The Bechdel Test and the Social Form of Character Networks

Do we know a feminist—or a non-misogynist—text when we see one? Are there structural criteria that might make a text definitively feminist? The Bechdel test implicitly proposes an answer to both questions, and we can see more clearly how it does so by relating it to social network analysis. As is well known, the Bechdel test gives films a pass or fail rating based on three linked criteria: "*One*, it has to have at least two women in it who, two, *talk* to each other about, three, something besides a *man*."[1] It originated with a 1985 strip of Alison Bechdel's long-running comic *Dykes to Watch Out For* (1983–2008), which preceded her widely acclaimed graphic memoirs, *Fun Home* (2006) and *Are You My Mother* (2012).[2] The Bechdel test is thus akin to film ratings warning viewers of strong language, violence, or sexual content, and in 2013 several Swedish cinemas made international news coverage by pledging to post Bechdel test scores alongside ratings. Like these ratings, the test advertises a horizon of expectation for the content of a film, but unlike them, it explicitly grants that content a political valence. In passing a politically charged judgment on a wide variety of kinds of cultural texts—it has been applied to plays, novels, films, videogames, and comics—the Bechdel test offers an unusual combination of empirical data and political judgment whose consequences for literary scholarship have not been addressed.

If, as James F. English has observed, conventional literary criticism has not been a "'counting' discipline," indeed has even been defined by a "negative relation to numbers,"[3] then

it should not come as a surprise that the Bechdel Test did not originate or spread in the academy, but rather in the realm of what Brian Droitcour has recently called "vernacular criticism."[4] Such criticism could be defined less by who writes it than by where it appears: YouTube channels, Amazon and GoodReads reviews, TVtropes.org entries, on fan sites and within fan fiction, and in web-based periodicals like *The New Inquiry, The Los Angeles Review of Books*, and *Salon*. Indeed, this public-facing criticism is often written by readers with some academic training or affiliation looking to write for a broader public.[5] Such has been the case with the Bechdel test: Anita Sarkeesian, who played an important role in popularizing the test in recent years, holds an MA in political and social thought from York University. On her YouTube channel *Feminist Frequency*, Sarkeesian has dealt with gender issues in video games as well as in films, where she has regularly run the Bechdel Test on the Best Picture nominees during Oscar Season since 2009. Beginning in the same year, the site bechdeltest.com has "tested" over 6,000 films with these criteria, using the additional proviso that the two female characters who talk to each other must be named characters, and it makes the database available for searching and for algorithmic aggregation.[6] In 2013, Daniel Mariani used the user-contributed data from bechdeltest.com to create a robust series of visualizations of the compiled data.[7] The findings include breakdowns by genre (musicals are the top-ranked genre), ratings for Oscar-winning films, and more.

Of particular interest to this article is the way in which the Bechdel test has arrived at a convergence with contemporary digital humanities methodologies.[8] Such a convergence also allows us to take the Bechdel test as a form of distant or operationalized reading similar to those developed by Franco Moretti, and as an explicitly politicized form of digital humanities scholarship of the kind Alan Liu and others have called for.[9] Relatedly, we can see it as an informative instance of what Stephen Best, Sharon Marcus, Heather Love, and others have

developed under the rubric of "surface reading." In what follows, I describe the Bechdel test as a

theory of character networks in fictional narratives. The Bechdel test provides one set of criteria

for generating a character network for a text, and it also works as a means of expanding the

scholarly conversation about the political dimensions of social networks within narrative. To that

end, I will return to a current in 1970s and 1980s feminist and queer scholarship and its

productive encounter with contemporary theories of social networks. Such theories bring up a set

of political stakes distinct from those that often surround discussions of contemporary digital

culture and what Manuel Castells has called the "network society." By situating the Bechdel test

and its social networks within a longer genealogy of feminist thought about agency, including

signal work by Virginia Woolf, Gayle Rubin, Eve Kosovsky Sedgwick, and Judith Butler, I hope

to sketch out a pragmatic approach to the politics of networked agency within literary and social

forms. The Bechdel test's description of character networks suggests that we move beyond what

Alex Galloway has called "network optimism" and "network pessimism"—the utopian and

dystopian poles of discourse about the contemporary "network society"—and toward a more

measured approach to networked agency.[10]

1. Social Network Analysis and Literary Works

Graph theory, the mathematical basis for social network analysis, offers first and

foremost a form of abstraction. As Newman, Barabási, and Watts put it in their introductory

book on network analysis, "by abstracting away the details of a problem, graph theory is capable

of describing the important topological features with a clarity that would be impossible were all

the details retained."[11] A network's topological features—that is, the shapes identified by this

form of abstraction—might tell us about the passage of traffic on a highway grid or within a

hotel, or the flow of information through a telephone switch or a social group. Formulae and algorithms can detect a network's communities (or cliques), the most central players, the best-positioned brokers of information, and the density and shape of a network according to various criteria. Such formulae might be used in planning traffic patterns to popular destinations, to analyze the use of email communication within a corporation, or to chart the social dynamics and patterns of friendship within groups of children. In literary studies, network analysis has so far found its most robust applications within new sociologies of literature, but it has taken on other modalities, as well.[12] Scholarship has also focused on the representation of network technologies within fiction, forms of electronic fiction that benefit from the formal technology of hypertext and other linking protocols, the contemporary political valences of networks, and also character networks. I'll briefly describe the historicist, methodological, and formal dimensions of such literary network analysis in this section.

