



HÁSKÓLI ÍSLANDS

Hugvísindasvið

The Wide-Reaching Influence of *Flush*:

***The Importance of Dogs in the Lives and Works of Elizabeth
Barrett-Browning and Virginia Woolf***

Ritgerð til BA -prófs í Ensku

Sigurlaug Kristjánsdóttir

Maí 2013

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Abstract

This essay demonstrates the positive effect the dogs of Elizabeth Barrett-Browning and Virginia Woolf had on the two writers' psychological and physical health as well as their influence on the women's prose and poetry. It shows how Virginia Woolf's book, *Flush: a Biography* is in part a means of expression for Woolf, especially when the chapter on Flush's abduction is examined. It establishes that Barrett-Browning and Woolf used their dogs as pathways or outlets for their feelings, especially in their interaction with other people, whether related to their work or daily matters. This is supported by referring to clinical studies on the health benefits related to a human-animal relationship. Additionally, the essay argues that the book *Flush: a Biography* is much more than a frivolous dog-book, and shows how it links Barrett-Browning and Woolf together alongside being a mouthpiece for Woolf's settlement of her own past. Further insight into the two writers' personal lives is gained by referring to their personal correspondence, diaries and biographies, but the picture Quentin Bell draws up of Virginia Woolf in her biography is simultaneously viewed and criticized.

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I. Introduction

Loving friend, the gift of one,
 Who her own true faith, hath run,
 Through thy lower nature;
 Be my benediction said
 With my hand upon thy head,
 Gentle fellow-creature!
 (“To Flush my Dog”)

In this first verse of twenty in Elizabeth Barrett-Browning’s poem “To Flush, My Dog”, the poet’s deep and intimate feelings towards her little dog shine explicitly through. When she was reading about Miss Barrett during her break from writing, Virginia Woolf was so touched by the descriptions of Miss Barrett’s little dog Flush that she became determined to write his story for others to enjoy, and hence *Flush: a Biography* was born. Despite the fact that they were not contemporaries and were profoundly different characters, Virginia Woolf and Elizabeth Barrett-Browning shared some similar life experiences, such as the need of a mother-figure along with the death of their loved ones over a short period of time; these eventually caused severe depression and anxiety for both women. For that reason they relied on the unconditional love of their pet dogs as well as the sense of security they provided, while also finding great inspiration in their devoted presence. Nevertheless, in studies of these writers, their dogs are usually kept in the background, and their presence is either not accepted or purposely left out. In fact, in his biography on Virginia Woolf, Quentin Bell does not even mention—in an otherwise accurate chronology—the instances when any of Woolf’s dogs died, in spite of having full access to all her diaries and correspondence and therefore knowing the profound emotional influence this had on her. In a similar manner, Flush’s significance in Elizabeth Barrett’s life is generally overshadowed by her romance with Robert Browning. Those two elements give rise to the question whether Barrett-Browning and Woolf’s vulnerable sides have been deliberately diminished in written material about them in order to cast a more positive light on their literary works. My claim is that the book *Flush: a Biography* is a mouthpiece for Victoria Woolf who, in the same manner as Elizabeth Barrett-Browning, resorted intuitively to the company of dogs to deal with her mental illness

and social deficiencies. As a result, the two writers were more able to tackle everyday functions as valid subjects of society and even to step out of their comfort zones.

Virginia Woolf did so by engaging in a socially stigmatized relationship with another woman and Elizabeth Barrett-Browning broke free from her strict Victorian father to find her love.

A dog loving reader of *Flush* might feel interested in getting to know more about Miss Barrett's dog as well as about the two women, Barrett-Browning and Woolf, who were united in such an unusual way through mutual interest in a pet. However, much criticism of *Flush* has primarily been from a feminist angle, whereas little has been written about it from the perspective of human-dog relationships. This essay therefore seeks to address this issue, using the study of Maureen Adams—a licensed clinical psychologist and a devoted dog owner. In this study, which is the basis of her book *Shaggy Muses*, Adams associates the lives of five prominent women and their flocculent friends through primary sources such as diaries and personal correspondence. These five women came from different backgrounds and were either novelists or poets, but they had one thing in common: they loved their dogs and were inspired by them. This association fascinated Adams who engaged in an interdisciplinary research to understand the close relationships that develop between a dog and his human (viii-x). She found that even though the pooches were normally left out or given little attention in the women's biographies, they were frequently mentioned in their diaries and private letters (Adams xi).

This essay begins by recapitulating Virginia Woolf's and Elizabeth Barrett-Browning's childhood and early years, with focus on their declining physical and psychological health, depression and anxiety. Based on this, various studies on the benefits of companion dogs, mainly related to the previously mentioned disorders and ailments, will be examined. The relationship Woolf and Barrett-Browning had with their dogs is given fair account along with the way Virginia Woolf chose to use *Flush* as an emotional pathway in her biography of *Flush*, as well as using her other dogs in her interactions with Vita Sackville-West. It is clear from the factual context addressed in this essay that dogs played an important role in the women's social and private lives, but *Flush* the dog had a positive healing impact on Elizabeth Barrett-Browning and the biographical version of *Flush* served as a form of expression for Virginia Woolf.

II. Elizabeth Barrett-Browning

Born in London in the year of 1806, Elizabeth Barrett-Browning, née Elizabeth Barrett Moulton Barrett, grew up on the family estate Hope End where she experienced a normal youth with her parents and siblings—until she reached her adolescence and began to show signs of illness suggesting what is known today as “panic disorder” (Kearney et al. 51). These were mainly symptoms such as “backaches, shortness of breath and lack of appetite”, and soon the young woman—taking prescription opium on a daily basis—became bedridden (Adams 7). Although she was regarded a physical invalid at the age of fifteen, Miss Barrett held her intellectual course and continued to write poems and to read novels. At the age of twenty-two, she suffered her first traumatic experience when losing her mother Mary Graham Barrett, suddenly after her last childbirth. In *Shaggy Muses*, Maureen Adams describes how the young woman could not, in view of her health, undertake her social responsibilities and assume her mother’s position in the house, despite being the eldest of twelve siblings. Instead, she had to leave her obligations to her two younger sisters and “her role as an invalid was now firmly established” (Adams 9). At this time Miss Barrett was showing clear signs of what is known today as “depression”, such as being “overwhelmed, unable to cry or even to talk about her mother” but she “remained alone in her room, reading and writing letters and poems” (Adams 9). Furthermore, her father had to sell the place where she grew up, Hope End, and move with his family temporarily to a small town in the southwest of England. However, when returning to London with her family a few years later, Miss Barrett’s lack of social skills was apparent. To help her readjust, her cousin John Kenyon introduced his shy niece to the London literary elite, among them being the author and dramatist Mary Russell Mitford, but the two women soon became close friends.

