Beyond Psychoanalysis: Resistance and Reparative Reading in Alison Bechdel’s Are You My Mother?

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Following her long-running comic strip Dykes to Watch Out For (1983–2008), Alison Bechdel’s first graphic memoir, Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic (2006), could hardly have garnered more popular and critical acclaim. Admired for its innovative use of a family archive of diaries, letters, and photographs, and for its portrayal of Bechdel’s relationship to her father, a closeted homosexual who died, presumably by suicide, at age forty-four, Fun Home was a New York Times best seller, a Time magazine best book, and an Eisner Award recipient. A musical adaptation of her memoir, after its award-winning run at New York’s Public Theater, opened on Broadway in spring 2015 and won five Tony Awards, including Best Musical and Best Book of a Musical. As these accolades reflect, Fun Home’s depiction of the effects of Bechdel’s relationship with her father on her coming out as a lesbian and her development as a cartoonist resonated with a range of readers and theatergoers, blurring the boundaries that typically separate popular and critical success and prompting contributions to an already significant body of scholarship.1

In contrast, Bechdel’s second graphic memoir, Are You My Mother? A Comic Drama (2012), elicited a mixed response. While most early reviews praised the book, highlighting its emotional honesty in portraying a daughter’s relationship with her mother, numerous negative appraisals uniformly faulted its focus on psychoanalysis. Dwight Garner, for example, claimed that the book’s “tone is therapeutic and flat”; Laura Miller contended that its psychoanalytic bent “may get at the same truths that art does, but the trip isn’t nearly as much fun”; Meghan O’Rourke criticized its “therapeutic ending”; and negative customer reviews on Amazon expressed downright loathing for what one reader, in a review titled “Enough with the Freud Already!,” called its “psychobabble” (Pooter). To be sure, much of the
book’s visual content and formal structure derives from psychoanalysis. Bechdel not only includes countless images of herself in therapy sessions or poring over psychoanalytic texts, she also organizes each of the seven chapters around the work of the pediatrician and psychoanalyst D. W. Winnicott. And she has commented that her memoir primarily seeks to depict “why and how therapy helped me” (“Alison Bechdel [2006 and 2012]” 172).

Bechdel’s autobiographical account of the workings of psychotherapy and her reading of Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung, Jacques Lacan, Alice Miller, and Adam Phillips, in addition to Winnicott, have appeared at a time of extended crisis for psychoanalysis, a crisis reflected in negative portrayals of the talking cure across contemporary discourses, in the declining numbers of analysts and analysands, and in the increasing pressure on the profession to provide evidence of its efficacy. At the center of this crisis is what Stephen Frosh has described as “a genuine epistemological, psychological, and social debate” regarding what constitutes a “cure” and how it is brought about (134). Far from clear, for example, is whether the psychoanalytic cure consists of symptom relief or instead involves more far-reaching results, such as the ability to experience pleasure, enjoy relationships, derive meaning from work, gain deeper insights into oneself, or engage in free association, which, as Sándor Ferenczi argued, is not a method for achieving a cure but the method’s very outcome, that is, the ability of patients to speak for themselves rather than repeat the analyst’s ideas (210). Also uncertain is whether a psychoanalytic cure, whatever it entails, is produced by making the unconscious conscious, by dissolving defenses, by assisting patients in constructing coherent narratives of their lives, or even by helping them understand the limits of their capacity to know themselves. Bechdel’s memoir invites us to explore these issues; its account of the psychoanalytic process, as the narrator says early on, considers “from both sides of the couch—just what it is that psychoanalysts do for their patients” (21).

*Are You My Mother?* does not, however, provide an argument, theory, or explanation regarding the efficacy of psychoanalysis. When Bechdel herself tried to sum up the psychoanalytic insights of her book, she acknowledged her inability to do so: “I’m not following a story so much as I’m following a psychic strand back to its root. . . . Oh! I can’t explain it. I can’t talk about it. The only way to tell this story is through this lengthy exposition of pictures and words together”—that is, through comics (“Hillary Chute”). And, indeed, the narrative’s use of comics form draws the reader into this exploration. The memoir places readers in the role of analyst, encouraging us to analyze Alison, a task that is facilitated and rendered challenging by the tensions that Bechdel creates through juxtaposing words and images in single panels. Moreover, the gutters separating panels require us to take an active role in reading across these blank spaces to construct the book’s meaning. Graphic memoir, in other words, is especially well suited to creating an experience of the psychoanalytic process for the reader. Comics, as Freud himself recognized by including an eight-panel cartoon in The Interpretation of Dreams, has the potential to express complex and typically unconscious associative patterns of meaning that invite interpretation. Bechdel’s book draws together seemingly unconnected events of her life, suggesting associations that the author sometimes consciously intends and other times may not. Her memoir functions to “distill, condense, juxtapose, and display multiple levels of information that the reader then unfurls and brings to life,” as Françoise Mouly, coeditor with her husband, Art Spiegelman, of the influential comics magazine Raw, has said of picture books and comics more generally (190). What the comics form of *Are You My Mother?* does, then, is directly engage readers
in responding to the question that Bechdel said she created the book to answer, the question of “why and how therapy helped me.”

