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Naming Shakespeare's Sister: Why Woolf Chose Judith

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In her classic feminist treatise, *A Room of One's Own* (1929), Virginia Woolf creates both a sister and a creative equal for William Shakespeare and names her Judith. Historical, biblical, and literary sources establish the aptness of Woolf's onomastic decision, if not the definitive answer to the question posed. Shakespeare's daughter, Judith, and Woolf's niece, Judith, are considered as possible models for the Bard's sister. Additionally, the title character of the Old Testament "Book of Judith" and of the early English poem fragment *Judith* is examined as an onomastic source. Finally, Judith Shakespeare is considered as a pseudonym for Woolf herself.

KEYWORDS Judith Shakespeare, Virginia Woolf, William Shakespeare, literary naming, onomastic sources

In Chapter Three of *A Room of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf presents the story of Judith Shakespeare, the equally talented, but purely invented sister of William Shakespeare. Like her brother, Judith desires an arts career, but custom bars her from earning her living by pen or on stage. Pregnant with a child fathered by a dismissive theatre manager, Judith kills herself, irrevocably silencing her gift of poesy. In this parable about a female Shakespeare and her likely fate in Elizabethan times, Woolf addresses her essay's central query: why historically women have composed less fiction in terms of quantity and quality than their male counterparts. Numerous scholars responded to Woolf's story about Judith Shakespeare and its depiction of social constraints that impede women artists, but none critiqued Woolf's onomastic decision.

The very name is proclaimed by Woolf with assertiveness: "Let me imagine, since facts are hard to come by, what would have happened had Shakespeare had a wonderfully gifted sister, called Judith, let us say" (Woolf, 1929: 46). In this line, Woolf conjures Shakespeare's sister as an individual act ("let *me* imagine"), then implicates her audience in the christening ("called Judith, let *us* say"). Though Woolf cleverly negotiates our acceptance of Judith as William's counterpart, she offers no insight into the exactness of *her* and, by clausal agreement, *our* onomastic decision.

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Was Woolf's choice of a name for Shakespeare's sister based on the name's popularity, familial connections to Shakespeare or to Woolf, or did it possess religious or cultural significance? Why Judith? And what makes Judith the right choice artistically?

Historical, biblical, and literary sources provide insight into Woolf's naming of her character. The Holy Trinity Parish register in Stratford records that William Shakespeare had several sisters, possibly two named Joan, but none christened Judith. Other names of sisters recorded in the family records are Margaret and Ann, neither of whom survived childhood. Obviously Woolf did not draw upon an actual sister of Shakespeare for her moniker. Shakespeare did, however, have a daughter christened Judith who may have served as a possible model for Woolf's Judith Shakespeare. If Woolf visited Stratford, searched the Holy Trinity Parish register, and discovered the name of Shakespeare's daughter, such a visit is not documented in her extensive personal writings. Furthermore, an error in her second novel casts doubt upon such a field trip. In *Night and Day* (1919), a work that predates *A Room of One's Own* by ten years, Woolf locates Shakespeare's gravesite in the churchyard, when he is, in fact, or at least according to tradition and signage, entombed within the church proper.

Still, information about Judith Shakespeare, the bard's daughter, was readily accessible to Woolf without a pilgrimage to Stratford. The works of Shakespeare were an essential element of Woolf's own acquired education, and Woolf's references to Shakespeare in her novels and essays reveal an expansive knowledge of the Bard and his oeuvre. Biographies of Shakespeare containing genealogical records were available at the time she wrote *A Room of One's Own*, both in the public reading room of the British Museum, where Woolf spent numerous hours among its holdings, and in her family's private collection. Woolf's father, Sir Leslie Stephen, was the first editor of the prestigious *Dictionary of National Biography*. The Stephen family home in London contained a well-stocked reference and reading library. Though her father referred to his collection as "mangy and worthless" (qtd in Lee, 1997: 48), its holdings were impressive. Among other works in this massive private library were biographies of William Shakespeare, including the one in the *DNB* that listed the names of Shakespeare's biological sisters and the names of his children with Ann Hathaway: Susanna, Judith, and Hamnet. Judith Shakespeare was the Bard's youngest of two daughters, Susanna being the eldest. Born in 1584, Judith was the twin of Shakespeare's only son, Hamnet, a boy who died in childhood at the age of eleven. This is likely the same age that the surviving twin, Judith, was sent into service as a maid in a wealthier household in Stratford (Greer, 2007: 271). The twins were christened to honor their godparents, Hamnet and Judith Sadler, close friends of the Shakespeare family (Greer, 2007: 135).

