

“I sometimes worry that I wouldn’t be such a feminist if I had bigger tits”: an essentialist portrayal of agency within Phoebe Waller-Bridge’s *Fleabag*

Originating in 2013 as a one-woman play, the television adaptation of *Fleabag* follows Phoebe Waller-Bridge’s eponymous character as she impulsively confronts the social, psychological, and sexual strains that come with being a single young woman. The show’s central conflict is not between Fleabag and an antagonist, but instead pits Fleabag’s own desire for self-improvement against her continued rage against the obligations of her womanhood, which inevitably manifests in some (self-)destructive fashion. Regarding this vicious cycle and using Stuart Hall’s “Encoding and Decoding in the TV Discourse” as a basis, I argue that decoding *Fleabag* from Hall’s “hegemonic position” presents agency as a fundamentally male concept, with ramifications for the world outside the TV evident by *Fleabag*’s proximity to modern life, both temporally and societally. In particular, I believe the Hegelian master-slave dialectic presented by philosopher Simone de Beauvoir’s in *The Second Sex* serves as a foundation for analysis of *Fleabag*’s male-, often phallo-centric universe. Adversely, one might also derive an “oppositional” reading arguing that Godmother manages to act of her own will; however, I observe that the manifestations of her control are merely a re-assertion of the pre-existing structures of male agency.

In Waller-Bridge’s own words during an interview with *The Guardian*, Fleabag is a “transgressive woman”, though in her romantic and sexual exploits, Fleabag seldom transgresses alone. However, her partnerships are rarely reciprocal, and her accomplices inevitably condemn her for their own gain. Philosopher Simone de Beauvoir categorizes this relationship in *The Second Sex* using the gametes, writing that “the ovum has sometimes been likened to immanence and the sperm to transcendence” (p.49). The very first scene, for example, features Fleabag’s encounter with “Arsehole Guy”, so dubbed as he has “never managed to actually ... up the bum with anyone before”. While this is a triumph for him (“it’s always been a fantasy of mine”), it becomes an insecurity for Fleabag— “you spend the rest of the day wondering [...] Do I have a

MASSIVE arsehole?’. The distinct lack of female agency is displayed here by the lengths Fleabag goes to in preparation for his pleasure (“you have to get out of bed, drink half a bottle of wine, get in the shower, shave everything [...]”) juxtaposed with the payoff—a self-deprecating punchline. de Beauvoir comments on the imbalance of sex at length, though she succinctly summarises this tension: “He *takes* his pleasure with her; he *gives* her pleasure; the words themselves do not imply reciprocity” (p. 456). This is further encoded by Arsehole Guy’s lack of dialogue or even presence within the frame, even though he initiates their liaison; his physical absence stands in for his emotional indifference towards Fleabag’s own wishes as he is able to wield his agency without losing anything, aligning with de Beauvoir’s description of the imbalance of intercourse: “the man introduces only an exterior organ: woman is affected in her deepest interior” (p. 455). Even in writing, there is a gendered difference between active and passive; somewhat amusingly, de Beauvoir’s interior, in the context of this first episode, refers both to Fleabag’s internal psyche and her internal organs.

As *Fleabag* portrays male agency, it simultaneously highlights female powerlessness, most prominently in its fourth wall breaks. *Fleabag*’s signature shot features the protagonist addressing the audience directly with a shallow depth of field, often mid-conversation, to give her own reaction or commentary on the scene. This signals to the audience a disparity between how deeply Fleabag feels yet how detached her feelings are from the world, and that her attempts to externalise them are superficial at best; de Beauvoir goes so far as to note that the “characteristic trait of the girl” is that “she is too divided internally to enter into combat with the world; she confines herself to escaping reality or to contesting it symbolically” (p. 421). The infamous dinner party of the second series’ first episode epitomises both facets in its depiction of Fleabag at odds with her widowed father’s recent engagement to her godmother. Fleabag’s impotence and insularity is laid out at the start of the episode by her direct sardonicism to camera, her sudden smile as a toast is made “to love!”, and several establishing shots of the other diners laughing together that cut to a close-up of Fleabag, alone, staring blankly at the audience. Much

of the narrative of the second series is driven by the “(Hot) Priest”, the only character able to recognise when Fleabag breaks the fourth wall, and this is foreshadowed in this episode; Fleabag is about to quip that “no-one’s asked me a question in forty-five minutes”, but the Priest interrupts (“So what do you do?”). Regarding the convenience of this relationship, de Beauvoir’s discusses Hegel’s reciprocity, writing that “the slave [...] out of dependence, hope, or fear, internalizes [...] need for the master” (p. 29), and that (narcissistic) women tend to develop a relation “with an unreal: her double or god; or she creates an unreal relation with a real being” (p. 810). Fleabag is unable to communicate her loneliness to the people closest to her, and instead is offered the Priest’s salvation. In Fleabag’s case, this “unreal relation” simply takes the form of an unrequited love: “I love you”, she brazenly declares in the final episode of the show. “It’ll pass”, he gently responds. Additionally, there is an inherent tension between Fleabag’s journey towards self-acceptance and her vulnerability in the face of the Priest; for the show to have a satisfying conclusion, one must therefore be sacrificed. Though he is eventually shown to be a discerning and erudite counterpart to Fleabag, this makes their eventual power struggle even more disappointing; while the Priest’s relationship with Fleabag inadvertently strengthens his faith, the heart-broken Fleabag is once again sacrificed to the whims of patriarchy.

