

Studies in 20th & 21st Century Literature

Volume 49
Issue 1 *Refugee Voices in Contemporary Literature*

Article 12

2025

Margaret C. Flinn, editor. Drawing (in) the Feminine: Bande Dessinée and Women. The Ohio State University Press, 2024.

Ryan Gomez
Washington University in St. Louis, ryan.gomez@wustl.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://newprairiepress.org/sttcl>



Part of the [French and Francophone Literature Commons](#), [Illustration Commons](#), [Interdisciplinary Arts and Media Commons](#), [Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Studies Commons](#), [Modern Languages Commons](#), [Modern Literature Commons](#), [Other Arts and Humanities Commons](#), [Visual Studies Commons](#), and the [Women's Studies Commons](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0 License](#).

Recommended Citation

Gomez, Ryan (2025) "Margaret C. Flinn, editor. Drawing (in) the Feminine: Bande Dessinée and Women. The Ohio State University Press, 2024.," *Studies in 20th & 21st Century Literature*: Vol. 49: Iss. 1, Article 12. <https://doi.org/10.4148/2334-4415.2311>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by New Prairie Press. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Studies in 20th & 21st Century Literature* by an authorized administrator of New Prairie Press. For more information, please contact cad@s-k-state.edu.

Margaret C. Flinn, editor. *Drawing (in) the Feminine: Bande Dessinée and Women*. The Ohio State University Press, 2024.

Abstract

Review of Margaret C. Flinn, editor. *Drawing (in) the Feminine: Bande Dessinée and Women*. The Ohio State University Press, 2024. xii + 263 pp.

Keywords

bande dessinée, French, francophone, comics, graphic novels, women, gender

Margaret C. Flinn, editor. *Drawing (in) the Feminine: Bande Dessinée and Women*. The Ohio State University Press, 2024. xii + 263 pp.

In her introductory remarks as the editor of *Drawing (in) the Feminine: Bande Dessinée and Women*, Margaret C Flinn makes a clear gesture toward feminist thought and gender studies with a reference to Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble*. The latter stands out for the seminal notions of gender performativity found within its pages. However, Flinn mobilizes the title phrase to underscore the apparent lack of representation and agency that women face in the products and production of *bande-dessinée* (BD), or French-language comics. To confront this different sort of 'gender trouble,' the volume and its contributors examine the reality of women's agency in the production and artistic representation of *bande-dessinée*. The book purports to challenge the notion that women's position within and around the field of comics and graphic literature has been negligible, if not altogether absent. Indeed, while the issue of parity is still of concern and there remains much to be done on that score, the editor and the contributors to the volume demonstrate the extent to which women have always been a part of the history of BD.

The volume acknowledges *bande-dessinée* and comics production and reception as a highly masculine cultural field. Admittedly, upon personal reflection, this is something that I as a male BD scholar seem to have taken for granted, either because of the blind spots within my own positionality or perhaps due to welcome shifts in contemporary BD gender trends. My first significant encounter with BD, nevertheless, involved a woman author: Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis*. To my mind, the success of this French-language graphic memoir supports this edited volume's larger point that women have always been within and around BD, shaping the medium and its reception. The global reach of a work like *Persepolis* is a testament to that fact and perhaps (thankfully) indicates that the very shift in gender patterns for which this book advocates has been underway for some time, or at least since the year 2000. With an admirable collaboration of voices from both sides of the Atlantic (particularly impressive given the challenges of a global pandemic) and a roving concentration on several different topographies and media contexts, the contributors demonstrate the extent to which women continue to occupy their own space and exert their agency upon and within the comics and BD industry. The contributions to the volume are divided into three parts: first, insight into industry practices and reception patterns; second, the geographic map of representation at play; and finally, the representation of women and history in the medium itself.

The first four chapters are dedicated to understanding the space that women occupy in the industrial realm of BD production. In the first chapter, Jessica Kohn examines the influence of women cartoonists in the French-speaking world as a tool for reassessing the profession and its merits which have long been considered

masculine. In chapter two, Sylvain Lesage examines the contributions of women colorists and the more feminine role's forgotten part in the legitimization of comics as a literary medium in France, at odds with the revered figure of the *auteur*. The section moves from more general appraisals of the industry to more zoomed-in perspectives. Namely, the focus shifts in Benoît Crucifix's chapter three toward singular artist Nicole Claveloux and the various crossroads her work engenders. The section then offers an in-depth look at a different geographical context in Jennifer Howell's outstanding appraisal of Moroccan comic activism in chapter four, which serves as a logical bridge to the next section on geographies and topographies of women in comics.

The second section, comprised of chapters five through eight, examines geographies represented by woman *bédéistes*, or BD authors and illustrators. In chapter five, Armelle Blin-Rolland offers an attentive perspective on the portrayal of women within the context of the nature of Brittany. In chapter six, Michelle Bumatay takes readers to another part of the world with an emphasis on the plurality and self-fashioning permitted by women's representation in popular West African BD. Alexandra Gueydan-Turek examines the feminist topography in the work of Lebanese BD collective Samandal in chapter seven. Finally, in chapter eight Catriona Macleod moves slightly more into the realm of direct representation of women with a discussion of how their experiences with abortion are represented in BD. This provides a link to the next section, which addresses how women are represented within the work of BD artists and the geopolitics at play.

