Sugar, Spice, and the Not So Nice

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Sugar, Spice, and the Not So Nice: Comics Picturing Girlhood.

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Soon after the Second World War, the comics landscape in Flanders – the northern, Dutch-speaking part of Belgium – started to be dominated by the “family comics” (familiestrip) genre. Even today the sales of comics in Flanders remain led by some four or five family comics series, all of which feature at least one hundred albums. Whereas the readers of these series often consist of adults and children alike, this contribution deals with the series that has always addressed specifically the youngest reading public (around seven to ten years old): Jef Nys’s *Jommeke* (for its protagonists, see fig. 1).

It is no exaggeration to say that in Flanders there are few fictional characters better known than Jommeke. One of the best known Flemish comics journalists, Gert Meesters (2005), has calculated that all Flemings, from infancy to old age, must have an average of ten *Jommeke* albums on their bookshelf. Notwithstanding this success, the blond hero’s fame hardly extends beyond Flanders’ borders: translations of *Jommeke* albums have generally not been successful, and in the Netherlands, where people can read the albums in
the very playful Filiberke, Jommeke’s best friend, accompanying him in almost all his adventures – the twin sisters Annemieke and Rozemieke, usually less prominent and more passive and/or frightened than the boys – the bright title hero, Jommeke, an only child (just like Filiberke) – the three pets: Flip, Jommeke’s parrot (who thinks, talks and makes stereotypical remarks like an adult man), the twins’ monkey Choco and Filiberke’s black poodle, Pekkie. The four children are all eleven years old. Each Jommeke adventure (album) consists of about forty-six pages. Image source: www.hln.be/showbizz/gezocht-extra-tekenaar-voor-jommeke-a7545da0/, © 2022 Standaard Uitgeverij.

the original language, Jommeke is little known or denounced, often for being too Flemish (especially with respect to Jef Nys’s language; Meesters 2012).

In the past, Jommeke, just like most other Flemish family comics series, has been increasingly criticised for its stereotypical portrayal of certain population groups, especially foreigners, but also women. To find out whether there is an evolution between the old and the recent albums with respect to the representation of girls and women, I had a long conversation with two gender studies scholars who grew up in Flanders – associate professor Katrien De Graeve and postdoctoral researcher Sara De Vuyst – about their reading experiences with three particular Jommeke albums. We discussed the performance of the series’ female characters through a selected corpus (fig. 2), consisting of “Het Hemelhuis” [The Heaven House] (1960, no. 6), “De supervrouw” [The Superwoman]
(1979, no. 94) and “Balletkoorts” [Ballet Fever] (2019, no. 293), the first two by Jommeke’s spiritual father Jef Nys (1927–2009), the latter by one of his successors, Gerd Van Loock. I chose these three – out of more than three hundred – Jommeke albums because they explicitly deal with gender-related themes. At the same time, I tried to pick out albums which represent the early (“Het Hemelhuis”) and the contemporary Jommeke (“Balletkoorts”), as well as the album which most explicitly addresses the feminist theme (“De supervrouw”).

**Girls’ and Children’s Comics in Flanders**

**Michel De Dobbeleer (MDD):** As a child, did you often read comics, and in particular Jommeke?

**Sara De Vuyst (SDV):** I did – and from a very young age. So young in fact that I couldn’t yet read the text (very well), but only looked at the pictures. I mainly read Jommeke, Suske en Wiske and Pitch: the last one was my favourite series, and I really collected those albums. Then came a break of many years, and now, as an adult, I have found my way again in the medium, thanks to graphic novels.

**Katrien De Graeve (KDG):** No, I’ve never been much of a comic book reader, but I have read Jommeke. I come from a working-class family where books were not highly rated. We actually had very few books at home, and no comics at all. I don’t remember there being a library in our village at the time either. So I only started reading books from secondary school onwards. But we did have the newspaper Het Volk at home, and that’s how I knew about Jommeke. My father always drew little Jommeke heads. I loved that and I often asked him to draw those little heads for me.

**MDD:** For me Jommeke was one of the first comics series I read, and surely the first which I wanted to read systematically. When I started reading it, the series already comprised some 130 albums. In fact Jommeke was my first introduction to choosing and reading books all by myself. I probably owe it to the series that I learned to read autonomously. Is that recognisable, in a way?

**SDV:** I think that Jommeke and the other children’s comics indeed did help me learn to read. On the one hand, you can always skip the difficult things in those speech bubbles. But on the other hand, it certainly wasn’t encouraged; when we went to the library in elementary school, we would always hear things like “you can only take a limited number of comic books” and “you have to take real books too”.