In the winter of 1838, Miss Barrett’s health declined drastically and she moved to the seaside town of Torquay where her family hoped that the dry sea air would do her good. She kept in touch with her friend Miss Mitford, writing to her about her symptoms and true feelings, which she had tried to keep from her family to lessen their worries for her (Adams 11). But in spite of the change of environment, her condition stayed the same and eventually worsened in the wake of her brother Sam’s death in 1840, but Adams states that when hearing the news Miss Barrett “fainted ... and was intermittently delirious for a month”, which strongly indicates her

fragile state of mind (12). To comfort his bereaved sister, Miss Barrett's closest brother Edward or "Bro", who had accompanied his sister to Torquay, stayed close by her side. All too soon, the family was struck by another disaster. When he felt his sister was recovering, Bro decided to go sailing with his friends on a beautiful day—and never returned. His death had an immense impact on his sister; Miss Barrett's mental health declined drastically and she eventually "regressed into frozen numbness, unresponsive to anyone" and "ate little, rarely slept, and appeared to be close to death" (Adams 12). Furthermore, Adams declares that the young poet gave up on her writings and succumbed to total melancholy (12-13). At this time, Miss Barrett had lost her mother and two brothers, but she was still not able to shed a tear. Her friend Miss Mitford understood the gravity of the young woman's mental health after having read her letters, where Miss Barrett described her own feelings as "bound, more than I ever remember having felt, in chains, heavy and cold enough to be iron—and which have indeed entered into the soul" (qtd. in Adams 13). Under those circumstances Miss Mitford did what she knew from her own experience would lift Miss Barrett's spirit and decided to send her friend the offspring of her own dog Flush, and as if to underscore the thread of connection he was supposed to signify, she also named the puppy Flush. After a short while, Flush had opened Elizabeth's heart and helped her to feel again, but she started writing soon after she got him and got inspiration from watching him and talking to him. Flush is in that case some kind of a medium or a bridge between her solitude and the outer world, her illness and health, emotional stagnation and love.

III. Virginia Woolf

Born at 22 Hyde Park Gate in London in the year 1882, Virginia Woolf, née Adeline Virginia Stephens, was third in line of four full siblings and grew up with four more half siblings from her parents' former marriages. Although being a devoted mother and wife, Julia Stephens was spreading thin by taking on various nursing and caretaking assignments and for this reason her youngest children—Virginia, Vanessa, Thoby and Adrian—did not always get the care and attention they needed from their mother. Instead, they were left in the care of their half sister Stella Duckworth, and relied on each other's company and emotional support (Adams 199; Bell 22-27). In May 1895, Julia Stephens died after a case of influenza. Not only did her death leave

her husband so bewildered by grief that “in one scene after another all through that dreadful summer, he broke down utterly and, while his embarrassed children sat in awkward silence, groaned, wept and wished that he were dead”, but it also marked another darker turning point in the lives of the Stephen children (Bell 40). In the eyes of friends and relatives, the eldest brother in the Stephen household, George Duckworth, was an exceptionally dedicated and bountiful brother whose “devotion to his half-sisters was exemplary” (Bell 42). Although this may be true in a sense, his behavior towards Vanessa and Virginia changed drastically after their mother died, and the sympathetic affection he had towards his sisters became indecent and offensive.

In his biography on his aunt Virginia Woolf, Quentin Bell describes how the sisters experienced this change, but he claims that “to the sisters it simply appeared that their loving brother was transformed before their eyes into a monster, a tyrant against whom they had no defense, for how could they speak out or take any action against a treachery so covert that it was half unknown even to the traitor?” (43). To emphasize how the abuse Virginia and Vanessa had to endure at the hands of their half-brother left the sisters traumatized for life, Bell states further that “Virginia felt that George had spoilt her life before it had fairly begun. Naturally shy in sexual matters, she was from this time terrified back into a posture of frozen and defensive panic” (44). It is important to realize that it was not until many years later, in a letter to her friend Ethel Smyth dated 12 January 1941, that Woolf confided this memory to her friend, about a disturbing incident involving her other half-brother Gerald: “I still shiver with shame at the memory of my half-brother, standing me on a ledge, aged about 6 or so, exploring my private parts” (qtd. in Bell 44). Therefore, it is not strange that young Miss Stephen succumbed to an emotional breakdown at this point—the first of many to come and the one that she would later refer to as “my ‘first’ breakdown” (qtd. in Adams 202). For the next ten years, Woolf experienced a series of personal traumas. She lost her father Mr. Stephens from abdominal cancer and her half-sister Stella died from complications during her pregnancy. In line with her previous reaction to personal tragedies and ordeals, Miss Stephens shunned her grief, succumbed to depression and was therefore not able to put her feelings into words until years later: “the blow, the second blow of death, struck on me: tremulous, filmy eyed as I was, with my wings still creased, sitting there on the edge of my broken chrysalis” (qtd. in Adams 205). Additionally, and only to deepen Miss Stephen’s

grief, she lost her favorite brother Thoby to typhoid fever, and her beloved dog Shag died (Bell 110, 22). To deal with her deep grief and deep sense of loss, Miss Stephens resorted primarily to the family dogs for solace, instead of her father or siblings. It is also evident from Woolf's diaries and personal letters that she continued to seek emotional relief and communicational support from her dogs as an adult, especially as seen in her correspondence with Vita Sackville-West. Furthermore, and possibly indicating her need of some personal settlement, Woolf began writing *Flush: a Biography* two years after her affair with Sackville-West ended.

