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Freedom of Body and Language  
Katherine Mansfield's "Bliss" as Precursor to the *Écriture Féminine* and Poststructuralist  
Theoretical Feminism

At the time of publishing "Bliss" in 1918, Katherine Mansfield was at the height of her narrative prowess. Had she not died untimely at the age of 34 from tuberculosis, there is no telling of the grandeur her place in the literary canon would possess. "Bliss" in particular showcases how Mansfield exposes the psyche of her characters through formal elements such as free indirect speech, and how she is able to mount a compelling political commentary in the absence of a strong plot (this likely being a conscious choice in order to let the subtlety of her critique shine). When read at surface level, "Bliss" can be mistaken as nothing more than the shallow meditations of a well-to-do housewife, though it carries a much deeper significance when one considers its psychoanalytical influences. T.S. Eliot is guilty of characterizing the story as "limited [...] and [...] what I believe would be called feminine" (qtd. in D'Arcy 252). I would contend that "Bliss" is indeed uniquely feminine, though not in the sense of being limited as Eliot means it. Rather, the text illuminates the conditions constructing the experience of womanhood (within Mansfield's social context), particularly the systemic othering of women in all major institutions—even language. This concept forms the central thesis of the *écriture féminine*, as developed by Hélène Cixous in her 1975 essay "The Laugh of the Medusa." The connecting threads between this work and Mansfield's "Bliss" will be the central focus of this essay.

The timing in which "Bliss" was published is worth noting, particularly for its concurrence with Freud's work on psychoanalysis.

Even though Mansfield never acknowledged any profound engagement with Freudian approaches to sexuality or psychic disorder, the truth is that several members of her circle

were quite convinced by the analyst's revolutionary diagnosis of Man's psychological condition [...] [T]he dates of publication of Freud's early work [...] could suggest that they formed the theoretical groundwork for Mansfield's *oeuvre* since all her stories highlight, in one way or another, the mode in which the mind's depths work against its conscious intentions—something which the then revolutionary practice of “psychoanalysis” was intended to reveal (D'Arcy 246-247).

It is thus natural to read “Bliss” as a testament to the unconscious—both in the narrative devices Mansfield employs and in the emergence of repression as a central theme.

Some feminist thinkers have determined psychoanalysis to be outside of the realm of feminism, given that traditional theories of psychoanalysis (in its study of sexual difference) create a view of womanhood that is too essentialist or that consideration of these concepts with a view towards feminism is not pragmatic or conducive to real social change and therefore should not fall within the purview of feminism. Patricia Elliot counters this perspective in her 1995 article “Politics, Identity, and Social Change: Contested Grounds in Psychoanalytic Feminism,” emphasizing how the study of sexual difference is important in understanding how ideas about gender (and accompanying social roles) come to be accepted or subverted.

The connection between psychoanalysis and women's liberation from an oppressive social order is made seamlessly in Cixous' “The Laugh of the Medusa.” Her essay appeals specifically to literary criticism and how women need to write as a means of understanding themselves, for the systems that govern language are distinctly male.

[U]ntil now, far more extensively and repressively than is ever suspected or admitted, writing has been run by a libidinal and cultural—hence political, typically masculine—economy; that this is a locus where the repression of women has been perpetuated, over

and over, more or less consciously [...] [T]his locus has grossly exaggerated all the signs of sexual opposition (and not sexual difference), where woman has never *her* turn to speak (Cixous 879).

As such, Cixous spends several passages describing the phenomenon of women not having recourse to language to articulate their experiences. Many such instances closely echo the language used by Mansfield to describe Bertha's sensation of "bliss". For instance, let us examine the following passages. When Cixous calls for women to produce their own literature and experience a form of catharsis as a result, she writes: "Time and again I, too, have felt so full of luminous torrents that I could burst—burst with forms much more beautiful than those which are put up in frames and sold for a stinking fortune. [...] Who, feeling a funny desire stirring inside her (to sing, to write, to dare to speak, in short, to bring out something new), hasn't thought she was sick?" (876). The sensations felt by Bertha in "Bliss" follow these descriptions closely, as seen in the opening of the story:

What can you do if you are thirty and, turning the corner of your own street, you are overcome, suddenly by a feeling of bliss—absolute bliss!—as though you'd suddenly swallowed a bright piece of that late afternoon sun and it burned in your bosom, sending out a little shower of sparks into every particle, into every finger and toe?...Oh is there no way you can express it without being "drunk and disorderly"? [...] [I]n her bosom there was still that bright glowing place—that shower of little sparks coming from it. It was almost unbearable (Mansfield 1).