**MDD:** Yes, that sounds familiar. Comics were “too easy”, and the language was considered to be bad.

Mel Gibson, a pioneer in the field of comics reader history, found that many British women to a certain degree have repressed their childhood experiences with comics [as discussed in Chapter 1]; does this apply to you?
KDG: (laughs) Well, it turned out that I did read “De supervrouw” already, whereas I strongly doubted this when you brought me the albums a few weeks ago.
MDD: Yes, perhaps it does apply to Flemish women, too, then, since now you also come up with this story about your father drawing Jommeke heads for you. You didn’t seem to remember that a few weeks ago. Maybe it is ingrained in our culture that comics are something for boys?
KDG: Well, I certainly didn’t see Jommeke as a boy’s comics series. I felt just as much addressed as a girl. And the same goes for Nero or even De Rode Ridder.
MDD: In spite of the fact that all these series have male protagonists?
KDG: Apparently, as a young reader I could just as easily identify with a male protagonist like Jommeke. I also read Tiny [fig. 3], but that was such an upper-class thing and so far away from my own world, whereas Jommeke was much closer to it; it clearly didn’t matter that the main hero was a boy.
SDV: Tiny didn’t appeal to me either. I remember that I received such a book as a present once, but I postponed reading it because I didn’t like the drawings.
MDD: My oldest daughter also got a Tiny book as a present, but she really liked it and asked me to borrow other Tiny adventures from the library. My youngest daughter, now four, likes it too; my son – together with his elder sister a Jommeke fan – rather doesn’t. In any case, if one Belgian children’s book series was (and – judging by the enthusiasm of my daughters – still is) popular and specifically known as “for girls”, it must be Tiny. But of course that’s not a comic book series.
Did you think Flanders lacked (or lacks) a girls’ comics series? In the UK and the US there were comics specifically for girls.
KDG: I never thought about that at the time. As for children’s books (so maybe not comics), I vaguely realised that there existed certain genres for girls, but I didn’t have access to them anyway. I have the impression that the range of books – but also of clothes, toys, etc. – on offer used to be much less gendered when I was a child, that children were less seen as an important commercial target group.
MDD: So you didn’t feel the need for specific girls’ comics, and overall didn’t consider children’s comics (with their often male protagonists) as something for boys?
SDV: Yes, just like Katrien, I never thought: “Jommeke is a series for boys”.
MDD: Neither did I, but when I look back now, and when I read the albums to my children – which they really love – I have my doubts about that.

Figure 3 Cover of Gijs Haag and Marcel Marlier’s children’s book Tiny leert paardrijden [Tiny Learns to Ride Horses] (1969).
SDV: It’s true, of course, that there are many male characters in *Jommeke*, and in comics overall, especially in the leading roles. Maybe that’s why I quit at a certain age.

KDG: I remember the video that was made to promote the book *Good Night Stories for Rebel Girls* (Favilli and Cavallo). In the video a mom and her daughter stand in front of a bookcase and take out every book that actually focuses on men or boys. At the end, there aren’t many books left...

MDD: Yes, I think if that bookcase had been full of *Jommeke* albums, very few – if any – would have remained.

SDV: I find this more striking in comics than in other children’s books. In adventures and quests, such as in the *Jommeke* albums, everything revolves around men. If there is a confrontation or fight, it is between men; women are secondary – or sometimes they cause problems that the men have to solve. In TV series from my childhood, it was less so. *The Teletubbies*, for example, are not really gendered. Or in *De boomhut* it was the female Alida who was central.

MDD: My children – my son too – are fond of Pippi Longstocking, a contemporary of Jommeke, so to say. Such a character could have been a comic book protagonist, couldn’t it? But maybe just not in Flanders?

SDV: You indeed didn’t have such characters in popular Flemish comics.

MDD: A question for you as parents, or hypothetically future parents: did your children read comics, or would you let them read comics? Any comics, or did or would you “guide” them in this regard?

KDG: Comics were rare in our house, instead of picture and other children’s books. Though I don’t really have a clear view of what my children read when they were young. Maybe they read comics behind my back. (laughs)

SDV: I don’t have children, but I don’t think that we must overprotect them when navigating media or “panic” in the assumption that they cannot find their way themselves and be critical. When reading aloud as an adult for children, it is good, though, to make comments where needed, for example when things are woman-unfriendly.

MDD: Yes, that is what I do when reading aloud *Jommeke*. I regularly hear myself saying things such as “in those days, women almost always washed the dishes”. And my children understand why I’m saying such things, because they often see me doing the dishes, too.

Are there any Flemish (Dutch-language/translated) comics that you consider more suitable than *Jommeke* as reading material for young Flemish girls or children in general?

KDG: Well, I never bought *Jommeke* for my children, but I wouldn’t have minded if they got those albums into their hands.

SDV: For me the same, I wouldn’t buy them either.

MDD: And what about *Suske en Wiske*? Wiske is definitely a strong female protagonist.

SDV: *Suske en Wiske* is certainly preferable to *Jommeke*, because in the former you really have female protagonists. I also have pleasant memories of Aunt Sidonia, although I have
now read that her position as a housewife is being criticised. That is not how I saw her at the time. I thought the series featured an intriguing family composition – one that was just different from the traditional composition (as in *Jommeke*).

**MDD:** Related to this, years of library visits with my children taught me that there are municipal libraries – at least in the province of East Flanders – that do not have *Jommeke* albums or books of the *Tiny* series in their collection, whereas most libraries have many dozens if not hundreds of them. A small-scale inquiry taught me that one library does not buy *Tiny* books because they are considered too sexist, while another one bans *Jommeke* albums because of the “poor” Dutch in it. What is your opinion? Should a comics series such as *Jommeke* or a children’s book series such as *Tiny* be banned from our municipal libraries? And if so, why?

**SDV:** For me *Jommeke* should not be banned, just like you shouldn’t forbid children to read it. The most important thing for me is that libraries put enough effort into offering comics that challenge gender stereotypes. So they should also actively look for such comics if they find that their current collection contains mostly comics that confirm stereotypes. Children should be able to choose from a wide range of comics that are not sexist.

**KDG:** I can only concur with Sara. I’m not an advocate of banning books either. It certainly can’t do any harm for children to learn about different views of the world, including conservative views. It can encourage them to think critically about the ideological frameworks that shape everyday life, and whom or what these frameworks exclude. It does become a problem, though, when children’s imaginations are only fed with gender-stereotypical, but also heteronormative, neocolonial, etc., representations. For instance, the fact that in Hungary, very recently, the conservative government [under Viktor Orbán; June 2021] only wants to give children access to heteronormative representations of sexuality, relationships and family, shows that this battle has not been fought yet. Indeed, libraries can play an important role here by providing a sufficient counterbalance with stories that are norm-breaking.

**MDD:** To conclude this long first set of questions, is the Flemish children’s comics market still too male-oriented? Are there too few comics for girls available?

**KDG:** I think the approach, the “angle”, of this question is not the right one; comics or books in general shouldn’t be “for boys” or “for girls”. Obviously, it is also important for boys that they get to see men and women in nontraditional roles. Of course, there is no direct causal link between reading *Jommeke* and becoming misogynous or racist. The harmful thing, however, lies in the repetition of these images. Through this repetition they become fixed in the minds of the children. I’m not a comics specialist, but at least in picture books, such as – in Flanders – those by Hanne Luyten and Noëmi Willemen, I see how artists and narrators are now trying to pay more attention to all of this. In such books girls don’t have to wear cute miniskirts (as the twins in *Jommeke* do) and the like.
Regarding that cliché: in more recent times there have been Flemish children’s comics series with less stereotypical female (co-)protagonists, such as Jan Bosschaert and Marc Legendre’s Sam (1990–2008) or Charel Cambré’s Jump (2007–2015), but they apparently couldn’t compete with the persistent success of the established series, such as Jommeke or Suske en Wiske.

Gender (and Diversity) Studies Concepts and Jommeke

MDD: What concepts from your field of expertise, gender and diversity studies, can be applied to Jommeke in general, and to these three individual albums in particular?

SDV: Quite a lot, in fact. First of all, the so-called male gaze – the idea that in fiction, for instance in comics as well as in cinema, we very often look through the eyes of men. The reader/viewer is always asked, as it were, to identify with the male characters. Women or girls, for their part, are mostly passive “objects” of this gaze.

MDD: So you would then relate this concept to the fact that, certainly in the past, and particularly in Flemish family comics, comics creators were almost always men? Jommeke, for example, even after Jef Nys’s death, has been predominantly created by men. Only the colourist nowadays is a woman: Jef Nys’s daughter, Agnes Nys.

SDV: Not necessarily; the burden of that male gaze weighs on female artists too, resulting – for instance – in critical views on women’s appearances or in women turned into objects in the works by female creators as well.

MDD: Of the more than three hundred Jommeke albums, only one was authored by a woman, namely Jef Nys’s granddaughter, Sarina Ahmad(-Nys), who after his death wrote and drew “Het Nianmonster” [The Nian Monster] (no. 278), the last album to appear in the jubilee year 2015, when Jommeke turned sixty. Although it features a quite intriguing new character, Rosalieke, one couldn’t really say, indeed, that the gaze has become female in that album. Annemieke and Rozemieke, by the way, are not involved in the story.

SDV: Except for the male gaze, one can also apply, more or less, the concept of “symbolic annihilation” to the Jommeke stories. This term from the seventies, refined by Gaye Tuchman, points to the symbolic denial, in media coverage, of the existence of certain groups of people, in particular women. In the news, but also in a lot of fiction, women are often invisible. In Jommeke, too, women – for example, the twin sisters, Annemieke and Rozemieke, in “Het Hemelhuis” – are clearly secondary, in the background.

Particularly applicable to comics is “oppositional reading”. As a reader you can always do something else with the text than what the creator has decided or wanted you to do (assuming we can figure that out). So in comics you have, for example, the freedom to skip certain balloons or panels, or to change the chronology, apart from interpreting the work as you want, of course. In this respect, I think about queer readings of Batman and
Robin, and how their bond has been read as a love relationship. I should reread *Jommeke* more thoroughly, but I think such oppositional reading could probably be done through the character of Filiberke. Isn’t he somewhat softer than Jommeke?

**MDD:** Well, Filiberke is at least known for his unbridled imagination. He can play a kangaroo or a cucumber, often for an entire album [resp. in Nys 1973 and Nys 1988]. However, the hypothesis that he is gay, if that’s what you mean, is not very widespread.

**SDV:** Yes, can’t that be read between the lines?

**MDD:** That some readers might think about it, read it that way is, of course, the fate of many male comics protagonists always hanging out with each other during all those adventures. Think of what is often insinuated about Tintin and Captain Haddock [De Weyer, 2009]. But Filiberke, in any case, now and then really falls in love with girls, and as an adult – which he will evidently never be in Jef Nys’s *Jommeke* universe – he will “unquestionably” marry Rozemieke (just like Jommeke will marry Annemieke).

**SDV:** Sure, but it is of course inherent in oppositional reading that the readers consciously choose to deduce their own story. The point that I would like to make here is that the meaning of comics is not fixed, but that it is shaped as well by the readers and their different perspectives on the text. On another note, one can also approach the *Jommeke* series with the paradigm of “hegemonic masculinity”: certain allegedly male traits are idealised, such as cleverness or strength and serve to justify male dominance. I found it remarkable that in “Balletkoorts” Jommeke, while dancing ballet, still has to distinguish himself by being strong. It’s not just female characters who come off poorly in this respect. Men who do not live up to ideals of hegemonic masculinity are often mocked. When Jommeke’s mother, Marie, in “De supervrouw” becomes a superwoman, his father, Teofiel, in the end feels so unworthy that he leaves his family to become a hermit. And judging from the jokes, Baron Odilon [van Piependale] is seen as clearly too short for a man [in “Balletkoorts”], especially when compared to his wife, the countess [Elodie van Stiepelteen; *fig. 7*], who can be said to represent the “female grotesque” [Russo], to introduce yet another concept to approach the series.

