity is undeserved, they have not disappeared from view because of their thoroughly researched brothers, and the opportunity their class and situation gave them to discover their talents. More women, almost invisible to historians, were never able to get this far, may have never themselves known what they were capable of if class and gender had not stood in their way. It is painful to imagine what could have been, had these “what-if” women’s achievements been possible. What discoveries, ideas, art, and leadership our culture denied itself. Are these lost talents not worthy of commemoration?

However compelling the idea of “what-if” women is, they are not the women of the past. It is a seductive rabbit hole to fall down; type “counterfactual history” into any search engine and you will be rewarded with infinite speculation on what could have been if the pistol that killed Archduke Franz Ferdinand had been an inch or two off. But as Richard J Evans points out, ““what if” is a waste of time.” (Evans 2014) That is not to say that we should not acknowledge the vast potential obscured by the repression of women, but that to dwell on hypothetical specifics is unproductive, reductive, and even insulting. To commemorate what never came to be is to disregard the accomplishments existing women actually made in a world. Real women deserve commemoration for their real achievements.

March is Women’s History Month. Historical women are given a spotlight, particularly in schools. And rightly so – little room is left for women on the school curriculum. The GCSE history course *Medicine Through Time* features just two prominent women – Florence Nightingale and Marie Curie, with no sign of Black Briton Mary Seacole – to dozens of men, despite women’s historical dominance in traditional medicine (Museum of Cambridge 2022). In March, the more diligent among us may find women who deserve commemoration drifting into obscurity and attempt to correct this. For example, in March’s LRB, Andrea Brady dedicates an article to Diane di Prima, oft forgotten female poet of the notoriously male Beat Generation. (Brady 2022) Woolf brings our attention to women like playwright Joanna Baillie, considered second only to Shakespeare in her day, and Aphra Behn, one of history’s first professional female writers, who “earned [women] the right to speak their minds.” (Woolf 2019, p.79) It is lives like these that need particular care in order to be commemorated duly, those at risk of being overshadowed and driven into nonexistence.

Women’s history is often taught in this manner. We emphasise the truly remarkable women, who not only made huge achievements in their own right but did so despite living in a culture which pushed them into the shadows. And though these women without a doubt deserve commemoration, the common thread in every story is that of an exception, a woman succeeding in the man’s sphere. When we imagine the “what-if” women, we imagine what the world missed by barring the rest – presidents, architects, astronauts, inventors. An assumption is made: the only achievements worth commemorating are male, the kind that cuts its name into tombstones. Women’s labour for much of history did not venture into

the public realm. For the rural working class, which still formed 66 per cent of Britain's population in 1801, (Law 1967, p.128) productive work for women and men almost entirely centred around the home, so no clear line was drawn between the two. (McCarthy 2018) The idea of the home being purely the place of the woman finds its roots in the Industrial Revolution, where the separation of the sexes into labourer and nurturer was a tool ensuring the stability of the capitalist economy. Juliet Mitchell writes that "the contemporary family can be seen as a triptych of sexual, reproductive and socializatory functions (the woman's world) embraced by production (the man's world) ... The exclusion of women from production... is the root cause of the contemporary social definition of women." (Mitchell 1971, p.148)

The work women undertook while restricted to the home was far from passive. Domestic labour included childbearing, birth, and rearing. Laundry work for much of history was also physically incredibly strenuous, involving manual scrubbing and wringing, and took up an entire day. (Mitchison 1983) Despite the capitalist model, particularly working class and migrant women frequently had to work a "double day," performing both paid labour during the day and unpaid domestic labour at home. (Baxter 1992, p.230) Women's labour, paid and unpaid, has always formed the bedrock of society, enabling men to publicly forge ahead. "Man, he lives in jerks... Woman, it's all one flow, like a stream, little eddies, little waterfalls, but the river, it goes right on... We ain't gonna die out," says Ma in *The Grapes of Wrath*. (Steinbeck 1939, p.423)

Women have lived, and live, fundamentally domestic lives. In light of this, I would argue that rather than commemorating only the women who escaped this domestic model and achieved as men did, we adjust our parameters for what deserves commemoration. Though confined, many women flourished as poppies did on Flanders Field, thriving where they found themselves. Women in medieval Europe held social power through the existence of wise women in most communities and their knowledge of folk medicine. (Federici 2004, p.14) While the progressively more scientific approach to medicine diminished their power, women as centres of community knowledge remained. Though the quote was corrupted into a sexist cliché by Bill Clinton, "behind every great man is a great woman," holds true, so long it is interpreted as "...who should be celebrated in her own right" rather than "...and there she should stay." The fact is, for most of history, "behind" was the only spot available. Mothers, wives, sisters and daughters of every commemorated man must have had influence in his success. Patty Carroll's photography series *Anonymous Women*, in which she covers women's faces with domestic furnishings as a comment on the "dichotomy of domesticity," (PattyCarroll) was influenced by *The Wizard of Oz*: "This feared being behind the green curtain who's pulling all the strings... when in fact it's just this lonely little guy who's made up this whole thing. But at the same time... he has all this power... and a lot of women actually have a huge amount of power by controlling their homes." (The Guardian 2016)

Beyond this, many women who did achieve outside of their sphere still do not receive the recognition and therefore commemoration they deserve. "Anon, who wrote so many poems without signing them, was often a woman." (Woolf 2004, p.) I remember reading a dusty copy of medieval verse in a moment of particular boredom, aged about eight, and seeing every other poem credited to "Anon" – I thought what a funny name that was, and how accomplished a poet he must be to be known by four letters. I was later told that Anon was a contraction, that authors were lost over time; I thought how very careless people must have been. If Woolf's theory is true, perhaps my perplexity was justified. In Mary Beard's lecture *The Public Voice of Women*, published in *Women and Power*, she makes the profound point that in the ancient world, to speak publicly was literally to claim manhood – *bonus dicendi peritus*. Any woman who spoke out was a paradox. This idea, though not as extreme, persisted as time went on. With the constant assurance that "speech will be the business of men," one can understand why so many women were reluctant to step out of their assigned role, and why those that braved the world of men either concealed their identity or saw themselves shunned and forgotten when they did not. (Beard 2017, pp.6-17)

Though we may recognise the *Oz*-like impact women have had over history, quietly influencing every aspect of culture, how can we credit them? In the words of Simone de Beauvoir, “representation of the world, as with the world itself, is the work of men; they describe from their own point of view, which they confuse with absolute truth.” (Beauvoir 1949, p.143) The past operated on the rule that achievements were made on men’s terms and were recorded as such, so no book compiles Great Women of the Homestead.

We will never know how many women of the past have met a similar fate to Janet Horne. Their lives deserve commemoration, both for what they have lost and what they have achieved. The unresolved matter is that of the Anonymous Woman; the real question of commemorating her “in the same manner as [her] male counterparts” is not “should we?” but “can we?” Her anonymity makes it impossible. The next step is to ask how they *can* be remembered. Typical symbols of what I would call male commemoration stick out in the public realm: statues of marble and granite, knighthoods, currencies, names of institutions, buildings, prizes, publications... the list goes on. They reflect the nature of their achievements: outward, and outwardly recognised. Following this pattern, perhaps we already see the unassuming nature of the Anonymous Woman’s achievements reflected in her commemoration: with the passing of knowledge from mother to daughter, letters, so-called “old wives” tales, skills of motherhood and cookery, solidarity shared across generations of women; understated commemoration, an enduring legacy that remains in its native environment. As commemorators, perhaps we should follow suit, adapt to their anonymity; be less “concerned about the health of their fame,” and focus on what can be learned from generations of women who accomplished quietly.

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