Cixous and Mansfield both employ metaphors based on light and similarly articulate an internal force that has no means of expressing itself outwardly, resulting in their subjects' sense of sickness or disorderliness. In examining Mansfield's text through the perspective offered by Cixous, we

may interpret what Bertha perceives to be an overwhelming sense of joy instead as a restlessness to express innermost feelings within a system that does not provide her with the means (the opportunity or linguistic tools) to do so. This thread of Bertha's inability to speak or manifest her feelings into words is carried throughout the story. For example, when speaking with her husband over the phone, Bertha feels compelled to convey some aspect of her sudden happiness to him but is unable to. Mansfield captures her thought process through free indirect speech: "What had she to say? She'd nothing to say" (3). When Bertha's dinner guests begin arriving, Eddie Warren tells her of there being a moon that night, to which Bertha's interior response is that "She wanted to cry: 'I am sure there is—often—often!'" (6). We can assume Bertha's impulse to substantiate Eddie's claims of there being a moon does not realize itself, given that it is framed by "she wanted to." The mythos surrounding moon patterns' supposed effect on behaviour (particularly women's behaviour, given its supposed ties to the menstrual cycle) gives this passing thought of Bertha's added significance, as she appears to be commenting (as conveyed through free indirect speech) on her ongoing inner unrest.

Cixous' essay also works to find a point of commonality between all women through their shared experience of exclusion from the regulation of language via social norms. This is visible from the outset of the text: "I write this as a woman, toward women. When I say 'woman,' I'm speaking of woman in her inevitable struggle against conventional man; and of a universal woman subject who must bring women to their senses and to their meaning in history" (Cixous 875-876). This unifying effort based on a subject that speaks to all women can inform our reading of Bertha's interactions with Pearl Fulton. One interpretation of the energy that passes between Bertha and Miss Fulton may be that of a process of identification between two women, in contrast to Marxist theory, which would inevitably place them at odds with one another. Marxism would have it that

women—under the assumption that they too are commodities—“like any other article of commerce, [are] consequently exposed to all the vicissitudes of competition and to all the fluctuations of the market” (Marx qtd. in D’Arcy 255). In her article “Katherine Mansfield’s ‘Bliss’: ‘The Rare Fiddle’ as Emblem of the Political and Sexual Alienation of Women,” Chantal Cornut-Gentille D’Arcy considers this interpretation as a valid explanation for the significance of Bertha’s connection with Miss Fulton. She states:

The mysterious link and almost silent communication established between Bertha and Miss Fulton seem to point, at first, to a fundamental break with Marxism to become instead the enactment of a woman-centered position—the radical-feminist precept of class categorization on the basis of GENDER. [...] However, the unexpected denouement, when Bertha suddenly perceives that her precious guest is an intruder [...] violently brings the reader round to the realization that ideal heterosexual and/or sisterly love are impossible feats in such a social set up [...] under the combined oppression of capitalism and patriarchy [...] (261).

D’Arcy points to the following passage as the site in which the bond between the two women is most apparent: “Bertha knew, suddenly, as if the longest, most intimate look had passed between them—as if they had said to each other: ‘You too?’—that Pearl Fulton [...] was feeling just what she was feeling.” (Mansfield 7). It is worth noting that Bertha does not experience this same sense of identification with Mrs. Knight. In finding that her sensation of “bliss” is echoed in Miss Fulton, Bertha ascertains that Mr. and Mrs. Knight, Eddie, and Harry “didn’t share it” (8). This may be because, unlike Miss Fulton, Mrs. Knight is too entrenched in the system of male dominance to be privy to this shared feeling of agitation from being suppressed under a phallogocentric social and

symbolic order. This point is only emphasized by the fact that Mrs. Norman Knight is known to the reader only insofar as her relationship to her husband.

Although it is fair to interpret Bertha's fascination with Miss Fulton as arising from a shared sense of womanhood—more specifically a shared perception of the inequalities involved in this shared social situation—one cannot ignore the undercurrent of homosexual attraction that Mansfield sets up in the meeting of these two women. Passages such as “What was there in the touch of that cool arm that could fan—fan—start blazing—blazing—the fire of bliss that Bertha did not know what to do with?” (7) solidify the reader's perceptions of there being a romantic element to the two women's encounter. The dialogue Bertha and Miss Fulton exchange as they look out the window upon the pear tree feels almost orgasmic in nature, particularly the instances “‘There!’ she breathed,” and “did Miss Fulton murmur: ‘Yes. Just *that*.’ Or did Bertha dream it?” (9). To do away with this interpretation would also minimize the political importance of the text. In consideration of the story's conclusion, in which both of Bertha's sexual prospects (Miss Fulton and Harry) are foiled, D'Arcy writes:

In order to register the full significance of this open ending, Mansfield's story should be read as a daring attempt to convey the non-goal-directed nature of a woman's sexuality in the aftermath of the Wilde trial (1895), when sex and sexual deviations were proscribed, if not forbidden subjects. [...] From this perspective, Bertha's state of hysteria comes to underline [...] how the heroine's anxieties and repressions are not merely a woman's personal malaise but the logical result of the way in which the social climate of her time causes her to repress (“to shut up”) her own desires (266-267).

Bertha's repression of her unseemly desires comes to a head when she experiences her “moment of being” in the latter portion of the story, in which “For the first time in her life Bertha Young

desired her husband” (Mansfield 10). It is no coincidence that Bertha’s sudden desire for intimacy with her husband emerges immediately after her awakening to her own homosexual inclinations, as Freud’s theories on hysteria illuminate. On the substitution of one thought for another, Freud states that this is “often achieved by means of an excessive reinforcement of the thought *contrary* to the one which is repressed” (qtd. in D’Arcy 264).