The appearance of the name Judith twice in Shakespeare's inner circle perhaps influenced Woolf's decision, but there were other doubles at her disposal, such as Ann, the given name of both Shakespeare's younger sister and his wife. During Shakespeare's lifetime, Judith was as common a name for a woman as William for a man; in fact, the name Judith reached its height of popularity as a given name in England during Elizabethan times (Campbell, 2009). Familial and popular context combined may have influenced Woolf's choice, but other names associated with Shakespeare — Mary, Ann, and Elizabeth — were equally popular and available, and

might have sounded right to the ear of those familiar with Shakespeare and his lineage.

But might Woolf have drawn the name from her own ancestral line? An examination of various family matrixes, including the Stephens, the Jacksons, the Thackerays, and the Duckworths (the marriage of Virginia Woolf's parents was the second for each) produces no evidence that the name Judith appears among her listed ancestors (Lee, 1997: xx–xxi). However, Woolf did have a niece named Judith, the daughter of her younger brother, Adrian Stephen, and his wife, Karin, a couple whose shared profession was psychiatry. Additionally, the Stephens had a second daughter with the same given name as Shakespeare's wife: Ann. The nieces were frequent visitors to Monks House, the country residence of Leonard and Virginia Woolf. Woolf, upon the advice of various physicians who treated her over the years for a mental illness now recognized as manic depression, never had children of her own with her husband, a decision she later regretted (Briggs, 2005: 41). Instead, her nieces and nephews provided an outlet for her maternal affection and their various memoirs recall her as a loving aunt. Judith Stephen was born in 1918, a decade in advance of the writing of *A Room of One's Own*. At the age of ten, Judith Stephen would have lacked the years to be an ideal model for the sixteen-year-old Judith Shakespeare, but her Aunt Virginia might have honored her still by selecting her name for the Bard's imagined sister. Unfortunately, none of Woolf's surviving letters or diary entries from the time period provide evidence of such a decision, so this connection remains speculative.

Given her awareness of the existence of Shakespeare's daughter, Judith, and purposing in her essay to show the disparity between the lives of women and men in Elizabethan times, it seems more likely that Woolf would have selected the name from Shakespeare's gene pool and not her own. Additionally, she may have been aware of mixed critical responses to Shakespeare's children. It appears that celebrity children have often come under scrutiny, and Judith Shakespeare is a person much discussed by Shakespeare scholars. Opinions about William Shakespeare's relationship with his daughter Judith run the gamut from father's favored child to spurned daughter. Katherine Duncan-Jones questions Judith's value in her family: "Judith [...] was not a favourite daughter. She may have suffered, in her father's eyes, from having had the insensitivity to stay alive so many years after the death of her much-loved twin brother at the age of eleven" (2001: 268). That the audacious girl did survive childhood is verified by legal documents. Records show that she married Thomas Quiney, the youngest son of her employer. Regardless of suppositions about the degree of paternal love bestowed upon her by Shakespeare, Judith was remembered in her father's will, albeit with stipulations. A monetary amount to be awarded her was dependent upon whether she or her children were still alive three years following Shakespeare's death (Greer, 2007: 318). Judith's first pregnancy, at the age of thirty-one, produced a son whose first name, Shakespeare, was his maternal grandfather's last, but the child died at six months of age. Two more sons survived infancy and grew to manhood, assuring Judith her full inheritance (Greer, 2007: 328–29).

While paternal feelings are debatable, the origin of Shakespeare's daughter's name is certain. Her twin brother and she were the namesakes of Hamnet and Judith Sadler, who served as godparents at their baptism. Judith Sadler herself would give birth to a daughter named Judith in 1596, when Shakespeare's own Judith would have been

twelve. This daughter of Hamnet and Judith Sadler would bear two illegitimate children; one was a daughter Judith, named for her mother and grandmother, but the infant girl survived only ten days (Greer, 2007: 274). Apparently, Judith was a popular name among acquaintances of William Shakespeare.