IV. The general benefits of a human-dog relationship

Before delving into the relationship Elizabeth Barrett-Browning and Virginia Woolf had with their dogs, in order to find out how the two women managed to keep their heads throughout their ordeals, it is important to run over some clinical studies and facts that explain the benefits of a human-dog relationship. This sheds a light on the reason why both women relied on their furry friends instead of their fellow humans for support.

Keeping in mind both the physical and psychological breakdown Virginia Woolf and Elizabeth Barrett-Browning endured early in their lives, it is intriguing to examine the ways they chose to deal with their ordeals, namely by depending on their pets in a therapeutic manner. Even though the women were most likely subconsciously relying on their dogs, they were decades ahead of their time, scientifically. To comprehend what Miss Barrett-Browning and Mrs. Woolf gained from the presence of their dogs, it is worth elaborating on some studies that establish the advantages of human-dog relationships. In the year 1977 an organization called the Delta Society was established around a group of people sharing their interest and personal observations on the positive impact pets had on their owners, for the purpose of engaging in further research on the subject and put their findings in practice. At this time the "human-animal bond" or "HAB" term had already been articulated by two pioneers in the field of human-animal relationships, namely Konrad Lorenz and Boris Levinson (Wells 146). Thirty-six years later, the organization, now known as Pet Partners, is still going strong and focusing on improving human health with the aid of companion animals ("History-The Early Years"). At an International Symposium on Human-Pet Relationships in Vienna in 1983, Dr. Leo Bustad, a

veterinarian and co-founder of the Delta Society, honored Dr. Konrad Lorenz in his summary lecture, recollecting his prescience in the field:

It is only within the last decade that very many people have been talking about this bond. But Konrad Lorenz was writing about it many decades ago. Listen to his perceptive words on this subject: “The wish to keep an animal usually arises from a general longing for a bond with nature. . . . This bond is analogous with those human functions that go hand in hand with the emotions of love and friendship in the purest and noblest forms.” (qtd. in Hines 7)

In essence, humans tend to seek the company of animals, in this case dogs, to fulfill their primal need of intimacy, but the human-dog cohabitation is believed to have existed for over 100,000 years in western society (Ziegler 1). For instance, in her article on domestic dogs and human health, Dr. Deborah Wells provides strong evidence of the physiological and social advantages this correlation possesses, and points out that “research has shown that animals, and in particular dogs, can ameliorate the effects of potentially stressful life-events (e.g. bereavement, divorce), reduce levels of anxiety, loneliness and depression and enhance feelings of autonomy, competence and self-esteem” (149).

With this in mind, it is easy to understand why humans with reduced social or physical skills, such as Virginia Woolf and Elizabeth Barrett-Browning, are more comfortable in the presence of their furry friends than in the presence of their fellow humans. Nevertheless, it is highly unlikely that the two women were seeking the company for therapeutic reasons, at least not consciously, as the ideology itself did not exist in their time. On the contrary, keeping a dog in Victorian- and early 20th century England was mainly for the upper class’s frivolous display (lap-dogs) or leisure (sporting dogs) (Walton 221). It is therefore fascinating in hindsight, to know that the women were experiencing the physical sense of well-being, or “increases in plasma concentrations of beta-endorphin and dopamine”, natural hormones that not only provide this good feeling but are also proven by modern scientists to decrease blood pressure and diminish anxiety (Ziegler 1; Wells 149). Given these points, it is evident that the mere presence of their dogs helped the women in any event, but the accounts that follow portray the nature of their relationships with their dogs.

V. Flush the sunbeam puppy enters the gloomy life of Miss Barrett

“How I thank you for Flush!—Dear little Flush—growing dearer every day!” (qtd. in Adams 14).

These were Miss Barrett’s words to Miss Mitford about the little dog soon after his arrival in Torquay in January 1841, but as soon as Miss Barrett got news about her friend’s pending present, her spirit lifted and her attention shifted from sorrow to hope—from constant rumination about her brother’s death to the outside world—so it is safe to say that Flush already made a positive impact on her before actually entering her life. Years later, when Miss Barrett reflected upon this time in her life, the following is how she described her somber state of mind by stating that “after what broke my heart at Torquay, I lived on the outside of my own life, blindly and darkly from day to day, as completely dead to hope” (qtd. in Adams 17). Flush’s cheerful presence lifted the gloomy atmosphere that had governed the Barrett household and within days, Miss Mitford received letters of praise and gratitude from her friend: “Such a quiet, loving intelligent little dog—& so very very pretty! He shines as if he carried sunlight about on his back!” (qtd. in Adams 14) and “He and I are inseparable companions, and I have vowed him my perpetual society in exchange for his devotion” (qtd. in Adams np.).

These letters clearly demonstrate the intense and positive change of Miss Barrett’s mindset and demeanor when Flush entered her life. Furthermore, while Miss Barrett had abandoned her books in the wake of Bro’s death she had now returned to them along with her correspondence with friends, where she usually spoke about Flush. A letter to her friend Richard Horne emphasizes further the bond the little dog actually formed between the two friends: “I have a little spaniel called Flush, the descendant of Miss Mitford’s spaniel, Flush the Famous, which she sent me *for company* & besides to remind me of her” (qtd. in Adams 16-17).

After three years in Torquay, the family moved back to London and Flush immediately took his place by the feet of his mistress in her murky room at 50 Wimpole Street, where she allowed him to lie on her bed, against her doctor’s orders. Adams believes this marked the beginning of Miss Barrett’s growing sense of self, that is, she was defying her doctor’s instructions with her actions (22). In order to realize the seriousness of Miss Barrett’s physical and mental health, it was not until

two years after her brother died that she finally felt strong enough to stand up on her own two feet. Interestingly enough, she did so by relying on Flush's physical support, instead of someone in her household: "Think of my standing alone, with only one hand upon Flush—he standing quietly upon the sofa—only one hand leaning on Flush, to steady me" (qtd. in Adams 25). Similarly, when she felt ready to venture from the security of her bedroom into the drawing room to join her family, she used Flush as a buffer by hiding behind him and his scampering dog-behavior that got all the attention, keeping Miss Barrett out of focus (Adams 26).

