The Bechdel Test

The Bechdel test gets its name from a 1985 comic, *The Rule*, an early installment in Alison Bechdel’s long-running series, *Dykes to Watch Out For*. The initial frame pictures a movie marquee showing *The Rule* (and offering thanks to Liz Wallace, whom Bechdel credits with the idea). Two women, unnamed, are seen walking past theaters with other offerings on their marquees—all apparently action movies: *The Mercenary*, *The Barbarian*, *The Vigilante*, and, finally, *Rambo Meets Godzilla*. The blond proposes they go to see one; the woman with short-cropped dark hair responds with her rule about which films she will see: “It has to have at least two women in it... who... talk to each other about... something besides a man,” a daunting prospect given what seems available. The strip has an unexpected punchline or two in response to the dilemma. The last film she was able to see, she continues, was *Alien*. It satisfied the rule; the two women in it (Ripley and Lambert) talk about the monster; describing them, the animated speaker fills the frame with a gesture meant perhaps to conjure up the monster. The two women continue their walk side by side in a frame that matches an earlier one, but now they seem stymied by the chance of finding a film to see. The blond ventures instead that they go to her place; her offer is accepted enthusiastically. Sex seems likely to be in view. *Alien* and the monster between the two women perhaps translates what they are about to do. That the two appear to be a cross-race couple adds to the tongue-in-cheek frisson.

By itself, *Alien* (1979; directed by Ridley Scott) is a witty solution to the dilemma the two women face; although it is an action film, with a predominantly male crew, it is only Ripley...
(believe it or not; her name perhaps nods in the direction of Patricia Highsmith) who escapes. She is the “final girl” figure Carol Clover identifies in *Men, Women, and Chainsaws*,¹ with the further twist that the “monster” is not a predatory male that the “final girl” survives to defeat. Does it have a gender? The thing it seems intent on doing is not so much the destruction of the crew as its own reproduction; it seems to have a number of ways of doing that—fields of pods, egglike plants (when touched, a creature bursts from one to suck face, impregnating Kane, one of the male crew members, who dies giving birth to another creature); other victims are bound in cocoons, gestating. It is probably premature to wonder whether the Ripley of *Alien* is a dyke to watch out for, although she does almost miss her chance to escape because she can’t find her cat, Jones; too soon too to wonder if in sequels she will want to ask the monster, “Are You My Mother?” The hint is given, however, in the film; the computer in charge of the mission is called “Mother.” “Mother” is intent on saving the life the monster mother creates, and is quite indifferent to human life.

No explicit connection to *Alien* can be found in Bechdel’s 2012 graphic novel *Are You My Mother?*, although its subtitle, *A Comic Drama*, gestures at the generic mashup it shares with the film. The film passes the Bechdel test; whether it is legible as feminist/sapphic, as *The Rule* certainly is, remains a question. Literary allusion is one route from the early strip to the novel, as was also the case in Bechdel’s first graphic novel *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* (2006).² The Wikipedia entry for “Bechdel test” credits Virginia Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own* as Bechdel’s inspiration for the rule, citing a passage from chapter 5, just after the project for the modern novel is announced in the stark, pregnant predication, “Chloe liked Olivia”: “All these relationships between women, I thought, rapidly recalling the


108
splendid gallery of fictitious women, are too simple...and I tried to remember any case in the course of my reading where two women are represented as friends.... They are now and then mothers and daughters. But almost without exception they are shown in their relation to men. It was strange to think that all the great women of fiction were, until Jane Austen’s day, not only seen by the other sex, but seen only in relation to the other sex. And how small a part of a woman’s life is that…” (A Room of One’s Own, 81).

Woolf’s excitement at what the imaginary novel she is describing might achieve is palpable; it is not just its subject matter of women in relation to each other, “a sight that has never been seen since the world began” (83), but that its realization would create an as-yet-unrealized world; it “would be to talk of something else, looking steadily out of the window...in the shortest of shorthand, in words that are hardly syllabled yet...to devise some entirely new combination of her resources...to absorb the new into the old without disturbing the infinitely intricate and elaborate balance of the whole” (82). This may be the ambition of Bechdel’s practice in its combination of word and image. In her introduction to The Essential Dykes to Watch Out For,\(^3\) Bechdel modestly, self-deprecatingly credits her achievement to her inability to succeed as an artist (she was rejected from art school) and her limited success as a writer; she cherishes a rejection letter from Adrienne Rich for an autobiographical piece she submitted to Sinister Wisdom, while a fan letter, years later, from Rich about her cartoon series affirms how well she succeeded by combining her resources. Are You My Mother? realizes the world in which its words take place: recurring scenes of Alison on the phone with her mother or in therapy with Jocelyn or Carol are filled in with the details of time and place thanks to Bechdel’s exacting drawing. Nothing is simply one thing, to recall the sentence from To the Lighthouse (1927; “For nothing was simply one thing”) that serves as the epigraph to Bechdel’s deeply recursive book.\(^4\)

