Virginia Woolf's feminist flush

VIRGINIA WOOLF'S FEMINIST *FLUSH*

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Although Virginia Woolf is one of a handful of women writers before 1950 to have had a recognized place in the literary canon, with novels such as *Mrs. Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse* having received both worldwide critical acclaim and mainstream success over the years, one particular text that has remained critically disregarded is Woolf's 1933 novel *Flush: A Biography*, which is the story of the eponymous character, a dog, and by association, his human companion Miss Barrett. The pair are based on the historical Elizabeth Barrett Browning and her dog Flush. The dismissal of the novel is odd since the novel was Woolf's most popular book at the time of its publication.

Flush is usually viewed through two poles of characterization: as a feminist allegory and as the biography of a dog. Susan Squier's "Flush's Journey from Imprisonment to Freedom" is a feminist perspective of the novel, demonstrating how it could be read as a calling out of the patriarchy for its marginalization of women, especially since "Flush's biography contains several important parallels between his experience and that of the woman writer," both Miss Barrett and Woolf (Squier 124). This is evident in how Flush's "social position as a house pet parallels [Miss Barrett's] as a woman in Victorian society" (Squier 124). Squier observes, for example, how the men in Miss Barrett's life seem to dictate what should and will happen when Flush is kidnapped, while completely disregarding her own and Flush's feelings on the matter, noting that "both Flush and his mistress are equally subject to the wills of the men around them" (131). Taking this into account, Squier argues that the novel must be taken seriously, particularly from a feminist standpoint.

Craig Smith, however, has some reservations on viewing *Flush* through a feminist lens. In "Across the Widest Gulf: Nonhuman Subjectivity in Virginia Woolf's *Flush*," he claims that viewing the novel as a feminist allegory "has had the unfortunate effect of implying that *Flush* may be accepted as a serious object of study only to the

extent that it may be represented as being not really about a dog," arguing that such an approach has an "anthropocentric bias" (349). While Smith's claim may have some validity, the reader cannot simply discard the implicit feminist connotations embedded in the text, especially being cognizant of Woolf's own explicitly stated views on women in the Victorian patriarchy, as seen in *A Room of One's Own*, particularly in the story of Shakespeare's sister. Woolf has always been for women making their mark in writing. This is especially relevant since Flush's mistress is a writer herself. Moreover, as aforementioned, there is a parallel between Miss Barrett's existence as a woman and Flush's existence as a companion. Nonetheless, while *Flush* contains aspects of critical animal studies, I will focus on its feminist representation here.

In *Woman and the Demon*, Nina Auerbach wrote of the Angel of the House, "the selfless paragon all women were exhorted to be, enveloped in family life and seeking no identity beyond the roles of daughter, wife, and mother" (67-69). What must be noted, however, is that angels can fall, metamorphosing from the holy to the demonic. This transformation is a component of *Flush*, presented through Miss Barrett. The reader meets her in her room at the family mansion in Wimpole Street. Here Miss Barrett is a "domestic carceral," a term which Helena Michie described as a woman being kept imprisoned in the home with the erroneous idea that she would be safer, happier and healthier there (58). This is not so, as the reader will learn. As Flush is given to Miss Barrett by her friend Miss Mitford, a change occurs. In her isolation, the Angel of the House is shown to be cunning, with demonic capabilities, as she writes and plots. But there is more to Miss Barrett and her ability to write in the face of patriarchal ideology and home imprisonment. While the act of writing is central for it demonstrates her feminist nature, there are other significant events in the novel which illustrate her dynamism as an Angel of the House. In particular, there is her deliberate displacement of male authority.