During the nineteenth century, stealing pet dogs from the upper classes was a profitable business and dognappers were able to "make several years' wages from one dog's ransom" (Adams 26). Flush was no exception; indeed, he was taken as often as three times in his lifetime. During these times, Miss Barrett's deep feelings for her dog became clear when she claims, "it is not *dogs* upon which they trade, but *feelings*. Wretched men!" and when her brothers laughed at her tears and devotion to her pet, she felt compelled to vent her frustration in a letter to a friend: "It was excusable that I cried. As if Love (whether of dog or man) must not have the same quick sense of sorrow!" (qtd. in Adams 26-27). Her response is interesting, not only because Miss Barrett had, according to Adams, only "shed few tears over her mother's and her brother's deaths" and was now finally able to display her feelings towards her little dog, but also for the reason that she equals the love of her dog with the love of a man (27). After receiving limited support from her father in the matter, since he did not intend to yield to dognappers' demands, Miss Barrett scraped together some money to pay the ransom and managed to convince her brother to help her. By doing so she not only challenged her father's autocracy but her actions also support how profound her feelings towards Flush really were. Or, like she put it herself in a letter to Miss Mitford: "My despair overcame my sense of obedience" (qtd. in Adams 27). Hence, the timid young invalid was gradually changing into an independent young woman. Nevertheless, when realizing how little emotional understanding she was getting from the members of her family she felt compelled to write to her friends, posing moral questions about their stance towards dogs by asking: "Do you know what it is, to love a dog & lose him—& is it in your philosophy to pardon a tear shed by woman in such a cause?" (qtd. in Adams 27). In fact, this became a habit of Miss Barrett when engaging in new correspondence, but according to Adams she "used the subject of Flush, or dogs in general, as a barometer to determine the level of intimacy she would

extend to”, indicating that she only trusted people who could understand and appreciate the human-dog relationship the way that she did (30). In fact, as a tribute to her furry companion, thanking him for wiping her tears in times of sadness, Miss Barrett wrote the poem “Flush or Faunus”:

You see this dog. It was but yesterday
 I mused forgetful of his presence here
 Till thought on thought drew downward tear on tear
 When from the pillow where wet-cheeked I lay,
 A head as hairy as Faunus thrust its way
 Right sudden against my face,—two golden-clear
 Great eyes astonished mine,—a drooping ear
 Did flap me on either cheek to dry the spray!
 I started first, as some Arcadian,
 Amazed by goatly god in twilight grove;
 But, as the bearded vision closelier ran
 My tears off, I knew Flush, and rose above
 Surprise and sadness,—thanking the true Pan,
 Who, by low creatures, leads to heights of love.
 (qtd. in Woolf, *Flush* 149)

These beautiful lines clearly display how much Miss Barrett valued the company of Flush and that she relied on him emotionally. Flush also played an important but subtle role in the Brownings’ courtship, although it is not the main subject here. Robert Browning entered Miss Barrett’s life in 1845, but only when she was confident enough to accept his visit, and had with Flush by her side. Furthermore, in their personal letters found in *The Brownings’ Correspondence*, Flush’s role as a “bridge” between Browning and Barrett is quite evident. In these letters, Mr. Browning showed his understanding of Miss Barrett’s intimate connection with her dog by stating: “I shall not attempt to speak and prove my feelings,—you know what even Flush is to me thro’ you”, and he even voiced his interest in physically being “like Flush, with all manner of coral necklaces about my neck, and two sweet mysterious hands on my head, and so be forced to hear verses on me, Ba’s [Miss Barrett’s] verses” (qtd. in Adams 33). Likewise, Miss Barrett used the spaniel to voice her desires to Mr. Browning: “I must & will see you tomorrow—I cannot do otherwise. It is just as if Flush had been shut up in a box for so many days” (qtd. in

Adams 33). These examples display unmistakably the pathway Flush provided between the lovers.

VI. From Shag to Pinka: The dogs that influenced Virginia Woolf

At the age of nine, young Virginia Stephens was called as a witness in a case against a neighborhood dog that had unfortunately attacked her rather severely, having in Miss Stephen's own words "... run at her and bitten her cloak besides knocking her up against the wall" (qtd. in Adams 197). Although the occasion itself stemmed from a rather grim event, the trial was a positive experience for young Miss Stephens, for the reason that she received her mother's undivided attention for a whole afternoon, which was a rare opportunity. Perhaps this was not Miss Stephens' first positive experience involving dogs, but at least the first of many to come where she would use dogs as the means to get closer to the people she loved (Adams 197). Even though there had always been dogs at the Stephens' residency and would later be around the adult Woolf, only the ones that influenced her specially will be discussed here.

First, there was Shag, a supposed hunting-dog originally belonging to Gerald Duckworth but because he lacked his presupposed hunting skills, Shag eventually became Vanessa Stephen's pet dog. Vanessa was an inveterate dog person and Virginia shared her sister's enthusiasm and would always associate her sister with dogs, like this short passage from Woolf's book *Moments of Being* clearly demonstrates: "Then there were days of pure enjoyment...when...[Vanessa] trotted about on various businesses, considering the characters and desires of dogs very gravely" (qtd. in Adams 201). Shag did not only provide young Miss Stephens with comfort and companionship after her mother died, but he was also a corporeal link to her sister Vanessa, but together the sisters encountered various escapades when walking Shag on a daily basis (Adams 203). By the same token, Shag provided the sisters with a fair amount of entertainment, but at one time he managed to eliminate the dull atmosphere of a boring tea party—to the sister's great delight—by biting an elderly guest for the mere reason that he referred to Shag by "the contemptible lap-dog title of 'Fido' " (qtd. in Adams 205). Ultimately, when Shag died, a deaf and old dog, Woolf commemorated her companion by writing him an obituary titled "On a Faithful Friend", that was published in *The Guardian* (Adams 208).