**MDD:** Yes, because the children, especially the boys and Jommeke in particular, take on the heroic roles, adult men are usually just fumbling around. In a way this even counts for Gobelijn, the professor of the series: of course, he is a genius who can invent anything, but he has the spirit and impetuosity of a child (which is precisely why he invents anything). As for grotesque women, Countess Elodie van Stiepelteen has been rightly connected to Tintin’s Bianca Castafiore [e.g. Mennes 24]; at least the physical similarities are striking.

**KDG:** In response to the question about the concepts from our field of expertise, I focused on “De supervrouw”. That album fully plays with the trope of the unhappy housewife, a concept from Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique*, describing the uneasiness of married women regarding their imposed role as housewife. As an American, Friedan concentrated on the US context, but of course it applied to Europe as well, and was highly influential
here. Friedan raised the issue of how housewives should take pleasure in caring for others while not being paid to do so. Basically, this boils down to a system of making people work unpaid – and they are expected to be happy about it. It is important to note that Friedan has been criticised for generalising the experience of only a limited number of women. The single-earner household was an ideal that the white working class was supposed to pursue, yet was not an option for a vast number of women. These women simply had to go to work and do the unpaid housework on top of their poorly paid employment. Nevertheless, those women who could afford living “the ideal”, felt frustrated by their work being undervalued and even no longer considered “real” labour. My mother, for instance, became a housewife as soon as my parents could afford it, after she had been forced to quit school at the age of fourteen, and after she had worked in a factory for about ten years. The lifelong undervaluation of her talents and work still makes her angry and frustrated. It is this dissatisfaction that “De supervrouw” addresses, I think.

**MDD:** If there is a nuclear family in Flemish familiestrips, like in *Jommeke* and *De Kiekeboes*, the mother is typically a housewife (who is supposed to be happy in this role). In *De Kiekeboes* there is also an album, a bit younger than “De supervrouw”, with the same point of departure: the mother being fed up with her role. How then did Jef Nys, in your opinion, play with this trope of the unhappy housewife in “De supervrouw”?

**KDG:** Well, as I said, the album clearly refers to the whole idea, but it doesn’t really criticise it – quite the opposite. The idea behind the album seems to be: let those women see how it is to be on the other, male side of society, and soon they will be happy to take up their role of housewife again. For me, “De supervrouw” is an anti-feminist book. The problem is actually laid at the door of feminism: it seems to imply that it is not the unequal division of labour that makes women unhappy, but feminism. It is feminist ideas that make Marie’s head spin at the beginning of the album, and thus it is actually feminism that makes her unhappy. All this reminded me of Sara Ahmed’s concept of the feminist killjoy, which points to the feminist who highlights existing injustices as the spoilsport and the
source of trouble and unhappiness. At the end of the album, the author quickly gets rid of the feminist concerns with the message that the husband should help a little in the household.

**MDD:** Yes, at the end, Teofiel promises to help wash the dishes [fig. 4] – so that his wife can be happy again, which she indeed immediately is.

**SDV:** I also found it remarkable that Marie’s demand for more equality is seen as stemming from a problem she is struggling with. That she is overstrained, even hysterical, is also seen as something typical of women.

**KDG:** Yes, and the cover speaks volumes [fig. 2]: she doesn’t look like a superwoman at all. (laughs)

**SDV:** The way Marie sits there on that chair also made me think of the Dutch word *ploetermoeder* [literally: “plodding mother”], a term that, just like “superwoman”, is still used today in feminist theory. A *ploetermoeder* is a mother who has to toil hard to combine work outside the home with taking care of the family.

### Annemieke and Rozemieke

**MDD:** Enough about Marie for now. How would you describe the twin sisters Annemieke and Rozemieke, the so-called Miekes, the girls as well as their role in the series?

**SDV:** What immediately stands out is the girls’ stereotypical portrayal by means, also, of their clothes: those cute little skirts and the like [fig. 1]. Unlike what we read about other women in the series, I found no negative comments about the Miekes’ physical appearance, so that must be pretty much the ideal image for the author. As for their role, the reader quickly understands that they are secondary, as I already said: clearly background characters.

**MDD:** Yes, and what about the fact that they are identical twins? I never thought about it as a child, but now it doesn’t seem like a coincidence to me that if there are twins in the series, that they are two girls. Perhaps somewhat disrespectfully, one could see it as a kind of convenience solution for Jef Nys. He only had to invent one girl and could immediately draw it twice. As the inseparable sisters which they are since their first appearance, he could always just let them chat with each other in order to have some “girl conversation” in his albums. He could let them behave stereotypically, you could say, not just towards the boys, but easily also towards each other.

**SDV:** Yes, sometimes there is some competition between the two [fig. 5], the kind of competition, jealousy sometimes, where you see the author thinking: that’s typically feminine!

**MDD:** In general, do you think that the twin sisters have evolved throughout the years?

**SDV:** No, not really. After all those decades one might expect that they would each have gained identity, but in fact they haven’t.
I agree, and it is notable that many other characters, like Countess Elodie van Stiepelteen in the recent “Balletkoorts”, almost always address them together. As if after so many albums she still doesn’t think it matters who is who.

They are really replaceable. I remember a scene in “Het Hemelhuis” in which Jommeke’s mother literally says that it remains the same if she addresses one sister by the name of the other, since they are twins anyway [fig. 6].

And the fact that they always wear the same clothes does not help, obviously.30 Sure, Jommeke and the other characters, too, almost always wear the same clothes, that’s something you often see in the familiestrip,31 but it’s of course a choice you make as an author to let identical twins also be indistinguishable through their clothing.

All this even more deprives them of their personality. As girls they are already laden with clichés. As twins, you could say this is doubly reinforced, as if “squared”.

Yes, they are not exactly round characters. Sometimes, however, their being twins is vital to the plot. There are albums in which enemies initially only see one of the girls. Later on they are surprised and fooled by the fact that the same girl (that is, actually, her sister) suddenly turns up somewhere else, whereas they thought that they had already, for example, captured this girl.

This is also the right place to talk about Philippe Delzenne’s one-shot De Miekes: Zonnedorp op z’n kop [The Miekes: Zonnedorp Upside Down] (2017), a spin-off album in which not Jom-
meke, but the twin sisters get the leading part. As the title indicates, the occasional heroes quickly turn Zonnedorp, Jommeke’s fictional hometown (somewhere in the neighbour-
hood of Antwerp), upside down. I found such a spin-off a very nice initiative, although I
didn’t like the album’s specific adventure (but that may be just me; De Dobbeleer 2019).
It would have been better, perhaps, if someone who is not one of the regular creators of
Jommeke had made such an album. In an interview afterwards, Philippe Delzenne said
the album sold less well than the regular albums. According to him, this may be because
there are probably still more boys than girls reading the series. They may not have been
attracted to such a “girl’s album” (Stabel 10).

Energetic, Incisive Women are Not Feminist per Definition

**MDD:** From Annemieke and Rozemieke to another kind of female character. We have
already mentioned her quite a few times: Countess Elodie van Stiepelteen. Gert Meesters,
himself a fan of Jommeke as a child, wrote a positive piece on the series in 2005, on the
occasion of the blond hero’s fiftieth birthday. Meesters acknowledged that the series
could indeed be blamed for a number of reasons. For a long time it was criticised for its
bad Dutch (while it was mainly Jef Nys’s intention to write in Flemish [Meesters 2012]),
and the gender pattern was certainly conservative. This definitely applies to Jommeke’s
mother, Meesters says, as well as to Annemieke and Rozemieke, who “have a supporting
role that consists of a lot of cooking and sewing”. But Meesters also wanted to add a note
of caution to this woman’s image, criticised from feminist angles. In his opinion, “the
feminists overlooked incisive women such as Elodie van Stiepelteen, who not just physi-
cally dominates her husband, baron Odilon, or Madam Pepermunt, who can easily stand
her ground” [Meesters, 2005].

The recurring character of Madam Pepermunt didn’t appear in the three albums we
discuss here, but do you agree with Gert Meesters concerning the character of Countess
Elodie?

**KDG:** Well, to begin with, I regret the way in which he formulates all of this. Actually, this
quote can be considered an example of anti-feminism. It somewhat insinuates that femi-
nists only see what they want to see. And as for those energetic, incisive female characters:
I find that a problematic, false impression of things, though also very recognisable to me.
I often heard it during my childhood: that cliché of the domineering wife. People always
made jokes about it, with the husbands invariably being under the thumb, etc., which is
just an absurd representation and a reversal of the power relations within a household
model that makes women financially dependent on men. (laughs)

**SDV:** You can see this also in the workplace now: female managers are said to be bossy and
so on. If women “stand their ground” (as in Meesters’s quote) in those roles, they are crit-
icised for not being “feminine” or “womanlike” enough, and for crossing boundaries of gender-appropriate behaviour. At any rate, I am not a fan of (the idea behind) the expression “women standing their ground”\textsuperscript{33} in the sense of being able to cope with, being a match for men.

**KDG:** It is not because such a woman, like the countess, is a strong character that it is therefore a feminist character.

**MDD:** That’s an important point. I guess, precisely to accentuate this idea of resoluteness, yes, of “standing her ground”, the countess has been given such a short husband.

**KDG:** The fact that she is an upper-class person also plays a role, I think. I assume that it is no coincidence that it is a woman of nobility that is allowed to play another role than that of a housewife. It would be revealing to conduct a class analysis on the series. The families of Jommeke and his young friends are clearly part of the working class, in the sense of people doing wage labour (not merely in the sense of blue-collar workers). While reading the albums, I had the feeling that one of the underlying aims of the *Jommeke* series was or is to discipline this class.

**Spirit of the Times?**

**MDD:** Stereotypical women’s images, like stereotypical images of other groups, have to do with or are part of the so-called spirit of the times or zeitgeist. At least that is what we often read and hear. What is your point of view on this, related to women’s images in *Jommeke*?

**KDG:** The series’ images of women seem to be more in line with the zeitgeist of the 1950s or 1960s than with that of more recent times, but it is important to stress that a zeitgeist is never the zeitgeist of a whole population.\textsuperscript{34} Even then, what was drawn upon was the zeitgeist of the more conservative people. The same goes for the stereotypes in a recent album such as “Balletkoorts”.

**SDV:** As for “Het Hemelhuis”: if I had been a researcher or, say, a critical reader back then in the sixties, I think I would have had the same reservations as I do now: why do women always have to be mothers – or girls, like the Miekes, always in the mother role? And if you look at the series as a whole, you always encounter the repetition of the same clichés. And that repetition is precisely the essence of stereotyping, in this case, linking certain characteristics to a binary idea of gender and constantly reusing them. Even in the series’ early days, this didn’t show a lot of creativity, I presume. Perhaps these clichés were also used because the artist could always fall back on them.

