



Grimké, Angelina Weld (1880-1958)

by Brett Genny Beemyn

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Angelina Weld Grimké.

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A noted writer from the 1900s through the 1920s, Angelina Weld Grimké was the first African American to have a play, *Rachel* (1916; published in 1920), staged, and her poetry regularly appeared in journals, newspapers, and anthologies during the era now known as the Harlem Renaissance. But Grimké apparently stopped writing by the end of the 1920s, and faded into near obscurity soon thereafter.

Her work was rediscovered in the 1980s and 1990s by lesbian, gay, and bisexual scholars, who recognized that Grimké was attracted to women and men and that her inability to act on these desires both inspired her writing and contributed to her ultimately abandoning it.

Grimké was born into one of the most prominent American families of the nineteenth century. She was named for her white great aunt, leading abolitionist and women's rights advocate Angelina Grimké Weld, who died four months before Grimké was born on February 27, 1880.

Grimké's father Archibald, a child of Weld's brother and one of his slaves, was a lawyer, an important Democratic Party activist--first in Boston and then in Washington, D. C.--and a leader of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. In 1879, Archibald married Sarah Stanley, a socially prominent white Bostonian, with whom he had one child, Angelina. The couple separated several years after Angelina's birth, with Stanley gaining custody of their daughter over Archibald's opposition. But Stanley proved unable to take care of her, so by the time she was seven years old, Angelina was her father's sole responsibility.

Archibald demanded much of his only child and was often disappointed by what he perceived as her failure to make something of herself. Grimké attended three different elite preparatory schools before graduating. The father attributed his daughter's failure to excel academically to her lack of initiative, but it more likely resulted from the sense of isolation that the sensitive, introverted Grimké experienced as probably the only African American in her classes. With her father threatening to withdraw her from school if she did not show more ambition, Grimké completed a degree in physical education at the Boston Normal School of Gymnastics (now part of Wellesley College) in 1902.

Emotionally and psychologically dependent on her father, Grimké vowed never again to disappoint him, even if that meant sublimating her own desires for his. With his help, she was hired as a physical education teacher at the Armstrong Manual Training School in Washington, D. C. in 1902 and was transferred to the city's more prestigious M Street High School (later renamed Dunbar High School) when she had a falling out with the school's principal five years later. Grimké strove to measure up in her father's eyes through excelling as an English teacher at Dunbar for almost twenty years and through gaining fame as a writer.

Grimké's best-known work, *Rachel*, centers on a young African-American woman who decides to forego marriage and motherhood rather than bear children who would be subjected to lynching and other acts of racial hatred. Lynching and the futility of African Americans having children in a racist society are also themes in several of her other works, including an unpublished drama entitled "Mara" and the short stories

"The Closing Door" and "Goldie," which were published in Margaret Sanger's *Birth Control Review*.

In contrast, Grimké's poetry, even when published in such collections of African-American poetry as Alain Locke's *The New Negro* (1925) and Countee Cullen's *Caroling Dusk* (1927), rarely addresses racial themes, focusing instead on romantic desire and unrequited love.

Moreover, she never sought to publish many of her poems, apparently because they describe an attraction to women. Nor did she avoid the use of female pronouns that reveal the nature of her longing. Indeed, her desire for a woman remains evident even in her published love poetry--including "A Mona Lisa" and "When the Green Lies Over the Earth"--through her use of traditionally feminine imagery and metaphors.

Perhaps the woman Grimké yearned for in these poems was Mary (Mamie) Edith Karn, a white classmate at Carleton Academy in Northfield, Minnesota, where Grimké attended school from 1895 to 1897. Grimké wrote two love letters to Karn in 1896 on the back of some class notes. (Scholars have often mistakenly identified the intended recipient as Mary "Mamie" Burrill, an African-American writer who apparently had a romantic friendship with Grimké when they were in their early teens.)

It is unknown whether Grimké showed Karn the letters or recopied and sent them to her.

However, a close reading of Grimke's unpublished poetry, in which she often assumes the voice of a woman rejected by a female lover--such as in "Caprichosa," "To Her of the Cruel Lip," and "Ballade to My Lady's Eyes"--suggests that Grimké did act, but that Karn spurned her interest, perhaps after initially responding favorably. Nothing more is known about Grimké's interest in women.

Evidence suggests that Grimké was also attracted to men, but scholars have largely ignored this aspect of her life. Grimké wrote a small number of poems that use pronouns and imagery indicating a male love interest, including "Little Red Heart of Mine," "Your Hands," and an untitled work that begins "Oh that he would love me."

It is possible that Grimké substituted male for female pronouns to disguise her same-sex desire and make her poetry more acceptable to editors, but she submitted few of these poems for publication. Moreover, she also kept a diary in her early twenties in which she chronicled her emotional anguish over an unnamed man who failed to return her affections. When he did not respond to her love letters, Grimké, like many of the protagonists in her fiction and drama, renounced marriage and motherhood. She foreswore loving anyone in the future except her father, for fear that a relationship with someone else would compete with her affection for him.

The extent to which Grimké's life revolved around her father was dramatically revealed after his death in 1930. Without her father and unable to develop a close relationship with another woman or man, she became even more withdrawn. She gave up writing and stopped corresponding with her Harlem Renaissance friends.

She moved to New York City, where she apparently lived as a recluse for the remainder of her life. Grimké died on June 10, 1958 after a long illness.

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About the Author

Brett Genny Beemyn has written or edited five books in glbtq studies, including *Queer Studies: A Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual Community Anthology* (1996) and *Creating a Place for Ourselves: Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Community Histories* (1997). *The Lives of Transgender People* is in progress. A frequent speaker and writer on transgender campus issues, Beemyn is the director of the Stonewall Center at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst.