

“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.

In recent years, debates surrounding the morality of statues of historical figures have brought the issue of commemoration into the public consciousness, with the general public coming to understand that who we choose to commemorate and in what manner is a reflection of our cultural values and beliefs, and a signal of what direction we want our country to move in. It is, then, condemnatory of our supposedly equal culture, that so few historical women have been honoured in the manner they deserve, and reflects a depressing truism: the patriarchal forces which have historically oppressed women are now dictating the expulsion of women from history, denying them their rightful place in our culture. Feminist historians in the 1960s and '70s worked to bring recognition to women in the public sphere, such as Joan of Arc and Sylvia Pankhurst, in doing so overlooking the vastly significant legacies of women in the private sphere. However, these attempts to conform to the patriarchal norms of commemoration by highlighting only women deemed ‘historically important’, who were too remarkable for history to ignore, have failed; of the 828 statues recorded by the Public Monuments and Sculpture Association in 2018, just 174 were female, and of these only 65 were named historical figures¹. Thus, we can see that as long as our culture is a patriarchy, with men still overwhelmingly overrepresented in positions of power, women will not be able to access this manner of commemoration. Instead, we must look to discard this androcentric view of history, which looks exclusively at those who hold power and whose names and legacies have been recorded in material possessions, and instead use the oral tradition to understand not only the women who have wielded great influence, but also the many disregarded women, who represent the culture of anonymity and obscurity that the patriarchy has nurtured.

The legacies of women of the past have been distorted by patriarchal forces which serve to diminish and belittle the achievements of women. Never is this clearer than through the lens

¹ BBC. 2018. “Reality Check: How many UK statues are of women?” April 24, 2018. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-43884726>

of ‘The Matilda Effect’, a term which describes the phenomenon in the scientific community of women’s work being attributed to their male counterparts. Indeed, in Matilda Joslyn Gage’s enduring 1883 essay “Woman as an Inventor”², from which the phrase originates, the notion of the erasure of women’s history at male hands is evidenced in myriad examples ranging from the invention of the mower and reaper by Ann Harned Manning, then patented by her husband, to Louise McLaughlin’s invention of underglaze painting on pottery, patented by another man. More recent examples include the unjust treatment of Lise Meitner, a female scientist in the 20th century who was excluded from collaborator Otto Hahn’s Nobel Prize, and Rosalind Franklin, who was never nominated for a Nobel Prize, unlike her counterparts Crick, Watson and Wilkins, who relied on her work. It is a testament to the pervasive power of the patriarchy that the legacies of women have been distorted in such a way that their impact has not truly been commemorated. The long-term implications of this are enormous - the exclusion of female scientists has reinforced the gender gap, as a lack of representation means young women are less likely to view STEM fields as a career path, and can even be fatal: the overwhelming dominance of men in science has meant much of our everyday lives are made for men. By way of example, when involved in a car crash, women are 47% more likely to be seriously injured and 17% more likely to die³, as the shorter height of women places them out of the ‘standard seating position’, making them more vulnerable, whilst many car seats are also too firm to prevent whiplash for women, who have comparatively lighter bodies and therefore are thrown further forward in a crash. Thus we can see that rather than anonymity being “in their blood”⁴ as Woolf suggests, the exclusion of women from history is instead woven into the fabric of the patriarchy, which is held up by the image of man as the norm, and the exclusion of women.

When we turn to examine this phenomenon in literature, it can be seen on both a personal and structural level. On a macro scale, female writers are excluded from the ‘canon’, institutionalising their ostracism and preventing them from being widely taught in schools and recognised in wider society: 91% of the writers, dramatists and poets remembered in

² Gage, Matilda Joslyn. “Woman as an Inventor.” *The North American Review* 136, no. 318 (1883): 478–89. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25118273>.

³ Perez, Caroline C. 2019. “The deadly truth about a world built for men – from stab vests to car crashes.” *The Guardian*, February 23, 2019.

<https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2019/feb/23/truth-world-built-for-men-car-crashes>

⁴ Woolf, Virginia. 2014. *A Room of One's Own*. London: Penguin Books, Limited, 60

Poets' Corner are men⁵. On an individual level, we can see 'The Matilda Effect' stretching to literature, with writers like Zelda Fitzgerald seeing her writing be stolen by her husband. Indeed, perhaps the most renowned line of 'The Great Gatsby'- "I hope she'll be a fool—that's the best thing a girl can be in this world, a beautiful little fool" - is taken directly from Zelda, who, immediately after learning the sex of her daughter, told her husband, "I hope it's beautiful and a fool - a beautiful little fool."⁶ This diminutive language perhaps speaks to Zelda's own disillusionment as a writer confined to the roles of wife and mother, roles that continue to entrap her, even posthumously, as she is commemorated as such.

Moreover, when we consider the roles and achievements of women of the past, the oppressive culture in which the permission of female power and success was a rarity becomes glaringly obvious. Crucial to the commemoration of women of the past is the acknowledgement of the women whose circumstances prevented them from discovering, writing or studying, as their male counterparts did. Woolf distils this troubled history in her analogous creation of "Judith Shakespeare", a fictional sister to William Shakespeare possessing the same genius, but not sent to school, to study literature, instead forced into marriage, and laughed out of theatres, eventually killing herself after becoming pregnant⁷. Furthermore, Woolf's allusion to men's desire to possess the material in the titular quote, in which she argues women can pass "a tombstone or a signpost without feeling an irresistible desire to cut their names into it" perhaps stems from a wider context of women historically not being allowed to own property - unlike men, who have been allowed to shape their identity based on material assets, as 'the second sex', women have been alienated from this culture of ownership and property. Central to the question of the politics of women's commemoration is the extent to which these diametrically opposed experiences of men and women of the past, as emblemised in the plight of Shakespeare's sister, create a pretext for commemorating men and women of the past differently.

