Narrating women in comics

*Graphic Women: Life Narrative and Contemporary Comics*
Hillary L. Chute (2010)

*Girls and Their Comics: Finding a Female Voice in Comic Book Narrative*
Jacqueline Danziger-Russell (2013)

*The Supergirls: Fashion, Feminism, Fantasy, and the History of Comic Book Heroines*
Mike Madrid (2009)

*Dotter of Her Father’s Eyes*
Mary M. Talbot and Bryan Talbot (2012)

Reviewed by Mark Nixon

In recent years, as comics has become a more pronounced and arguably elevated medium in culture, there has also been a development both in the appreciation and participation of women and girls (characters, readers, creators) in comics, as Danziger-Russell notes in the opening pages of her book, and of nonfictional graphic narratives, as Chute recognises in her opening passages. There has been a burgeoning of academic interest in
comics, as literature and cultural history. Linguists, however, do not seem to have been as interested in the form, despite its apparent usefulness for considering questions about the relationship of the visual and the verbal, and the structure of storytelling. Thus, while comics uses both borrowed and its own verbal and visual grammars, Kress and van Leeuwen (1996) do not touch upon comics in any sustained way. Similarly, the recent turn to multimodality has paid little attention to this quintessentially multimodal medium, although Jacobs (2013) considers comics as a tool for teaching multimodal literacy in the classroom.

At the turn of the century, there was a flurry of books that dealt with language in comics, such as Bongco (2000) on superheroes, Varnum and Gibbons’s (2001) attempt to bring the semiotics studies prevalent in continental European comics studies to an English-language audience, and Saraceni’s (2003) textbook, inspired by McCloud (1994). More recently, Bramlett (2012) has chapters on multilingualism, metaphor, identity and language representation in comics, while eschewing a major consideration of narrative. Cohn (2013) has developed a cognitivist-semiotics account of comics, which he has placed against the influential formalist semiotics account of Groensteen (2013). Postema (2013), although offering useful insights for those beginning a narratological study of comics, is primarily written for practitioners. Stein and Thon (2013) produced an important collection showing how a specifically graphic narratology has been developed in recent years. Miodrag (2013) offers perhaps the most sustained work on comics and language of recent years, arguing from a perspective that criticises some of the alleyways down which comics studies in its dominant defensive mode has forced itself. It may be hoped that these books will inspire a new interest in comics from linguists. In the meantime, the field of narrative studies in particular has been ceded to literary theorists.

Gender in comics has also been less studied than perhaps might be expected. To some extent this is a reflection of the main formalist and semiotics approaches in comics studies, which obviate consideration of wider social and cultural issues. Manga studies cannot fail to consider gender, at least in audience studies, but English-language work on east Asian comics is still in its infancy. Where North American and European comics studies has considered gender, it has almost invariably featured superhero comics, a genre from which questions of gender bleed from almost every page, as the title Our Gods Wear Spandex (Knowles 2007) makes clear. It is a field, however, that is largely cultural-historical (not, for instance, drawing on the kinds of analysis offered by Mills 1995, in which the visual is analysed alongside the verbal), and which largely interests itself in men, masculinity and male homosociality/homoeroticism.
Mike Madrid’s work is an act of excavation, an opportunity for a reader-collector of comics featuring superheroines to place that tradition on show. Indeed, it should perhaps be read alongside his subsequent anthology featuring some of the less-remembered female comics characters of the 1940s, *Divas, Dames and Daredevils* (Madrid 2013). Chapters on each of the decades from the 1940s to the 2000s are interspersed with chapters on key themes. Opening his account with Sandra Knight/Phantom Lady (1941), Madrid immediately focuses on what becomes a key theme of the book: costume. Her ‘shapely form’ and ‘low-cut neckline’ are important to her image, although Madrid’s later focus on costumes tends to be more on ever-rising cuts below the waist than ever-lowering cuts above. As Madrid shows, in these early years the main propositions of the genre are formed, not least through the influence of the characters Sheena (1937) and Wonder Woman (1941). In a later chapter, Wonder Woman is used to show how characters are reshaped as cultural fashions and social mores change. This trope – of women in comics reflecting visions of women in society – sets the tone for his analysis. Perhaps as a result of his fandom, he seems unwilling to recognise any constitutive act by his favourite creations in cultural developments with which he does not approve. In the 1990s, for example, he argues that comics creators ‘followed the rest of popular media by sexualising young girls’ (my emphasis).