What I argue in the section that follows is that Bechdel’s memoir articulates the effectiveness—and limits—of psychoanalysis as a therapeutic tool, particularly in the context of resistance. *Are You My Mother?* rejects the classic notion of a psychoanalytic cure based on the analyst’s interpretation of the patient’s symptoms and the dissolution of the patient’s resistance to this interpretation. This conception of a cure, for example, prompted Freud to declare his treatment of Ida Bauer (“Dora”) a therapeutic failure when she resisted his interpretation that she was sexually attracted to her father’s male friend and subsequently terminated the analysis (Rose 129; Moi 184). However, even while Bechdel’s book displays skepticism about the analyst’s ability to produce a cure by overcoming patients’ defenses, its rich representation of the psychoanalytic process suggests that patients can make important gains by discovering their resistance, as well as by rejecting the authority of psychoanalysis to define what a life, once “cured,” should look like.

Bechdel repeatedly depicts her resistance to her analysts’ interpretations. And although resistance has long been understood as integral to psychoanalysis, her work demonstrates that the efficacy of analysis does not necessarily follow from interpreting, dissolving, or challenging the patient’s resistance to the analyst’s authoritative perspective. Rather, Bechdel’s text portrays resistance as enabling the artist to embrace the messy neuroses of her everyday life not as symptoms of a psychic disturbance to be resolved but as a core component of her identity, particularly her identity as a graphic memoirist. What her resistance to a classic psychoanalytic cure makes possible, then, is the very creation of *Are You My Mother?*, the book in which Bechdel depicts the intense and even agonizing compulsions that underwrite her work.

But, as I argue in the second section below, Bechdel’s memoir also moves beyond psychoanalysis by gesturing toward the possibility of a broader, more transformative experience for the author, as well as for readers, a possibility that requires us to reconsider the frequently maligned idea that literature can serve therapeutic aims. Like most contemporary memoirs, *Are You My Mother?* attends to the interiority of the autobiographical subject in a manner that threatens to indulge narcissistic forms of individualism and to neglect the social and political contexts that shape identity. However, Bechdel’s book uses the medium of comics to neutralize this threat by transcending the focus on the self, by articulating affinities between author and readers, and by blurring the boundaries between the private and the public. In so doing, her book invites a form of reading that Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has called “reparative” (144). Bechdel’s work translates the autobiographical subject’s private anxieties and disappointments into a graphic narrative that elicits recognition of a daughter-artist’s internal struggles, while inviting readers to acknowledge a history of complex and often emotionally fraught mother-daughter relationships that merits public examination, empathy, and social inclusion. In eliciting this acknowledgment, *Are You My Mother?* demonstrates how reading a story about an autobiographical character’s inner life—particularly in comics form—can promote cultural understanding of women’s often ambivalent relationships with their mothers in ways that might help repair the emotional damage that these relationships all too commonly cause.

**Resistance and Reclamation**

*Are You My Mother?* tells the story of Bechdel’s search for an explanation of her personality that would uncover and alleviate the causes of her suffering. This quest leads her back to the mother issue, which extends
to every aspect of Alison’s life, including the painstaking and time-consuming process of creating her graphic memoir. Although Alison confides in a therapy session that her “suffering over the book” might issue from “normal creative strife or menopausal insanity,” she attributes her artistic difficulties to her mother. Alison recognizes that she has internalized her “mother’s editorial voice—precisian, dispassionate, elegant, adverbless” (23). What Alison wants from psychoanalysis, then, is self-knowledge, the knowledge of how the answer to the painful riddle of her personality might well be her mother.3

And yet the only knowledge that seems available to Alison is her resistance to self-knowledge. “I know. I’m resisting,” she tells her analyst Jocelyn when voicing criticism of her parents only to then dismiss her own critical remarks (106). Again Alison acknowledges, “There’s this . . . this line I seem unable to cross” (268). Alison’s resistance appears at first glance to involve a blockage that psychoanalysis might help her overcome. But in many ways her repeated struggle seems closer to Jacques Derrida’s notion of resistance. In Resistances of Psychoanalysis, Derrida argues that although Freud discovered the patient’s resistance to psychoanalysis, Freud’s understanding of this resistance was based on a defensive resistance of his own: his inability to recognize that patients’ resistance to the analyst’s interpretation was not simply their refusal of self-knowledge but, more important, their bearing witness to a deeper truth about themselves—namely, that the ultimate nature of identity and the origins of the subject’s formation cannot be fully known. By deconstructing Freud’s text, Derrida argues that radical resistance emerges through “the interminable drama of analysis” and makes transparent an “affirmation that remains the ultimate unknown for the analysis that it nevertheless puts in motion” (29). This analytic unknown, the mystery of the subject’s formation and the inscrutability of identity’s core, both troubles and motivates Bechdel’s narrator. Indeed, Alison apparently seeks a cure less for her anxieties than for her unintelligible complexity, a tendency that Ken Parille has also observed. “What makes Bechdel’s text so compelling, and at times frustrating,” he writes, “is that she asks questions about herself that cannot be fully answered, yet seems to believe that definitive solutions are available, perhaps in the writings of Donald Winnicott or Virginia Woolf, or in psychotherapy.”