Historicist analyses of network culture face a difficult question: when and how did networks begin to explicitly and decisively shape literary strategies for mapping the social world? We can acknowledge that in the U.S. online social networks are now part of many people's everyday consumption of political news and information without being uncritically enamored of Deleuze and Guattari's "rhizome" or being dupes to a fantasy of a "revolutionary Twitter," as critics like Alex Galloway, Eugene Thacker, and Evgeny Morozov worry.[13] Likewise, a literary text need not include a celebration of what Galloway calls "the reticular fallacy"—the fetishization of decentralized networks as inherently democratic—to have interesting commentary on the networks of culture, as contemporary works by David Simon, Jennifer Egan, Dave Eggers, Neal Stephenson, Karen Tei Yamashita, and many others might suggest. Nonetheless, the cultural-historical question about when networks emerged as either a

thematic concern or an explicit formal strategy remains a thorny one. David Ciccoricco, Wesley Beal, and Stacey Margolis have demonstrated, relative to digital fiction, modernist fiction, and the early-19th-century novel respectively, that it is difficult to put a precise start date on social networks or communications networks as explicit topics within literary texts, because such networks exist in some form during all historical periods.[14] A complement to this historical scholarship, though, can be found in work that tries to treat self-reflexively our own contemporary critical tendencies toward network analysis. In this context, Patrick Jagoda, Steven Shaviro, and Thacker and Galloway find within the broader field of contemporary intellectual and political discourse a preference for networks that seems near-ubiquitous in the present.[15]

If we are to join rather than beat the network-oriented, then in terms of methodology Bruno Latour's actor-network theory encourages scholars to use the network as a model for investigation. By taking a networked approach to a conceptual problem, a researcher also frames that problem and its evidence in a particular way. For Bruno Latour, a sociological method defined by "tracing a network" allows the researcher to avoid unseemly leaps between text and context, the "local" and the "global," or the "actor" and the "system."[16] Heather Love's essay, "Close but Not Deep" introduces the virtues of Latour's strategy of tracing a network with regard to literary studies, and she connects Latour's avoidance of "leaps" between the local and the global, the actor and the system, to the impulse behind Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus's "surface reading." Love's essay suggests that this empirical style of reading can and should be applied to the networks within literary texts, too. Best and Marcus write that one of the modes of surface reading is describing the "patterns that exist within and across texts"; Love, for her part, avers that literature "offers accounts of the world that are faithful, detailed, and complex, and that trace networks."[17] This approach has most deeply informed the "new sociologies of

literature" that James F. English has described. In these studies, the critical mode is less one of uncovering the disavowed cultural politics of texts than of tracing the social patterns of practice that authors and critics seldom take care to emphasize—the patterns of reprinting a work; how winning a prize changes the trajectory of a career; which authors bridged the disparate communities defined by different modernist poetry journals; or how admiration by French critics helped boost an American artist's prestige at home.[18] Each example of such an approach implicitly traces a limited network of a certain kind of connection—reviews, journal acceptances, prizes, and so on—within the literary field.

In formal terms, the networks within fiction that Love describes also work to create detailed maps of the social world and its recurring forms. Caroline Levine takes Charles Dickens's *Bleak House* (1853) as an informative example: the novel "imagines society itself as a network of networks," and its complex narrative form comprises networks that link characters through ties such as "the law, disease, philanthropy, the space of the city, class, gossip, and the family tree."[19] Indeed, many large fictional works map the social world in this way. Moreover, one can see within different types of social ties, as they coexist on such a map, entirely different sub-networks. As Ned Schantz argues in *Gossip, Letters, Phones: The Scandal of Female Networks in Film and Literature*, the multiplicity of modes of interconnection within a social world can also produce tension, disruption, and subversion.[20] Schantz has shown how in work by Richardson, Austen, and others, the official and male-dominated structures of bureaucracy and authority are often influenced or even undercut by backchannels of gossip and advice. Levine takes this insight a step further when she observes that David Simon's *The Wire* (2002–8) revels in the analytical power that resides in understanding the networks of people and institutions around us. Levine pays particular attention to the characters in *The Wire* who "work the

network," including Lester Freamon, the policeman who cracks the drug gang's communication protocols, and Omar Little, the thief who pounces on opportunities to rob the drug dealers. As opposed to the protagonists who rail against the bureaucracy in *The Wire*, Levine points to these network-savvy characters as the show's innovative "epistemological and ethical exemplars;" in so doing, she encourages us to consider social networks as a mode for reading both literary texts and the social world around us.[21]

Social network analysis as practiced in sociology and other fields, then, has the potential to enrich our descriptions of social networks as they occur within fiction. The Stanford Literary Lab has been innovative in this regard, particularly in its analysis of character networks in the works of Shakespeare, Dickens, and Cao Xueqin.[22] Moretti's work on character networks emphasizes the ludic approach enabled by the information-visualization dimension of such networks. What might the social world of *Hamlet* look like, his team asks in one example, without Hamlet? The Stanford team demonstrates that the character network produces a flattened depiction of the text's plot, which transforms it from a time-object into a visual diagram. Indeed, one of the pairs of diagrams in the accompanying article prefigures Bechdel's point about gender disparities within fictional social networks: Moretti highlights the two most central male characters' connections—Hamlet's and Claudius's—and juxtaposes them with an image that highlights Gertrude's and Ophelia's connections, showing them to be less central participants in the social network, as defined by lines of dialogue, that *Hamlet* shows its audience.[23] Moretti's main goal with *Hamlet* is to map style onto the overall network, where he finds the court's style and diction (at the social network's center) to be more elevated than those of the state's functionaries (an early version of a "bureaucracy" Moretti sees in the outer reaches of the network).[24]