**MDD:** Exactly, the use of clichés was and is in the DNA of this kind of series. You could probably go so far as to say that that kind of repetition has to be in it or you don’t have
family comics, which is not to say, though, that such repetitions have to be woman-unfriendly, of course.

SDV: Well, I don’t know; an alternative that comes to mind – although not for children, I admit – is Alison Bechdel’s *Dykes to Watch Out For* [1983–2008]. That’s an example of a comic strip that avoids clichés.

MDD: Definitely, but it is more recent and with a different target audience, as you say.

SDV: Younger, yes, but not that young, and in any case: when you read it now, it is still topical, relevant. Here you are less likely to refer to the spirit of the times because everything’s so creative.

MDD: Regarding *Jommeke*, referring to the spirit of the times makes sense in my opinion, although I agree that is often all too easy to do so. Besides, I would also like to point to something like the Flemish “comics landscape conditions” at the time. These were obviously related to the conservative Catholic zeitgeist in Flanders, but they in fact made the Flemish creators even more conventional or cautious than the so-called zeitgeist would have dictated without these “comics landscape conditions” – if zeitgeists are able to dictate things... From the late 1940s onwards, making comics in Belgium was seriously hampered by the directives of French publishers. Thus, even before Frederic Wertham’s *Seduction of the Innocent* (1954) and the Comics Code Authority in the US, these directives (as from 16 July 1949) boycotted the success of Belgian authors by means of exaggerated, not to say absurd, censorship regulations. Draconian measures regarding the depiction of violence and sex, references to politics and so on were imposed on all Belgian comics – to protect the French youth, but certainly also to protect the French market, since for French comics creators, these “rules” were less strict.35 Most Belgian comics authors, think about Willy Vandersteen, and especially their publishers, wanted to make it in France, but in order to do this, they had to drastically reduce the sensuality of their female characters. Notorious, in this respect, is the near absence of women in Hergé’s *Tintin* universe.36 Soon the strict French rules were adopted by the Belgian comics publishers themselves, also for series that did not make it in France. Understandably, comics authors who targeted the general public practised self-censorship. And this also applied to artists in conservative Flanders whose work was not translated into French. *Jommeke* has been translated into French, from 1961 onwards, but without achieving any real success in the French-speaking world.37 All the same, when Jef Nys started *Jommeke*, he was part of a comics landscape in which his examples, the authors he admired, and thus he himself in fact could only afford to depict two kinds of female characters: young girls, like Anne-mieke and Rozemieke, on the one hand, and (older) adult women who were allowed to look anything but sensual. It is a crude way of putting it, I realise, but what both types have in common is that there was no need to depict breasts. Of course, adult women, especially mothers, like Jommeke’s, had breasts, but they were to receive as little attention as possible. At any rate, the reader should not be able to distinguish an individual breast.
Hence why adult women, such as Castafiore, but also Marie in the oldest *Jommeke* albums, got what De Weyer (2015) – hesitantly searching for the right word – calls a “facade”.\(^{38}\)

**KDG:** Yes, I noticed the difference between how Marie was depicted in “Het Hemelhuis” and how she looked in “De supervrouw”.

**MDD:** As a matter of fact, this kind of look, that “facade”, best suited bossy women, with whom the husband is under the thumb. Clichés aplenty, I know... That’s enough of a long “history lesson”. I say all this because *Jommeke*’s old-fashioned and certainly very limited image of women may also be partly due to this medium-specific context. And, as we can see, that “outmoded” world – and women’s – view has continued long after those French measures were lifted, at the end of the sixties. Unquestionably, we are dealing here with a conservative comics format and, on top of that, a conservative creator.

**KDG:** For me that does not justify the women’s image in the younger *Jommeke* albums, for instance, “De supervrouw”. I also don’t see why women should have large (discernible) breasts in order to be able to be more daring, less stereotypical characters.

**MDD:** You are right. Comments like that about Flemish family comics are actually too rarely heard, I think.

**SDV:** For me what mattered when reading the albums was not how the girls or women are portrayed physically, but how the other characters react to how they look. What struck me is that there are many jokes and remarks made about women who do not fit traditional Western beauty standards.

**KDG:** Yes, even still in the most recent album of the three, “Balletkoorts”. There’s really a kind of obsession with being slim [fig. 7]. This obviously reinforces the problematic issues we already dealt with regarding gender in the series.

**MDD:** Believe it or not, as a child I really never noticed it, but now as an adult, I realise that this obsession is prominent in the series.

**SDV:** I don’t think we should take these remarks about physical appearance lightly. In their personal lives, many young readers must have asked – and still ask – themselves

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**Figure 7** Gerd Van Loock, “Balletkoorts” (*Jommeke*, no. 293, 2019: 9, strip 26, panel 1)\(^{39}\) © 2022 Standaard Uitgeverij.
questions about these issues. This is something you can be bullied about at school. And then you are again confronted with such remarks while reading comics. Once more, this endless repetition shows little creativity, in my opinion. Why do these remarks always have to be at the expense of women? Why is their appearance so much more important than that of men?

MDD: Fat men are certainly made fun of too in the series, but you are right that women are too often the target of remarks concerning their physical appearance.

To close this part about the zeitgeist: in general, have you noticed an evolution over the three albums regarding the portrayal of the girls and women in the series?

KDG: Amazingly little evolution, actually.