Cixous’ essay is a call to action for women on two primary accounts: that they should regain possession of their bodies by inscribing them through writing, and that through this writing they should aim to dismantle the existing male-centric literary order by breaking convention. In her political critique and narrative choices, we may argue that Mansfield is on course with both items from Cixous’ agenda. Although at the time of writing her essay in 1975 Cixous states that “with a few rare exceptions, there has not yet been any writing that inscribes femininity,” (878) “Bliss” is a work that may figure among those exceptions, or in the very least is of the right spirit to be in close proximity with those named exceptions. Cixous advises her reader: “Write your self. Your body must be heard. Only then will the immense resources of the unconscious spring forth. [...] To write. An act which will not only “realize” the decensored relation of woman to her sexuality, to her womanly being, giving her access to her native strength,” (880). Although Mansfield treats the subject of the female body and its innate desires subtly (anything more radical at the time of “Bliss” being first published in 1918 would likely incur censorship), it is nonetheless present in a revelatory way. Mansfield first presents us with the metaphor of the fiddle to convey how the body (more pressingly women’s bodies) is policed by social norms: “Why be given a body if you have to keep it shut up in a case like a rare, rare fiddle?” (1). She soon follows this with Bertha’s haste to rid herself of her coat, for “she could not bear the tight clasp of it another moment” (1). In her focus on Bertha’s bodily sensations—the burning in her bosom that makes

itself continuously felt—Mansfield attempts to bring that which is continuously banished to the unconscious, into the physical world. By the end of “Bliss,” Bertha is by no accounts a woman who has “won back [her] body” (Cixous 886) by emancipating herself from the guilt and shame that women are conditioned to feel about their bodies and desires, but the author has at least advanced the notion that this liberation should be a valid concern.

The means by which Katherine Mansfield breaks with conventional literary form (as established before she and her modernist contemporaries chose to challenge these conventions) is also worth consideration. On the project of women writers constructing a discourse for themselves, Cixous writes:

Women must write through their bodies, they must invent the impregnable landscape that will wreck partitions, classes, and rhetorics, regulations and codes, they must submerge, cut through, get beyond the ultimate reserve-discourse [...] Such is the strength of women that, sweeping away syntax, breaking the famous thread (just a tiny little thread, they say) which acts for men as a surrogate umbilical cord [...] (886).

One method by which Mansfield departs from convention is her affinity for absurdity. For instance, she conjures a striking image of Mrs. Knight as resembling a primate: “[A]nd a funnier thing still was that now her coat was off she did look like a very intelligent monkey—who had even made that yellow silk dress out of scraped banana skins. And her amber ear-rings: they were like little dangling nuts” (5). Mansfield’s style in this passage both draws attention to the artifice and frivolity of Mrs. Knight’s fashion choices as a critique of the superficiality of the upper class, and blurs the boundaries between real and illusory, reinforcing the presence of the unconscious.

Another important innovation in Mansfield’s writing is her use of free indirect speech to portray the psyche of her story’s heroine. In a departure from the third-person-omniscient narration



favoured by her Victorian and Edwardian predecessors, the author moves seamlessly between Bertha's innermost thoughts and the action of the story—with notable sophistication in comparison to earlier stories, as D'Arcy remarks (247). The distinction between that which is spoken and that which is simply thought by the heroine is at times unclear. One such example is when Bertha responds to what she perceives as Harry's excessive coldness towards Miss Fulton: ““Oh Harry, don't dislike her. You are quite wrong about her. She's wonderful, wonderful. I shall try to tell you when we are in bed tonight what has been happening. What she and I have shared”” (10). Although there is nothing in this passage that points to it being thought rather than spoken, the level of candour expressed by Bertha calls into question whether she actually says this. Another means by which Mansfield is able to convey Bertha's psychological disposition is through sentence structure. Let us examine the following passage:

Harry was enjoying his dinner. It was part of his—well, not his nature, exactly, and certainly not his pose—his—something or other—to talk about food and to glory in his ‘shameless passion for the white flash of the lobster’ and the ‘green of pistachio ices’—green and cold like the eyelids of Egyptian dancers (Mansfield 8).

This continuous interjection of information being added or refuted lends itself to the ebb and flow of one's thoughts, simultaneously an act of “sweeping away syntax” for which Cixous advocates.

In summary, revisiting Katherine Mansfield's “Bliss” through the affordances of Hélène Cixous's “The Laugh of the Medusa” and its inauguration of the *écriture féminine* allows us to uncover a deeper significance within the text and potentially trace origins within it to future social and literary movements. In this case we may find in “Bliss” a precursor to feminist literary criticism and poststructuralist theoretical feminism (which explores the relationship between gender and power-relations, with language and psychoanalysis figuring among the tools used to

investigate this relationship). Because of the economy of the short story's form, its full contents are not conveyed directly, meaning that the work of interpretation is never finished. Over a hundred years later, we continue to read "Bliss" and ascribe new meanings to it.

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