Miss Barrett versus Victorian Patriarchy

If writing is considered transgressive for a woman in a patriarchy, is speaking criminal? There is very little spoken conversation in *Flush*, yet what there is is powerful. This, however, does not mean that the silence in the novel should be devalued or overlooked. If anything, silence is just as powerful as the act of speaking in *Flush*, for, as Auerbach has noted, "mystic powers of control" lurk behind a victim's silence (35). Unless in company, Miss Barrett is usually in silence in her room. The silence is a tool that serves to strengthen

Miss Barrett; her fall towards the demonic, her treachery against the Victorian patriarchy, begins with it. The reader can observe this with the introduction of her father, a stereotypical patriarch:

> …a step that was heavier, more deliberate and firmer than any other, stopped on the stair; solemnly a knock sounded that was no tap of enquiry but a demand for admittance; the door opened and in came the blackest, the most formidable of elderly men—Mr. Barrett himself. (*Flush* 51)

The introduction of Mr. Barrett highlights the silence that permeates the novel. The description of him literally disturbs the quiet, solidifying his status as ruler of the house. As he comes into Miss Barrett's room, his immediate inquiries over whether she has followed his rules and guidelines in terms of eating and the like demonstrate his controlling nature. Miss Barrett is under the rule of his gaze, which effectively silences her. The terrifying figure of her father is contrasted with his genuine paternal love and care, but it is constructed in a manner that appears to be conditional. Mr. Barrett loves his daughter with what he projects on and perceives of her; not as she is. This is exemplified by Flush's own reaction towards Mr. Barrett—"shivers of horror and terror" run down his spine as he knows he has to compartmentalize himself in Mr. Barrett's presence (*Flush* 51). He feels Mr. Barrett is a terrible force that one is powerless against, and at one point, Flush finds him on his knees praying at Miss Barrett's side. This patronizing act further solidifies Miss Barrett as the Angel of the House, reveled as a relic of Victorian ideals. Yet as noted before, angels fall and with the kidnapping of Flush, Miss Barrett falls heavily.

Her fall is neither erratic nor violent; it is precise, cautious and tenacious, as the reader will observe. Miss Barrett is walking with Flush and her maid Wilson on Wimpole Street. Unfortunately, she had forgotten to leash Flush and he was stolen from her by Mr. Taylor's gang—

> If one forgot, as Miss Barrett forgot, one paid the penalty, as Miss Barrett was now to pay it. The terms upon which Wimpole Street lived cheek by jowl with St. Giles's were laid down. St. Giles's stole what St. Giles's could; Wimpole Street paid what Wimpole Street must. (*Flush* 89)

Wimpole Street stood for privilege, while Whitechapel was one of the worst slums in London. Woolf has juxtaposed the two places by informing the reader that Whitechapel was located behind Miss Barrett's bedroom, and it was there where "poverty and vice and misery had bred and seethed and propagated their kind for centuries without interference" (*Flush* 88). This is a side effect of patriarchal capitalism, which allows for very little social mobility unless one is a privileged

white straight male with education and/or family money. Thus, those in Whitechapel are motivated to do whatever it takes for survival, and if that includes using dogs as a method of extortion, then so be it. The people of Wimpole Street, however, do not see it this way. Wimpole Street finds Whitechapel to be a victim of its own, and Wimpole Street must stay out of Whitechapel, and vice versa. This is not to be so. In the intermingling of these two streets, Woolf demonstrates the tyranny of patriarchy. As Flush is stolen, Woolf cleverly uses language to denote blame—if Miss Barrett forgot to leash her dog, then it is her fault he was stolen from her—not the transgressor for his decision to undertake a crime of opportunity. The narrator claims this is due to the terms, but who makes these terms? What exactly do they constitute? From the subtext of *Flush*, the reader can decipher that the terms are related to a contextual value.

As Pamela L. Caughie noted in "*Flush* and the Literary Canon: Oh Where Oh Where has that Little Dog Gone?," context is crucial in the novel. The value for Wimpole Street is to maintain a correct moral position, while the value for Whitechapel is monetary gain. Miss Barrett is to suffer between these two codes, her pain instigating a battle between herself, the male figures of her family, and even Mr. Browning, her romantic interest in the novel.