MDD: That’s curious, because, as you know, I have chosen these three albums because they each originate from three different “time periods” in the series’ history.

SDV: If you hadn’t said it, I might not have even noticed it. Of course, you can tell by the colour edition that “Balletkoorts” is the youngest, but purely in terms of content, I wouldn’t have realised it was so recent.

MDD: Well, and I especially chose “Balletkoorts” because that album got some media attention. When the album appeared, you could read how Jommeke was now really becoming a child of his time and things like that. That a male character in this series would take up ballet would indeed have been unthinkable in the first decades of the series.

**To Wrap Up...**

Can I conclude this conversation by assuming that you can agree, at least partially, with this quote from the call for papers for the Sugar and Spice conference: “As gendered products, comics have constructed feminine role models and identities to which girls have replied with both rebellion and conformity”. And if so, how exactly does this apply to the reading of Jommeke?

KDG: It applies, according to me, but readers have replied more with conformity, I’m afraid. Evidently, as I already said, there is no direct causal connection between the ideas the series propagates and the behaviour of people who once read (a lot of) Jommeke albums. But that doesn’t mean that the dissemination of ideas in comics is innocent or harmless. It is the constant and everyday repetition of limited images of women that sediments into people’s bodies and minds.

SDV: I don’t think either that we should speak of a direct, demonstrable influence. But, indeed, that doesn’t prove, of course, that those albums had no influence at all. It is just more nuanced than a direct causal relationship.

KDG: As I said, I identified myself rather with Jommeke than with the Miekles. One could say: as a child you do what you want with the things you read on your own... but, for
example, those fatphobic or sexist remarks: as a child you internalise them; it certainly impacts the way you perceive and value yourself. If we now realise how much our society is imbued with woman-unfriendly ideas and images, then we also have to look in the direction of children’s comics.

**MDD:** Yes, and the fact that *Jommeke* and the Flemish family comics series in general have had immense commercial success since the 1960s – and even today are still among the bestselling books according to the figures – makes these concluding comments all the more thought-provoking.

**Notes**

1. Although some people call the Dutch spoken in Belgium “Flemish”, it is a kind of Dutch. The degree of difference between Dutch from Belgium and Dutch from the Netherlands is comparable to that between British and American English. When I use the term “Flemish” here, I mean belonging to the culture of the northern, Dutch-speaking part of Belgium, and thus not to that of the Netherlands. The southern part of Belgium is French-speaking.

2. On the difference between family strips and family comics (both are called *familiestrips* in the Low Countries, but elsewhere I have argued to reserve the term “family strips” for comic books with one gag per page), see De Dobbeleer (2021a). On the particularity of the publication format of the Flemish family comics (first in newspapers – two tiers a day – where the main/first readers were adults, then in albums – approximately four new albums a year – whose main readers were children), see Lefèvre.

3. Only recently do the Chinese (see De Weyer 2018) and German (re)translations (see Hüster) of several albums seem to appeal to new reading publics.

4. See Herten, Malcorps and Tyrions (87–88, 194), Mennes and more recently De Lille.

5. Katrien De Graeve (Ghent University) is an anthropologist whose research has consistently focused on inequalities and exclusions in the personal spheres of life. Sara De Vuyyst (Ghent University) studies different aspects of gender, sexuality and media. Her current postdoc focuses on the representation of older (queer) women in comics, zines, art, cinema and other types of media and on the construction of alternative narratives on ageing, gender and sexuality by media producers.

6. Until album 45 (1971), Jef Nys did all the work himself (De Ryck 140). From the following album onwards, a small-scale studio gradually formed around him, but Nys kept meticulous control over each album. After his death in 2009, two studio employees took over most of the work: Philippe Delzenne and Gerd Van Loock.

7. I have put round brackets around words that were effectively said during the interview, e.g. a little later, to clarify something or in places where it might be difficult to
immediately understand the sentence without these round brackets. Square brackets are placed around words that have not been said, but which the reader (unfamiliar with *Jommeke*) requires in order to follow the argument properly.

8. Willy Vandersteen’s (1913–1990) *Suske en Wiske* (in the UK known as *Spike and Suzy*, in the US as *Willy and Wanda*), with more than three hundred albums, is the longest-running Flemish family comics series (1945–present).


10. The Catholic *Het Volk* [*The People*] was the Flemish newspaper in which *Jommeke*’s adventures were published from 1958 until 2008. *Het Volk* was also the publisher of the first 175 *Jommeke* albums (until 1994).

11. Marc Sleen’s (1922–2016) family comics *Nero* (1947–2002; 216 albums) and Willy Vandersteen’s medieval-based sword-and-sorcery series *De Rode Ridder* [*The Red Knight*] (1959–now; more than 270 albums) are also two of Flanders’ best known comics series.


13. *De boomhut* [*The Tree House*] was an award-winning educational children’s programme broadcast by the Flemish public television service from 1994 to 2006.

14. Here, De Graeve refers to a statement by Jelle De Beule, the writer of a recent homage/parody *Jommeke* album (De Beule and De Cloedt): “I do not feel that I have become misogynous or racist by reading *Jommeke* albums”, although he acknowledges that women’s and other images in the albums can be considered questionable (De Dobbeleer, 2021b, 45).

15. This important concept in feminist film theory was coined by Laura Mulvey.

16. Since 2000 Agnes Nys colours all *Jommeke* albums (De Ryck 147).

17. Rosalieke is intriguing because it seldom happens that an everyday young women gets a substantial role in *Jommeke*.

18. In “Het Hemelhuis” *Jommeke*, Filiberke, Annemieke and Rozemieke – without the knowledge of their parents – take care of an abandoned baby, Polleke. Whereas the girls take on the motherly tasks, the boys build the “Heaven House” from the album title.