Then there was Gurth, “an attractive young sheep-dog puppy—who, though of authentic breed, was unhappily without a tail” (qtd. in Adams 206). Like Shag, he was Vanessa’s dog and perhaps one of the most influential ones in Woolf’s life, as she would later liken the people she loved to his breed, the sheepdog. Furthermore, her love and devotion to Gurth is reflected in her diaries, along with her satisfaction in taking care of another living being: “I took Gurth out—he is a load on my conscience—for a walk in Regents Park. This is what he most enjoys” (qtd. in Adams 210). There were no limits to their companionship, but Gurth accompanied Woolf everywhere, and she in turn disregarded anyone objecting the presence of his muddy paws. Woolf even brought him to a concert, one that became very interesting according to her journal: “Out after lunch with Gurth to...the Joachim concert at the Bechstein Hall, where Gurth accompanied a...song with a voluntary bass of his own composition & I had to remove him in haste” (qtd. in Adams 211). Woolf’s relationship with Gurth was very close, perhaps because of his intrinsic sheepdog nature of protecting, but this is apparent in her reluctance to return him to Vanessa after taking care of him for her: “I will send your dog. I should be glad to keep him, for he is really rather an engaging beast but I suppose he will be better with [you]” (qtd. in Adams 213). Moreover, Adams brings up the fact that Gurth replaced Vanessa and Stella as a social buffer, enabling Woolf to venture out of her home, but their long walks around the streets of London and her observations later inspired Woolf when she was writing *Flush* (211).

During WWI, the Woolfs took care of their neighbor’s dog Tinker, a large spirited Clumber spaniel that attracted Mrs. Woolf’s interest. Also, and perhaps for the reason that Woolf did not associate Tinker with anyone she loved or cared for, their relationship was quite different from the others. She monitored and investigated Tinker’s every move from a writer’s point of view, gathering information and extending her own comprehension of dogs, concluding that “He is a human dog, aloof from other dogs” (qtd. in Adams 218). With these words in mind, Adams believes that Woolf identified with Tinker in a way, that she related to the dog’s character because of “her own aloofness and her own spirit ‘in quest of something not to be found’” (Adams 219).

Next in line is Grizzle the mixed-breed terrier, who entered the Woolf household quite abruptly, as the first indication Adams finds about her is a short uncanny announcement in Woolf’s diary: “Grizzle now belongs to us” (qtd. in Adams

220). Although she was much more emotionally attached to Grizzle, Woolf seems to approach her a similar way as Tinker, in an inquisitive manner, observing and transcribing her behavior and quirks, details that Woolf would for sure use in her book *Flush*. Woolf's amusing and adventurous account of one of their walks in the country where they encountered a herd of cows, shows how much she enjoyed Grizzle's character and company: "How they barked & belled like stags round Grizzle; & how I waved my stick & stood at bay; & thought of Homer as they came flourishing & trampling toward me: some mimic battle. Grizzle grew more & more insolent & excited & skirmished about yapping" (qtd. in Adams 221). Besides Grizzle's apparent entertainment value, she also took on the role of Woolf's personal bodyguard when they were alone in the house, or as noted in her diary: "Grizzle pricks an ear; lies flat again", "Do I hear him? Grizzle says Yes: stands tail wagging—She is right" and "Thank God here's L. Grizzle knows the way he shuts the door & jumps down & runs out" (qtd. in Adams 221-222). Therefore, it is clear that Grizzle's protective nature was deeply valued by Woolf, but her insecurity and fear of being alone is quite evident in the above-mentioned diary entries. In general, Grizzle played an important part in the Woolf's childless but content relationship, but Woolf claimed in her diary: "The immense success of our life, is I think, that our treasure is hid away; or rather in such common things that nothing can touch it. That is, if one enjoys a bus ride to Richmond, sitting on the green smoking...combing Grizzle" (qtd. in Adams 222).

Strange as it may seem, there is no record of Grizzle's death in Woolf's diaries according to Maureen Adams's sources, but she suggests the reason being that it was too painful for Woolf to write about (229). Her suggestion is plausible because at this time Sackville-West had already entered Woolf's life and Grizzle served as a medium between the two women from the beginning, so her death could have been a delicate issue. Furthermore, and to underscore the special relationship Woolf had with Grizzle, she included her in her book *Mrs. Dalloway*, where Grizzle made a "cameo appearance ... as Elizabeth's dog" (Monte 616).

Last but not least is Pinka the spaniel dog (also called Pinker and Pinks), a present from Vita Sackville-West to the Woolfs, and in fact a rather abstruse one, for the reason that Grizzle was still alive when Pinka was handed over to them. Furthermore, and possibly because he knew about his wife's affair with Sackville-West, Leonard Woolf was at first reluctant to accept the dog as a present, but was

eventually won over by the charming puppy, “Leonard says seriously she [Pinka] makes him believe in God—and this after she has wetted his floor 8 times in one day” (qtd. in Adams 227). After Grizzle died Pinka’s part in Woolf’s diaries and correspondence became more extensive as she replaced Grizzle as a medium for her intimate communications, but this is clear in Woolf’s farewell letter to Sackville-West before she went to Persia, “Please Vita dear don’t forget your humble creatures—Pinker and Virginia. Here we are sitting by the gas fire alone. Every morning she jumps on to my bed and kisses me, and I say that’s Vita” (qtd. in Adams 229). Apart from Pinka’s important role in Woolf’s social interactions, her calming effects and nonjudgmental companionship was priceless for Woolf personally. In one occasion, when having to discontinue her writing due to bad health, Woolf found relief in Pinka’s presence, “Half of the horrors of illness cease when one has a book or a dog or a cup of one’s own at hand”, and when resuming her writing she would unwind in a long walk with Pinka, “The only cheerful event was walking with Pinker through a field of clouded yellows this afternoon” (qtd. in Adams 235-236). Therefore, it was a tragic day when the Woolfs returned from their holiday eager to reunite with Pinka, only to find out that she died the night before. Oddly enough, and despite his aunt’s sorrowful diary entries, Quentin Bell does not mention Pinka’s death (or any other dog’s for that matter) in his otherwise scrupulous chronology (1: 189-201; 2: 227-252).

