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About a Boy: The Bechdel Test and Teaching Classical Literature

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The Bechdel Test is a term from popular film criticism that asks if a movie features at least two women (in some versions they have to be named) who talk to each other about something other than a man; it was first devised by Alison Bechdel and Liz Wallace.¹ The test is itself partly inspired by a passage in Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*.² Although initially created as a rather pointed joke, it has become used as a way of critiquing the male-centered world of Hollywood, and has spread into other genres as well. At first glance, this might seem irrelevant to Classical texts. Ancient Greece and Rome were manifestly patriarchal societies whose literature was composed, as I say in almost every class I teach, by and for and about a male audience, so of course we do not expect many—or perhaps any—works of Classical literature to pass the Bechdel Test. Applying it, therefore, may seem to serve no purpose.

Due in part, however, to some discussions I have had about this topic on Twitter, both with Classicists and with members of the wider literary community, I believe that thinking about the Bechdel Test and Classics can be valuable, in particular from a pedagogical viewpoint. It can provide an opening for discussions of audience, silencing, authorial intent, gender roles, and socialization, but it can also help

1 Bechdel (1985).

2 Woolf (2015, p. 62).

students see the ways that investigation of historical problems can cast light on contemporary issues, and vice versa. In particular, looking at some of the works that have been suggested as passing the Bechdel Test raises questions about the purpose of the test itself, how well it reflects the predominant gender roles of the society it interrogates, and the complicated relationship between ‘entertainment’, power, and societal norms.

Although I had been thinking idly about the Test and its application to Classics already, this started for me when Daniel Mendelsohn posted this tweet:³ “As far as I can tell, *Odyssey*, *Oresteia*, *Aeneid* all fail the Bechdel Test. But “*Antigone*” passes!”⁴ And it is certainly true that the *Antigone’s* opening scene features a long conversation between Antigone and Ismene, two named women. But do they talk about something other than a man? I wondered, so I asked him if he thought that discussion about burying Polyneices does not count as “about a man.” Mendelsohn replied, arguing that “the discussion is about politics: about the respective rights of civic and political spheres. Polyneices is merely the vehicle.” It seems to me that this opens up a useful discussion about the intent behind the “about something other than a man” element of the Bechdel Test, and brings us to a more sophisticated discussion of the full implications of a male-centered society that silences the female perspective. From one point of view, yes, the sisters certainly are not talking “about a man” if by that phrase we mean “about a boyfriend, husband, lover, or crush” - which is the implicit assumption that many people seem to make about the point of the test. But on the other hand they most certainly are discussing a man—Polyneices—as well as Eteocles and Creon, and the focus of their argument is the exact nature of their duties to those men.

As characters on the stage they are defined by their relationship to the men they discuss; the dilemma they face arises directly from their connection to those men, and their actions are constrained both by their emotional relationships with them and by the expectations about how they, as women, should act. And if, in Mendelsohn’s words, they are discussing “the respective rights of civic and political spheres,” does it not matter that they, as women, are specifically excluded from both those spheres? In other words, they are discussing male worlds. Is their conversation

3 I must clarify that this was an informal and passing remark, and I do not hold Mendelsohn to any of what he said, or mean to criticize him; this conversation merely acted as a catalyst for my own ruminations, for which I thank him sincerely.

4 All tweets are listed in full at the end of the paper. Thank you to everyone who participated in this conversation with me and helped me refine my thoughts on the subject.

not, then, “about a man”?

As a thought experiment, I pose the question I asked Mendelsohn on Twitter: could you imagine Sophocles writing this conversation between two Greek men, talking about burying their sister in defiance of their duty to the city? Or even between two women, but talking about a sister not a brother? His answer was that yes, he could, easily—while I find that very difficult to envision. Is that a failure of my imagination, or an indication of how deeply ingrained in the Greek, and even the modern, male mind the assumptions are about who really matters, and how the roles of women and men differ? And if it is the latter, then this discussion could be a useful way to bring to students’ attention their own assumptions about the eliding of women’s voices and perspectives not only in the ancient world but also in the modern world, and how the question of “who really matters” is often obscured by discussions that assume that a work of fiction represents women well as long as the women in it are not talking about a man they love.

There is no guidance in Bechdel’s original cartoon about how to interpret “about a man,” but if we look back to the Woolf quote that she has said was part of the inspiration for her ‘rule’, there is some justification for interpreting it in a wider sense:

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.⁵

I actually feel that this may be closer to the way the ancients might view the question, if it had ever occurred to them to pose it. Women were defined by their connections to men, but the connection through love or sex was only part of that and, I would argue, it was a much smaller part in those societies than in modern culture, where familial connections are de-emphasized, especially those to fathers, brothers, and other male relatives. Scott Selisker, in a blog about the Bechdel Test and different types of literary ‘data’, puts it this way:

The Bechdel Test looks for female community, in both the conventional sense of the word and somewhere near its more specialized sense in network theory. Bechdel jettisons conventional thinking about agency in

5 Woolf (2015, p. 62).

literary texts in order to describe it as a network effect: that is, agency in our thoroughly connected world might be described as the potential reach of our ideas within a network.⁶

Thus the issue is not whether women are just focused on love or sex or not, but whether they are represented as functioning within a network that does not depend on male ‘nodes’.