Madrid rightly notes the huge impact of the anti-comics agenda of the 1950s, following the publication of the conservative psychologist Fredric Wertham’s *Seduction of the Innocent* (1954) and the resulting creation of the Comics Code Authority (CCA), on the representation of women in comics. Wertham’s fixation on sexuality and clothing, and the CCA’s rules on ‘suggestive posture’ and the ‘exaggeration of … physical qualities’, ended the careers of many women characters. Phantom Lady, Sheena and Catwoman all disappeared in 1955. The following year, however, Batwoman was created, this time in response to another gender problem about which Wertham had worried: Batman’s and Robin’s relationship was distractingly homoerotic, and despite her relatively demure clothing, Batwoman existed to shore up Batman’s heterosexuality.

Madrid sees hope in recent developments. In 1996, *Birds of Prey* was launched, the first female buddy superhero series featuring, at first, Black Canary and Oracle. Crucially for Madrid, the relationship between these two women is the main dynamic in the series, not relationships with men or even crime-fighting, their ostensible *raison d’être*. In 2003, the ‘Birds’ become a foursome, with the addition of Lady Blackhawk and Huntress. The latter, Madrid notes, has been castigated as a whore on numerous internet sites by mostly male comics fans. The reader is reminded here of
the paucity of serious analysis of gender in these comics. It is, for Madrid, enough to note that women get to be central characters, and to place their relationships with each other centre stage, for him to see these recent comics as an implicitly positive move. But without a careful working through of representation on the page, and without any textual analysis of substance, his cultural historical approach becomes little more than an annotated chronicle of ‘the Supergirls’.

Jacqueline Danziger-Russell opens her book with what she calls a ‘Brief History’ of ‘Girls and Their Comics’. Although she notes the presence of females in the superhero genre – in particular Sheena, whom she notes was designed for a male gaze, and Wonder Woman, the first character specifically designed to provide a role model for girls – she turns away from such characters. The implication is that Madrid’s female characters are for male readers, whereas Danziger-Russell is interested in male and female characters for female readers. From 1945 to 1955, ‘teen comics’ dominated this market, with shallow, undifferentiated girl characters in the main roles. For Danziger-Russell the impact of Wertham and the CCA is different to that outlined by Madrid: firstly, it creates a new gender segregation in the comics market (romance comics for girls, adventure comics for boys) and secondly, with the loss of many independent titles on which a greater proportion of creators were women than was the case in mainstream comics, the loss of women working in the industry. The chapter ends with a comparison of the characters Little Lulu (independent, not ‘boy crazy’) and Miss America (vacuous, ‘boy-crazy’) in which she uses a textual analysis far more detailed than anything Madrid offers. Indeed, much the rest of the book rests upon close readings of the contemporary comics she considers, and does so in the light of some of the linguistics-inspired comics studies of the last fifteen years or so. It is an assumption of comics studies that comics is a medium with its own grammar(s), its own strategies, and its own traditions. The parts of a comics rhetoric (panels, gutters, balloons, captions, etc.) are where information, plot and meaning are developed, and have fascinated comics theorists from semioticians to narratologists. For Danziger-Russell, these features are the loci of analysis.

Unfortunately, given the promise of analytical rigour in contrast to Madrid’s descriptive method, Danziger-Russell’s analyses often appear to fall short. Her reading of Holly Black and Ted Naifeh’s gothic comic Good Neighbours (2008–9), while showing some of the ways in which the tension between text and image helps create ambiguity in the narrative (p. 47), does not consider how the grammar of the page under study partly resolves and partly develops that ambiguity. The fifth panel clearly references both externally to a classic of the corpus of gothic imagery – the film
Nosferatu (1922) – and internally to the first panel’s image of the shape of Rue’s hand in the act of writing. For Danziger-Russell, reading forwards through from the first to the last panel, the question being considered is the presence or otherwise of Rue’s mother; the paradigmatic relations of the page, however, seem rather to suggest that the question at hand is how Rue’s mother, whether physically present or not, enters (is written into) the narrative. Indeed, many features of both Danziger-Russell’s close readings and wider theoretical aims could be developed further, perhaps in ways to which an attention to language would be helpful or even essential. A trivial example might be the prevalence of the reinscribed ‘Dear Diary’ in Mariko and Jillian Tamaki’s Skim (2008), noted in passing (p. 97) without considering its function as a discourse marker. More complex issues are thrown up in the construction of reliability and unreliability in, respectively, the visual and verbal narratives of Shannon and Dean Hale’s Rapunzel’s Revenge (2008), which Danziger-Russell merely accepts as a cultural norm without analysis (pp. 49–52).