By looking over Virginia Woolf’s relationship with dogs, and how she meticulously watched and studied their behavior, it is apparent that she was highly influenced by them. As a result, she had an abundance of material to work with when she decided on writing her novel *Flush: a Biography*.

VII. The hints and shades of *Flush* by Virginia Woolf

In her novel, *Flush: a Biography*, Virginia Woolf writes about the life of Flush the spaniel dog, owned by Elizabeth Barrett-Browning—actually featuring her own dog Pinka on the front page in the role of Flush. The story spans his lifetime, from puppyhood to the day he dies as a content and happy dog. Having closely monitored the dogs in her life, Woolf possessed eminent understanding of dogs that, along with her personal knowledge of the species’ behavior and keen senses, makes her narration both detailed and delightful. Equally important is the way Woolf transmits her life

experiences through Flush's story. Woolf's intuitive and yet poetic description of Flush the puppy wallowing in the fields with Miss Mitford, is a good example of how deeply she understood her dogs, describing how "the cool globes of dew or rain broke in showers of iridescent spray about his nose; the earth, here hard, here soft, here hot, here cold, stung, teased and tickled the soft pads of his feet" (Woolf, *Flush* 16). Further, when Flush is stolen from Miss Barrett, and suddenly finds himself a shackled prisoner in one of London's most dilapidated neighborhoods, Whitechapel, amongst scoundrels and "ruffians," his experience is meticulously reported by Woolf: "He had been forgotten and deserted. No help was coming ... another night had folded its blackness over Whitechapel. And the rain dripped steadily through a hole in the roof and drummed into a pail that had been stood to catch it. Miss Barrett had not come" (Woolf, *Flush* 83-84). For obvious reasons, there are no sources about Flush's imprisonment in Whitechapel, but Woolf manages nevertheless to capture the despondent atmosphere in a very insightful manner. It is plausible that for this purpose she used her own childhood experience of abuse to mediate Flush's bitter feelings of disappointment and despair, but that would not be the first time she used a dog to relay her most intimate feelings. In any event, the two of them share the vulnerability of a mute—Flush by nature and Woolf by mental oppression—whereas their existence as innocents was transformed in a split second and their cry for help was not heard. To emphasize the relation between their feelings and view it in context, this is how Woolf described the oppression she endured from her brother: "One felt like an unfortunate minnow shut up in the same tank as an unwieldy and turbulent whale" (qtd. in Adams 202), which is similar to Flush's experience of repression: "... He whined and a heavy hand beat him over the head ... He lay, not daring even to whimper, hour after hour. ... These horrible monsters ..." (Woolf, *Flush* 78-79). Both felt as if being overpowered and held down, either emotionally or physically, by an external force.

When Flush is finally set free after five days, Woolf describes his state of mind as indifferent and hopeless: "A hairy man hauled Flush by the scruff of his neck out of his corner. Looking up into the hideous face of his old enemy, Flush did not know whether he was being taken to be killed or to be freed. Save for one phantom memory, he did not care" (Woolf, *Flush* 94-95). These feelings are akin to those Heiman and Ettin refer to in their article about therapy options for abuse victims, namely the remains of the surviving victim's trauma: "powerlessness, helplessness,

hopelessness, betrayal and stigmatization...” indicating further affiliations between Flush and Woolf (qtd. in Heiman and Ettin 265). Therefore, and for the sake of his ordeal, Flush returns to Wimpole Street as a changed dog—frightened and broken. Even when he was back in safety and lying on the sofa by the feet of his mistress, Flush did not feel safe enough around people he used to trust, like Miss Barrett’s uncle Mr. Kenyon and Mr. Browning, “he trusted them no longer. Behind those smiling, friendly faces was [*sic*] treachery and cruelty and deceit. Their caresses were hollow” (Woolf, *Flush* 96). This seems a judicious sentence and one easily related to Woolf’s own experience with her half-brothers who exploited her naïve trust and sexually abused her. Besides that, these examples correlate with the theory that Woolf vents her feelings through the book.

In his article “Across the Widest Gulf: Nonhuman Subjectivity in Virginia Woolf’s ‘Flush’”, Craig Smith argues that Woolf detached herself purposely from *Flush* by debasing the book in her letters. All things considered, this is a fair suggestion, given that in Woolf’s period of time the mainstream discourse was about the Cartesian divide—a popular vision from the Enlightenment period where the French philosopher and writer, René Descartes, stated that non-human animals lacked self-awareness and should therefore not be anthropomorphized. Such personification, like anthropomorphism, was furthermore strongly related to sentimentality in contemporary literature (Smith 351). Therefore, Smith claims that Woolf was afraid of being dismissed as a modern novelist for the reason of “sentimentality”, because “to view nonhuman animal consciousness in human terms is, ipso facto, to sentimentalize it” (351). The detachment Smith talks about is clearly reflected in Woolf’s response to Hugh Walpole, a fellow novelist and friend, in April 1933, where she in fact undermines her own book, calling it a joke in more than one instance: “Flush is only a joke—done by a way of a lark when I had finished the *Waves*: but its [*sic*] too long—gone out of hand—and not worth the trouble,” and later in a letter to Sackville-West in September the same year: “Oddly enough an American Adams wants to buy the MS. of *Flush*—that foolish witless joke with which I solaced myself when I was all a gasp having done *The Waves*. (You remember that very bad book?)” (Woolf, *Letters* 177, 169). It took Woolf two years to write her “joke” so her trivializing of the book is quite interesting, especially when coming from such a distinguished novelist as Virginia Woolf, and it actuates further speculations about its purpose.