Within both sociology and literary studies, one must make consequential decisions about what "counts" in a network before beginning to undertake network analysis. Since the network is a form of abstraction, the observer makes choices that define both the scope and the focus of that abstraction. Such a choice takes shape as the scope of who or what counts as belonging to the set of nodes (the network's points, also called vertices) and what forms of contact or exchange constitute the edges (the lines of the network, whose lengths usually denote the weight or strength of that connection between nodes). I write "who or what" here because Latour takes care to emphasize that "nonhuman actors" or "actants" may well serve as nodes.[25] Indeed, an example of such a human-to-nonhuman network can be seen in Beal's reading of Jean Toomer's experimental novel *Cane* (1923) as a network structure that traces a geographical social network of African Americans and also the forms of production, including that of sugar, that help constitute it.[26] We also choose what constitutes the edge between characters, whether it is dialogue, as in Moretti's method, name co-occurrence, which enables algorithmic extraction of approximate character networks, or another kind of connection.[27] In one playful example, the data visualization designer Jerôme Cukier constructed a network model of George R.R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* saga whose edges are constituted by murders.[28] The decision regarding the extent or scope of the network is usually an easy one to make within literary networks, as the individual work or series of works forms an intuitive boundary point.[29]

Most importantly for my purposes here, Latour refers to nodes and edges in order to connote the comparatively active and passive functional elements of a network, as "mediators" or "intermediaries."[30] An intermediary might merely be a vehicle for information that constructs a network, while the "mediator" actively modifies information that passes through a network. Latour describes even the comparatively active "mediator" as an "actant," a a term that

contributes to Latour's skirting of the "actor" and "system" problem, because the actant's actions are always fundamentally shaped by the networks in which it participates.[31] For human actors the actor-system problem takes on a new form when considered in social network analysis: networks turn our attention to the specific topology of the social system in which an actor finds herself, rather than to an undifferentiated and panoptic system against which a character works alone.[32] Using social network analysis, we can examine how different styles of action are suited to different network topologies, for instance, or how the specifics of certain institutions or networks privilege particular kinds of actants.

For one example in which mediators of information take on a positive valence, let us take Ronald S. Burt's analyses of communication within corporations. He shows how what he calls "brokers" of ideas often advance faster in their careers, sharing valuable knowledge by connecting with members of other cliques within the company. Burt shows how middle managers whose "networks spanned structural holes [that is, bridged relatively unconnected subgroups] were more likely to have a good idea, express their idea, and discuss that idea with colleagues."[33] Having and sharing ideas as a means to promotion and advancement is the kind of agency that Burt focuses on within the corporation, and he comes to a counterintuitive conclusion about how such idea-oriented agency functions: "the brokerage value [and the general value] of an idea *resides in the situation*, in the transaction through which an idea is delivered to an audience; not in the source of the idea, nor in the idea itself."[34] It is this same understanding of character, and of networked agency, that I find in Bechdel's Test, which helps us to see the differences between mediators and intermediaries, nodes and edges, within the social networks that cultural texts model for their audiences.

2. Female Networks, or Between Women

If we consider that female characters are often intermediaries between male characters, that is, serving as points through which to triangulate male-to-male desire or power, we can understand Bruno Latour's distinction between mediators and intermediaries in a new key. The mediator, as noted earlier, is that which acts upon input, whereas the intermediary is a comparatively passive vehicle. In terms of network visualization, the mediators are nodes or points, whereas intermediaries are counted as edges or lines between them. We could then visualize the actor-network of a text in which intermediary female characters could be accurately represented not as nodes in their own right, but as mere edges between the male nodes.

This notion that some humans might be passive conduits for others' desires is, of course, developed in two classics of feminist and queer theory. Gayle Rubin's "The Traffic in Women" and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's *Between Men* base their analyses on the claim that both real and fictional worlds often treat women as intermediaries within their social networks.[35] Rubin puts this point, gleaned from Claude Lévi-Strauss's work on arranged marriage in gift economies in *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*, succinctly: "If it is women who are being transacted, then it is the men who give and take them who are linked, the woman being a conduit of a relationship rather than a partner to it."[36] In her application of this idea via the work of René Girard, Sedgwick even visualizes how it applies to character networks in fiction: she writes: "the graphic schema on which I am going to be drawing most heavily in the readings that follow is the triangle," a strategy that springs from the observation that the "triangles Girard traces are most often those in which two males are rivals for a female; it is the bond between the males that he most assiduously uncovers."[37]

Sedgwick expands on this core observation in ways that I cannot pursue here, but she makes the key point early on that the structure of the relevant triangles is based on more than just the differentials in social and political power accorded to men. Because there is an "asymmetry" between "the relatively continuous relation of female homosocial and homosexual bonds and on the other hand, the radically discontinuous relation of male homosocial and homosexual bonds," the need for female intermediaries is a more widespread and pressing one.[38] What Sedgwick points out here is a qualitative difference between same-sex bonds in men and in women: men are able to use women as intermediaries in order to forge a particular kind of bond between men; women, by contrast, seem not to need an intermediary partner.

