Chapter 6

The Ambivalence of Girlhood and Motherhood in A Girl-and-Her-Dog Comics Series: *Margot & Oscar Pluche / Sac à Puces*

Benoît Glaude

Although this chapter does not draw on reader-response criticism, it follows on from the previous one, by Sylvain Lesage, in the sense that it studies the questioning of gender roles and norms in a corpus of French-language comics that appeared in the children's press. This chapter concerns a comics series published between 1990 and 2010 by Belgian authors De Brab (Carine De Brabanter), Falzar (François D'Hondt) and Zidrou (Benoît Drousie). The series, initially titled *Margot & Oscar Pluche*, then *Sac à Puces*, focuses on an eight-year-old girl called Margot and the stray dog she adopts clandestinely, without her parents' consent. A child from a large lower-middle-class family, the central character plays the roles of daughter, sister and friend. This chapter will analyse the representation of Margot through the evolution of her relationship with the dog she calls initially Oscar Pluche, then Sac à Puces [Fleabag]. The first section will describe the publication context of the comics series. Before being released in albums by Casterman and then by Dupuis publishing houses, the comics were pre-published in two Belgian periodicals, targeting a mixed youth audience, and which had French and Dutch editions: *Dauphin / Zonnestraal* and *Spirou / Robbedoes*. Focusing on the French-speaking albums, the second section will link them to a genre, family comics, that is rooted in Flemish comic strip (such as *Jommeke*;

see Chapter 9 for an interview about girls in this comics series). The next two parts will describe Margot's social interactions, first with her large family, then through her exclusive relationship with her dog. The conclusion will show how this comics series combines graphic reproduction with social reproduction.

Between Children's Press and Comics Publishing

This series is symptomatic of the evolution of the representation of girlhood in French-language comics for children, and was published in a context that favoured this evolution. And yet, if the production of albums experienced a strong growth in the French-speaking book market in the 1980s, a journalist wrote in 1985 that "the stories aimed at teenagers and adults are mainly those that are favoured today by most publishers"[1] (Rouyet 9). He explained that "this is somewhat normal, insofar as comics have had to fight for a long time against the tendency to confine them to the role of a consumer object for the youngest. So, it takes its revenge [...] and forgets the children". He continued by mentioning the intergenerational comics series of *Spirou* magazine's publisher, but he conceded that "Dupuis does not address the very young comics lovers". For this audience of children, the comics critic could only recommend the *Yakari* albums published by Casterman.

This was to ignore the creativity of the youth press. Admittedly, many magazines that traditionally pre-published comics disappeared – such as *Pilote* in 1989, as well as *Pif Gadget* and *Hello BD* (formerly *Tintin*) in 1993 – although *Spirou* managed to maintain itself by targeting readers aged eleven to fifteen, leaving the younger children's market to the timeless *Mickey*. Beside comics weeklies, other youth magazines published innovative comics that had several points in common. First, created for magazines, they did not necessarily undergo editorial development, and when they did, they maintained the link with their magazines of origin. For instance, the short comics stories of *Tom-Tom & Nana*, a series created by Jacqueline Cohen and Bernadette Després for the first issue of *J'aime lire* in 1977, which the publishing house Bayard issued a number of collections from 1985 onwards, but which remained attached to the literary magazine. It is worth noting, second, that these magazines for young readers welcomed works by comics authors, including female authors – shortly before Cohen and Després in *J'aime lire*, Nicole Claveloux had opened the way in *Okapi* – at a time when the profession was far from reaching parity. Third, these works stand out for the range of topics they allowed themselves to deal with. As they were independent from the publishing houses specialised in comics, these graphic narratives were freer to follow the innovations of children's literature. A fourth common feature of these comics is that they did not exclusively feature male heroes.