So then I asked the basic question of my own twitter followers: are there Classical texts that do pass the Bechdel Test? And people did come up with a few suggestions: Mendelsohn himself suggested the Erinyes in the *Eumenides* (though that faces the same problem as the *Antigone*; their discussion with Athena about their change in status may qualify, though); the *Medea*, where the Nurse and the Chorus discuss Medea’s sufferings (lines 131–213)—though her suffering is caused by Jason, and he is mentioned in the conversation, as are the (male) children; in book 6 of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, when Minerva and Arachne talk about weaving, with no reference to men or male pursuits (except in the scenes they weave); I would add to that the conversations between Minerva and the Muses and between the Muses and the daughters of Emathia in book 5; Theocritus’ *Idyll 15* is an extensive conversation between women, and though they do discuss their husbands and the King, they talk about many other subjects as well; and finally, Psyche’s sisters in Apuleius talk about her, although they mainly complain about their husbands and her secrecy about her own. Aristophanes’ *Ecclesiazusae* and *Thesmophoriazusae* also come to mind, as does Sophocles’ *Trojan Women*; like the *Antigone*, these plays also raise questions about when a conversation is really ‘about a man’. I doubt that this list is comprehensive; if one extends the search to all Classical literature, and accepts fairly short stretches of conversation, there must be more.⁷

The fact that there are not very many, and that many may not really fulfill all the conditions, will not surprise us. What I want to focus on is how we can look at these results and the issues they raise in a way that is useful for the classroom and for undergraduate teaching. I brought up the topic in my Greek and Roman Tragedy course when we read the *Antigone*. Not all of my students knew of the test, but once I explained it, a good discussion followed—one in which several students who rarely participate got much more involved than usual. Here was something they could have

6 Selisker (2014).

7 The Greek novels would be a good place to look for women’s conversation, for instance, though the topic of men probably arises fairly often.

some expertise on (modern movies) and an opinion about, something that I did not necessarily understand better than they did. The class was fairly split—some considered the *Antigone* to pass the test, others did not—and their efforts to convince each other led to good, nuanced conversations about gender roles and audience in Athens.

But even more, I found that the really intriguing part of the test was that it could be applied in exactly the same way to ancient texts and modern, and therefore gave the students a point of contact, of comparison, between their world and the one we were studying. For instance, we often say Greek (and Roman) literature is “for men, by men, about men”; but at the same time many people have noted that in modern movies, even films that are “for women” and “about women” fail to pass the Bechdel test, sometimes even if they are also “by women.” Romantic comedies, for instance, fall into this category; so, famously, does *Sex and the City*, which Bechdel herself has said does not pass her test (though she is still a fan).⁸ People often suggest that increasing the numbers of female writers in Hollywood would help with this issue. But this assumes that the source of the problem is male obliviousness to or lack of interest in issues that do not involve them—but if women watch and enjoy shows that fail the test, does that not perhaps suggest that the problem goes deeper than that: that women, too, have been socialized to think primarily of male-centered topics as interesting, and to marginalize or elide their involvement in other areas? Would more female writers just result in even more stories about women talking about men? And perhaps ancient women, like some modern women, internalized societal roles, and Greek literature was in fact “for women” as much as it was “for men” - but for women socialized into a male world. In other words, men were not deliberately ignoring women and speaking only to and about other men, but the entire culture worked to make women and men agree about the priorities, about who was important, and whose actions and feelings mattered, so that women and men were equally interested in the actions of men on stage, for instance, and saw women’s existence as subsidiary to male action. In other words, do we envision Athenian women as watching plays (if they were even present)⁹ or listening to Homer, and thinking “this is boring, it’s all about men, I wish I were able to go off and write something that better reflected my own, separate priorities”? Would that have occurred to them, any more than it does to the majority of female audiences who

8 Tess Katz (2014).

9 For a basic summary of the argument about the presence of women at the theater, see Henderson (1991, pp. 133-147).

watch modern romantic comedies or action movies and enjoy them? An article online about the Bechdel Test and classic literature put it this way:

When I realized that even *War and Peace*, a novel so vast, all-encompassing, profound, and moving, presents a seriously diminished portrait of the lives of women, I began to see that the deeper point of Bechdel's test is not to accuse Homer, or Tolstoy, or me of being sexist. Instead, the test reminds us that biases like sexism, racism, heterosexism, and classism are the water in which we swim. They pervade our culture. They are our culture, and to such an extent that we sometimes forget about them until someone like Bechdel reminds us.¹⁰