How, if Rubin and Sedgwick make explicitly diagrammatic claims about women's roles within social networks, does Bechdel's test continue this line of inquiry? To situate Alison Bechdel's 1985 comic, "The Rule," within that tradition of feminist scholarship, I will begin with the caveats that Bechdel herself frequently mentions. First, on the first cell of the strip, an asterisk indicates that it was her friend Liz Wallace who devised the "rule. Bechdel thus claims her comic is merely brokering the idea to a wider public, but I will contend that the comic also actively mediates and comments upon Wallace's idea. In a blog post from 2013, when the strip was making headlines after the Swedish cinemas' inclusion of "test" ratings, Bechdel points to a relevant antecedent in Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*, where the passage on a fictitious book in which "Chloe liked Olivia" occasions the following meditation:

> "Chloe liked Olivia," I read. And then it struck me how immense a change was there. Chloe liked Olivia perhaps for the first time in literature. Cleopatra did not like Octavia. And how completely *Antony and Cleopatra* would have been altered had she done so! [...] All [the] relationships between women, I thought,

rapidly recalling the splendid gallery of fictitious women, are too simple. So much has been left out, unattempted. […] [A]lmost without exception they are shown in their relation to men…

Also, I continued, looking down at the page again, it is becoming evident that women, like men, have other interests besides the perennial interests of domesticity. "Chloe liked Olivia. They shared a laboratory together…" […] Suppose, for instance, that men were only represented in literature as the lovers of women, and were never the friends of men, soldiers, thinkers, dreamers; how few parts in the plays of Shakespeare could be allotted to them: how literature would suffer!"[39]

In *A Room of One's Own*, the "tests" are counterfactuals: the well-known thought experiment about Shakespeare's sister, for instance, as well as, in the beginning of this passage, a hypothetical novel where women have a thoughtfully developed relationship. The end of the passage adds a third counterfactual: what would it be like if all characters in literature functioned as women have done in the vast majority of plots? How would literature even *work*? In this counterfactual, Woolf imagines the dullness of a literature comprised only of intermediary characters, and it is this point that Bechdel sees as a precursor to "The Rule." Were we to turn to Woolf's own work, of course, we'd see that her novels raise more questions than they answer about what a well-developed female relationship might look like. To take just one example, the tie between Lily Briscoe and Mrs. Ramsay indicates how tenuous and fleeting the feelings of connection in a relationship might be, and how hard it is to judge what amounts to a significant relationship. But with Woolf's much simpler example of Cleopatra and Octavia, we see that it's

in the absence of a direct *relationship* between these women that their structurally subordinate role becomes most evident.

Although Bechdel attributes the "rule" to Wallace and points out a predecessor in Woolf's work, she complicates the idea further in the process of transmitting it. In "The Rule," Bechdel makes evident a sense of mischief through the first film that is subject to the test, Ridley Scott's *Alien* (1979). Because it features a strong female lead, it would seem by familiar criteria of representativeness, recognition, or identification to be a feminist film. Bechdel's character puts *Alien* to the test and concludes that two female characters do talk to each other, but only about "the monster." Clearly this is only a small step up from talking about a man. With this twist, the comic playfully undermines its own "rule" by implying that it doesn't quite provide the last word on the subject, or a necessary and sufficient criterion for a feminist film. (Indeed, the explicit judgment in the comic is only whether this character will watch the film.) Nevertheless, talking about "something besides a *man*" suggests that there might be a way to judge whether characters are merely functioning as intermediaries between men.

Indeed, to take "The Rule" point by point, we find that it guarantees only that a text: (1) has female characters who could be considered fully part of the character network; because (2) it includes conversational "edges" between those characters. Criterion (3)—that they talk about "something besides a *man*"—tries to guarantee that those edges are meaningful in terms of the character network, such that dialogue does not merely serve to subordinate these female characters to male characters, or deploy women solely as a means for the indirect characterization of men. In the comic, the notion of talking about "a monster" brings up an additional point, as it highlights *Alien*'s commonalities with the horror genre (as one early critic put it, *"Halloween* in space"): the film can be read as a network wherein the monster acts as the

inescapable hub of a social structure defined primarily by its acts of violence. Indeed, if describing the Bechdel test in terms of character networks helps to make its aim—finding the possible emergence of female community within fictional worlds—clearer, then network theory also helps to explain why talking about "the monster" is, in this case, a poor improvement.

If we take the round female character or strong female character as one criterion for evaluating a text's representation of gender, then it would seem that the Bechdel test, despite its simplicity and shortcomings, offers an innovative alternative to such an approach. I believe that is the value of its claim to our attention here, though we must also acknowledge that the two phenomena of character flatness and non-central network position are not wholly unrelated. Alex Woloch's work on minor characters in *The One vs. the Many*, which Moretti references in a follow-up to his essay on *Hamlet*'s networks, helps to elucidate this relationship between flat characters and character networks. For Woloch, major characters and minor characters serve competing aims in realist fictional works: "depth psychology and social expansiveness [respectively], depicting the interior life of a singular consciousness and casting a wide narrative gaze over a complex social universe."[40] Flat characters serve the purpose of one kind of realism, social representation, at the expense of another kind of realism, that of characters' psychological depth. Those competing aims fit onto both round and flat characters as E.M. Forster described them, and also onto characters who have relative centrality in a network, versus more peripheral or intermediary status. Moretti casts Woloch's "minor minor" (that is, particularly fleeting) characters in terms of character networks: "to be connected to a network by a single link, or by four or five, is not a matter of emphasis … but of function: 'obedience' (or, much more rarely, disobedience) for single-link characters; and 'mediation' [as mediators or intermediaries, Latour might say] for those who, because of their various connections, are almost always linked to more

than one network region."[41] In *Hamlet*, Moretti argues, the periphery is almost entirely occupied by functionaries who take various orders. Likewise, the messenger in *Romeo and Juliet* (who tries and fails to transmit a message between the lovers) and Camillo in *The Winter's Tale* (who disobeys his king's order) would count in these episodes as passive and active mediating characters respectively in Moretti's terms. But the difference in quantity of connections-- one versus four or five-- can tend to signal a qualitative difference in the function of the character in the text. In our reading, we can thus identify the periphery, the intermediary position, and even a position of total isolation near the center of a character network as trouble spots, and often as the positions of flat or intermediary characters.