Nevertheless, keeping Smith's speculations in mind, Woolf's reply to Lady Colefax in September 1933 is quite interesting, and perhaps refutes his theory, since she seems to let her guard down and embrace Colefax's insightful compliment: "I'm so glad that you liked *Flush*. I think it shows great discrimination in you because it was all a matter of hints and shades, and practically no one has seen what I was after, and I was elated to Heaven to think that you among the faithful firmly stood—or whatever Milton said" (Woolf, *Letters* 236). This short but significant sentence by Woolf seconds the hypothesis that *Flush* was not a superficial "dog-book" or a secondary biography of the Brownings' love affair, but a more intimate story with a hidden agenda. Another support to this theory is Smith's notion about *Flush*'s last dream before he dies, but he takes notice of the absence of any memories including *Flush*'s mistress, which proves in his opinion that the book is neither "simply a secondary biography of the poet" nor a "story of Robert Browning's courtship of Elizabeth Barrett as seen through the eyes of Barrett's cocker spaniel" as sometimes presumed by critics (Smith 357, 351). Therefore, the idea that there is a hidden agenda, that *Flush* could be an expression of Woolf's own emotional confrontation receives further support and could explain her reasons for debasing it.

VIII. The shaggy confederates: how dogs united Virginia Woolf and Vita Sackville-West

"She was brought up with dogs in the home, she had always kept dogs and liked them; but she was not, in the fullest sense of the word, a dog lover" (Bell 2: 175). This is how Quentin Bell chooses to describe his aunt, Virginia Woolf, in his biography on her, notwithstanding the evidence found in her correspondence and diaries of how intimate her relationship actually was with her dogs. By doing so he overlooks the important part, Woolf's dogs played in both her social and most intimate interactions. Bell's views on his aunt's alleged disregard for dogs shines through significantly in a hypothetical reply he makes on her behalf; when Lady Ottoline Morrell wrote to Woolf congratulating her on *Flush* and rhetorically asking: "Don't you sometimes hug your dog – I did my darling Socrates – hugged him & hugged him – and kissed him a thousand times on his soft cheeks", Bell adamantly claims that his aunt's reply would be "no". This is an interesting assertion on his behalf, especially since Woolf asked Bell in a letter dated 27 April 1934, to kiss Nessa (Vanessa Stephen, Bell's

mother) *and their family dog Clinka* on her behalf (Woolf, *The Letters* 297). Furthermore, in a letter to her friend and somewhat mother figure, Violet Dickinson, Woolf asks for a loving gesture through the means of Dickinson's chow dog Rupert with the words "So, kiss your dog on his tender snout, and think him me" (qtd. in Adams 206). Even though he has access to all these letters, Bell decides to disregard or diminish this aspect in his aunt's memoirs. Conversely though, and perhaps to demonstrate that his task was not quite feasible, Bell takes time and space in his book to describe Virginia's unconscious habit of stroking her dog's nose when engaging in a conversation, a habit that shows mutual trust and intimacy between the two (Bell 2: 175; Somervill et al. 521). Another interesting contradiction in Bell's biography is when he, despite his foregoing statement, acknowledges that his aunt (although "clearly" not a dog-person) used a dog as a physical escape route by stating that "Her dog was the embodiment of her own spirit, not the pet of an owner. Flush in fact was one of the routes which Virginia used, or at least examined, in order to escape from her own human corporeal existence" (Bell 2: 176). Given these points, it is apparent that Woolf was more emotionally attached to her dogs than Bell gives her credit for in his biography, and this is a part of her personality that he seems determined to diminish in order to focus on other selected aspects. It is almost as if having loving feelings for a pet-dog would not be entirely "proper" for a distinguished novelist like Virginia Woolf, a female modern novelist who was at the time engaged in an extramarital affair with another woman.

"Beauty shines on two dogs doing what two women must not do" wrote Virginia Woolf after having watched her dog engage in sexual antics in the park (qtd. in Adams 234). Much to her dismay, she realized that her dog received more toleration in public than she could ever hope for in her relationship with Vita Sackville-West, but homosexuality was highly stigmatized in 1920s England. It is therefore understandable (apart from the reason that they were both married) that the women used ambiguous language to express their feelings in their correspondence and diaries.

A year into her love affair with Woolf, Vita Sackville-West gave the Woolfs Pinka the purebred Spaniel dog. Having solely owned and been more comfortable with mixed dog breeds Virginia seemed, according to Maureen Adams, to associate Pinka's pedigree status to Vita's elite background, questioning their social compatibility for example by asking herself whether she was able to "... live up to a

Sackville Hound?” (qtd. in Adams 227). This small statement supports Woolf’s lack of confidence in her intimate relations and indicates that she, indeed, never did feel worthy of Vita’s love—an emotional symptom often characterizing abuse victims throughout their life (Davis, Petretic-Jackson and Ting). Furthermore, and perhaps in view of her history of depression, Woolf would, when feeling particularly unattractive, compare herself in a negative manner to her raggedy mixed-breed terrier Grizzle: “If ever a woman was a lighted candlestick, a glow, an illumination which will cross the desert and leave me—it was Vita; and that’s the truth of it: and she has nothing, nor will ever have, in common with dog Grizzle who stands before me, raw, greasy, mudstained [*sic*]” (qtd. in Adams 225). Using Grizzle as a buffer, enabled the otherwise inhibited Woolf to express her erotic feelings for Sackville-West:

“Remember your dog Grizzle and your Virginia, waiting for you; both rather mangy; but what of that? These shabby mongrels are always the most loving, warmhearted creatures. Grizzle and Virginia will rush down to meet you—they will lick you all over” (qtd. in Adams 226). Therefore, Woolf’s use of dogs, mainly Gurth, Grizzle and Pinka, in order to circumvent her communication difficulties, is unmistakable.

Another good example would be when Woolf compares her lover to a sheepdog (in an amorous way) soon after they made love for the first time, possibly referring to her old beloved dog Gurth: “Vita is a dear old rough coated sheep dog: or alternatively, hung with grapes, pink with pearls, lustrous, candle lit” (qtd in Adams 225).