While Miss Barrett is very much willing to pay the ten pounds it would take to get Flush back to her, and her sister Arabel is supportive of her endeavor, Miss Barrett is barred from the task by the men in her life. As she gets home, she informs her brother Henry who goes to see Mr. Taylor, and is told that he must consult his "Society." When days pass and Miss Barrett still does not have Flush back, Miss Barrett finds out that her brother has lied to her—

> She summoned her brother Henry, and cross-examined him. She found out that he had tricked her. "The archfield" Taylor had come according to his promise the night before. He had stated his terms—six guineas for the Society and half a guinea for himself. But Henry, instead of telling her, had told Mr. Barrett, with the result, of course, that Mr. Barrett had ordered him not to pay, and to conceal the visit from his sister. Miss Barrett was "very vexed and angry." She bade her brother to go at once to Mr. Taylor and pay the money. Henry refused and "talked of Papa." But it was no use talking of Papa, she protested. While they talked of Papa, Flush would be killed. She made up her mind. If Henry would not go, she would go herself. (*Flush* 97-98)

The limitations imposed on Miss Barrett can be clearly observed here. She is effectively silenced as her brother consults their father instead of her and no one notifies her of their decision to leave Flush in the lurch. The Angel of the House is not allowed agency. When she does attempt to save Flush on her own, the matter of the kidnapping

becomes public and political. Wimpole Street demands that it must take a stance against Whitechapel. Outsiders contact the family, telling them it would be a sin for the ransom to be paid. Yet what of others who have paid before? Why is it sinful for Miss Barrett to pay? Does it relate to her gender? It may, as Miss Barrett's brother and father join forces against her, "capable of any treachery in the interests of their class" (*Flush* 98). The privileging of their social standing over Miss Barrett speaks volumes. Even Mr. Browning concurs with the males in her family, as he tells her that it would be a "lamentable weakness" to pay the ransom, for she would be "increasing the power of evil over right" (*Flush* 99-100). Caughie claims that Miss Barrett is "shoring up" and promoting "the tyranny of patriarchs" by paying the ransom in order to recover Flush, and while Wimpole Street certainly perceives it this way, it is an impossibility. Miss Barrett has no agency in a patriarchy. Paying the ransom is inconsequential in the grand scheme of things for she is a woman. Although some women participate in the patriarchy, which they have internalized, women are not what construct and uphold the capitalist Victorian patriarchy—it is men. Thus, the actual implication behind the words of Miss Barrett's brother, her father and Mr. Browning is that the true evil would not necessarily be paying the ransom; it would be the act of going against their word—the Law of the Father. And so the Angel begins her descent, for she is "not to be intimidated" (*Flush* 100-101). She will not be silenced. While Wimpole Street and Whitechapel worry over their own values, Caughie notes that throughout it all, Miss Barrett worries over what will be "discarded in the process—Flush" (51). Her attachment to him makes her fearless of what the men in her family and Mr. Browning think, and she chooses to save him. Immediately, she is admonished by her brother who tells her "that in his opinion she might well be robbed and murdered if she did what she threatened" (*Flush* 102). This demonstrates the hypocrisy of her brother as he is threatening her himself, instead of being supportive. Nevertheless, Miss Barrett goes on to Whitechapel with her maid Lily Wilson accompanying her.

The displacement of male authority continues as Woolf depicts sisterhood in the novel. In "Of Footnotes, Fanciers, and Fascism: Virginia Woolf's *Flush,*" Anna Snaith claims that while Mr. Barrett imprisons his daughter, Miss Barrett does the same to her maid Lily Wilson—"Wilson is the unsaid of *Flush*, below the text in a footnote, marginalized and boxed off" (620). She highlights in particular what occurs after Miss Barrett's confrontation with her brother, as Wilson is asked by Miss Barrett to call a cab in order to go to Whitechapel and rescue Flush. "All trembling but submissive, Wilson obeyed. The cab came. Miss Barrett told Wilson to get in. Wilson, though

