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Digital Manor

Challenging the Selective Historical Writing of the Patriarchy

Virginia Woolf's "The Journal of Mistress Joan Martyn," is set in the early 20-century English countryside, yet it transports readers to medieval England through the journal of Mistress Joan Martyn. The entries portray the stifled life of a 15th-century woman, highlighting the prevailing patriarchal norms. Rosamond Merridew, a historian, becomes captivated by the unfulfilled desires and dreams of Joan, serving as a poignant first-hand symbol of feminine oppression. Jeffrey M. Brown writes in his paper, "A Verbal Life on the Lips of the Living:" Virginia Woolf, Ellen Terry, and the Victorian Contemporary," "...challenged by her (Woolf's) awareness of the material inequalities that defined that past and the forms of female cultural production that remained invisible and fleeting, resistant to the ossification and enduring life of print" (29); this directly correlates to Woolf's challenging the selective nature of historical records by giving voices to experiences of women like Joan Martyn and Rosamond Merridew through her fiction.

The character of Rosamond casts aside the patriarchal expectations of a life including marriage and children in search of non-traditional, non-maternal accomplishments. In "The Journal..." Woolf writes, "...if I state that I have exchanged a husband & a family & a house in which to grow old for certain fragments of yellow paper," (240). The first floor of Digital Manor

represents Rosamond Merridew's passion for her work as a historian and includes assets which represent a career, instead of a life of domesticity and child bearing; the discarded Conventional Family Photo under her desk shows her disregard for convention. The worn Wooden Desk, Bookshelf, and Strewn Books embellish her study and serve as representations of Merridew's commitment to scholarly pursuits.

Mimicking her physical journey and research as a historian, "Merridew Goose Chase" illustrates the chase to overcome the prevailing belief that women lacked intellectual capacity for academic endeavors. In "The Journal..." Woolf creates the impression of a renowned female historian, "I am not absolutely unknown in one or two secluded rooms in Oxford & in Cambridge (240), showing the reader this "goose chase" earns Merridew acceptance and recognition at the most prestigious of universities. This status comes at a cost; the Digital Manor's first level is sparse, cold and vacant, evocative of the price Rosamond must pay to receive the accolades and have others "give a soiree in my (Rosamond's) honour" (240). The second floor of the Digital Manor welcomes a visitor with warmth, personal effects, and the familial lineage of belonging. In "The Community of Birth," *Giving Birth in Eighteenth-Century England*, Sarah Fox notes that when women bore children in the eighteenth-century, the community immediately "moved into action...prepared gifts of food and drink or medicines..." (163); this article is an example of the sense of community a scholarly woman would likely sacrifice.

This sacrifice and the creation of Merridew was semi-autobiographical, as Jane Lilienfeld notes in her piece "Introduction: Virginia Woolf and Literary History" Virginia Woolf had her own aspirations of becoming a historian before she became a writer (87). The representation of this similarity between Virginia Woolf and the fictional Rosamond Merridew is displayed by the

Bust of Virginia Woolf perched atop the Wooden Desk, in Merridew's Corner, further signifying a solidarity of like-minded rebellious females.

As a writer, this rebellious nature was consistently exhibited in Woolf's commitment to unveiling and challenging the oppressive history of women which motivates her use of literature to disrupt and reshape the narrative of women's history. Margot Kotler's "After Anger: Negative Affect and Feminist Politics in Virginia Woolf's *Three Guineas*," refers to "Woolf's investment in describing the sources of women's oppression and her interest in depicting women's interiority," (39) however, in this same article, Woolf is said to believe that "personal is inappropriate to both the essay and fiction;" (39) this unemotional approach lends itself to the need to be viewed as level-headed. Virginia Woolf's ingenious use of female characters in traditionally male roles stands as a powerful weapon against the oppression of women in literature. By presenting women as active agents in their own stories, Woolf dismantled the restrictive narratives that sought to confine them, leaving an enduring legacy in the fight against the oppression of women in literature.

Works Cited

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