But Bechdel’s book depicts how her search for authority figures that might release her from doubt ultimately unleashes her resistance to the interpretations of her analysts and other writers, making accessible a deep core of self from which her memoir emerges. Put differently, Bechdel’s resistance yields nothing less than her ability to show and tell us who she is: a graphic artist who fastidiously, even obsessively, and sometimes in a state of anguish, archives her life and uses the formal properties of comics to portray the complexities of how she feels, thinks, relates to others, and labors. Recalling the therapy she underwent in her twenties, Bechdel includes a two-page spread that depicts how the resistance to her analyst’s interpretation is crucial to her reclamation of self (fig. 1). The panel, which builds on an earlier sequence of images, shows Alison’s mother, Helen Fontana Bechdel, taking dictation from her young daughter, when Alison’s obsessive-compulsive disorder rendered her daily journaling a nearly paralyzing task. Framed in close-up, the overlapping images of the picture book that Alison holds in her left hand and the daughter’s diary that Helen writes in with her right hand suggest a form of proto-comics: pictures and writing come together in a key scene in Bechdel’s formation as a graphic artist. In the panel, the mother’s body not only occupies most of the visual space but also appears to form a contiguous whole with Alison’s. The narration in the upper text box raises a central question posed in the book: the question of the emotional truth
of Bechdel’s relationship with her mother. Significantly, Bechdel does not cede authority and embrace her analyst’s interpretation, that Alison harbors repressed anger toward her mother. While including Jocelyn’s interpretation, the image shows not a daughter’s rage but Alison’s recognition of Helen’s nurturing at the moment Bechdel portrays her first memory of words and images coming together.

Here and throughout Are You My Mother?, Bechdel draws on the work of Winnicott, particularly his idea of the “good enough mother,” in representing her relationship with her own mother (Playing 111). On the one hand, Bechdel’s memoir represents Helen as a middle-class American mother of the 1960s, a mother who—perhaps like most—causes her daughter psychic distress and internal drama, the kind of everyday “drama,” as reflected by the book’s subtitle, that appears in both form and content as “comic,” rather than tragic. On the other hand, the memoir depicts Helen as a sufficiently present and informed mother who read Benjamin Spock’s psychoanalyti-

![Image of a page from the book with text overlay.](Image)

ally inflected work on parenting, patched her young daughter’s torn clothes, and bucked social norms by attempting to breast-feed her daughter. And Bechdel herself has repeatedly described her memoir as an “effort to get my mother to hear me tell her that I love her” (“Alison Bechdel: the Balancing Act”; “Alison Bechdel Talks”), a description rendered even more poignant by her mother’s death, in May 2013, approximately one year after the book’s publication. Bechdel thus identifies herself as a daughter whose personal difficulties point back to her mother and as an observer who resists laying blame on Helen for her own perceived shortcomings. Bechdel, in her autobiographical graphic narrative—or “autography,” to use Gillian Whitlock’s term (965)—allows these seemingly contradictory perspectives on herself to circulate simultaneously, challenging Jocelyn’s effort to remedy what the analyst regards as an internal conflict issuing from Bechdel’s unacknowledged anger toward Helen. Bechdel resists Jocelyn’s interpretation while showing how psychoanalysis has
succeeded in producing the possibility of her resistance, and, through it, the discovery of a deep truth about herself.

In what is arguably the book’s most significant depiction of psychotherapy, Bechdel also resists the interpretation of her latter analyst, Carol, portraying Alison, now in her forties, as both a patient in search of a cure and an artist in possession of insight about herself. Alison appears as sufferer and observer, captive and liberator, in relation to her afflictions. The maladies of self-absorption that she frequently discusses with her analyst—her tendency to break off romantic relationships just when her partners commit to them, her feeling of being “annihilated” when faced with the successes of other lesbian writers and cartoonists, and her criticism of herself as a “self-indulgent, solipsistic” artist—seem traceable to what her analyst interprets as Alison’s “presenting symptom.” “The thing is,” Carol tells Alison in the book’s central chapter, “you relate to your own mind like it’s an object . . . like it’s an internalized parent or lover. Being attached to your work, your mind, the way you would be to another person—that cuts you off from the world” (152). Carol attributes what she sees as Alison’s self-undermining behavior to the intensity with which her patient takes her own mind as an object of narcissistic attachment and heightened scrutiny. The analyst diagnoses her as suffering from a pathological form of introspection, interpreting Alison’s acute interest in the workings of her mind as a defensive compensation for disappointing relationships in the external world. And Bechdel, who validates this interpretation elsewhere in the book and traces it back to her childhood (132–33), suggests that her mother’s remoteness caused her to retreat inward at an early age and to depend on her own imaginative and mental processes as substitutes for maternal care.

Nevertheless, the analyst’s attempt to remedy her patient’s intense introspection clearly provokes Alison’s resistance. Bechdel depicts this resistance, most explicitly, in a panel that shows an aerial view of Alison getting up from the couch, suggesting the potential for psychoanalysis to set her free, to release her from the incessant archiving, scrutinizing, and self-criticism that characterize her life and her work (fig. 2). But the tension between image and text, so crucial to Bechdel’s comics form, does not signal a triumph for psychoanalysis—far from it. Indeed, Alison responds to her analyst’s interpretation not by ceasing to regard her mental processes as an object of inspection but by insisting that she needs to record that interpretation, presumably for future reflection and, as it happens, for ironic expression in the book: “The irony of the fact that I’m writing a book about all this is not lost on me” (152). This ironic rendering of psychotherapy as yet more fodder for...
inner reflection suggests that Bechdel does not view her symptom as a problem to be deciphered and resolved by her analyst. Rather, by depicting her mental self-involvement as a core component of her identity (and also, not incidentally, as the source of her livelihood and artistry, also central to her sense of self), Bechdel represents herself as “enjoying” her symptom, embracing and identifying with it—precisely the sort of result that Lacanians, including Jacques-Alain Miller, Slavoj Žižek, and Lacan himself, have described as the outcome of a successful analysis.4