convinced that death awaited her, got in" (*Flush* 102). On the one hand, Snaith's claim has validity for the language that Woolf uses for this scene complicates the relationship between the women. On the other hand, Woolf has presented the importance of sisterhood. Hélène Cixous has noted the rarity of it because "men have committed the greatest crime against women. Insidiously, violently, they have led them to hate women, to be their own enemies, to mobilize their immense strength against themselves, to be the executants of their virile needs" ("The Laugh" 248). In *Feminism is for Everybody*, bell hooks echoes this line of thinking by noting how women have been socialized into competition with each other, to look upon one another with "jealousy, fear and hatred" in order to gain approval from the patriarchy (14). Although it may be argued that Wilson does not have the class standing or social privilege to say no to Miss Barrett, she is actually employed by Mr. Barrett. If he opposes the situation, then why does Wilson help Miss Barrett in this situation, even when she does not fully agree with it? What Woolf does here is break with the expectation of women typically written in relation to men—she creates solidarity and loyalty between the two women. Their partnership is noteworthy because it demonstrates the success that women can accomplish when they band together, as opposed to when they are kept locked in a patriarchal mindset which seeks to influence women to attack and/or undermine other women. As her maid, Wilson does as Miss Barrett says, but Miss Barrett values Wilson, and vice versa. They refuse to be bullied into internalizing patriarchy, to be forbidden from bonding or from protecting each other's interests. Wilson could very well betray Miss Barrett and go to her father, but she always stands with her.

The sisterhood continues with the pleasant business conversation that Miss Barrett has with Mrs. Taylor once she and Wilson make it to Whitechapel. Mr. Taylor is out, but Mrs. Taylor is cordial to Miss Barrett, even inviting her into her home to wait for him. Miss Barrett declines, asking for Mr. Taylor to bring back Flush to her. Wilson and Miss Barrett head back to Wimpole Street, and the journey is a cause for reflection. Miss Barrett is very well aware of her privilege—although she recognizes that she has very little as a woman (and one with a disability, at that) in a patriarchy, she also knows she is not entirely without it. If it were not for her economic privilege, she could very well be in Whitechapel, where there "lived women like herself; while she lay on her sofa, reading, writing, they lived thus" (*Flush* 104). It should be noted that Wilson could be in Whitechapel too if it were not for her employment as Miss Barrett's maid. It is certainly problematic to construct Miss Barrett as Wilson's savior but again,

this can be avoided by considering how the two women sincerely value one another and play key roles in each other's lives. This will be further explored once the kidnapping of Flush is resolved.

When Mr. Taylor arrives at Wimpole Street, he does not bring Flush with him, but instead requests that six guineas be paid to him immediately and he will return the dog to Miss Barrett on his word of honor. She concedes but to her misfortune, as she is about to pay him, Alfred Barrett sees Mr. Taylor and foils her plans by going on a tirade against him, calling him names. Mr. Taylor returns the insults, ultimately threatening Flush's death. Miss Barrett panics, for Flush is her family. She attempts to go back to Whitechapel in order to save him, but her family stops her from doing so—"Her brothers, her sisters, all came round her threatening her, dissuading her, 'crying out against me for being 'quite mad' and obstinate and wilful—I was called as many names as Mr. Taylor'" (*Flush* 107). Her lack of agency is once again highlighted. The Angel of the House can only be glorified by her limitations, and Miss Barrett's decision to save Flush solidifies her fall to the demonic. Miss Barrett falls into the reanimation of the Angel of the House per Auerbach, with "revolutionary ardor and … dangerous mobility, for the angel's otherworldly power translates itself imperceptibly into a demonism that destroys all families and all houses" (4). The irony is that her family is the one who is on the offense—actively attacking Miss Barrett (allegedly for her own good) and constructing her as crazy and irrational. Even her sisters join in on the attack, having internalized patriarchy. Yet Miss Barrett is relentless. Auerbach has noted that a somewhat similar creature to the Angel is the mermaid, "a creature of transformations and mysterious interrelations, able to kill and to regenerate but not to die, unfurling in secret her powers of mysterious, pre-Christian, pre-human dispensation" (7). Miss Barrett, who so often lived in silence, ruminating, demonstrates her mermaid-like capabilities as she undertakes the transgressive act of not only speaking up but calling out her family.

This act results in her family's realization of "the extent of her folly" (*Flush* 107). The use of the word folly here is indicative of the family's perception of Miss Barrett—they think her foolish and nonsensical. Her brother Septimus only concedes to save Flush if she is willing to head back to her room "in good humour" (*Flush* 107), patronizing Miss Barrett and framing her as deranged for wanting to save her dog. She manages to have Flush returned to her, but what has happened with her family is irreparable. This is the defining event that Miss Barrett needed to experience in order to steel herself before leaving Wimpole Street.

Some weeks after the kidnapping, Miss Barrett changes her

routine, dressing formally in the morning. Wilson is dressed as well. Flush notices that Miss Barrett is wearing a gold ring on her left hand, clearly an indication of her nuptials with Mr. Browning.[1] The ring is hidden since Miss Barrett is keeping the marriage from her family. Perhaps due to the conflicts she has endured with them, she is able to hide the marriage from them effortlessly. Only Wilson knows, which is further evidence of the power of their sisterhood. She could very well tell Mr. Barrett and the family of Miss Barrett's actions. However, Wilson chooses to cover for her, solidifying the importance of sisterhood in the novel. It is Wilson who aids Miss Barrett in escaping Wimpole Street as the pair join Mr. Browning in Italy.

Politics of Place

As noted in the previous section, Caughie has pointed out the importance of context in the novel when it comes to values. The values of Whitechapel contrast with those of Wimpole Street. Thus, the politics of place are vital to values, for privilege is contextual to location. Squier has noted that women were routinely marginalized in urban society, especially women with disabilities, and it was beneficial for men because the Angel of the House serves to highlight the alleged strength and virility of men (125). This would hold true on Wimpole Street and in Whitechapel, but it is a world of difference for Miss Barrett, because her economic standing provides her with a room of her own. While the room certainly has its limitations, it is nonetheless a room of her own. This is not to say that Miss Barrett is bound to this room, but rather to point out the complexities of her privilege. In retrospect, she has little, to be sure, yet she has more than a woman with or without her condition in Whitechapel. Starting with her nuptials, Miss Barrett is to discover that there is more in the world than the codependency of Whitechapel and Wimpole Street.

Caughie has claimed that Mr. Browning liberates Miss Barrett (51) but such a statement dismisses the complexities of Miss Barrett's liberation. Being from a wealthy family and with the privilege of a room of her own makes marriage for Miss Barrett an option rather than a necessity. Thus, any liberation she experiences from marriage to Mr. Browning is simply a bonus, for she already experienced a kind of liberation through writing. It was what sustained her in Wimpole Street. Once they move to Italy, Miss Barrett experiences a different kind of liberation, and while certainly related to her marriage and the

[1] Once married, the narrator refers to Miss Barrett as Mrs. Browning in the novel. However, for the purpose of continuity, she will be referred to as Miss Barrett for the remainder of this article.

separation from her father, it is largely attributed to space. Where there was darkness in her enclosed room, Italy is light and open. The odoriferous staleness of her room gives way to fresh air in Casa Guidi. The family mansion on Wimpole Street was full of relics such as bustles, giving it the air of a museum, while Casa Guidi has an open concept which reflects the new possibilities and opportunities in Miss Barrett's life.

Much of Miss Barrett's liberation has to do with the independence that the culture of Italy allows her, for on "the streets of Pisa pretty women could walk alone" (*Flush* 123). Miss Barrett was silenced and controlled as the Angel of the House through various tactics, including the gaze, both in Whitechapel and Wimpole Street. In Italy, however, Miss Barrett is liberated from the threat of objectification and assault—she is free to explore her agency without judgment.

Miss Barrett is not the only one to evolve in Italy. Wilson does as well. The portrayal of Wilson on Wimpole Street and in Whitechapel was one of a dutiful woman with a stiff upper lip. Living in Italy, however, allows her to discover another side of herself. The carefree nature of the place allows her to let go of her inhibitions—she falls for a guard, Signor Righi. Later on, she is grateful she never married him when the family visits England. Nevertheless, the fact that Wilson had the privilege to explore her sexual agency in Italy is momentous, for it further demonstrates the politics of place.

While Wilson and Miss Barrett's positive experiences in Italy are certainly influenced by the men in their lives, it must be reiterated that the men do not liberate them. Mr. Browning neither controls nor molds Miss Barrett. If anything, he is merely a player on the stage of Miss Barrett's life. He may have some influence, such as when she wears "a cap made of some thin bright silk that her husband liked," but he does not control her (*Flush* 128). Her metamorphosis in Italy is more influenced by her escape from England. The same goes for Wilson. Thus, by considering the relationship of the two women throughout the novel, one can observe how the pair play a key role in each other's liberation, solidified in Italy.

