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Listening to Men, Then and Now

Boasts have yielded to humor, but women are still the audience.

BY DEBORAH TANNEN

A WOMAN AND A MAN MEET AT the end of the day. He asks how her day was, and she replies with a long report of what she did, whom she met, what they said and what that made her think and feel. Then she eagerly turns to him:

She: How was your day?

He: Same old rat race.

She: Didn't anything happen?

He: Nah, nothing much.

Her disappointment is deepened when that evening they go out to dinner with friends and suddenly he regales the group with an amusing account of something that happened at work. She is cut to the quick, crestfallen at hearing this story as part of an audience of strangers. "How could he have said nothing happened?" she wonders. "Why didn't he tell me this before? What am I? Chopped liver?"

The key to this frustration is that women and men typically have different ideas about what makes people friends. For many women, as for girls, talk is the glue of close relationships; your best friend is the one you tell your secrets to, the one you discuss your troubles with. For many men, as for boys, activities are central; your best friend is the one you do everything with (and the one who will stick up for you if there is a fight).

As the millennium approaches and commentators examine how our lives have changed in the last thousand years, I find myself wondering about the change in relations between the sexes. Clearly there has been a transformation. In the past, the woman was deferential, subordinate. Now we are not trying to be partners in a societal arrangement with a clearly defined separation of labor, but rather hoping to be each other's best friends. Yet at least two aspects of women's and men's relations have endured — our differing expectations about the importance of talk in intimacy, and the tendency of women to take the role of listener in conversation with men.

In the absence of tape recordings from earlier times, we can look to conver-



sations in literature. For a glimpse of how a 16th-century couple might have talked to each other, I turned to Shakespeare — and my earliest memory of his plays. When I was at Ditmas Junior High in Brooklyn, my classmates were all atwitter: our teacher had us reading "Julius Caesar" aloud, and, having read ahead, we knew that the next day some poor girl would have to stand and read a passage in which Brutus's wife uses the word "harlot." Susan Ehrlich had the bad luck to be chosen, and I can still see her, tall and brown-haired, reading, "Portia is Brutus's harlot, not his wife."

Revisiting those lines today, what strikes me is how similar the sentiment is to what I hear from contemporary women. Portia wants to be Brutus's best friend — and her idea of what this means is very similar to ours. Waking up to discover that her husband has left their bed, she finds him pacing, and implores him to say what is worrying him. Like the modern woman who feels that best friends tell each other secrets, Portia pleads:

Within the bond of marriage, tell me,

Brutus,

Is it excepted I should know no secrets

*That appertain to you?
Am I yourself
But, as it were, in sort or
limitation,
To keep with you at meals,
comfort your bed,
And talk to you
sometimes? Dwell I but
in the suburbs
Of your good pleasure? If
it be no more,
Portia is Brutus's harlot,
not his wife.*

A similar sentiment emerges in an even more distant conversation — in the Arabian romance of the Bedouin hero Antartar, believed to have been written between 1080 and 1400. In one episode, a character named al-Minhal, escaping a king he has wronged, comes upon a ruined castle inhabited by a female demon named Dahiya. She gives him shelter, feeds him, falls in love with him and wins his love by her attentions, which include her conversation. Sounding rather like Portia, Dahiya says: "I want you to be my companion and to be my lord, and I will be your wife. Disclose to me what is in your heart. Do not believe that I will ever let you go. Open your mind to me for I have need to know your thoughts." They are married on the spot, and, we are told, "Long was their companionship, and they loved each other dearly."

I am not suggesting that relationships between women and men were the same then as

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now. But it's intriguing to think that what women regard as intimacy, talking about what's on your mind, has been a common thread right through the millennium. There's another, related pattern that seems to have endured. It, too, is evident in the case of the husband who can't think of anything to tell his wife but comes up with an amusing story to entertain a dinner gathering. To her, it's a failure of intimacy: if we're truly close, I should hear everything first. To him, I think, the situation of being home with someone he feels close to does not call for a story performance. This creates a paradox. Many women were drawn to the men they fell in love with because the men told captivating stories. After marriage, the women expect that the closer they get, the more the men will open up and tell. Instead, to their deep disappointment, after marriage the men clam up.

Once again, looking at how boys and girls are socialized provides a key. Boys' groups are hierarchical; low-status boys are pushed around. One way boys earn and keep status is to hold center stage by verbal performance — boasting, telling jokes or recounting mesmerizing stories. And this seems to work well in winning maidens as well.

This aspect of storytelling can be seen as far back as "Beowulf," that Anglo-Saxon saga, usually dated to the eighth century. The hero, a member of a Swedish tribe known as the Geats, wins the attention of Wealhtheow,

queen of Hrothgar, who is serving beer to a gathering of men:

Beowulf spoke, the son of Ecgtheow: "I resolved, when I set out on the sea, sat down in the sea-boat with my band of men, that I should altogether fulfill the will of your people or else fall in slaughter, fast in the foe's grasp. I shall achieve a deed of manly courage or else have lived to see in the mead-hall my ending day." These words were well-pleasing to the woman, the boast of the Geat. Gold-adorned, the noble folk-queen went to sit by her lord.

Boasting, my colleague Catherine Ball tells me, was a customary male activity in the Anglo-Saxon mead-hall, so it is not surprising that Wealhtheow was well pleased, even though the exploits Beowulf boasts of have not yet taken place. (In fact, he sounds a little like Cassius Clay predicting what he will do to Sonny Liston.)

This scenario — a woman wooed by a man's boasts of exploits in battle — brings us back to Shakespearean icons: Desdemona and Othello. As Othello tells "how I did thrive in this fair lady's love," he explains that she became entranced when she heard him telling "the story of my life":

*Wherein I spoke of most disastrous chances:
Of moving accidents by flood and field,
Of hair-breadth scapes i'th' imminent deadly breach;
Of being taken by the insolent foe. . . .*

And so on, until:

*My story being done,
She gave me for my pains
a world of kisses. . . .
And bad me, if I had a friend that lov'd her,
I should but teach him
how to tell my story,
And that would woo her.*

As we know, he wooed her himself with his own story.

In our era, the tactic of wooing by verbal performance takes a funny turn. Etiquette books of the 50's instructed young women to be good listeners if they wanted to win their men, and you need only look around a restaurant to see many women attentively listening to talking men. In place of battle yarns, what I hear, over and over, is that a woman fell in love because "he makes me laugh." That's why Michelle Pfeiffer said in 1992 she picked a particular boyfriend, and why Joanne Woodward fell for Paul Newman. I don't hear the same explanation from men as to why they fall in love. What I hear is the corresponding one, as for example when Woody Allen said of his relationship with Soon-Yi Previn: "She's a marvel. And she laughs at all my jokes."

We seem to have a situation of *plus ça change*. Even as relationships between men and women have changed, our contrasting expectations about the meaning of closeness still cause confusion and disappointment. And though the performance has shifted from heroic tales to amusing entertainment, more often than not the apportionment of roles has stayed the same: Women are the audience and men are the show. ■