When Woolf’s beloved dog Grizzle died, Pinka replaced her as a medium and became the center of the women’s correspondence as demonstrated in this letter from Sackville-West to Woolf, dated 8 December 1926 when Sackville-West was looking after Pinka for Woolf:

I had to explain [to Pinka the dog] that Mrs Woolf lived in London, a separate life, a fact which was as unpleasant to me as I could be to any spaniel puppy, so she has adopted me as a substitute. I explained that everybody always betrayed one sooner or later, and usually gave one away to somebody else, and that the only thing to do was to make the best of it. (DeSalvo and Mitchell 167)

At this time, their relationship was starting to lose its spark, so it is possible to reason that Sackville-West was either indicating her own insecurity towards Woolf or even conveying in a subtle manner her future intentions of ending the relationship.

Whatever the reason, their correspondence was in general filled with metaphorical

and humorous language where the women did not only refer to their own dogs but alternatively took the role of Potto, an imaginary dog fabricated by the two women. Sometimes Sackville-West took the part of Potto: “This letter is principally to say that Potto is not very happy; he mopes; and I am not sure he has not got the mange; so he will probably insist on being brought back to Mrs. Woolf”¹ (qtd. in Adams 225). In other instances, Sackville-West imagined Woolf (here being sick at home) as Potto: “Does Potto sit under the sofa...Potto has a stary [*sic*] coat and a hot nose. His tail doesn’t wag. It just moves, but only just” (qtd. in Adams 225). Additionally, when Woolf found out that Sackville-West was seeing former lovers she used good old Grizzle to convey her hurt with a sharp edge: “Well, my faithless sheep dog, — you’ll be turned into a very old collie if you don’t look out, blind of one eye, and afflicted with mange on the rump—why don’t you come and see me?” (qtd. in Adams 225). In the same manner, Sackville-West appeals to Woolf in a letter dated five years after they ended their affair, with the same sheepdog connotation: “Tell me about dinner on the 13th – if you still have any affection left for a rather shabby sheep dog that gnaws its bone at the Café Royal” (DeSalvo and Mitchell 412).

When the women finally terminated the love affair, and line with aforesaid associations, Woolf wrote Sackville-West a satiric letter about the tragic death of Potto:

Potto is dead. For about a month (you have not been for a month and I date his decline from your last visit) I have watched him failing. First his coat lost lustre; then he refused biscuits; finally gravy. When I asked him what ailed him he sighed, but made no answer. The other day coming unexpectedly into the room, I found him wiping away a tear. He still maintained unbroken silence. Last night it was clear that the end was coming. I sat with him holding his paw in mine and felt the pulse grow feebler. At 7:45 he breathed deeply. I leant over him. I just caught and was able to distinguish the following words—“Tell Mrs. Nick that I love her....She has forgotten me. But I forgive her and...(here he could hardly speak) die...of...a...broken...heart!” He then expired....Oh my God—my Potto. (qtd. in Adams 232)

¹ A deliberate pun

Although Woolf's intentions were probably to detach from this hurtful event and conceal her deepest feelings, her message undoubtedly reached Sackville-West. The letter is a thorough account on how their passion faded away until there was no basis for continuing their relationship on that intimate level, resulting in its metaphorical death. Therefore, and in light of all the above, it is safe to assert that dogs (whether real ones or not) acted as a bridge between the two women throughout their friendship.

Conclusion

Many critics have viewed Virginia Woolf's book *Flush: a Biography* either as a tribute to the Brownings' love affair or as having feminist values in the foreground. However, as has been established in this essay, this is a very limited assessment of the importance of Woolf's book and the actual influence of her subject on both Barrett-Browning and herself. Not only did Flush provide his owner Elizabeth Barrett-Browning with the strength she needed to experience personal freedom, but he also provided Virginia Woolf with the means to deal with her past in writing. The importance and value of Flush has been demonstrated throughout by referring to personal diaries and correspondence that further unfold the similar backgrounds of Barrett-Browning and Woolf. Both women suffered from depression and anxiety following several traumas over a short period of time and both turned to dogs for solace and support. Eventually, the two women were, in a way, united through the means of literature when Woolf wrote the biography of Barrett-Browning's spaniel dog, Flush, and by doing so, found outlet for her personal feelings.

Due to the women's backgrounds, their childhood and adolescence traumas, Elizabeth Barrett-Browning and Virginia Woolf dealt with severe psychological issues. They were depressed, and struggled with panic disorder; and instead of reaching out to their family members, both women followed their intuition and resorted to their pet-dogs for solace and emotional support. Flush entered the life of Elizabeth-Barrett at a critical period and early on, he assumed the role of a physical link between her and the outside world. Miss Barrett's relationship with Flush is also parallel to Woolf's relationship with most dogs in her life, but both these women were particularly attached to their dogs.

The field of human-animal relationship studies emerged long after the women

lived, and clinical research based on such relationships supports the hypothesis that Barrett-Browning and Woolf turned to their dogs in order to feel better. The studies reveal the immense therapeutic value of pet dogs, but the mere presence of the dog, or even just petting it, increases the levels of natural stress-reducing hormones such as dopamine and beta-endorphin in the dog's owner. In light of these benefits, it is understandable that these particular women were more comfortable with a dog by their side, especially when considering their inability to seek comfort with humans.

Woolf's dogs infused her personal life and inspired her literary work, but her general interest in dogs and keen understanding of them was undoubtedly a strong motivation for her to write *Flush: a Biography*. When the book was published, she went out of her way to debase its value, because of its intimate underlying meaning. However, it is plausible that in order to portray Flush's feelings in captivity, Woolf sought inspiration in her own childhood experience of abuse. Therefore, and when considering these factors, the versatility of this little dog when it comes to the women's social interactions and general health is quite impressive. The therapeutic and positive impact of Flush the dog and Flush the biographical dog has been clarified and verified through substantial facts.

Virginia Woolf and Elizabeth Barrett-Browning used their dogs to express their most intimate feelings, without crossing the moral barriers of their time. By talking "through" their furry friends and turning to their company for safety they were pioneers in harnessing this underestimated relationship, namely that of a human and a pet. Or in Virginia Woolf's own sincere words to a friend when Pinka died: "This you'll call sentimental—perhaps—but then a dog somehow represents ... the private side of life—the play side" (Woolf, *Letters* 396)

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