Conversely, the Belgian scriptwriter Denis Lapière (quoted in Daele and Glesener 9–10) deplored, in a 1993 interview, the difficulty of publishing an ambitious work for

young readers with a comics publisher: "we are condemned to do third-rate 'tout public' [suitable for all audiences] comics and say they are aimed at children". He continued:

> When we see what exists as topics and as stories told in children's books, what one dares to write in these books, we say to ourselves that comics have a long way to go! Except for comics like *Jojo*, *Jimmy Boy*, *Margot & Oscar Pluche*, *Docteur Poche*, *Billy the Cat*.[2]

However, by mentioning only series centred on male heroes – with the exception of *Margot & Oscar Pluche* – Denis Lapière neglected the feminisation of the characters of the new comics for children. This is precisely why Carine De Brabanter (quoted in Gavo and Dutailly 16) decided to embrace a career as a cartoonist:

> In fact, when I was a child, as soon as I could read, I read comics. [...] What made me want to create comics was that I couldn't relate to them. Because boys could identify with anything they wanted, but not girls. [...] Natacha, for example, is an inflatable doll [...] Yoko Tsuno has no flesh, she's a paper woman [...] In short, I could only identify with Mouche, in *La Patrouille des Castors*. He is a little boy and I thought: "He can do the job, in a pinch". [...] I didn't want to be either Bianca Castafiore or Tante Sidonia [in *Tintin* and *Suske en Wiske*].

The editorial trajectory of *Margot & Oscar Pluche / Sac à Puces* is an example of the renewal of comics for young readers that took place outside the specialised editorial field. The two heroes were the star characters in the weekly magazines *Dauphin / Zonnestraal*, which were (and still are today) broadcast in primary schools, respectively in the French-speaking and Dutch-speaking parts of Belgium. In the 1990s the editions in two languages were designed by a bilingual editorial staff (Ghesquière 37). This educational magazine, part of the catalogue of the Catholic publishing house Averbode, was aimed at pupils in the third and fourth grades of primary education, aged eight to ten. If we take (at random) the no. 29 of *Dauphin* in 1996, we find on the twenty-four pages, two pages of a to-be-continued comic strip (an episode of *Yakari*, from Casterman publishing house), and two pages presenting the contents of the issue, animated by Margot and Oscar Pluche, written by Zidrou and Falzar, with original illustrations by De Brab and Godi. The latter cartoonist was authoring with Zidrou the bestselling series *Ducobu* in another weekly of Averbode, *Tremplin / Zonneland*. In addition to these comics, he drew a new flea of Oscar Pluche in *Dauphin* every week. There is also a double-page spread contributed by the readers, entitled "The good ideas of the week" ("Les bonnes idées de la semaine" 16–17). Children were invited to send their announcements, riddles, jokes, poems and drawings to Margot and Oscar Pluche, to the address of the Averbode publishing house. Several readers' productions (**fig. 1**), including a "flea" in the manner of Godi, make direct reference to the comics heroes.

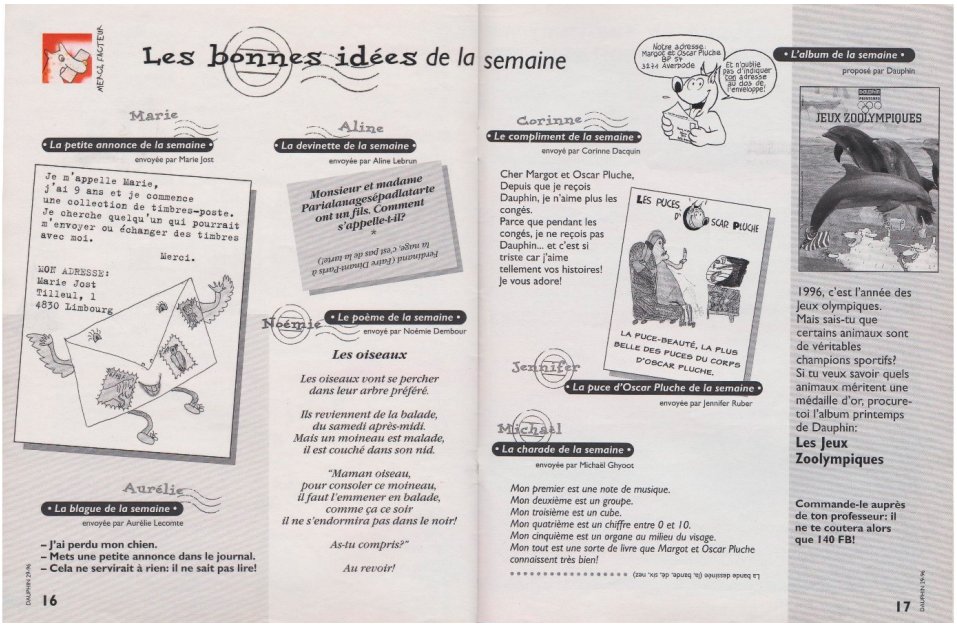

Figure 1 "Les bonnes idées de la semaine", *Dauphin* 29, 1996, pp. 16–17. Reproduced with kind permission from Éditions Averbode.

