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Catriona MacLeod, *Invisible Presence: The Representation of Women in French-Language Comics*. Bristol: Intellect Books, 2022. xii + 244 pp. Notes, references, index, and figures. \$113.50 U.S. (hb). ISBN 9781789383904; \$39.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 9781789386813; \$85.00 U.S. (eb). ISBN 9781789383928.

Review by Fransiska Louwagie, University of Aberdeen.

Invisible Presence: The Representation of Women in French-Language Comics is the monograph stemming from Catriona's MacLeod PhD research, which provides a highly useful and considerably overdue systematic study of the representation of female characters in *bande dessinée*.

The study is framed as an investigation of what MacLeod designates as the "woman problem" (p. 188, 189, 190, 192): the latter relates to issues around the representation of women in art in general and in comics specifically. As the introductory chapter demonstrates, within the field of *bande dessinée* the difficulties in representing female characters stem from a combination of factors, the first of which is the origin of the medium as a low-status cultural product, which was traditionally directed at a young readership, mostly boys. A predominance of male characters thus provided easy identification for the readers whilst also sheltering them from a potentially harmful female presence. The medium's predilection for comedy and action further reinforced the erasure of women characters, deemed less compatible with these genres. Comics production by female creators has also emerged relatively slowly, as has research into women in *bande dessinée*. As this situation has started to change, MacLeod's research ties in usefully with recent interests in the field, exemplified in part through the 2016 special issue of *Alternative francophone* on "La bande dessinée au féminin." Contrary to this publication, however, MacLeod's focus is not restricted to female creators, but focuses on matters of representation within the broader tradition of *bande dessinée*.

The main body of analysis is split into three sections: the two initial sections focus on the work of male creators, with the first offering a study of some (rare) key female protagonists, and the second examining the representation of secondary female characters. The third section focuses on female creators and their representation of women. Each of these sections starts with a useful overview chapter, contextualising and setting out relevant evolutions in the field. The different sections then offer a number of case studies on specific comics series, offering background insights into their production and reception as well as close analysis. Selected images relating to these are available at the end of the volume.

In spite of the book's title, which might suggest a broad Francophone perspective, the focus is primarily on Franco-Belgian productions, though with some references to other French-speaking

areas, as well as useful cross-language comparisons with American comics (though not with manga, another field that would provide interesting insight into female protagonists and their reception). In terms of selection and discussion of works and contexts, it might have been useful for the introductory chapter to further outline and unpack some of these parameters and the geographical and temporal delimitations of the study.

The introduction to the first section, on female protagonists in the work of male creators, considers the general growing up of the *bande dessinée* medium and the related development of its female characters, who gradually transform from young girls (aimed at a children's audience) into young women. As MacLeod reminds us, the steer towards a more adult audience in the 1960s went hand in hand with a much more sexualised depiction of women, which has become a long-lasting commercial strategy. As opposed to this, MacLeod points out, character-led narratives by male creators have emerged much more recently, particularly within the independent sector.

The first case study in this section, which focuses on Bécassine, critically reassesses the evolution of this founding figure as well as her evolving reception. MacLeod's analysis demonstrates how the character has been largely defeminized, which restricts her development as a female character. By contrast, in Jean-Claude Forest's Barbarella series, which is the focus of the second case study, it is the protagonist's constant oversexualisation which reduces the potential for a "real female presence" (p. 60). The third and final protagonist analysed is Tardi's Adèle Blanc-Sec: it is argued that the latter predominantly functions as a monstrous protagonist, on the grounds that she maintains an isolated and exceptional status; however, this monstrosity is also neutralised through the use of idealised nudes. As the analysis shows, such an uncertain and conflicted representation confirms the longstanding struggle between the representation of sexual extremes for female characters. In terms of further development, it might have been interesting to also compare this type of protagonist with the more recent character-led approaches mentioned in the introduction.

The second section considers the representation of secondary female characters in the work of male creators. The opening introduction embeds the selected case studies within the broader Franco-Belgian and American comics scene. It particularly assesses the impact of the 1949 law on publications for children, which has contributed to an enduring erasure of female characters. By way of illustration, MacLeod refers to the belated addition of a female presence in Peyo's series *Les Schtroumpfs* (*The Smurfs*), and the limitations of female characters in this series as well as others, including *Astérix*. Furthermore, the apparition of mainstream genres such as historically based *bande dessinée*, heroic adventures, and also heroic fantasy, continue to allocate secondary and largely sexualised roles to female characters, whilst secondary women of colour or lesbian characters only appear sporadically. MacLeod points out that since the 1990s a move towards the everyday in the independent sector has shifted this situation somewhat, initially directing female characters towards parenting roles, though their scope has expanded further through the increase in autobiography and biography genres, particularly in the work of female creators.