Danziger-Russell does begin to show some of the ways in which comic books can offer women’s voices an outlet, and how gender concerns are treated in the works she considers. She shows how paratextual marks in Skim’s diary function as both a form of self-censorship within the narrative and as a method of denying the public airing of private thoughts. She suggests that the presentation on the page of that act, making public the problem of the private/public boundary, treats the question of how a feminine interiority may be externalised and brought into the public sphere. In her discussion of Bryan Talbot’s One Bad Rat (1994), Danziger-Russell also argues that comics offers a medium through which trauma (in this case, incestuous child abuse) can be shown and victims given a voice (pp. 192–8).

This is the guiding principle of Hillary Chute’s book, a psychoanalytic literary account of five authors who have, at the centre of their work, stories of trauma – abuse, rape, war and parental suicide. Chute’s aim is to show both the unique opportunities graphic narratives provide for the re/presentation of trauma, and the ways in which those narratives are inseparable from their gendering and their gender politics. Indeed, one of Chute’s central claims is that the very themes present in the graphic narratives under her consideration – hybridity, trauma, the body – make them feminist (p. 4). Her focus on the form of comics is based on three key features. First, she shows the ways in which comics construct time in space, the temporal strategies of comics tending to draw attention to aspects that may require further consideration by the reader, while offering the opportunity to skip or stop, with powerful effects for the comprehension
of the narrative elements (we might think here of Genette’s work on ellipsis and pause in duration; Genette 1980), while recognising the strategies available to comics creators to impose some degree of reading time on the reader. Additionally, noting the peripheral availability of panels denoting other moments than that shown in the panel being read, she writes of the ‘discursive recursivity’ built into the very ‘narrative scaffolding’ of comics (p. 8). Second, the handwritten form of these graphic narratives – displaying the never solely symbolic nature of the verbal and the never solely iconic nature of the visual – marks the hand of the author as always present, pointing to the self-reflexivity of these authors about the construction of (their) narratives (p. 11). Third, she stresses the importance of the role of the visual/verbal duality in constructing meaning, such as in the multiple narrations of child protagonist and adult narrator in many of the works, the concurrent presentation of diary entries and an interpretation of them in Gloeckner’s work (p. 74), and the use of beauty to represent trauma in Satrapi’s Persepolis (p. 146).

Chute shows how her five authors are very different, but each contributes to this greater vision of women’s memoir comics. Aline Kominsky-Crumb’s work has been criticised for being ‘ugly’ or ‘scratchy’, even ‘bad’, especially in comparison with the critically lauded work of her husband Robert Crumb. Chute argues that this scratchiness is for Kominsky-Crumb a realistic representation of the ‘everyday fabric of women’s lives’, the ‘grain’ (to borrow from Barthes) that creates a feminist aesthetic in the face of a male/masculine style. Conversely, Phoebe Gloeckner’s fine technique disrupts the acts of gazing and being gazed at and introduces a suggestion of complicity into scenes of abuse, through the ‘rupturing alternation between effects’ afforded by the visual/verbal duality (p. 71). Lynda Barry relies on the essentially fragmentary nature of comics, in which readers are left to (re)construct narrative in the gutters between the panels, showing how traumatic memory is also fragmentary and visual (p. 114). Marjane Satrapi narrates herself as a multiple subject, a feminist project of never-forgetting (pp. 140–41). Alison Bechdel, through a complex relationship with ‘things’ – the archival objects she reinscribes rather than merely reproduces – recuperates a shared past, making ‘real’ the specificities of her abstracted father (pp. 179, 182, 188). This ‘materialising’ of history, an idea that she notes Art Spiegelman has discussed (p. 3), effectively bookends Chute’s study.

Chute’s psychoanalytic focus, however, may be said to make invisible certain features of these graphic narratives. Attention to the different visual modes of Satrapi’s Persepolis, the only book studied by both Chute and Danziger-Russell, may be instructive. Certain key scenes in the book,
such as those of war, the political protests attended by Marji’s parents, and the deaths of hundreds in the burning of a cinema, are shown in a more stylised form of the expressionism that Satrapi uses throughout the book. Chute argues that ‘the narrative’s force and bite come from the radical disjunction between the often-gorgeous minimalism of Satrapi’s drawings and the infinitely complicated traumatic events they depict’ (p. 146). Focusing on her central idea of the narration of multiple selves, the captions are shown to be Marjane’s adult glosses of the panels (the narrating self, perhaps), which depict a child’s imagination drawing upon a visual repertoire of representation (rather than experience) of violence, death and war. Conversely, Danziger-Russell barely considers the visual changes, instead offering a short discussion of the ‘voice-over’ contained in the captions, which ‘may be the adult Marjane’s narrative or her parents’ (p. 186). Given Danziger-Russell’s earlier discussion of the different functions of captions and direct speech, it is perhaps surprising that she does not here make greater play of what is happening.