By refusing the conventional psychoanalytic practice of dissolving resistance, Are You My Mother? suggests, then, an alternative meaning of symptom. This meaning emphasizes its productive rather than constractive function. Bechdel’s analyst understands, of course, that Alison’s symptom is not “ego-dystonic” but rather “ego-syntonic” (Fleissner 109); that is, Alison’s heightened self-involvement is not the source of a mental disturbance of a person in deep conflict with herself but rather an expression of personality traits that organize her identity. But despite regarding her patient’s symptom as an integral part of Alison’s personality, Carol equates the symptom with a state of dysfunction requiring a cure. However, like contemporary works of fiction that, according to Jennifer Fleissner, have revalued the symptoms of obsessive-compulsive personality disorder (110), Bechdel’s book wrests Alison’s symptom from the presumption of impairment.

This reappraisal of the symptom is most forcefully displayed in a sequence of images in the book’s final chapter, where Carol raises the topic of Alison’s drawing method, interpreting her artistic process as a way for Alison to defend against facing her ambivalence toward her mother. Bechdel typically produces a series of ever-more-developed sketches based on digital photos for the images in her work; as an alternative to this meticulous artistic process, Carol invites her to consider drawing “more spontaneously” (251). Alison follows her analyst’s lead in exploring a psychoanalytic interpretation of her artistic process: her “anal” and “laborious” drawing might issue from her “superego,” while the act of “spontaneous drawing,” emanating from her “id,” promises to expose and potentially cure her internal conflicts (252). Although Bechdel clearly finds this conversation interesting, she represents psychoanalysis not as producing a transformative interpretation but rather as offering an agonistic source of creativity. Indeed, as the narrative demonstrates by relating “the very first stirrings of this book” to an image showing Alison reading Lacan (253)—itself no doubt an agonistic (if not agonizing!) experience—psychoanalysis is the creative catalyst that allows Bechdel to depict the myriad compulsions, doubts, and anxieties that went into the making of her graphic memoir. In response to the possibility of taking a more spontaneous approach to drawing, the narrator insists, “That’s impossible!” (252). Bechdel resists, and Are You My Mother? is the book of this resistance.

Bechdel’s memoir succeeds in dramatizing how her resistance to the interpretative closure offered by her analysts has enabled her to enjoy her symptom, affirming an artistic process that Bechdel has elsewhere described as “99.97 percent a grimly obsessive-compulsive activity” that also produces “a few shimmering mystical moments” (“Q&A”). This reclamation of self is made clear when Bechdel focuses her memoir on her creative process and addresses the painful core of her distress: her mother’s refusal to recognize her as an artist. In the first of a sequence of images distributed throughout chapters 5 and 6, Alison, who is shown in her early twenties, calls her mother on the phone, hoping to impress her with news of a book contract for a volume of Dykes to Watch Out For, only to have Helen respond, “I would love to see your name on a book, but not on a book of lesbian cartoons” (182). Although Bechdel, drawing on her diary of the period,
acknowledges that “lesbianism is only a minor inlet” in the “emotional gulf” that separates her from her mother (182), she nonetheless renders the devastating pain of her mother’s comment by repeating, forty-seven pages later, a similar phone conversation in which Helen continues trying to persuade her to publish the Dykes volume under a pseudonym. The panel shows Alison having just hung up on her mother, realizing that even though Helen has supported her financially, her mother is unable to recognize the artistic value of her work (fig. 3). The audible is made visible in the image of Alison’s convulsive sobbing, and the size of the panel, which occupies two tiers of a three-tier page, emphasizes the devastating pain of Bechdel’s experience.

Four pages later the image recurs, but with a difference: the lower-right panel shows Bechdel posing and taking a digital photo in preparation for drawing the image we just saw (fig. 4). A quotation from Winnicott (“When I look I am seen, so I exist”) and the narration (“Things got easier after that”) highlight the transformative value of Bechdel’s work. That is, her graphic-memoir making repeats an experience of emotional injury that enables the author to transform her sense of self from an object of suffering to a subject of artistic production. In so doing, Bechdel’s “metabook,” as her mother calls it near the memoir’s end (285), makes visually and verbally explicit what Hillary Chute has insightfully addressed as the “regenerative” method that Bechdel employed in Fun Home (193). According to Chute, Bechdel’s drawing process, as well as her repurposing of archives, demonstrates how “the repetition compulsion she enacts

Fig. 3
Illustration from Bechdel, Are You My Mother? (229).
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through making the book becomes literally productive, procreative” (213). The work of artistic production portrayed in Are You My Mother? suggests that by creating her memoir Bechdel has cured herself—if by cure we mean her ability to engage in meaningful work and to affirm her identity as a graphic artist.

