

Performance of Instinct: Bechdel's Experience as Criticism of Butler's *Gender Trouble*
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A Performance of Instinct: Bechdel's Experience as Criticism of Butler's *Gender Trouble*

Judith Butler's 1990 text *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* claims that gender is performed through imitation of previous gender performance, creating a cultural feedback loop that denies an inner, expressive self-identity and instead is indicative of compulsory heterosexuality that regulates our bodies and our sexuality. At first glance, Bechdel's autobiographical graphic novel *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* extends this message, with scenes where Alison buys a Swiss army knife simply because "it seemed like something a lesbian would have" (78), or a moment when Alison's father Bruce asks "Is *that* what you want to look like?" in reference to his daughter's recognition of a butch-lesbian, which becomes Alison's model: "the vision of the truck-driving bulldyke sustained me through the years" (119). However, gender as simple mimicry is actually disputed in *Fun Home*, undermined because these performances—for they *are* performances within a context of oppressive heterosexuality—stem from an 'inner self' that affects the outer gender presentation. This complication of Butler's theory is written all over Bechdel's narrative, most notably in the ways Alison confronts her father's femininity to better understand the interior self he hid from her, for example when she finds a photograph of him in a woman's bathing suit, a moment I will examine towards the end of this essay (120). Butler's *Gender Trouble* thesis is half-supported, half-erased by a growing interiority in Bechdel's separation of objective from subjective viewpoints, performance motifs, as well as the attempt to glean her father's true self in his literature and her own eventual lesbian identification. Performance finally comes to *represent* the inner self through the inscription of gender signifiers on the body, suggesting a gendered self within that is acted out in the exterior.

Early on in the text, Bechdel establishes that she is presenting her narrative as separate from how things truly were, setting a precedent for the text as one that is from her unique

perspective and altering the ways in which we may interpret the novel. As Alison imagines a scene her grandmother paints regarding her father, told to her as a child, she writes in parentheses over the image, “I know Mort was a mailman, but I always pictured him as a milkman, all in white—a reverse Grim Reaper” (Bechdel 41). A visual of Mort dressed as a milkman accompanies this aside: not as he truly was, but as Alison sees him. This example of Alison’s vision as separate from reality can be carried through not only her imaginings of her parents’ past for which she is not present, but also her own past, distorted by time and reorganized to suit the themes presented in Bechdel’s text. This is crucial to our understanding of the text as ‘internal’ and subjective, rather than objective and ‘external,’ lending us access to Bechdel’s inner self—in which she tries to understand her father’s inner self, not as his performance indicated, but beneath this façade and into his interior. In this way, the form of her graphic novel parallels her intention, just as her father’s exquisite home paralleled his intention to hide that self from discovery: “He used his skillful artifice not to make things, but to make things appear to be what they were not” (Bechdel 16). We can thus deduce that the narrative Bechdel presents exposes an interiority in the hopes of stripping away the pretense her father spent his life erecting. This in itself supposes a core to the individual that is deeper than performance, and on which performance is dictated.

Furthermore, in her subjective imaginings of the past, the frequent depictions of theatrical performance come to represent real life: the outer presentation of character masking, mimicking, or changing the internal actor, again a representation of internal and external elements that dictate one another. Bechdel relays that her parents met *in* a performance, which parallels their eventual role-play of husband and wife as an act. Despite the fact of surface performance, there is a truer, underlying element that is signified by the presentation, revealed in Bechdel’s prose:

“The willful Kathrin’s spirit is broken by the mercenary, domineering Petruchio. Even in those prefeminist days, my parents must have found this relationship model to be problematic. They probably would have been appalled at the suggestion that theirs would play out in a similar way” (70). By revealing her parents’ fateful meeting and posing it as an indication of what is to come, Bechdel layers the performance of playacting over the performance of their marriage, implying that the two become interrelated and affect one another, as if the act determined the marriage just as the performance of selfhood and gender determine the presence of the soul or identity. This works in reverse, as well, when Alison’s mother prepares for a role in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, creating her own costume, learning every line apart from her own, in order to portray a character not indicative of her inner self: “In a photo before the play opened, she’s literally holding herself together. But in her publicity shot as Lady Bracknell, she’s a Victorian dominatrix to rival Wilde himself” (Bechdel 164). Still, Bechdel goes on to conflate the persona of her mother with the fictional counterpart she performs, writing, “In a fitting coincidence, Lady Bracknell’s first name, Augusta, was my mother’s middle name” (165). This connection, however feeble, strings together the role with the actor, as two parts of a whole—one within and one without, one authentic and one impersonated. Whether genuine or false in portrayal, the true self still lurks beneath the performance throughout this important leitmotif.

If the theme of playacting generates a connection between internal and external selves operating in conjunction with one another through performance, it is literature that acts as a key to the development and interpretation of that inner self. Throughout *Fun Home* Bechdel uses her father’s reading list as a way to gain access to his ideas and feelings, from Camus’ *A Happy Death* as his final novel and suggestion of his intentional suicide (27), to his identification with Fitzgerald’s characters and personal life (63), and including Colette’s autobiographical *Earthly*

Paradise as an unconscious communication with his daughter about their shared identity (205). Alison begins communicating with her father through literature in high school, when he is her teacher; their relationship exists through the discussion of *Catcher in the Rye*, creating “the sensation of intimacy” between them—the only familiarity Bechdel admits to having with her father (199). Books thus become a way to access her father’s personhood, and of his library, Bechdel comments, “Perhaps affectation can be so thoroughgoing, so authentic in its details, that it stops being pretense...and becomes, for all practical purposes, real” (60). Her father’s library is an extension of him, and acts as fantasy—but rather than fantasy becoming an “[illusion of interiority] maintained for the purpose of the regulation of sexuality” as Butler suggests, fantasy in Bechdel’s presentation becomes *real*, a way to access the *true* interiority her father has (Butler 329). More than just this, books become a way to access Alison’s own interiority, and she describes the realization of her lesbianism as, “A revelation not of the flesh, but of the mind” (Bechdel 74). Far before she was comfortable physically and socially engaging in the gay community, she used literature to understand her own identity, engaging in the ‘definition’ of the word lesbian, rather than experimenting via lesbian experience. It is literature that acts as a gateway to the inner self, and exposes it as a reality rather than illusion.