Taking this question of minor characters' functions, we might also relate the Bechdel test's focus on network position to other categories of minority character inclusion. The female character isolated near the center of a network often serves as a prop for a central male character's self-actualization, and this can also be the case with a black character if we follow Leslie Fiedler's classic observations about the functions of black characters in U.S. texts' black male, white male dyad. [42] Likewise, the recent #NotYourAsianSidekick Twitter hashtag also pointed out how popular texts use the mere presence of a minority character as a guarantor of cool, authenticity, or cosmopolitan-ness. Unsurprisingly, such characters are often flat and occupy instrumental positions of isolation near the character network's center, and they would as a rule also fail a modified Bechdel test. Sociologists engaged in social network analysis, moreover, have argued that the cohesion of self-identified groups is a prerequisite for expressions of identity. As John Scott writes in his overview of the field's history, sociologists working in the 1940s and 1950s found that "cohesive sub-groupings that had their own norms, values, orientations, and subcultures … were among the most important sources of a person's

identity and sense of belonging, and their existence was widely recognized in the everyday terms

… that people used to describe their social world."[43] The culture or outlook of a particular group

can, by that measure, only be expressed within a fictional text if it occurs within some semblance

of that group's social world, and not by a single or token member from that group interacting

with majority characters.

Bechdel's 1985 comic strip concludes with a cell that depicts the two female characters

walking silently and defeated, until they make the decision to "go to my house and make

popcorn," a turn of events that returns the strip's focus to the relationships between its own

female characters. In the same way "The Rule" does not prescribe the content of the female

relationships (so long as they don't serve to make those characters subordinate), the strip leaves

the relationship between its characters open and indeterminate. This feature of the test seems

particularly germane to the 1985, pre-queer-theory appearance of Bechdel's original comic,

when mainstream feminist discourse may not have spoken directly to Bechdel or to the queer

characters who populate *Dykes to Watch Out For*.[44] Judith Butler noticed in *Gender Trouble* how

feminism often modeled a "heterosexual coherence," which "conceals the gender discontinuities

that run rampant … [in] contexts in which gender does not necessarily follow from sex, and

desire, or sexuality generally, does not seem to follow from gender."[45] When we identify a

"representative subject" of feminism in a role model or a text with potential for feminist

identification, we necessarily prescribe the content of that role. While the Bechdel test remains

out of step with the queer and gender theory that has followed *Gender Trouble*—the latter with

its more fluid treatments of sex and gender, affect, intersectionality and performance—it still

raises the question of community and collectivity in a potentially useful way. Intended for a

broader audience, the Bechdel test jettisons prescriptions about the behaviors of women within

cultural texts, along with prescriptions about the content of their exchanges, so long as it's certain they don't function solely as intermediaries between men. It looks for social spaces in which women's communities can be allowed to develop as they will, and it directs readers' attention more broadly to the roles minority characters play within both fictional texts and the social forms around them.

3. Critical Labor and Literary Data

The Bechdel test focuses on the presence of relationships that solidify two characters as mediators and not intermediaries, nodes and not edges, in a character network. As such, the Bechdel Test provides an alternative framework to ideas of identification or role model criteria that are also common within vernacular feminist criticism. As Rita Felski has observed, scholarly engagement with identification and recognition "is hedged round with prohibitions and taboos, often spurned as unseemly, even shameful, seen as the equivalent of a suicidal plunge into unprofessional naïveté."[46] This status hierarchy is an interesting phenomenon in its own right, and I want to conclude with several speculations about prestige, labor, and the data-character of the Bechdel test.

To take an example of the kind of identification-based response that populates the sphere of vernacular criticism, Sarkeesian's YouTube channel *Feminist Frequency*, which has been largely responsible for the Bechdel test's increased visibility since 2009, has also featured an identification-based series on "Tropes vs. Women." This unusual use of the term "trope"—to encapsulate "stereotype," "commonplace," or "flat, stock character"—originates with TVtropes.org, a wiki-format fan website that lists the commonplaces found primarily in video games and genre fiction. One such trope, for instance, is the "manic pixie dream girl," a stock

character Nathan Rabin identified in *The Atlantic* in 2006. Other such "tropes" include commonplaces like "Vazquez always dies"—the action-film commonplace wherein butch female characters, like the female soldier in *Aliens* (1986), are frequently eliminated—and the exposure of an android impostor, or "robot reveal," both of which appear prominently and repeatedly within the *Alien* film franchise. In "Tropes vs. Women," then, Sarkeesian emphasizes the difficulties of recognition when female characters are especially flat within popular texts. Recall Forster's own "test": "test of a flat character is whether it is capable of surprising in a convincing way. If it never surprises, it is flat."[47] These "tropes" announce genre commonplaces that, through repetition, have lost their ability to surprise. While the insistence upon round, identifiable female characters has not been at the forefront of academic feminist or gender-studies criticism in recent decades, it continues as a major issue within the sphere of vernacular criticism.

Pointing out the lack of a strong female character in a text, however, is dull work that may in turn fail to be surprising, and it does not afford one much credit for originality, nor would it help scholarly advancement. It's a repetitive kind of intellectual labor that we might associate with the "women's work" that Natalia Cecire has pointed out with regard to the devalued stages of literary production, such as typing and proofreading.[48] Noting that a film or a videogame does not have a confident or forceful female character is a kind of repetitive labor that the academy values much less than, say, interrogating the ontology of the sex-gender system. This is not to say, however, that academics are immune to underappreciated and repetitive political labor. In her recent discussions of "diversity work," Sara Ahmed identifies a tension between the creative intellectual labor of academic research and the kinds of repetitive and devalued institutional labor that diverse academics perform. For Ahmed, the labor of "having to keep insisting" on

basic points like gender pronouns, committee makeup, diversity training, and the like, leads to a

sort of exhaustion "where the necessity of repetition gets in the way of the hope of things just

receding."[49] The creative labor of critical theory and the ordinary labor of politics turn out in

institutional terms to be quite different things. Pointing out the devaluation of critical labor in the

spheres of vernacular feminism and institutional work might be one step in the direction of more

justly acknowledging it as labor.