One might argue that Godmother, in her enterprising and quasi-villainy, serves as a counterargument to this decoding—by the end of the series, she achieves exactly what she wants at little personal cost. Agency, therefore, is not exclusively male. However, I would first contend that the result of Godmother’s marital machinations is described by de Beauvoir as an inescapable serfdom, lamenting that “parents still raise their daughters for marriage rather than promoting their personal development; and the daughter sees so many advantages that she desires it herself [...] the vicious circle is knotted: this inferiority reinforces her desire to find a husband” (p. 189). Godmother’s quest for self-determination, therefore, is merely a patriarchal illusion and achieves the opposite effect. In de Beauvoir’s view, Godmother can be likened to a woman who marries outside of her “clan”, as “she almost always goes to live under her

husband's roof: this fact is proof enough of male domination" (p. 106). For example, in continuing Fleabag's humiliation during their dinner party, she interjects innuendo into a discussion of Fleabag's dad gifting her a therapy session for her birthday: "all my presents are bedroom presents, aren't they?", she jests to Fleabag's dad, only further entrenching her Hegelian status, acting in service to manhood. de Beauvoir is unambiguous in the role sex has on male agency, asserting that "his domination is expressed by the coital position of almost all animals; the male is on the female" (p. 58). Furthermore, almost every manifestation of Godmother's agency is explicitly sexual, which I argue only widens the "heterosexual division of labour", as film theorist Laura Mulvey notes in her essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema". The most substantial instance of this comes in the catastrophic finale of the first series, featuring Godmother's "Sexhibition": "a journey through my physical and sexual life climaxing in a few pieces inspired by and moulded on your father". Designed to humiliate Fleabag, the works featured include a statue of a nude torso based on Fleabag's (dead) mother, and a life-size plaster cast of an ex-boyfriend, though part of the sculpture instead features on the "wall of cocks" nearby.¹ To qualify this as phallogentric would be an understatement. Godmother's attack is her own personal domination over Fleabag, but in its explicit sexuality, echoes the refrain of female subjugation implicit within male agency—that "even the coital posture that places the woman underneath the man is an added humiliation" (p.77), as de Beauvoir claims—and further reduces both characters to a caricature of a hypersexual woman. While one might argue that Waller-Bridge's choice to depict a godmother antagonising her female protagonist speaks in its own way to the potency of female agency, de Beauvoir views this as a perpetuation of a cycle of trauma, referring to Snow White and Sleeping Beauty as examples of "a whole cohort of tender heroines beaten, passive, wounded, on their knees, humiliated, [that] teach their younger sisters the fascinating prestige of martyred, abandoned, and resigned beauty" (p. 353). Godmother's

¹ See images below as it is impossible to do this scene justice with merely description.

vindictiveness is ostensibly unproductive; however, its claims towards self-sufficiency and empowerment are founded upon the same tenets of patriarchy that already hold Fleabag back.

It is important to distinguish the catharsis that Fleabag (and Godmother) feel by the end of the show's narrative from the notion of true female agency—Fleabag is forced to breakup with the Priest, without whom Godmother would not have been able to get married. In both instances, “it is the male who opens up the future toward which she also transcends” (p.100), as de Beauvoir somewhat sourly remarks, though one might question the relevancy of de Beauvoir's second-wave feminism amidst contemporary interest in intersectionality and self-constructionism. Even so, I conclude that the fundamental Hegelian male-female relationship is prominent within *Fleabag*, and modern existence more generally; this dependent approach towards female transcension is certainly true of *Fleabag*. In an interview with *The Hollywood Reporter*, Waller-Bridge denied the potential for a third series in the near future, acknowledging Fleabag's journey having “started as someone who sort of hated herself and ended up as someone believing that she could love again and forgive herself. I have to respect that arc and let her go and live for a bit”. In Waller-Bridge's portrayal of Fleabag's infirmity and her blunt critiques on the expectations and disappointments of womanhood, particularly through Godmother, it is her sexual and spiritual conflicts with the Priest's masculinity that draw her through this arc. Even so, in the show's final moments, Fleabag feels the camera's gaze on her, as we know her so well to do, yet shakes her head, and walks off into the night alone. In abandoning her escapism and choosing to exist in her own thoughts, I argue that these final seconds are the closest that *Fleabag* gets to female agency—and the closest Fleabag is to peace.



Fleabag:

I'd love one of these on my floor ...

Like a rug with perks.

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