19. The idea of oppositional reading, to indicate that readers can oppose the dominant or preferred reading of the text and reject it, was developed by Stuart Hall in 1973 (see Hall).

20. Although we can often read in the albums how in a distant future *Jommeke* and Filiberke will marry Annemieke and Rozemieke respectively, Filiberke sometimes falls heavily in love with other girls (esp. in Nys 1970, but also in Nys 1994).
21. In this 2019 album, Jommeke helps out the local ballet school (with which Annemieke and Rozemieke are affiliated) by performing dances in Tchaikovsky’s *Swan Lake* to celebrate the school’s one hundredth anniversary.

22. Actually, also the pets (see fig. 1) take on heroic roles, cf. Meesters and Lefèvre (63–64).

23. For this impetuosity, see De Beule in De Dobbeleer (2021b, 44).

24. “De supervrouw” opens with how Marie is overstrained and fed up with her life as a traditional housewife. As is often the case, Professor Gobelijn comes to the rescue. The pills which he prepares to help her get back on her feet are so powerful that Marie transcends herself, whereupon a roller coaster of adventures can start. First, Marie starts doing her husband’s office work, far better and more quickly than him, then she easily concludes difficult trade agreements in the US, she plays a decisive role in the World Cup soccer final (i.e. of the men’s tournament), she lands an almost crashing plane and so on. Near the end, Marie actually becomes the first president of Europe (thirty years before her fellow countryman Herman Van Rompuy would be the first to hold this position). Throughout, Jommeke watches closely to make sure that his mother always gets Gobelijn’s pills on time; without her knowledge, he mixes them into her coffee. However, when the pills have finally run out, Marie – happy after all – takes on her old position in the household.

25. Merho’s *De Kiekeboes* [The Kiekeboes; the surname Kiekeboe means “peekaboo”] is one of the somewhat younger popular family comics series in Flanders (1977–present; more than 160 albums). For a comparison between the album in question, “Het lot van Charlotte” (*De Kiekeboes*, no. 30, 1985) and “De supervrouw”, see De Dobbeleer (2021a).

26. Marie: “Teofiel! I’d better wash the dishes again ... | Teofiel: “Marie! I will help ...” | Flip (paraphrasing the concluding verses of the late eighteenth-century Dutch children’s poem ‘Het goede voorbeeld’ [The good example] by Hieronymus van Alphen, which have become popular wisdom): “Only there can be love, only there life is sweet, where people quietly and freely do everything for each other!”; “Einde”, on the placard in this album’s final panel, means “The end”.


28. Annemieke: “Rozemieke, Jommeke has found a little baby, and he asks if I want to be the mother.” | Rozemieke: “Hey, Annemieke, I can do that too.” – Annemieke: “But if Jommeke asks me!” | Rozemieke: “I would like to be the mother!” – Annemieke: “No, I am the mother!” | Rozemieke: “I – I – I – I!” – Annemieke: “I – I – I – I!” | Rozemieke: “Okay, then we are the mother both at the same time.” | “Are we twins or not?”

29. Marie: “What do those cloths mean???” | “Annemieke, where did you get those cloths?” | Rozemieke: “I am not Annemieke, madam. I am Rozemieke.” | Marie: “That remains the same; you are twins after all!”
The fact that their names both end in “-mieke”, does not help either. That Jef Nys called them Annemieke and Rozemieke enables the narrator as well as the other characters to just call or address them briefly as de (“the”) Miekes (which was also used in the spin-off album devoted to them).

For the “obsession” with having the characters wear the same clothes all the time in Flemish family comics, cf. Horsten (137) and Stabel (9).

As can be seen in fig. 7, Odilon van Piependale is much shorter than his wife, Elodie. Madam Pepermunt (Dutch for “peppermint”) is an enthusiastic and bustling American woman who lives alone on a ranch and shoots with a gun loaded with peppermints, hence her name.

In Dutch (also the expression used by Meesters): zijn mannetje staan, literally translated: “to stand one’s little man”.

De Graeve refers here to a comparable remark by Jelle De Beule (supra, note 14) in De Dobbeleer (2021b, 45).

For this protectionism, see De Weyer (2015, 84–87) and Groensteen (296–297).

In Geert De Weyer’s history of Belgian comics (85), opera singer Bianca Castafiore, the most famous woman in Tintin, is called a mix of the three then-dominating women types: “the witch, the cow and the mannish woman”.


In De Weyer’s Dutch: “voorgevel” (2015, 85), indicating the heavy “pack” above the belly, in which no individual breast is discernible (which might have been too sensual). Compare fig. 6 to the cover of “De supervrouw” (fig. 2), where Marie no longer has a “facade”. In the 1970s the measures had been lifted.

Elodie van Stiepelteen: “Unfortunately, I had to stop dancing when the years started to manifest themselves!” – Odilon van Piependale: “She means the kilograms!”

The pinnacle is probably the second half of “Het monster in de ruïne” [The Monster in the Ruin] (1980, no. 101), where Jommeke and his friends continuously call a group of Amazonian people Fatsoes or potbellies and the like.

See e.g. De Poorter. For more on “Balletkoorts” specifically, as well as on the question whether it would be worthwhile to rewrite the (older) Jommeke albums, see De Dobbeleer (forthcoming).
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