Another consideration comes into play, though, when we consider the Bechdel test's

status as *data*, particularly in comparison with the work of identifying strong female characters.

The data of the Bechdel test appear, that is, to have a more objective, data-oriented quality than

do interpretations regarding the political valences of representations of women . Even though the

Bechdel test has not been fully automated—whether female characters significantly discuss

something besides a man remains a minimal judgment call—perhaps it benefits from the

appearance of impartiality and impersonality. For a point of contrast, consider that when men

have attacked feminist critics on the internet—such as the GamerGate bomb threat that forced

Sarkeesian to cancel a university speaking engagement—they often make personal criticisms of

what they see as a type: the "social justice warrior," i.e., the stereotype of the feminist as

unreasonable, sanctimonious, biased, and self-aggrandizing. These resistant readers of feminism

allow us to reconsider the "ethical charisma of the critic" that, Love claims, surface reading

allows us to skirt around.[50] If such ethical charisma, whether it resides in the critic or in the

politically correct text, fails to convince resistant and suspicious conservative readers, it seems

that the surface reading strategy of the Bechdel test can offer, if not a guarantee of success, at

least an alternative approach. Commentators have frequently noted the apparent modesty of the

Bechdel test's criteria, such that the figures on how many films fail the test can always be played

as a surprise.[51] Perhaps the data-character of the Bechdel test, as well as its amenability to

visualization, made it popular in journalism for many of the same reasons that the eye-catching

diagrams of the digital humanities took off around the same time: they both offer the appearance

of empirical certainty in fields (popular feminism and literary studies) that seem to larger news-

reading publics to be dominated by conflicting opinions rather than by data. Perhaps seeing the

Bechdel test as a vernacular form of the digital humanities can both enable us to pay more

sustained and serious attention to vernacular criticism and to borrow from its strategies for

reaching wider audiences. In this context, we might read Best and Marcus's "Surface Reading:

An Introduction" as both a call to a new kind of empirical rigor or even falsifiability—Karl

Popper's development of that concept also railed against Freudian and Marxian interpretive

styles—and as the formulation of a desire for larger reading publics to acknowledge the validity

of literary scholarship.[52]

Lastly, we can draw from the Bechdel test a final insight for thinking about post-critical

reading, surface reading, and actor network theory within literary studies. I would suggest that

considering the networked elements of fictional characters' agency—developing a character-

actor-network-theory—would allow us to think in a more supple way about the conditions that

circumscribe our own decisions and actions. Such an approach gives us a hold on an

understanding of agency as the reach of one's actions, and particularly of one's ideas, within

social networks. Levine approaches this idea in writing about *Bleak House*'s networks, noting

that the novel "undermines the usual sense of narrative's affordances by replacing the centrality

of persons with the agency of networks."[53] While I agree with the gist of this argument, I would

amend its wording to a new end in the light of the Bechdel test. Rather than replacing persons

with networks, I see the Bechdel test as encouraging us to *place* persons within networks, to see

how the structures and forms of the social world both enable and constrain subjects'

developments and actions. It is in this sense that Latour's actor-network approach can help solve

the problem of alternating between "actor" and "system" within literary and cultural studies.[54]

The Bechdel test shows us that the agency we should look for in texts and in the world—unlike

the sublime agency of the action film and unlike the sublime unfreedom of the panopticon—is

fundamentally social, and thus fundamentally networked.

[1] Alison Bechdel, "The Rule," *Dykes to Watch Out For* (Ithaca, NY: Firebrand Books, 1986), 22. Original emphasis.

[2] Soraya Nadia McDonald, "Alison Bechdel just won a MacArthur Foundation 'genius' grant. She's already changed the way we talk about film" *Washington Post Morning Mix*, 17 September 2014; Alison Bechdel, *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* (New York: Mariner Books, 2007); Alison Bechdel, *The Essential Dykes to Watch Out For* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2008); Alison Bechdel, *Are You My Mother? A Comic Drama* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2012).

[3] James F. English, "Everywhere and Nowhere: The Sociology of Literature After the Sociology of Literature," *New Literary History* 41, no. 2 (Spring 2010): v–xxiii, xii.

[4] Brian Droitcour, "Vernacular Criticism," *The New Inquiry*, July 25, 2014. http://thenewinquiry.com/essays/vernacular-criticism/

[5] See, for example, Philip Maciak and Lily Loufbourow "The Semipublic Intellectual," *PMLA* 130, no. 2 (spring 2015), forthcoming.

[6] For the sake of comparison within the realm of online collaborative databases, Wikipedia was founded in 2001, and TVTropes.org, was founded in 2006 and also remains active.

[7] A biostatistics PhD candidate based in Brazil, Mariani notes that he lacks academic knowledge of film or sociology. Daniel Mariani, "Visualizing the Bechdel test," *Ten Chocolate Sundaes* 24 June 2013 http://tenchocolatesundaes.blogspot.com/2013/06/visualizing-bechdel-test.html .