After several years in Italy, the family travels to England after the death of Mr. Barrett. The lightheartedness of Italy gives way to the customs of Victorian civility. Miss Barrett seems to enclose in herself as she visits the family mansion in Wimpole Street with Flush creeping upstairs "stealthily, as silently as once before they had come down" and seeing that "nothing had been changed. Nothing had happened all these years" (*Flush* 149). It is imperative for Miss Barrett to go back to England because it forms a contrast with her life in Italy. The lack

of change in Wimpole Street could have been her demise. Had Miss Barrett remained in the house, nothing for her would have changed. She would not have had the opportunities she had in Italy for growth and experience.

Motherhood and Domesticity

Before her visit back to Wimpole Street, Miss Barrett had a child. From her arrival in Italy, Miss Barrett metamorphosed from the Angel of the House to a vibrant woman with a vigorous appetite for life—

> She was a different person altogether. Now, for instance, instead of sipping a thimbleful of port and complaining of the headache, she tossed off a tumbler of Chianti and slept the sounder. There was a flowering branch of oranges on the dinner-table instead of one denuded, sour, yellow fruit. Then instead of driving in a barouche landau to Regent's Park she pulled on her thick boots and scrambled over rocks. Instead of sitting in a carriage and rumbling along Oxford Street, they rattled off in a ramshackle fly to the borders of a lake and looked at mountains; and when she was tired she did not hail another cab; she sat on a stone and watched the lizards. She delighted in the sun; she delighted in the cold. (*Flush* 122)

Miss Barrett's life in Italy has a faster pace than her life in England; she is always on the move. Things begin to change as she becomes pregnant. Her approach to life changes; things slow down. However, she does not revert back to the Angel of the House through pregnancy nor is she forced into the role of "domestic carceral" again. To demonstrate this, the reader may consider the perspective of French feminism, which has reclaimed maternity. Cixous claims that "begetting a child doesn't mean that the woman or the man must fall ineluctably into patterns" and that society must move away from the idea that "the child is the death of his parents" ("The Laugh" 261). This is demonstrated with Miss Barrett, who is happy with the change in her life because in this instance, she has a choice. It is worth mentioning, however, how Woolf describes the birth—Miss Barrett suddenly becomes "two people" (*Flush* 134). This hints at a possible loss of identity for Miss Barrett, for the structure of patriarchy relegates women to a reproductive role and by having a child, Miss Barrett would be known as a mother before anything else. However, Miss Barrett is a writer, and because the act of writing gives her agency as she takes back her body, she complicates and challenges traditional concepts of motherhood and identity. She may have a child, but she is still her own person.

Flush and French Feminism

In *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf applauded Samuel Taylor Coleridge's claim that "a great mind is androgynous" (2143). The application of this theory to writing would ideally produce transcendent creativity, as Woolf did. But as Elaine Showalter noted in *A Literature of their Own*, Woolf used androgyny as a myth "that helped her evade confrontation with her own painful femaleness and enabled her to choke and repress her anger and ambition" (264). This was especially true in her texts from the 1920s. Showalter noted that by the 1930s, Woolf was writing from a more inherent feminine perspective. This likely had much to do with Woolf's research on Elizabeth Barrett Browning, and her dog. The critical ignorance of Barrett Browning's textual significance and the focus on her as a celebrity (particularly due to her elopement with Robert Browning) had such an effect on Woolf that it largely influenced her to focus on the inherently feminine in writing. It is a complete departure from the masculine, as *Flush* is. *Flush* is a text written by a woman about another woman writer, written in the erratic style of free indirect discourse, and its leads are a woman and dog who do not engage in a violent adventure that suddenly leads to epiphany. Rather, they discover each other and therefore themselves. Thus with *Flush*, Woolf not only broke the mold—she broke her own mold as she explored the complexities of woman in Victorian society.