I mention these three generations of Judiths in the Sadler family not only as a testament to the name's viability in Shakespeare's time and among his circle, but because questions of ancestry and legitimacy loom large in Virginia Woolf's story of Judith Shakespeare, the gifted sister of William whose talents were wasted by a society not yet prepared to accept virtuosity in a woman. What Woolf finds unavailable from her gender, although available to men, is the ability to trace a literary heritage back through the ages. Likewise the question of legitimacy is central to artistic production; such endeavors were sanctioned for men but not for women. Aphra Behn, the first known English woman to earn her living by writing for the stage, was deemed a scandal by her late seventeenth-century society (Woolf, 1929: 63–64). Woolf admits that social conditions made it "[. . .] impossible, completely and entirely, for any woman to have written the plays of Shakespeare in the age of Shakespeare" (1929: 46). As Woolf concludes her tale, Judith Shakespeare finds herself with child by the actor-manager Nick Greene and "killed herself one winter's night and lies buried at some cross-roads where the omnibuses now stop outside the Elephant and Castle" (1929: 48). Lest readers judge the imaginary Judith Shakespeare too harshly or misconstrue her reasons for committing suicide, Woolf comments upon Judith's death: "[W]ho shall measure the heat and violence of the poet's heart when caught and tangled in a woman's body?" (1929: 48). Illegitimate births were quite common in Shakespeare's day, as parish registers attest, and Woolf suggests it was not the stigma of procreative illegitimacy that led to Judith Shakespeare's suicide, but her inability to conceive and develop her artistic calling legitimately.

If Woolf's Judith Shakespeare was modeled after William Shakespeare's daughter, there is a degree of irony involved in the author's decision. In terms of bloodline, such a choice is both dramatic and appropriate, suggesting how likely it was for a female relative of Shakespeare's, whether sister or daughter, to share his potential for greatness. Yet, according to historical records, the daughter of the Bard could barely write her name. In 1611, when Shakespeare's progeny was twenty-seven, she was witness to a deed. According to Germaine Greer, who appraised the legal document, "Judith could only manage the kind of wobbly double squiggle that shows she was quite unused to holding a pen" (2007: 270). This image of William Shakespeare's semiliterate daughter contrasts sharply with the sister Virginia Woolf created for him. Woolf's Judith "had the quickest fancy, a gift like her brother's for the tune of words" and even as a child "scribbled some pages up in the apple loft but was careful to hide them or set fire to them" (1929: 47). Still, the educations, or lack thereof, of Shakespeare's actual daughter and Shakespeare's imagined sister bear striking resemblance. Regarding the literary acumen of the Bard's offspring, Greer notes:

> Until at least the mid-1590s Shakespeare was certainly not a wealthy man, and no attention would have been paid to providing Judith with an education that she did not need. [. . .] We may be sure [. . .] that Judith could read her Bible, and she evidently couldn't write with a pen, but she might well have been able to enter transactions in chalk on a slate or keep track of them with wooden tallies. (2007: 271)

Shakespeare's daughter, Judith, if she received an education, received one that was practical and appropriate to her station in life. In her childhood, her father was neither the theatrical success he was to become nor residing at home with his family. Apprenticed as a servant in a wealthy household at the age of eleven, likely because her mother Ann could not afford to keep her at home, Judith would later marry the youngest son of that household. Education for young women of that era was not considered a necessity, even for the daughter of William Shakespeare.

Likewise Virginia Woolf notes that her imagined Judith Shakespeare would have been discouraged from acquiring an education, even if she sought one.

> She was as adventurous, as imaginative, as agog to see the world as [her brother] 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 [...] 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. (1929: 47)

Shakespeare's fictional sister had the gift of poesy if not the means to develop or express it. She was so endowed by Virginia Woolf who wrote that "[Judith's] genius was for fiction and [she] lusted to feed abundantly upon the lives of men and women and the study of their ways" (1929: 48). If Virginia Woolf chose Judith as the given name for the Bard's sister based on the name's appearance in the Shakespeare family records, she did so for the name's familiarity (a Judith Shakespeare had once existed!) and for its ironic potential. If even so passionate a poet and advocate of the arts as the Bard himself did not support the education of his daughter or nurture her gift, what chance did any other girl of the era have of finding support for her talents?