⁵ Alberti, Fay B. 2019. "Writing Women's History at Westminster Abbey: The Case of Poets' Corner." History Workshop.

<https://www.historyworkshop.org.uk/writing-womens-history-in-westminster-abbey-the-case-of-poets-corner/>

⁶ Fassler, Joe, and Megan Garber. 2013. "The Great Gatsby Line That Came From Fitzgerald's Life—and Inspired a Novel." *The Atlantic*, July 2, 2013.

<https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2013/07/the-i-great-gatsby-i-line-that-came-from-fitzgeralds-life-and-inspired-a-novel/277476/>

⁷ Woolf, "A Room of One's Own", 56

The patriarchal systems which destroyed the experiences and legacies of the women discussed above are still intact; therefore, the misrepresentation of women in history continues. Within this worldview, women have to be commemorated separately to men else they risk being excluded completely. When women and men are commemorated together, women face structural disadvantages, exemplified in the Nobel prize's failure to recognise female scientists. Yet the alternative is equally dangerous. The temptation to commemorate women in a different category to men, placing their sex at the forefront of their contributions to society, is reductive, diminishing the value of women's work by making it the secondary facet in their legacy. As Woolf writes, "It is fatal for anyone who writes to think of their sex [...] anything written with that conscious bias is doomed to death"⁸. Whereas men of the past are simply defined by their achievements, women of the past are restricted to a subsection of success. In trying to combat the patriarchal forces that first disadvantaged these historical women, commemorating women in a different manner to their male counterparts actually reinforces these androcentric views. Perhaps this is inevitable when we consider that the patriarchy remains intact - how can we expect the commemoration of women to be unmarred by this? Indeed, though the utopian approach may be to assume women's heritage would be treated with the same respect as male heritage, even if commemorated differently, the misogyny inherent to our culture would deem this commemoration inferior to men's. This was reflected in the 2019 drama "Fleabag", in which Kirsten Scott Thomas' character laments that women's awards are "the children's table of awards"⁹. Indeed, there is a common thread throughout feminist discourse which discusses the role of women within a patriarchy being to highlight the prowess of their male counterparts. In *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir puts forward that "The whole of feminine history has been man-made. Just as in America there is no Negro problem, but rather a white problem; just as anti-Semitism is not a Jewish problem, it is our problem; so the woman problem has always been a man problem"¹⁰, whilst Woolf puts forward a similar argument, positing that "Women have served all these centuries as looking glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size"¹¹, with both writers implying that the identity of women as a

⁸ Woolf, "A Room of One's Own", 126

⁹ Waller-Bridge, Phoebe, writer. 2019. *Fleabag*. Season 2, episode 3. Two Brothers Pictures.

¹⁰ Beauvoir, Simone D. 2012. *The Second Sex*. Translated by Sheila Malovany-Chevallier and Constance Borde. N.p.: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 181

¹¹ Woolf, "A Room of One's Own", 42

whole has been constructed by men to further male ambition and success. If we attempt to commemorate women in a manner which places focus on their sex, whilst still existing within a patriarchy, we are confining women to an ‘other’ status which only reinforces the power of men. Just as women’s legacies have previously been distorted by men in power, who are, in Woolf’s words, the “power and the money and the influence [...] the proprietor of the paper and its editor and its sub-editor”¹², commemoration of women specifically would be subject to a similar distortion, confining women to a lesser status.

Thus we can see that the histories of women do not fit neatly into the patriarchal landscape of commemoration - too much of women’s history has been erased, too much of the patriarchy is still intact to honour women within this framework, and too many view, subconsciously or consciously, the history of women as inferior to that of their male counterparts. Instead, when we look to commemorate women, we must discard this patriarchal framework and instead look to distinctly female manners of commemoration: Woolf wrote that women “think back through our mother”¹³, and it is certainly true that oral history has proved more valuable when studying women than traditional - male - methods of using history. Rather than “cut[ting] their names” into the material, the legacy of women is continued through the memory. Much of women’s history has been spent in the domestic sphere, not the public, and perhaps the commemoration of women should reflect this. In using the oral tradition, “women are creating a new history – using our own voices and experiences”¹⁴, rather than pleading with the patriarchy to recognise women as ‘historically important’.

To conclude, the negationist revision of female history is endemic to the patriarchy, which survives through an image of man as the sole hero, activist, scientist and writer. Until this chauvinistic power structure is dismantled, women will consistently be underrepresented in discussions of history, confined to the class of ‘Other’, if included at all. Therefore, it is vital that we seek to understand the broad spectrum of women’s experiences through oral history, a distinctly female technique allowing us to commemorate faceless, voiceless women through

¹² Woolf, “A Room of One’s Own”, 40

¹³ Woolf, “A Room of One’s Own”,

¹⁴ Gluck, Sherna. “What’s so Special about Women? Women’s Oral History.” *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 2, no. 2 (1977): 3–17. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3346006>

the memories and testimonies of their descendants. Only through this method, which abandons the patriarchy's insistence on the public sphere and instead reflects the uneasy reality of women's history, will women of the past begin to be truly and justly commemorated.

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