Reparative Reading and Recognition

And yet something troubling persists in the image of Bechdel’s enjoying her symptom, for the depiction reveals that although making her memoir alleviates suffering, her artistic process has not generated a less anguished and more pleasurable relation to her life and her work. Bechdel has gone on record since the publication of Are You My Mother? to say that creating her memoir did not produce a “cathartic release from my mother’s constant critical presence in my head” (“Alison Bechdel Talks”). She expressed, as well, a desire to find a less emotionally fraught way of working. “The next phase of my art,” she said after receiving a 2014 MacArthur Foundation “genius grant,” “is to have an easier relationship with it. I know this is strange to say, because I’m a cartoonist, and you would think it’s fun to draw comics, but I have a rather tortured relationship to my own creativity” (“Alison Bechdel Is”).

Bechdel’s comments indicate a desire for an emotional transformation beyond the capacity to enjoy her symptom, the kind of desire that Sedgwick has linked to a reparative impulse that occurs in writing and reading certain works of literature and that seeks to move away from minimizing pain and toward maximizing pleasure. In her account, the work of reparation involves “the subject’s movement toward what Foucault calls ‘care of the self,’ the often very fragile concern to provide the self with pleasure and nourishment in an environment that is perceived as not particularly offering them” (137). In making this claim, she understands that literary scholars invested in the hermeneutics of suspicion—what she calls “paranoid reading”—may well reject literature’s reparative aims as “sappy, aestheticizing, defensive, anti-intellectual, or reactionary” (150). Nevertheless, Sedgwick’s work invites us to devise methods of “reparative reading” that consider “the many ways selves and communities succeed in extracting sustenance from the objects of a culture—even of a culture whose avowed desire has often been not
to sustain them” (151). Such methods, she argues, in drawing on the work of Melanie Klein, entail not a choice between “paranoid” and “reparative” reading so much as a “more flexible to-and-fro process” and “heterogeneous relational stances” (128). Klein writes that reparation constitutes an internal healing process, an imaginative means by which the mother is made whole and thus becomes a stable object that the subject can identify with (311–13). But while Bechdel’s book certainly invites a Kleinian reading, particularly in the way it makes reparations to the mother by establishing an identification between Helen’s acting career and Bechdel’s identity as a graphic artist (243), *Are You My Mother?* primarily enacts the communal notion of reparative reading formulated by Sedgwick.

If *Are You My Mother?* represents a version of paranoid reading by critiquing the analyst’s objectivity to make room for the patient’s subjectivity, the memoir also models and elicits a reparative-reading practice that might bring about an even more far-reaching emotional transformation for the author—and for readers. Bechdel’s book models reparative reading in the way that it engages the work of Winnicott and Virginia Woolf. The memoir suggests that Alison’s internal difficulty as a daughter, even a daughter who has enjoyed relative affluence and maternal care, might be repaired not by gathering psychoanalytic knowledge of its cause so much as by eliciting public acknowledgment of its commonality and significance.

Bechdel recognizes in reading Winnicott the possibility of moving beyond the rather obsessional quest she otherwise pursues: her quest to use psychoanalysis and graphic-memoir making to determine the causes of her suffering, as if knowing would necessarily transform pain into pleasure. In his radical challenge to orthodox psychoanalysis, Winnicott eschewed the aim of fostering knowledge about such causes, as well as the cure this self-knowledge was supposed to produce (*Playing* 96). Instead, he developed techniques for engaging patients in an open-ended process of discovery, including what he called the “squiggle game,” a collaborative creativity activity in which children add to lines or shapes initially drawn by the analyst (*Therapeutic Consultations* 3). The squiggle game provides access to the unconscious, though the drawings are not meant to be interpreted by the analyst but rather understood by patients on their own terms. Even more significant, Winnicott emphasized the value of patients’ not knowing what their experiences might mean. Rather than a state of ignorance or resistance on the part of patients, “not knowing” for Winnicott indicated a psychic space in which no predetermined aims and outcomes were imposed on his patients, either by themselves or by others (*Playing* 51). Though Bechdel does not mention the squiggle game in *Are You My Mother?*, she explicitly draws on Winnicott’s account of not knowing: Alison reports a clinical case history of one of his patients, a forty-seven-year-old woman who had previously been in psychoanalysis, who continually failed to find herself, and who started keeping “a detailed diary of her analysis with Winnicott.” “But at the climax of their work,” Alison continues, “she stopped writing in it. The woman was now able to feel something she described as a ‘not knowing’” (151), which, as Winnicott wrote of the case, “produced tremendous relief” (qtd. in Bechdel, *Are* 151).

Beyond this thematization, Bechdel’s book weaves the idea of not knowing into its structure, suggesting that powerful benefits can arise from realizing the limited therapeutic efficacy of self-knowledge. This critique of a psychoanalytic injunction to know thyself is particularly evident in one of the most repeated visual and verbal motifs in *Are You My Mother?:* the fear of spiders and their webs, shown in some thirteen panels. In the dream that opens the second chapter, a blanket on which Alison’s girlfriend sleeps is magically
transformed into “a quilt, spanned by a perfect, dew-covered spiderweb” and divided into “eleven precisely equal sections” (40). Bechdel’s description of the web-covered quilt perfectly captures her work as a graphic artist. Alison sees in the web’s skilled and precise patterning a reflection of her impulse to impose explanatory patterns on her experience. As a metaphor for her own book, the spiders’ web weaving elicits a degree of fear, for Alison recognizes that her own memoir making requires an intense form of “self-consciousness” that she regards not only as productive but also as “self-destructive” (41). In basing her work on her life, Bechdel is aware, in other words, that imposing knowable patterns to make sense of her experience threatens to entangle, fetter, and restrict her, thus foreclosing possibilities for other forms of self-discovery.