The etymology of the name Judith may further support the aptness of Woolf's choice. Literally, Judith means "woman from Judea" ("Judith", 2009). Another meaning attributed to Judith is "Jewess" (Bruns, 1967: 43). In the apocryphal "Book of Judith" and in the Old English poem based upon the biblical book, simply titled *Judith*, the word "Jewess" is interchangeable with the name. Additionally, Judith means "praised one" (Campbell, 2009), incongruous in the context of a silenced female voice such as Judith Shakespeare's, but appropriate to Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* in its entirety, a multi-chapter essay that pays homage to women writers past, present, and emerging. Some reference works emphasize Judith as a symbolic name rather than a name representative of a historical person, but certainly it can be indicative of both at once.

As a biblical character, Judith appears in the "Book of Judith," part of the Roman Catholic Old Testament, but a work later excluded from Protestant and removed from Jewish canons due to historical inaccuracies. Ironically, the name Judith became common in England around the time the Protestant Reformation led to the removal of its source story. Because the veracity of the "Book of Judith" is questionable (Bruns, 1967: 44), many scholars approach it as early historical fiction, similar in intention and spirit perhaps to Woolf's inclusion of a fictional character, Judith Shakespeare, in a work of nonfiction.

In the story, Judith becomes a one-woman army. General Holofernes has been sent by Nebuchadnezzar, the King of Nineveh, to subdue the Jews. He succeeds in routing the Jews in village after village, until he nears Judith's city, Bethulia, "a transliteration

of the Hebrew word for 'virgin'" (Bruns, 1967: 45). Around the virgin city a barricade has been erected to impede the general's march towards Jerusalem. Instead of proceeding directly with his campaign of terror, the general sets up camp outside of Bethulia and diverts the city's water supply. After thirty-four days, the Jewish citizens, facing death, consider surrender. Judith, a young widow, chastises them and announces that she will defend their city. Armed only with her beauty, wit, and virtue, Judith visits the encamped general and pretends to be an informant against her own people. When the general is in a state of inebriation, she decapitates him, returning to her city with his severed head as evidence of her victory. She then sings a hymn of praise to God. Judith, her city, and by extension all Jews are saved by her heroism.

Whether she was an historical or a symbolic character, the biblical Judith was an extraordinary woman. In the "Book of Judith," she is praised as unique among her gender: "There is no woman like her from one end of the earth to the other, so lovely of face and so wise of speech!" (1966: 11.21), to which I would add — "and so brave of heart." The biblical Judith was deemed extraordinary by her society for her ability to exceed in mind and body the capacity of the men and women around her. Judith became the warrior her society needed, although that role was not considered appropriate for a woman of her time and place. Because she succeeded in her plan to defend her city, she was not ostracized for her unorthodox choice. Instead, she was embraced by her fellow citizens and much sought by suitors. Judith rejected the men, however, remaining faithful to Jewish teachings of the time that did not favor remarriage for widows. Having stepped over the bounds of propriety — in a sense breaking her chastity — by seeking, encountering, and slaying the enemy, Judith ends her adventure by returning to a chaste life.

Chastity also factors into Woolf's discussion of why, historically, so few women authors emerged until recently. She relates chastity of the body to a chastity of the mind that led women writers to remain anonymous through unsigned works or shrouded behind male pseudonyms: "It was the relic of the sense of chastity that dictated anonymity to women even so late as the nineteenth century. [. . .] Thus they did homage to the convention, which if not implanted by the other sex was liberally encouraged by them . . . that publicity in women is detestable" (1929: 50). The "Book of Judith" provides an early example of a woman who broke with the custom of intellectual chastity for women. The biblical Judith did not allow her gender to silence her; she voiced her plan and made her words concrete through action. In contrast to her biblical namesake, Judith Shakespeare's physical virginity is breeched, but her expressive chastity, vouchsafed by customs that ensure her silence, remains intact. Although Judith Shakespeare's artistry is thwarted by the society and age into which she is imaginatively born, the author holds out hope that Judith will be reborn in an age in which she can fulfill her destiny and claim her voice. In her conclusion to *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf notes, "the opportunity will come and the dead poet who was Shakespeare's sister will put on the body she has so often laid down" (1929: 114).

Virginia Woolf was not a religious woman and certainly not an orthodox practitioner of any religion. While she might have been disinclined to biblical study, she was certainly aware of biblical stories. Moreover, the popularity of Judith as a character and the story's availability in sources outside of the Bible, including an

opera, make it unlikely that Woolf, despite the Protestant culture of England and her familial and personal agnosticism, would have been ignorant of the tale, even if she had not read the biblical account.