These events, which are not directly witnessed by Marji/Marjane, have been related to her by others, whether parents, other family members or the media. They are the adult Marjane’s re-presentation of the witnessing by others of events: ‘My parents demonstrated every day. / Things started to degenerate. The army shot at them. / And they threw stones at the army’ (p. 18). The secondhand accounts are always presented in captions not balloons, and are almost always accompanied by the highly stylised variant on Satrapi’s expressionism that Chute notes. Conversely, events in which Marji/Marjane is present, while still using captions (in these cases for voice-over or adult narration of the memories of childhood), use balloons for their primary representation of the verbal. Balloons may be thought of as reporting clauses, a largely iconic version of the symbolic ‘I/she said’, showing direct speech, while captions present indirect speech. The visual elements of direct witnessing are relatively realist within Satrapi’s overarching expressionism. With indirect speech, the visual becomes more abstracted as the verbal is abstracted from the words of others. Seeking Marji/Marjane’s selves, Chute does not give a voice to these other narrators.

Throughout *Fun Home* (2006), Bechdel’s relationship with her father is suffused with the books they share and discuss, notably those of James Joyce. At the close of her book, Bechdel writes ‘*Ulysses* … fared much better than Joyce’s actual children’ (p. 231). It is a sentiment with which Mary Talbot, the daughter of a Joycean scholar, might agree. When discussing women and comics in the journal *Gender and Language*, it might be remiss not at least to mention one of the most successful British comic
books of recent years, Mary Talbot and Bryan Talbot’s *Dotter of My Father’s Eyes* (2012). Bryan is a leading exponent of comics in Britain; Mary, as the author’s biography and list of publications in the book attest, is a scholar of gender and language, latterly Reader in Language and Culture at the University of Sunderland until her retirement in 2009.

Without the space to offer a fuller study of Talbot’s book, it is nevertheless worth showing some of the aspects of gender with which it deals, how it uses strategies particular to comics and some of the features that may interest students of language. *Dotter* is partly biography (of Joyce’s daughter, Lucia), partly memoir (of Mary’s father, James Atherton) and partly Mary’s autobiography. Although Mary dismisses talk of parallels between herself and Lucia in a conversation with colleagues (p. 15), parallels and contrasts between the two of them act as a structuring element throughout the book, figured on the front cover showing the title (a description of Lucia) above a portrait of Mary as a girl. It is also a book that, throughout, is concerned with questions of gender and women’s place in the world. While Lucia never manages to free herself from her father’s idea for her life (‘It’s enough if a woman can write a letter and carry an umbrella gracefully’), until she is committed to an asylum by her brother, Mary’s anger at her father’s joking use of the middle English lyric ‘Of all creatures women be best: / Cuius contrarium verum est [Of which the contrary is true]’ (p. 32) – using his scholarship to confound the unschooled Mary and her mother – represents her push against her father which, eventually (via a university of which he does not approve), leads to a life of scholarship for herself.

*Dotter* has a striking visual register, or set of registers. Three different colour palettes are used: full colour, with bordered panels, for the present; sepia with some use of bold colour, for Mary’s/her father’s past; and a dark grey-blue wash for Lucia’s story. The borderless frames soften the impact of the gutter, the space in which the reader joins the fragments in the frames to produce a completed narrative, connoting, perhaps, the ‘telling’ of historiographical discourse from archival fragments. The most open panel of all features Lucia at a moment of liberation through dance where she is shown without any background, leaping up and out of the page: her arm reaches beyond the fore-edge to a freedom not bound by the book, which stands metonymically for her author–father (p. 41). Pictures speak back and forth through the book: an early, full-page swirling image of Mary’s brothers running around her ‘madhouse’ of a childhood home (p. 8) in part seen through banisters, moves by way of other full-page ‘splashes’ with related imagery (pp. 37, 43), to a swirling image of the multiple selves of Lucia in a sanatorium, seen through the bars of her cage (p. 83). The endpapers reproduce the endpapers of Mary’s father’s much written-in
copy of *Finnegan’s Wake*, enclosing the Talbot’s book within James Atherton’s/James Joyce’s book. This book-within-a-book trope is reiterated with scenes showing both Mary (pp. 14, 33) and Lucia (p. 38) reading comics. Word balloons are not enclosed in lines; they disappear entirely when the panel has a clean white background, as is often the case in pages featuring Lucia’s story, apart from a simple line indicating the speaker, replacing the usual balloon tail. Even where the balloon is marked by colour, the effect is to free-float the words within the image, minimising spatial separation of the visual and verbal narratives. Two types are used to render words in the narrative: a representation of handwriting for speech, and a representation of typewriter lettering for captions. The former connotes the handmade and the personal/subjective, whereas the latter connotes a drier, or academic/objective, text. Indeed, it reminds the reader of Mary’s father, who is often depicted working at his typewriter.