The case studies in the second section are illustrative of the long tradition of typing and confinement of female characters. This is exemplified first in more detail in *Astérix*, a series that was largely pioneering, but where women tend to form a backdrop of domestic normality for the male characters' fantastical adventures. The second case study examines the BD adaptation of Thierry Jonquet's novel *La Vie de ma mère*. As this work is part of a trend focussing on difficult

socio-economic realities in *bande dessinée*, women are being cast in roles that are very different from the first case study, but MacLeod notes that they are nevertheless heavily typed and fit categories such as mother, Madonna or whore, carer or victim. As this case study considers a comic adaptation of a literary novel, it also offers the potential to explore the specificity of the *bande dessinée* medium in its representation of secondary female characters: in this respect MacLeod identifies both a tendency towards reductive caricature and potential for added expressivity through the use of static images.

The third case study considers work by German-Belgian co-authors Éric Warnauts and Guy Raives, focusing on their depiction of black secondary women in two albums about colonial Congo and postcolonial Guadeloupe, respectively. This case study explores again the specificity of the *bande dessinée* medium, noting how the women's bodies are foregrounded and eroticised via divided, atomised depictions spread out over different panels. This tendency towards exoticisation and female typing carries through even in the second work on modern-day Guadeloupe, despite some minor evolutions.

In the fourth and final case study of this section, MacLeod focuses on Marc Lancenet, whose work is connected to the New Wave movement that has marked the field of *bande dessinée* during the last decades, and which combines a focus on the everyday with a light tone, as opposed to the examples of darker realism mentioned above. MacLeod demonstrates that Lancenet's *Combat ordinaire* both features and questions female stereotypes: with an increased focus on introspection, there is increased scope for character evolution amongst the secondary female characters, particularly in light of the decline in authority of the male protagonists.

The introductory presentation to the third and final section details the slow emergence of female *bande dessinée* authors. The focus in this introduction interestingly extends to non-European French-speaking areas, referencing for instance Congo-born author Chantal de Spiegeleer, who features several black female protagonists in her work, or Canadian cartoonist Julie Ducet. It also highlights the work of some of the most well-known French-speaking female creators, some of whom, like Marjane Satrapi and Aurélia Aurita, have a non-European background. However, it is noted that diversification of representation in the field with regard to ethnic identities or sexual orientation only occurs very gradually. From an analytical perspective, MacLeod argues that rather than a female aesthetic, the work of female creators is quite diverse in genre and style, though an autobiographical tendency is known to emerge at the end of the millennium.

The Satrapi effect in particular has created a vogue for female and autobiographical creations (alongside the well-known development of this genre amongst male *bande dessinée* authors). As MacLeod indicates, the autobiographical genre provides an obvious opportunity to move beyond stereotyping, whilst on the other hand, the emergence of *bande dessinée girly* or chick-BD, considered to fall outside the temporal scope of the study, "threaten[s]" to reinforce female stereotypes (p. 150). The latter genre could still have been connected usefully to some of the case studies in this section, given for instance the intertextual references to Aurélia Aurita in the portrayal of Judith Forest by La Cinquième Couche (in their 2009 *1h25* publication, subsequently exposed as a hoax in *Momon: Apostille à 1h25*), which offers a (male and therefore not unproblematic) critique of this genre. More broadly, given the acknowledged outsider status of female creators in general, the overview could potentially also give some consideration to self-publishing artists and their characters (with examples of crowdfunded publications such as *La Vie d'Ebène Duta* by Cameroun-born artist Elyon's, which features a black protagonist).

The case studies for this section go from *Ah! Nana* to Chantal Montellier and Aurélia Aurita and offer interesting observations on how the “women problem” is challenged through their active engagement with stereotypes and confinement. *Ah! Nana* is considered as the first platform for female creators: with a diversity of representations, it acted as a disseminator of feminist themes, some of which are studied here in more depth. Chantal Montellier, the second case study, is one of the artists emerging from this platform: her work offers a critical reflection on the depiction of women in *bande dessinée* and across pictorial media, challenging both the phallogocentric society and restrictions of women imposed by other women.

The final case study looks at Aurélia Aurita’s autobiographically based work, which is known to challenge expectations around female sexuality. MacLeod shows how the artist reclaims the female body, challenges myths of female “lack” (p. 186-187) and also shifts the gaze through her normalisation of sexuality: the focus on the female libido is brought in contrast with the simplicity of the sketches, contrasting “innocence” and “depravity” (p. 187). As the analysis shows, the work thus confronts both visual codes and social myths to tackle the women problem, or at least certain aspects of it.

The short concluding chapter is titled “Problem Solved?” and discusses some of the key evolutions in relation to the so-called “women problem,” and particularly the role of female creators in this, though it is argued that the shift is less about the identity of the creator than the drive to deconstruct stereotypes. To expand on these items, it might have been interesting to return more explicitly to the question of audiences, genres and status, in response to the issues set out in the introduction. Further consideration could also be given to more institutional perspectives, such as publication platforms, festivals, and prizes. That being said, as the research considers the relationships between broad societal visions and the representations and depiction of women within *bande dessinée*, it offers great insight into the ways in which this medium can be a particular vector for reflecting and even enhancing stereotypes, whilst also having the potential to nuance and challenge these through its visual and narrative strategies.

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