[8] While this essay was under revision with the journal, Association for Computational Linguistics conference proceedings appear to have closed this loop: Apoorv Agarwal, Jiehan Zheng, Shruti Vasanth Kamath, Sriram Balasubramanian, and Shirin Ann Dey, "Key Female Characters in Film Have More to Talk About Besides Men: Automating the Bechdel Test," *Human Language Technologies: The 2015 Annual Conference of the North American Chapter of the ACL*, Denver, Colorado, May 31–June 5, 2015. Agarwal et al measure many data-oriented aspects of the Bechdel test (their focus is on automating the test), though they also include several standard social network analysis measures. They found in a dataset of films that the mean degree centrality, the mean closeness centrality, and the mean between-ness centrality of named female characters were higher in films that passed the Bechdel test. That finding is a quantitative confirmation failing the Bechdel test correlates with being in either a peripheral or isolated position within a network, much like Moretti's finding, discussed below, that *Hamlet*'s most central women are less central than its most central men.

[9] Alan Liu, "Where is the Cultural Criticism in the Digital Humanities," in *Debates in the Digital Humanities* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 490–509.

[10] Alexander R. Galloway, "Network Pessimism," *Culture and Communication*, 11 November 2014. This blog post extrapolates on points made in Galloway and Eugene Thacker, *The Exploit: A Theory of Networks* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007) and Galloway, *Protocol: How Control Exists after Decentralization* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008).

[11] Mark Newman, Albert László Barabási, and Duncan Watts, *The Structure and Dynamics of Networks* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), 4. See also John Johnston's excellent short overview of network theory in "Network Theory and Life on the Internet," *JAC* 24, no. 4 (2004): 881–99.

[12] In new sociologies of literature, see for example William B. Warner's *Protocols of Liberty: Communication Innovation and the American Revolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013); Richard Jean So and Hoyt Long, "Network Analysis and the Sociology of Modernism," *boundary 2* 40.2 (2013), 147–82. Ongoing online projects include Stanford's *Republic of Letters*, UCSB's *RoSE* project, Daniel Shore's *Six Degrees of Francis Bacon*, and Ryan Cordell's *Viral Texts* project.

[13] Thacker and Galloway, *The Exploit*, 64; Evgeny Morozov, "Iran: Downside to the 'Twitter Revolution,'" *Dissent* (fall 2009), 10–14.

[14] David Ciccorico, *Reading Network Fiction* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 2007); Wesley Beal, "The Form and Politics of Networks in Jean Toomer's *Cane*," *ALH* 24.4 (Winter 2012): 658–79, 659; Stacey Margolis, "Network Theory circa 1800: Charles Brockden Brown's *Arthur Mervyn*," *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* 45.3 (fall 2012), 343–67. See also, on network forms in Victorian science, Anna Gibson, "*Our Mutual Friend* and Network Form," *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* 48, no. 1 (spring 2015): 63–84. See also for work on networks in historical transport and media Jonathan H. Grossman, *Charles Dickens's Networks: Public Transport and the Novel* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012) and Mark Goble, *Beautiful Circuits: Modernism and the Mediated Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010).

[15] Steven Shaviro, *Connected, or What it Means to Live in the Network Society* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003); Patrick Jagoda, "Terror Networks and the Aesthetics of

Interconnection, *Social Text* 28.4 (Winter 2010), 65–89 (also, Jagoda, "Network Aesthetics,"

manuscript forthcoming from University of Chicago Press).

[16] Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network Theory* (New York:

Oxford University Press, 2005): 103, 170.

[17] Best and Marcus, "Surface Reading," 11; Heather K. Love, "Close but not Deep: Literary

Ethics and the Descriptive Turn," *NLH* 41.2 (Spring 2010), 371–91; 377–8. She also writes that

such a mode of reading "suggests the possibility of an alternative ethics, one grounded in

documentation and description rather than empathy and witness" (375). Love characterizes

Erving Goffman's microsociology as an "exhaustive but 'thin' description … of the social

world" (375). The Bechdel test provides a similarly thin, but less exhaustive, form of description.

[18] See Pascale Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters*, trans. M. B. DeBevoise (Cambridge,

MA: Harvard University Press, 2004); James F. English, *The Economy of Prestige: Prizes,*

Awards, and the Circulation of Cultural Value (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press,

2008); Richard Jean So and Hoyt Long, "Network Analysis and the Sociology of Modernism,"

boundary 2 40, no. 2 (2013), 147–82. See also William B. Warner's *Protocols of Liberty:*

Communication Innovation and the American Revolution (Chicago: University of Chicago Press,

2013), Nathan K. Hensley, "What Is a Network? (And Who is Andrew Lang?)," *Romanticism*

and Victorianism on the Net 64 (October 2013). Ongoing online projects including Stanford's

Republic of Letters, UCSB's *RoSE* project, Daniel Shore's *Six Degrees of Francis Bacon*, and

Ryan Cordell's *Viral Texts* project.

[19] Caroline Levine, "Narrative Networks: *Bleak House* and the Affordances of Form," *Novel: A*

Forum on Fiction, 42, no. 3 (fall 2009), 517–23, 518. Nathan K. Hensley also worked on the

multiplicity of networks in an undergraduate course that traced the networks of *Middlemarch*, at:

https://blogs.commons.georgetown.edu/engl-161-spring2013/sample-page/conclusion-2/. I discuss David Mitchell's fiction and the multiplicity of global networks therein in "The Cult and the World System: The Topoi of David Mitchell's Global Novels," *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* 47, no. 3 (fall 2014), 443–59.

[20] Ned Schantz, *Gossip, Letters, Phones: The Scandal of Female Networks in Film and Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

[21] Caroline Levine, *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015), 149.

[22] Franco Moretti, "Network Theory, Plot Analysis," *New Left Review* 68 (March-April 2011), 80–102.

[23] Moretti, "Network Theory, Plot Analysis," 83.

[24] Moretti, "Network Theory, Plot Analysis," 93.

[25] Latour, 55.

[26] Beal, mentioned above, writes that, "for Cane, however, the choice of sugarcane as the material agent of interconnection carries heavy symbolic import," in "The Form and Politics of Networks in Jean Toomer's *Cane*," 667.