The volume's closing section moves readers into a final set of chapters dedicated to the representation of women and history, aptly rechristened "herstory." Jacques Dürrenmatt opens the section with chapter nine's exploration of women's faces in early BD, including the works of such early medium artists as Gustave Doré. Mark McKinney once again shifts the topography of concern with a look in chapter ten at the representation of the Amazons of Dahomey in French and African Comics. In chapter eleven, Isabelle Delorme focuses on Catel Muller, whose graphic biographies of notable women such as Olympe de Gouges and Josephine Baker have captured the attention of contemporary BD readers. And finally, closing the volume, Veronique Bragard's chapter twelve examines the plurality of women's voices behind the authors of Emilie Plateau's American Civil Rights BD *Noire*.

Drawing (in) the Feminine represents a successful appraisal of women in comics from the perspective of the industry's production practices, the reception and circulation of comic works, and the representation of women and female-presenting people in the works themselves. The editor and contributors are careful to avoid the often-tempting mistake in BD studies of centering a single comic tradition, which often entails entrenching analyses within a single geography and limiting the reach and contact points for the research. The volume purports to challenge the prevailing narrative about women's relative absence or ineffectuality

in comic works, both historically and contemporaneously, and does so while providing space for the voices of the readers and artists themselves to write the realities of women's existence in BD into print. It highlights several of the realities faced by gender- or sexually nonconforming authors like Montreal transgender comic artist and author Sophie Labelle. It is strange how often her own work, she remarks, is taken to be "educational" when so much of its humor relies on its refusal to answer many of the "stupid questions" that circulate about the experiences of trans, genderqueer, and queer people depicted in her work. In *Assignée garçon* (*Assigned Male*) number 156, for example, we see an exasperated trans girl attempting to provide clarity against her classmate's questions about whether she's a "boy dressed up as a girl," and whether he himself would be gay if he were attracted to her. These everyday, personal realities are woven into the larger geopolitical trends and impulses to which literary circulation is subjected, such as the editor's larger observations about French Universalism barring certain discussions of difference and novelty that are more common in North America. The volume is not only aware of the institutional apparatuses around the production of BD, but it also reads them as measures of the attitudes and values of any given time. One need simply refer to the controversial and unequivocally masculine 2016 Angoulême Grand Prix shortlist to get a sense of the domain's tastes and direction at the time. The shortlist has thankfully reflected a more inclusive evolution in taste and representation as recently as 2022, according to Flinn.

Any review of BD scholarship would be remiss not to mention the recent unfortunate rise in banned graphic novels, particularly those done by women, feminine presenting, and gender nonconforming voices—Maia Kobabe's *Gender Queer* and Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home* are two such frequently targeted titles that come to mind in an American context, among plenty of others elsewhere. Is it any coincidence that such voices are so often the target of censorship, particularly the sort that has arisen alongside troubling waves of right-wing populism and ideological conflict throughout the world? A graphic work's communicative power as both a visual and textual medium is a double-edged sword; for all the admirers it gathers, it tends to draw seemingly as much ire from those who see such powerful means of expression as a cultural and ideological threat. And sadly, women of all expressions seem to find themselves especially targeted when they author such works. To this day, Marjane Satrapi remains exiled from her native Iran for her memoir's criticisms of the current regime. While she may have found an ostensibly safer home in France, the European nation's longstanding commitment to freedom of expression is nevertheless challenged by extremist ideologies that have seen people murdered in the offices of Charlie Hebdo or decapitated in suburban streets for supporting free expression and/or education. In another part of the French-speaking world, as Flinn acknowledges, Sophie Labelle has long suffered extensive campaigns of violent right-wing harassment. Upon the release of her book titled

Dating Tips for Trans and Queer Weirdos in 2017, Labelle received particularly hateful vitriol from extremists insisting that there are only two genders and supporting their affirmations with neo-Nazi imagery and troubling WWII references on her social media pages, including the pronouncement that trans people should be “gassed.” While Labelle claims to have grown accustomed to this type of harassment (a habituation that is as shameful as it is shocking), the sheer scale of this attack led to the cancellation of her book release event scheduled in Halifax out of safety concerns. This violence directed toward women and gender non-conforming individuals who dare to share their perspectives and experiences is an unfortunate testament to the work that yet remains to be done in fully giving women in BD their due. Working to stem this violence seems like a crucial co-requisite for fighting the troubling patterns outlined in Flinn’s text. Such women merit commendation for their continued efforts toward expression and the realization of their artistic pursuits in the face of this particular brand of “gender trouble.” Indeed, as Flinn pointedly insists, there is a long history of female oppression in comics. Yet, while the issue of parity remains unresolved, women continue to thankfully occupy more and more space within and around bande-dessinée as evidenced by the numerous valuable scholarly contributions contained within *Drawing (in) the Feminine*.

Ryan Gomez
Washington University in St. Louis