One significant retelling of the story of Judith dates back to Old English literature. The 348-line fragment *Judith* was discovered in a monastery in the sixteenth century, reportedly copied by one of the scribes who penned the text of *Beowulf*. Evidence suggests that *Judith*, a condensed version of the "Book of Judith," was composed in the late ninth or early tenth century, in part to entreat the Anglo-Saxons to defend Britain against the Danish invasion (Kennedy, 1961: 23). The title character is a rare example of a female hero appearing in an Old English poem. Less reliant upon her feminine charms than her biblical counterpart, the Old English Judith is a woman warrior who employs faith and courage to defeat her adversary. These traits — faith in one's ideas and the courage to voice them — are necessary for women writers as well, and emerge in the secular *A Room of One's Own*, often through religious imagery or allusion, but without religious intent. By creating the story of Shakespeare's sister, and more specifically by naming her heroine Judith, Virginia Woolf expresses her faith in the future of women writers and in fiction written by women. Woolf also underscores the heroism implicit in the acts of women who record their thoughts in writing despite cultural opposition.

In "Autumn and Virginia Woolf," originally published in 1931 and among the first critical responses to *A Room of One's Own*, Rebecca West characterized Woolf's "imagined sister of Shakespeare [as] a genius like himself, who was so frustrated by the restrictions laid on her sex as to physical and mental movement that she died with all her plays still in the unopened packet of her brain" (1967: 211). But West only realizes half of the story of Shakespeare's sister. Woolf provides a more open ending. Woolf's Judith Shakespeare embodies the courage of women artists past, present, and future to pursue their talents despite cultural opposition that denigrates or, at the very least, discourages such pursuits. For if Judith Shakespeare, in the time of William Shakespeare, embraced suicide rather than live a suppressed life, Woolf predicts her eventual resurrection from the dead. Like the Old English Judith, who returned to her city triumphant, Woolf foresees a comparable homecoming for Judith Shakespeare. Woolf exhorts her audience, ostensibly young collegiate women, but inclusive of all readers of *A Room of One's Own*, to prepare the way:

> Drawing her life from the lives of the unknown who were her forerunners, as her brother did before her, she will be born. As for her coming without that preparation, without that effort on our part, without that determination that when she is born again she shall find it possible to live and write her poetry, that we cannot expect, for that would be impossible. But I maintain that she would come if we worked for her, and that so to work, even in poverty and obscurity, is worth while. (1929: 114)

Woolf's invocation at the end of *A Room of One's Own* is an effort to channel into existence the specter of Shakespeare's sister. Allyson Salinger Ferrante observes that "Woolf makes it possible for every woman to resurrect the spirit of Judith Shakespeare in their own bodies [. . .]" (2006: 28). Woolf's emphasis upon resurrection in the final pages of *A Room of One's Own* symbolically moves Judith Shakespeare out of the realm of the Old Testament (the source, perhaps, for Woolf's onomastic

decision) and into the realm of the New, the as yet unwritten chronicle of women writers to come.

If the story of Judith influenced Virginia Woolf in naming Shakespeare's sister, her selection was well chosen. If Shakespeare had had a gifted sister, she too would have been an extraordinary woman. As Woolf suggests, when Judith Shakespeare arrives, she will not only exhibit the creative genius of a William Shakespeare, but the audacious courage of a biblical Judith.

From these possibilities, historical, biblical, and literary, no singular explanation for Virginia Woolf's choice of Judith can be determined. It may be that Judith is an amalgamation, a name selected by the author for various and valid reasons. Regardless, Judith is an onomastic conduit that links the cultures and talents of both writers, William Shakespeare and Virginia Woolf. Moreover, the name Judith acts as an unintended alias for Woolf herself. As Julia Briggs observes, "[. . .] Woolf's relationship to Shakespeare lies along a horizontal rather than a vertical axis: despite her own writing father, she sees herself not as Shakespeare's daughter but his sister" (2006: 20). If Woolf views herself not as Shakespeare's descendent, but as his sibling, then their rivalry transcends the four hundred years that separate them in historical time and makes them contemporaries in the realm of literary works that transcend time. Though the genres in which each chose to write are curiously distinct, Shakespeare's plays and poems versus Woolf's novels and nonfiction, the literary production of each is prodigious and will keep scholars engaged for centuries. Equal to the Bard in genius and in craft, as well as in sheer output, I believe that Woolf became her own prediction, the woman writer of whom readers could finally assert: here is our female Shakespeare.

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