In one of her most important forays into literary truth, Bechdel examines Proust’s literature and life as being indicative of gender reversal, an imperative feature within *Fun Home*’s subject matter that is played out in the lives of both Alison and her father to reach the conclusion truer selfhood. Proust’s literature fictionalized his real love interests, but masked their gender by substituting male names with female personas: Alfred became Albertine. When Bechdel recalls asking to be referred to as a male ‘Albert’ before a masculine shovel operator, she expresses, “my stratagem strikes me as a precocious feat of Proustian transposition,” a

masculine expression of identity parallel to Proust's 'Albertine.' Both identities are false, generated as performance for social acceptance—much in line with Butler's ideology—but beneath each performance lies a truth: Proust's real male love and Alison's desire to be male, respectively. This masculine presentation is often a compensation for what her father lacks: Bechdel admits that she and her father were, "Inversions of one another" (98). While her father wished to fulfill his feminine desires, Alison avoided all ornament in an attempt to spurn her own sex. Yet more than simply mimicking social convention to fit with public discourse, at the crux of the novel Bruce confesses to an older Alison, "When I was little, I really wanted to be a girl. I'd dress up in girls' clothes" (Bechdel 221). This is the closest Alison ever comes to a 'reunion' with her father, and it is presented as a moment of awkward interiority with each character's most minute gestures presented moment-to-moment, during which Alison is allowed insight to her father's thoughts and feelings. This brief time period spans two pages of the text and is one of the few times when narration syncs with visual depiction of events, a moment of insight given, instead of alluded to through books and memory. In those memories and literary connection, Bechdel at first rejects Proust's simple definition of homosexuality as inversion as "imprecise and insufficient," though she later accepts it in terms of herself and her father, musing, "perhaps it *is* sufficient" (97). Though hints of Butler are present in Bechdel's depiction of queer identity, she casts doubt and challenges Butler's denial of inner self by referring to the genuine desires of both her father and herself that cause them to perform in certain ways—on top of writing from the perspective of an inner self, entrenched in Bechdel's own vision of the world, and within the context of literature, established in the earlier paragraph as an attempt to interpret the internal.

We can take this argument one step further in examining Butler's argument in regards to cross-dressing: "drag fully subverts the distinction between inner and outer psychic space and

effectively mocks both the expressive model of gender and the notion of true gender identity” (329). Butler quotes Newton’s explanation of drag as a double inversion, that which expresses a feminine exterior despite a masculine body while symbolizing an outward appearance of masculinity despite an interior, feminine essence. The contradiction of these claims “displace[s] the entire enactment of gender significations from the discourse of truth and falsity” (Butler 329). Again, the experience Bechdel offers in *Fun Home* only half represents this argument, notably when Alison discovers photographs of her father from college in which, “He’s wearing a woman’s bathing suit. A fraternity prank? But the pose he strikes is not mincing or silly at all. He’s lissome, elegant” (120). Here we see an image of cross-dressing that defies the concept of mockery; the idea of ridicule is proposed, but dismissed as inadequate. Her father’s appearance in drag is not a double inversion—it is simply a multi-layered expression of self: his interior is feminine, and though his outward sex is male, he still inscribes femininity upon it. It is a performance, certainly, but one that holds true with truth and falsity, the very truth and falsity that make up a complex narrative of fatherhood. This vision of her father in a women’s suit corresponds to Alison’s adolescent experience dressing in her father’s clothing: “Putting on the formal shirt with its studs and cufflinks was a nearly mystical pleasure, like finding myself fluent in a language I’d never been taught” (Bechdel 182). Butler’s entire argument stands on the performance of gender as one *learned* from obligatory heterosexuality, yet here Alison expresses a feeling of familiarity beyond simple acquisition of heterosexual cues: it is innate. Butler poses that, “part of the pleasure, the giddiness of the performance is in the recognition of a radical contingency in the relation between sex and gender in the face of cultural configurations of causal unities that are regularly assumed to be natural and necessary,” and while a young Alison is certainly giddy at the possibility of a performance that lies outside her sex, how can we assume

that her desire is *not* natural and necessary itself?

Over the course of *Fun Home*, we witness a father-daughter relationship that is expressed through performances, learned and instinctive. These performances are instilled into the visual vocabulary of the graphic novel, played out in narrative themes, and ultimately dissected to find the interior meaning of both familial relationship and the relationship with one's self. It is the very purpose of the text, and innate in the personal manner with which the book is written. What it tells us about Butler's *Gender Trouble* is a complex blend between the performance of socially imperative gender norms and the Foucaultian truth that "the soul is the prison of the body" which inscribes its characteristics onto outward appearance. Gendered society is a context for living, and important to understanding the limitations we place on those who live in inversion, but we are ignoring human essence to say that our self-expression is mere mimicry within this code.

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