That typewriter also provides the soundtrack to Mary’s childhood, the ‘tap tap tap’ of the keys. Comics regularly use onomatopoeic words within the image to represent sound (the ‘Biff! Pow!’ of superhero comics), as comics studies semioticians have noted. The ‘tap tap tap’ is a strong enough trope in *Dotter* that it comes to mark Mary’s father’s presence even where he is not directly shown. In *Dotter*, these diegetic sounds are almost only ever present in scenes featuring Mary’s father – for example when a ball smashes a window in the Atherton family home with a ‘Crash!’ (p. 9), a sound that is not replicated in the silent panel showing the smashing of a chair in the Joyce family home (p. 82) – and are often associated with the more traumatic elements of Mary’s upbringing such as her father’s distancing from the family (‘Slam’) and corporal punishment (‘Smack’). The sole exception is the page on which Mary meets Bryan, when a friend, Marky, blows a whistle (p. 60). Marky reappears towards the end of the book, where he recuperates Mary’s ‘cold mad feary father’ (pp. 86–7).

The appearance of sound at the appearance of Bryan is instructive, for the same page has the beginnings of new colouring in Mary’s story, where the bold, iconic colours of remembered elements in Mary’s life with her father are now joined by a more washed colouring for her life with Bryan. The girl is handed over from the father to the husband in two scenes shown over consecutive pages. Noticing a pendant Mary is wearing, Bryan asks about it; Mary says it was a present from her father (p. 69). It appears to have ‘just squiggles’ on it, but when it is blown on, the centre of the pendant spins and the marks on each side combine to form the words ‘I love you’. As the object transforms the apparently meaningless visual into the deeply meaningful verbal, Bryan asks for the pendant ‘Cos it’s *me* who loves you.’ On the following page, Mary and Bryan get married, not by means of the
performative ‘I do’, which is elided by way of narrative ellipsis, but in a pair of mirrored panels, the first showing an unsure-looking Mary on the right stepping onto the arm of her father, the second showing a confident Mary on the left, now on the arm of Bryan (p. 70). Although it is, culturally, a patriarchal handing over, Dotter questions traditional gender roles in marriage by opening with Mary going out to work while Bryan stays at home, and closes with Mary returning home from work as Bryan stirs a pot on the stove. Thus also, despite the multiple narratives within, of different durations, never contiguous, sometimes fragmentary, sometimes with relatively closed tellings, the duration of its framing narrative is a working day – perhaps also the duration of its reading.

As a medium defined by its story-telling strategies, discourse analysts have much to offer, and much to gain from, the study of comics. Using comics featuring female characters, Madrid shows us that there are many unexamined texts out there; using comics written for female audiences, Danziger-Russell begins to show us that there are ways to think about comics linguistically; and using comics written by women, Chute shows us some of the ways in which gender can be encoded in comics. With their close attention to texts and meaning construction, linguists have at least as much to offer comics studies in terms of analytical methods as cognate disciplines such as literary studies and cultural history; similarly, with their hybrid visual/verbal techniques and their complex treatment of temporality, comics have at least as much to offer linguists for studying social semiotics, identity construction and narrative strategies as do cognate media such as magazines and film.

Notes
1. Following McCloud (1994), it is a convention of Anglo-American comics studies that ‘comics’ takes the singular form of the verb, analogous to ‘poetry’.
2. Danziger-Russell (pp. 192–4) notes Bryan Talbot’s use of colour in The Tale of One Bad Rat (1994) at moments of remembrance around the abuse Helen suffered.
3. This technique parallels Bechdel’s reinscription of the wallpaper from her family home in her endpapers, enclosing her Fun Home within the walls of the Fun(eral) Home in which she was brought up.

References