But in the last of the book’s spider references, Bechdel’s memoir also points to an event that exceeds the author’s comprehension: Alison is shown in a therapy session talking about her mother’s childhood encounter with a spider, when, quite inexplicably, “a small spider suddenly rappelled down from the ceiling” between Alison and her analyst (fig. 5). Bechdel’s panel, marked by the look of astonishment on the faces of patient and analyst, as well as by the absence of dialogue, testifies to the impossibility of knowing what this encounter with a spider might mean. In a book replete with psychoanalytic theories of arachnophobia, including Winnicott’s, Bechdel provides us with an image of a spider that cannot be neatly woven into an otherwise intricate web of comics signification.

By incorporating the idea of not knowing into the book’s structure, Bechdel’s memoir critiques its own artistic practice of imposing meaningful patterns, a practice that the author otherwise relies on, as she does in the book’s first double-page spread (32–33). Here, Bechdel calls attention to having adopted an attitude of knowingness in deliberately sequencing five family photographs of uncertain chronology so that they tell the story of the disruption of a jubilant mother-child union by the intrusion of a threatening paternal presence. In contrast, what Bechdel shows us in the perplexing appearance of a spider is an image of herself as someone who has been released from the omniscience and intransigence of claiming to know what her experience means. For all the value that Bechdel ascribes to the examined life, her memoir suggests that nonanalytic activity, removed from the quest for self-knowledge, might also play an important role in Alison’s struggle to repair the psychic damage caused by her relationships with others, particularly her mother.

Bechdel uses Winnicott to play her own squiggle game. That is, she not only enacts his object relations theory in the medium of...
comics, as Heather Love’s perceptive reading of the book’s representation of the “mom problem” has addressed, Bechdel also treats Winnicott’s work as the author intended: as a psychoanalytic experience of shared creativity—but one whose rules Bechdel remakes by translating psychoanalysis into comics form. In so doing, her graphic memoir moves beyond what Phillips calls the “knowingness” of psychoanalysis, including even the residual elements of knowingness in Winnicott’s work. The challenge that Phillips poses to the “authoritative point of view” of psychoanalysis in On Kissing, Tickling, and Being Bored (4)—a book that Alison is shown reading in Are You My Mother? (253)—delineates the way Bechdel engages and surpasses Winnicott. As Phillips writes, “By pooling the language of psychoanalysis rather than hoarding it—by circulating it in unusual places with other languages—psychoanalysis can be relieved of the knowingness that makes it look silly; the knowingness that comes from its ‘splendid isolation,’ the fantasies of inner superiority in the profession” (4). In similar fashion, Bechdel’s memoir weaves psychoanalysis together with many other personal, cultural, and, especially, literary languages. The opening chapter, for example, reflects the intertextual weaving of two discourses by staging an instructive encounter of psychoanalysis with modernist literature: Bechdel pictures an imaginary meeting between Winnicott and Woolf in which a twenty-nine-year-old psychoanalytic trainee tips his hat to an already influential middle-aged writer (26). The panel suggests the kind of debt that psychoanalysis owes to literature, a debt that Freud himself acknowledged when he remarked, “The poets and philosophers discovered the unconscious” (qtd. in Trilling 34). And yet neither Freud nor Winnicott ever seriously considered that literary texts could be curative. In contrast, Are You My Mother? explores the reparative potential of texts and, by combining the language of psychoanalysis with that of other discourses, particularly literature, it succeeds in moving beyond the limits of psychoanalytic insularity and knowingness.

Bechdel’s book makes a powerful case for the capacity of literature generally and graphic memoir in particular to serve the reparative aims that psychoanalysis, when pursued in isolation from other practices, is depicted as failing to fully accomplish. The memoir treats a daughter’s ambivalence toward her mother not as a private issue that can be wholly resolved through the knowledge acquired in therapy but rather as a common complaint that might be ameliorated through social acknowledgment—that is, through recognition and inclusion in public life. Rita Felski, who has theorized acknowledgment as a form of cultural recognition provided by literature, discusses what it means for readers, especially those marginalized by culture, to see themselves reflected in the pages of literary texts (29). She argues that recognition ensures “that books will often function as lifelines for those deprived of other forms of public acknowledgement” (43). This type of recognition, which she calls “self-intensification,” makes readers aware that their emotions and behaviors are far from unique. Intersubjective recognition thus promotes readers’ awareness of a “perceived commonality and shared history,” suggesting how literature “has often fueled the momentum of social movements” (39), a point that Timothy Aubry similarly makes in arguing that the awareness of shared affect by readers has played a “generally underexamined role in shaping America’s social and political history” (2). Felski, in building on Sedgwick’s notion of reparative reading (4), writes that the recognition readers derive from books “is about knowing, but also about the limits of knowing and knowability, and about how self-perception is mediated by the other, and the perception of otherness by the self” (49). If reading constitutes an integral part of the way we engage in self-fashioning, it also, as Felski
describes, speaks to the human need for acceptance and for a valued place in social life.