---


4 Parenthetical citations are from Alison Bechdel, Are You My Moth-
Allusions to Woolf are dense in Bechdel’s text. Crucially, she recalls a moment in Woolf’s late “A Sketch of the Past” (printed in *Moments of Being*). We see Bechdel reading that volume, pen in her mouth, as she thinks about how much more she imagines herself in her mother’s mind than she probably is (18). How to effect their separation — how to get out of a feedback loop that often becomes one with no way out: Woolf’s way, she reports, and Bechdel quotes, lay in writing *To the Lighthouse*: “[O]ne day walking round Tavistock Square I made up, as I sometimes make up my books, *To the Lighthouse*; in a great, apparently involuntary rush…when it was written I ceased to be obsessed by my mother” (*Moments of Being*, 81). Nothing is simply one thing on this page with its juxtaposition of Bechdel and her mother, Woolf and Julia Stephen. In the frame that completes the page, showing Alison with her therapist Carol, the pen that was in Bechdel’s mouth at the top right of the page is in Carol’s hand at the bottom left; Woolf’s profile on the cover of the first edition of *Moments of Being* is answered by Alison’s below; Alison is not talking to her therapist about her mother, although the banner above the frame indicates that she has been in therapy her entire adult life because she has yet to lay her “deeply felt emotion” about her “to rest”; inside the frame, she remarks on her solid but precarious relation with her lover and on the book she is engaged in, writing about her father’s suicide. As she reports towards the end of *Are You My Mother?,* it was while in the midst of “intense creative ferment” (253), working simultaneously on her comic strip (in which “one of my characters has just gotten pregnant”) and on *Fun Home,* while reading intensively in psychoanalytic theory (the cover of an Adam Phillips title appears at this point), that she felt “the very first stirrings of this book about my mother.” The scene of “conception” is this flood of coincidences.

Metaphorically, these multiple things — writing/drawing; comics; novels; Woolf; psychoanalysis, on the page, on the couch — are condensed in the figuration of maternal conception.

On the opening page of *Are You My Mother?*, in an image worthy of *Alien*, Bechdel explains how she “understood reproduction as a child. I was an egg inside my mother and she was still an egg inside her mother, and so forth and so on” (7). The task of creating involves breaking out of this “dizzying infinite regress” without beginning or end. “There’s a certain relief in knowing that I am a terminus,” Bechdel reports (7). But a terminus, an end point, also is a place where one can make new connections, get off one train and board another. The metaphor of maternal reproduction shuts down the process belied in the very fact of the writing/drawing, producing an object that is neither Alison Bechdel nor her mother; the moment in the narrative when they communicate best is when they speak lines written by someone else, Oscar Wilde, in fact (241). Bechdel concludes that “by stepping back a bit from the real thing to look at it, that we are most present” (242).

It’s a conclusion worthy of Woolf. In *To the Lighthouse*, Mrs. Ramsay makes the present by bringing people together for the possibility of an experience that is not simply theirs, not just a matter of individual consciousness or of conscious desire. Woolf makes clear that this way of living is an aesthetic project by assigning it to the figure of Lily Briscoe, trying to capture in her painting what Woolf attempts in words. Lily is not part of the Ramsay family; she too is a terminus, an unmarried woman; she conveys the life of the Ramsays in geometrical forms on canvas. *Are You My Mother?* draws on a number of psychoanalytical texts, Lacan’s mirror stage among them, but mainly on essays by D.W. Winnicott (and Bechdel’s research into his life). Winnicott read Woolf; the connection Bechdel traces is by way of James Strachey, translator of Freud, Winnicott’s analyst, and the youngest brother of Woolf’s beloved Lytton. They cross paths, unknowingly, on two pages of Bechdel’s book (24–5) — Woolf strolls, making it up, in Tavistock Square as the young Winnicott rushes by on the way to Strachey’s couch.

*    *    *

In a diary entry that Bechdel cites (November 28, 1928), Woolf records that had her father lived longer, “his life would have
entirely ended mine” (3:208); a year later (December 14, 1929), she notes that had she married Strachey, she would “never have written anything” (3:273). Late in *Are You My Mother?*, Bechdel recounts that while researching Winnicott she had yet to tell her mother that her “book about him” also was to be about her (197). Is Winnicott Bechdel’s mother? Bechdel acknowledges that is her desire (21); it is based perhaps on identification — Bechdel credits Alice Miller’s claim that therapists often were children who responded to their mother’s neediness by mothering them, as Bechdel thinks she herself has done. “I want Jocelyn to be my mother,” she writes as well (51). Jocelyn breaks a (therapeutic) rule when she tells Bechdel that she lost her mother when young (as Woolf did) and that it took years for her to get over it. She breaks another, and would do it again, she tells Bechdel years after therapy ended, when she tells Alison that she is adorable (273–4), a sentence she wanted her mother to say. *Are You My Mother?* asks its reader to occupy that place. Am I your mother?

*    *    *

In the “Cartoonist’s Introduction” to *The Essential Dykes to Watch Out For*, Bechdel reports that until she began that project she only drew men (xiii). At the end of the introduction, contemplating her accomplishment in the decades-long series, she wonders whether in answering the call of Adrienne Rich to “speak the unspeakable” (xviii; an admonition that echoes Woolf’s call to find “words that are hardly syllabled yet”), she had made lesbians conventional. “Have I churned out episodes of this comic strip every two weeks for decades to prove that we’re the same as everyone else?” Does (God forbid) *The Essential Dykes to Watch Out For* essentialize dykes? There is, I would venture to say, more than one way to essentialize. If Bechdel’s book succeeds in the mold that Woolf provides, it does so by showing that nothing is one thing, and / but that nonetheless there is, as Woolf puts it in *To the Lighthouse*, something “between things, beyond things” that lends them “some common feeling” (192). There is, in short, a life in common that
allows each thing to be itself and yet not itself, same and different, at once.