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Female Bodies in Graphic Narratives: on Sexuality and Pregnancy

This paper examines depictions of the female body in graphic narratives and explores recent changes in the comics landscape, focusing on Japanese manga where female creators work towards breaking taboos surrounding such representations.

Throughout the history of visual art, the human body has often been reimagined in idealized forms. In Greek sculpture, renditions of ideal bodies were considered the norm for representing beauty; this pursuit of ideals was reiterated by Renaissance art, the artistic principles of which were carried over from ancient Greek and Roman culture. This fascination with the "ideal body" has been inherited by succeeding generations, where the pursuit of perfect proportions and the emphasis on masculinity and femininity continue. In comics, a dominantly pictorial narrative medium, characters' bodies are often depicted with these gendered features sometimes exaggerated. In the depiction of women, femininity is often reinforced as positive representation, while the lack of femininity is condemned or ridiculed. So too, in Japanese manga, women with normative "feminine" bodies tend to take the lead, while the realities of female bodies are often overlooked, sometimes through oversexualization and at other times through the concealment of sexuality. Depictions of women's bodies in narratives about sexuality and pregnancy by female artists such as Moto Hagio, Moyoko Anno, and Yumiko Shirai opened up the discussion of this problem. It is worth noting that Japanese female-authored manga have established a history of denouncing male-oriented status quo as well as the sanctions such a society levels against those who question gender roles: by analyzing their stories about sex and pregnancy, as well as essay comics that have flourished in recent years, this paper examines the continuing pursuit against idealization and taboo.