Regardless of which language one may refer to, language is contextual, gendered, and privileged towards men. Historically, the language of men is passed down from generation to generation. The writing of women remains on the sidelines. Woolf has been the exception to this rule, perhaps due to the androgyny in her writing. *Flush*, however, is concretely feminine, and thus overlooked as a frivolity. An error, considering that *Flush* explores the intricacies of language, both written and spoken. *Flush* is the very champion of what French feminists termed *écriture féminine* (literally "feminine writing")[2] and *parler femme* (literally "to speak woman"). Thus, *Flush* is a text far

[2] In *The Routledge Companion to Experimental Literature*, Ellen G. Friedman affirmed that écriture féminine "is non-hierarchical, nonlinear, polyphonic, open-ended, and has multiple climaxes. Writing *l'écriture feminine* means inscribing the female body in texts. It follows a pattern of female sexual pleasure and is distinct from the linear, single-climax pattern of traditional narratives Cixous associates with male sexuality. ... For Cixous, *l'écriture feminine* has no particular gendered signature and may be written by anyone. Although she advocates a future in which women will practice this writing, her examples come mainly from male modernists such as James Joyce. In Cixous' economy, whether male or female, the writer who disrupts the forms of conventional narrative disrupts the dominant social structure these forms iterate and opens a space for the culturally repressed, for the feminine to erupt into consciousness" (155).

ahead of its time. Regardless, Sandra Gilbert has argued that "the words of Cixous, and, say, Luce Irigaray often seem almost immoderately theoretical, even mystical, in their straining to imagine a female language…. Woolf is (isn't she?) too practical for such imaginings to illuminate hers" (209). *Flush* challenges Gilbert's argument and could even be helmed as a precursor to French feminism. Woolf has regularly been positioned as the Mother of All Feminism, but Woolf is only mother to a *certain* kind of feminism, one that is typically white, upper-middle-class, and therefore privileged. Woolf's examination of issues of class, gender and language parallels those of French feminism which, like Woolf's ideas, came about as a direct reaction to patriarchy. Thus, although there is no explicit connection between the French feminists and Woolf herself, there is a strong similarity in their philosophy.

French feminism is largely centered on the politics of language. It is an attempt to conceptualize women's language. But who are those women, particularly if writing comes from the body? If gender can be considered fluid and non-binary, if there is more than the masculine/feminine pole, how is a woman's language defined when the question of woman and gender in general is being reconceptualized? Moreover, how do people of color, persons with disabilities, and queer individuals fit into the discourse? Gilbert and Gubar have noted that Woolf's writing contains characters which "experience themselves as alienated from the 'ordinary' sense of language" and that she also offers them "the amazing grace of fantastic new languages (530)." The languages differ according to gender, class and circumstance, as Woolf explores these issues by addressing depression, sexuality and privilege in various texts. Likewise, Irigaray posits that women have access to more than one mode of language, and continuously ("This Sex" 101). If this theory is valid, then each woman's language is as particular and unique as herself.

Finding Miss Barrett's language in *Flush* is an interesting prospect due to the scarcity of spoken language. This is partly due to the perspective of the novel coming from a dog, who it is made clear at various times does not understand human language. Moreover, there are large periods of silence. However, the novel is told by an omniscient narrator, and much of the spoken language in the novel, such as Miss Barrett's showdown with her family, is not vocalized—instead it is paraphrased through events for the reader by the narrator. Irigaray tells us that although women have language and access to plurality, historically it has been denied to them. The manner in which the conflict between Miss Barrett and her family is written reflects this argument. However, Miss Barrett simultaneously challenges it

because she is a woman writer with a disability. For her, writing the body is revolutionary. Likewise, as Jane Marcus has shown, Woolf "raided the patriarchy and trespassed on male territory, returning to share her spoils with other women: women's words, the feminine sentence, and finally the appropriate female form" (xiv). These acts become meta in *Flush* as Woolf has Miss Barrett in her room *not* resting as she seemingly should be, but rather plotting and writing.