This brings up another point. The Bechdel Test has been expanded to cover other groups, to highlight the lack of other types of diversity onscreen by looking at class, race, and queer identities, for instance. Some of those apply even less to the ancient world than the test about female characters, but looking at representations of class can be helpful in illuminating what it means that women are represented as they are. How often do non-elite figures appear on the stage? When they do, do they speak of anything except the elites? The answer, of course, is No, because slaves and non-elite characters exist on stage only to facilitate the important stories about royals and heroes, and slaves in particular are presented as talking about their masters because they are so dependent on them and devoid of agency themselves. A good example is the opening of the *Medea*, in which the Nurse and the Tutor fear for their own situation because of the problems facing Medea. This is not at all a surprising conclusion, but it casts an interesting light back on the Bechdel Test. If we reverse the logic, slaves on stage only discuss their masters because of their utter dependency on them and lack of personal agency; women on stage (or screen) only discuss men because of their utter dependency on them and lack of personal agency. Again, for students, drawing the parallel back to modern depictions is illuminating. I found in my class that both the women and the men were actually quite shocked by this conclusion. When it was pointed out; they immediately started piling on examples, both ancient and modern, and elaborating on the basic point, in a very gratifying way.

Finally, to take a different perspective, does the focus on the Bechdel Test perhaps, in fact, raise an unimportant question? Does the lack of portrayal of women-only concerns in popular entertainment not actually indicate very much about

10 Kovarik (2011).

the society that produces it? For example, I have been suggesting that the lack of works that pass the Bechdel Test in Classical literature reflects the patriarchal culture of the time, the lack of female agency, and the silencing of female voices. Given how few works pass the test right now in popular culture, if we were to draw parallel conclusions about today's society, it would indicate that our culture is deeply patriarchal, women have little political or cultural power, and no public voice. But it is clear that, objectively, the position of women in today's culture is very different from that of Athens or Rome. So what does that indicate about the importance of representations in popular culture for indicating or contributing to real social and political change? Or, perhaps, what does this suggest about our knowledge of Greek women's role and status? This conversation can be a useful corrective to the common trap of 'othering' ancient society, condemning its -isms in order to reassure ourselves that we are not like that, that we have progressed. This is something I see fairly often in students' answers to questions about women in antiquity, in which they often express the idea that women in the ancient world were oppressed, but now things are much better because women have full equal rights.

Now, of course, the Bechdel Test is an arbitrary and artificial tool by which to measure any literature. As many critics have pointed out, and Bechdel herself has said, it represents at best a minimum standard at which creative works should aim. Passing it does not mean that a work is equitable, feminist, balanced, or progressive, nor does it ensure that it is any good! But I hope I have demonstrated that it can be a useful tool for teaching Classical texts, to help students link culture and literature together, and teach them to look at their own culture with something of the same critical tools we are trying to help them to use on antiquity. I also think that this approach can be a helpful corrective even to some modern scholarly approaches to gender; in our discussion, Mendelsohn also said "for me, what's admirable in tragedy is [the] attempt to create female characters who express precisely what doesn't fit in [the] male view," but I think the Bechdel Test perhaps helps us to define more clearly what the "male view" is and if it means something more than just "what comes out of a man's mouth." That also challenges the idea that if we could only find more women-authored material we would know more about the 'real' views that women had. Was there such a thing? Or would we just find the equivalent of *Sex and the City*, with women reflecting back their patriarchal socialization?

Twitter conversations

Feb 28, 2014:

@DMendelsohn1960 (Daniel Mendelsohn):

“As far as I can tell, Odyssey, Oresteia, Aeneid all fail the Bechdel Test. But “Antigone” passes!”

@AvenSarah (Aven McMaster):

“@DMendelsohn1960 I was thinking about this a little while ago; you think, then, discussion about burying P doesn’t count as “about a man?””

@DMendelsohn1960 (Daniel Mendelsohn):

“@AvenSarah the discussion is about politics: about the respective rights of civic and political spheres. Polyneices is merely the vehicle.”

“what women in “Antigone” care about is “the eternal and unwritten laws” that supersede human politics. I trust Bechdel wd approve”

@DMendelsohn1960 (Daniel Mendelsohn):

“@AvenSarah yes, I can imagine just that. And while we’re at it surely the Erinyes in “Eumenides” pass the test...? :-)”

@magistrahf (Lydia Haile Fassett)

“@AvenSarah according to this translation, the Nurse and the Chorus discuss Medea’s suffering: records.viu.ca/~johnstoi/euri...”

“@AvenSarah Ovid- Minerva and Arachne talk about weaving. #classicsbechdel”

@HelenLovatt2 (Helen Lovatt)

“@AvenSarah Theocritus 15 - women talking about going to festivals. Aeneid 11 - Camilla to Acca, talking about war. But A does not reply...”

@Katherine_McDon (Katherine McDonald)

“@AvenSarah How about Cupid and Psyche, Apuleius? Psyche’s sisters talk to each other about how annoying she is...”

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