When Bechdel turns her attention to Woolf’s To the Lighthouse, she recognizes nothing less than herself: her own “mom problem” given public expression and social validation by the novel’s discourse. In Bechdel’s memoir, this recognition proves more reparative than the knowledge that her relationship with her mother has caused Bechdel to suffer. Bechdel’s account of reading Woolf moves the focus, then, from a psychoanalytic understanding of causes to an experience of recognition facilitated by literature. Bechdel reads Woolf’s To the Lighthouse through the lens of “A Sketch of the Past,” a memoir essay in which Woolf lays out her novel’s autobiographical sources. Ferreting out the novel’s references to Woolf’s life enables Bechdel to blur the boundaries between fiction and memoir, collapse the distinction between literary characters and real people, and understand Woolf’s novel as expressing Bechdel’s difficulties as a daughter. Literary scholars may well bristle at Bechdel’s insistence on authorial biography as the arbiter of textual meaning, equating the turn to the biographical with an abandonment of critical distance and a foreclosure of the novel’s aesthetic, social, and political significance. Scholars might also reject her reduction of the novel’s meaning to a version of reader response, regarding the emphasis on the reader’s psychological needs as fostering self-indulgent forms of individualism and further privileging private over social concerns. But Bechdel’s memoir not only raises larger questions of how and why people read literature, especially outside the academy, it also offers a compelling demonstration of how fictional and autobiographical texts respond to the human need for recognition and speak to deeply seated communal aspirations of readers.

If Fun Home reads as Bechdel’s version of James Joyce’s A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, a story of an artist’s development, then Are You My Mother?, while also participating in the tradition of the Künstlerroman, reflects Bechdel’s revisioning of To the Lighthouse, a novel of a female artist’s struggle to complete a painting in tribute to an ambivalent maternal figure. What elicits Bechdel’s admiration in reading the novel is Woolf’s demonstration that literary production can heal the artist. When Bechdel incorporates To the Lighthouse into her memoir, particularly on a page near the end, she highlights the reparative potential of artistic creation. In the top panel of a three-tier page, Bechdel pictures herself in a dream (fig. 6), having finally succeeded in uprooting her “mother’s encampment” by excising from her cheek a tumor that reminds her of a uterine fibroid (255). She overlays the image of the dream with a text box containing the first sentence of Woolf’s famous statement about the healing effects of writing To The Lighthouse: “I suppose that I did for myself what psychoanalysts do for their patients. I expressed some very long felt and deeply felt emotion. And in expressing it I explained and then laid it to rest” (“Sketch” 81). To the Lighthouse not only allows Bechdel to recognize her “mom problem” but also provides a reading experience that might help her resolve it. So important is the novel to Are You My Mother? that we see Bechdel, in the page’s bottom left panel, granting Woolf something of the status of a comics artist: Bechdel represents her as a spatial thinker, if not an actual cartoonist, by showing the image that Woolf drew in her diary to depict her novel’s form, the image that the novelist described as “two blocks joined by a corridor” (Bechdel, Are 255).

But although Bechdel takes Woolf as a model for her own work—as a literary mother whom she thinks back through in creating her memoir, as Vera Camden has pointed out, Bechdel also attempts to render her memoir more accessible to readers, using comics to bring clarity and immediacy to what can be dense and difficult to comprehend when
expressed by words alone. In the middle-tier panel, Bechdel calls attention to the advantages of her own medium by pointing to what she sees as a potential limitation of Woolf’s. She highlights a line from To the Lighthouse—“Subject and object and the nature of reality”—understanding that Woolf’s novel (and by implication Bechdel’s memoir) carries the weight of philosophical inquiry. But in a text box placed over part of
the redrawn manuscript page, she identifies Woolf’s “subject and object” formulation as “vast and pompous-sounding,” while also recognizing that the phrase accurately describes the novel’s intellectual reach (255). In contrast to Woolf’s novel, with its modernist difficulty, Bechdel’s book retells the story of a daughter-artist’s struggles in the accessible yet sophisticated form of comics. The graphic memoir invites a broad readership by combining words and images, as well as by spatializing time and thus visually presenting, as so many of Bechdel’s pages do, the simultaneity of many temporali- ties and the enduring presence of the past in psychic life. Bechdel’s use of comics form provides wider access to the complexities of the mother-daughter relationship and thereby to a reading experience that may be reparative for author and readers.