In "The Laugh of the Medusa," Cixous noted that "women's imaginary is inexhaustible" (246); they are comprised of not only one world, but several worlds, and their imagination is infinite. Miss Barrett, in her dark, ivy-shaded room, is a cornucopia of "luminous torrents," just as Cixous was (246). This is especially apparent as Miss Barrett goes through the writing process—a taxing task which seems to inspire guilt and melancholia. After a morning's bout of writing, she philosophizes on the particulars of writing:

> She was lying, thinking; she had forgotten Flush altogether, and her thoughts were so sad that the tears fell upon the pillow. Then suddenly a hairy head was pressed against her; large bright eyes shone in hers; and she started. Was it Flush, or was it Pan? Was she no longer an invalid in Wimpole Street, but a Greek nymph in some dim grove in Arcady? And did the bearded god himself press his lips to hers? For a moment she was transformed; she was a nymph and Flush was Pan. The sun burnt and love blazed. (*Flush* 46)

With this scene the reader can understand how Miss Barrett internally struggles as she writes. Cixous has suggested that women usually write in secret, and they punish themselves for the act (246). Somehow the act of writing is wrong; it is a transgression against the patriarchy. Miss Barrett transcends her status as a "domestic carceral," exploring the various worlds and "luminous torrents" inside her by deconstructing the "funny desire stirring inside her" (Cixous 246). Like an addict, the writing process consumes her as she spends hours writing, and suddenly becoming overwhelmed with emotion; her eyes watering with tears. This demonstrates how the writing process for Miss Barrett is not only a criminal act that allows her to take back her body, but an act in which she is given an outlet for catharsis.

Woolf portrays Miss Barrett as slightly hysterical when writing, a bold choice in an era where hysteria was a woman's curse. French feminism, however, heralds women's language as one intrinsically hysterical, and through this perspective the reader would be able to appreciate Woolf's portrayal of Miss Barrett as one that reclaims hysteria. In the novel, Miss Barrett's slight hysteria during the writing process is presented in a manner that mirrors the Kristevan *chora*. This effectively demonstrates that Woolf has trespassed on male territory, as she turned the issue of hysteria around, one that pigeonholes

women into a prefixed patriarchal identity, and constructed it as a positive effect of the writing process, just as French feminism has attempted to reclaim hysteria.

Juxtaposed with Miss Barrett's seeming hysteria when writing is the ubiquitous silence in the novel. The silence is paired with a sense of restlessness through the writing style of the novel and the narrator's voice. With the silence, Woolf further demonstrates Miss Barrett's estrangement and ostracization from society. Perhaps this is a factor in why, as previously noted, Miss Barrett's conversations are generally not shown but rather told, contributing to the perception of silence in the novel. Again, this is most evident during the showdown with Miss Barrett's family—her pleas are merely glossed over, whereas her family's insults towards her are better detailed, effectively demonstrating Irigaray's deduction that the silencing of a woman is an action that indicates "I don't understand what you're doing so I reject it, we reject it" and also her affirmation that "silence itself is related to the discourse being spoken" (*Je, Tu, Nous* 52, 34).

The *parler femme* is not immediately evident in the novel for it is written in the English language, which is not gendered as French is. Instead, the *parler femme* shines through Woolf's writing as she constructs the feminine subjects as positive, of value, and not as an object of the masculine, but rather an independent body which happens to be feminine. This is what makes *Flush* a threat to the canon as it is known, for it destabilizes traditional concepts of plot and language. The novel is a product of the concept of writing the body, not only Miss Barrett's but Woolf's. Woolf had previously struggled with her womanhood; through the novel, however, she channels the joys of femininity. Any sort of liberation she may have experienced during this period is tied to language, for writing as woman allowed her to take back her body.

Taking this into account, the novel must also be considered from the concept of écriture féminine, as it calls for the value of experience. As noted before, there is little spoken language in the novel, with the narrator usually glossing over conversations. Instead, there is emphasis on experience, as Miss Barrett undergoes a transformation, becoming a fully-formed woman at the end of the novel. What maintains her womanhood is her writing as her independence is denied to her during her stay at the family mansion. The experience of this hardship is what illuminates her success at the end of the novel. Miss Barrett starts out the Angel, pigeonholed into a position of submission. In her room, she ruminates and eventually comes out demonic, mermaid-like; a woman with agency.

As the reader can see, Woolf's *Flush* was ahead of its time in its representation of women's issues and surmount of the patriarchal limitations of language. What I have presented here is only a small aspect of the novel's intricacies, which include disability theory and critical animal studies. It is my hope that this article has brought some light to the layers of *Flush*, ushering in a new era where the novel's "hints and shades" are regarded (Woolf, *Letters* 236).

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