[27] See David K. Elson, Nicholas Dames, and Kathleen R. McKeown, "Extracting Social Networks from Literary Fiction," *Proceedings of the 48th Annual Meeting of the Association for Computational Linguistics (ACL 2010)*, Uppsala, Sweden; and Graham Sack, "Character Networks for Narrative Generation: Structural Balance Theory and the Emergence of Proto-Narratives," in *Complexity and the Human Experience: Modeling Complexity in the Humanities and Social Sciences* ed. Paul A. Youngman and Mirsad Hadzikadic (Singapore: Pan Stanford Press, 2014): 81–104. Sack has also worked with structural balance theory, wherein ties that

correspond to friendship or enmity, typically arranged in triangles, make for either stable or

unstable social arrangements; unstable triads generate reversals toward stable triads, which

changes may then cascade through other, connected groups of friends or enemies. If such triads

form a major basis of narrative action, then isolated or intermediary female characters would

seem to be cut out of such action.

[28] Jerôme Cukier, "Events in the Game of Thrones"

http://www.jeromecukier.net/projects/agot/events.html.

[29] One exception here might be the extensive networks one might map with regard to fan fiction,

both on the internet and its earlier iterations in mail-system coterie form.

[30] Latour, *Reassembling*, 37.

[31] Rita Felski elaborates on this point of Latour's in "Context Stinks!" *NLH* 42.4 (Autumn 2011),

573–91: "The 'actor' in actor-network theory is not a self-authorizing subject, an independent

agent who summons up actions and orchestrates events. Rather, actors only become actors via

their relations with other phenomena, as mediators and translators linked in extended

constellations of cause and effect" (583).

[32] Latour suggests moving from a "panopticon" to the "oligopticon," a deliberate move away

from both the unrelentingly critical perspective Foucault brings to studying science, but also to

the paucity of institutional description that necessarily attends the abstract model of the

panopticon (*Reassembling*, 175).

[33] Ronald S. Burt, *Brokerage and Closure: An Introduction to Social Capital* (New York: Oxford

University Press, 2005). I am indebted here to Long and So's discussion of "brokerage" in

"Network Analysis and the Sociology of Modernism."

[34] Burt, *Brokerage and Closure*, 63, my emphasis.

[35] Gayle Rubin, "The Traffic in Women: Notes on the 'Political Economy' of Sex," in *Toward an Anthropology of Women*, ed. Rayna R. Reiter (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1975), 157–210; Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985).

[36] Rubin, "Traffic," 174. Another fascinating point of Rubin's can be imagined in terms of economic networks. First, Rubin sees a *de facto* compulsory heterosexuality in Lévi-Strauss's observation that the sexual division of labor "insure[s] the union of men and women by making the smallest viable economic unit contain at least one man and one woman" (178). That is, to count socially and economically within a community, the household is the essential, internally divided node or unit of activity. Later in the essay, Rubin also imagines the exchange-ability of women as a consequential factor in economies: where women "can be turned into something else," the possibilities might include goods, "political power or wealth," such that women may play roles in various wealth-amassing strategies (207). We are accustomed to thinking of money as the paradigmatic intermediary in economic networks.

[37] Sedgwick, *Between Men*, 21.

[38] Sedgwick, *Between Men*, 5. One exception to this gender rule that springs to mind is Nella Larsen's 1929 novel, *Passing*, in which a man serves as an intermediary between the two female principals; Deborah McDowell analyzes this dynamic in *The Changing Same: Black Women's Literature, Criticism, and Theory* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1995).

[39] Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* [1929] (New York: Mariner Books, 1989), 83.

[40] Alex Woloch, *The One vs. the Many: Minor Characters and the Space of the Protagonist in the Novel* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 19.

[41] Franco Moretti, "'Operationalizing,' or the function of measurement in modern literary theory" *Stanford Literary Lab Pamphlet* 6 (December 2013), 8.

[42] Leslie A. Fiedler, *Love and Death in the American Novel* (New York: Criterion Books, 1960), 12.

[43] John Scott, *Social Network Analysis, Third Edition* (Los Angeles: Sage Publications, 2013), 99.

[44] Along similar lines, Bechdel noted in 2013 that the adoption of the test is a signal that "mainstream culture is starting to catch up to where lesbian-feminism was 30 years ago." Alison Bechdel, "Testy," *Dykestowatchoutfor.com*. 8 Nov 2013.

[45] Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 172–3.

[46] Rita Felski, *Uses of Literature* (New York: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 26. Felski defends the complexity and variety of forms of literary recognition in this essay, a complexity that does not in general inform Sarkeesian's work, particularly in her advocacy for more first-person female characters in videogames. For this reason, I use "recognition" and "identification" interchangeably here.

[47] E. M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel* [1927] (New York: Mariner Books, 1956), 78.

[48] Natalia Cecire, "Ways of Not Reading Gertrude Stein," *ELH* 82 (2015): 281–312, 281. Cecire focuses on the labor of distant reading and of typewriting in an analysis of distant reading's implicit devaluation of the genre-oriented and female-authored texts are most frequently described as unworthy of thorough reading.

[49] Sara Ahmed, *Willful Subjects* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), 149.

[50] Love, "Close But Not Deep," 387.

[51] See, for instance, Charlie Jane Anders, "Why the Bechdel Test is More Important than You Realize," *io9.com*, 4 June 2014.

[52] Popper discusses the similarities of Marixan and Freudian reading styles in *Conjectures and Refutations:The Growth of Scientific Knowledge* [1963] (New York: Routledge Classics, 2002), 44.

[53] Levine, "Narrative Networks," 520.

[54] Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network Theory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005): 103, 170.