“The reason I write,” Bechdel commented in reference to her mother, “is to get the recognition from others I didn’t get from her” (“Alison Bechdel Talks”). The reader’s recognition of Bechdel as a graphic artist is central to repairing the author’s damaged psyche, especially since Helen, even in the years following the phenomenal success of Fun Home, is depicted as still refusing to acknowledge the real artistic merit of her daughter’s achievements in memoir. Helen, who emerges in Are You My Mother? as a staunch critic of life writing, considers memoir a “suspect genre” (11). She discounts the confessional poetry she reads as “annoying” and “too personal” (198), holding up instead the work of Wallace Stevens, a poet she describes as never having “used the word ‘I’” (202). To Helen’s claim that the “self has no place in good writing” (200), her daughter offers this critical response: “Yeah, but don’t you think that . . . that if you write minutely and rigorously enough about your life . . . you can, you know, transcend your particular self?” (201). In Alison’s formulation, the story of a daughter’s emotional difficulties extends beyond the author to encompass readers: Bechdel represents the frustrations, disap-
and repairing the “mom problem” is the lesson I take from the book’s recursive design. The double-page spread that concludes the memoir shows mother and daughter playing a game they invented and refer to as the “crippled child” (287): the young Alison pretends she cannot walk and Helen plays along by providing imaginary leg braces (fig. 7). The panel’s composition suggests a birthing scene, in which Alison appears to have just crawled out from the space between her mother’s parted legs. The image expresses Bechdel’s profound gratitude to her mother, acknowledging the central role that Helen has played in her daughter’s artistic development. At the same time, the narration in the final text box—“She has given me the way out”—indicates the book’s signal achievement: the release of the autobiographical subject from the constriction of her relationship with her mother (289). And yet this happy ending is rendered ambiguous by the aerial perspective of the panel’s composition, which minimizes our emotional involvement in the scene, and especially by the book’s recursiveness. The concluding image, showing Alison not as an adult but as a child, circles back to the book’s beginning, where the adult Alison—depicted in a borderless image that evokes an aura of timelessness—finds herself in a fetal-like position; we see Alison sinking in a “deep and murky” pool of water and succumbing to a “sublime feeling of surrender” (3). What the book’s recursive ending does, then, is take us right back to where we started: to the “mom problem.”

In an interview following the release of Are You My Mother?, Bechdel said she learned from Fun Home that “somehow the writing and drawing of the book isn’t the whole process”; creating a book includes “the process of talking about it in public” and “public reaction” (Interview). As Bechdel’s remark indicates, readers play a key role in the communal work of identifying and repairing the damage that many daughters experience in their relationships with their mothers. In encouraging readers to recognize themselves in Alison’s experience, Are You My Mother? promotes
Fig. 8
Dust jacket of Bechdel Are You My Mother? Copyright © 2012 by Alison Bechdel. Reprinted by permission of Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company. All rights reserved.
awareness of a shared affective history that merits social acknowledgment. Bechdel’s memoir demonstrates, finally, how releasing the autobiographical subject into a community formed in the mutual recognition of common suffering creates a potentially reparative experience. The dust jacket of the hardback edition makes the importance of this mutual recognition wonderfully legible: the question posed by the book’s title, printed in the mirror atop her mother’s dresser, invites readers to play the role of Bechdel’s mother and recognize her identity as a uniquely gifted graphic artist, thereby providing the acknowledgment that her own mother withheld (fig. 8). In turn, by recognizing Bechdel, we may also recognize ourselves as daughters of good-enough mothers and as agents whose reparative reading has the capacity to regenerate both our own and the author’s identities.

NOTES

I extend my gratitude to Vera Camden for insightful feedback and to Mark Bracher—my indispensable reader.

1. E.g., Chute 180; Fantasia 88; Freedman 129; Pearl 287; Rohy 346; Warhol 2; Zunshine 130.

2. Freud used a cartoon, taken from a Hungarian humor magazine and titled “A French Nurse’s Dream,” to illustrate a type of “wakeup dream” (368). The cartoon represents how dreams fold into their content external noises and disturbances, enabling people to remain asleep; however, these disruptions, according to Freud, are translated into ever-more-intense dream symbols, ultimately compelling sleepers to awaken. On the relation between comics and psychoanalysis, see Kunzle, whose study of the nineteenth-century European comic strip discusses the humorous element of cartoons in relation to Freud’s theory of jokes (361).

3. Bechdel originally planned to title her graphic memoir “The Drama of the Gifted Mother,” an allusion to Alice Miller’s _The Drama of the Gifted Child_, a book featured in _Are You My Mother_? and important to Bechdel’s understanding of her early development and her mother’s role in her formation as a graphic artist. However, on her editor’s recommendation, Bechdel borrowed her title from Eastman’s 1960 children’s book, a story of a baby bird that tells his mother about the adventures he had after he hatched and went in search of her (“Hillary Chute”). The title change shifts the attention from her mother to Bechdel herself, as does the book’s dedication—“For my mother, who knows who she is”—indicating that the graphic memoir does not, strictly speaking, tell her mother’s story so much as Bechdel’s own.

4. For more detailed discussions of these ideas, see J.-A. Miller 10; Lacan; Verhaeghe and Declerq 63; and Žižek, _Looking_ 137–38, _Sublime Object_ 74, and _Enjoy Your Symptom!_ 155.

5. Chaney, in his work on the cartoonist Linda Barry, has addressed self-reflexive depictions of the author laboring on the book we read. Such depictions, Chaney writes, “compel us to recognize that the graphic artist will honestly illustrate her life, since as we hereby witness, she cannot stop herself from doing so, going so far as to draw even this metadiscursive pledge regarding the irresolvable nature of autobiographical authority, which perforates the opposition of fact and fiction” (22). See also Hatfield, who addresses a self-reflexive comics strategy he calls “ironic authentication” (31).

6. Love argues that Bechdel’s memoir grounds its “work of repair” in Winnicott’s concept of play, which yields “a paradoxical space—neither internal nor external—where creative life transpires.” See also Diedrich, who provides a detailed account of Winnicott’s importance to Bechdel’s graphic memoir (192). For a speculative reading that draws on cognitive neuroscience to suggest that Bechdel’s reliance on psychoanalysis and literature impedes her efforts to accommodate her past, see Giaimo (55).

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