Along with the pre-publication in *Dauphin / Zonnestraal*, six albums were published by Casterman, a Belgian publishing house unrelated to Averbode. Although it was best known, at the time, for the adult graphic novels that it drew from the magazine *(À Suivre)*, Casterman had a long history with children's books. Paradoxically, it did not realise the innovative potential of some of its series (such as *Yakari* and *Margot & Oscar Pluche*) for young readers. Among other grievances (see Gavo and Dutailly 17), the limited sales of the latter series of albums in the 1990s prompted the authors to continue it with a competing publishing house.

Under a title refocused on the dog, renamed *Sac à Puces / Vlooienbaal*,[3] the series continued into the 2000s in Dupuis's widely broadcasted weekly comics magazine *Spirou / Robbedoes*. According to Carine De Brabanter (quoted in Gavo and Dutailly 17), the change of editor allowed for the renewal of contact with the readers, thanks to the pre-publication of the comics in *Spirou*, since they were no longer published in *Dauphin*. When it serialised the first comics story, *Super maman* [Super Mom], which relates, from Margot's point of view, the arrival of a newborn in her already large family, the magazine hailed the event by inviting its readers to choose the baby's sex and first name. The editorial staff received nearly four hundred ballots and proclaimed "It's a girl! She's going to be called Marine!" ("C'est une fille!" 17) The first albums were published in the "Tout public" [For all audiences] series, intended for family readership. A few years later, Dupuis tried to seg-

ment its range of publications for young readers by targeting age groups. Two comic book series were created in the first decade of 2000, under the co-direction of Denis Lapière and Laurence Van Tricht: "the Puceron [Aphid] series, to be read alone from 3 years old" and "the Punaise [Shield bug] series, to be read alone from 6 years old", in which the *Sac à Puces* albums were reintegrated. According to Denis Lapière (quoted in Mixhel 52),

> the Punaise comics are made for children from six or seven years old, who are not yet great readers. It is very important that the story is embodied by the drawing and not only by the text. In Punaise, all the themes are tackled [...], all that makes Life.

Even if the publisher has now abandoned its children's comics series, others remain elsewhere, such as "Mille bulles" [One thousand bubbles] from L'École des loisirs, fed by the catalogues of Casterman, Dargaud, Delcourt, Dupuis and Le Lombard. Significantly, it has reissued the first two episodes of *Sac à Puces* (vol. II1 and II2).[4] It was a return to the roots of the series, since it imports themes from the children's picture books of which L'École des loisirs constituted a prestigious catalogue.

A Franco-Belgian Family Comics

One could be tempted to classify the *Margot & Oscar Pluche / Sac à Puces* series, featuring a large family, in the family strip genre. A French-speaking model of the genre is the still ongoing series *Boule & Bill* (see Capart; Delisle), created in 1959 by the Belgian comics artist Roba. Centred on a fusional boy-and-his-dog duo, it has featured, through hundreds of one-page gags, a limited number of secondary characters gravitating around a stereotypical middle-class family, composed of a housewife, an office-worker father, a seven-year-old boy (Boule) and their English cocker spaniel (Bill). Repeating the same eventless ordinary situation over and over again, the micro-stories are entirely devoted to a humorous objective, without generating any evolution of the characters. The success of this series and its successors – especially in the magazine *Spirou* where it appeared, like *Cédric*, *Le Petit Spirou*, *Kid Paddle* and many others, all centred on the family life of a little boy – has never wavered. Although these series have not been successful on the English-speaking book market, they belong to a comic strip genre that is not local. This is the family strip, developing short-length gags pre-published in the press before being collected in volumes, focusing on daily family life.

In contrast to this transnational genre, the *Margot & Oscar Pluche / Sac à Puces* series presents a family model that is unusual in French-language comics. The Duchêne are a large family from the lower middle class, with a father who is a teacher and later a nursery director, involved in the education of his seven children, even though the mother assumes

the traditional role of housewife.[5] They are the owners of a modest terraced house in a small town that could be Belgian or French, but they cannot afford to replace their old estate car, which is perpetually broken down. At the centre of the comics series is a tandem of an eight-year-old girl and a street dog who have everyday adventures, almost always in the neighbourhood where the family home is located. Most of the stories are about forty pages long, the length of a standard album in the Franco-Belgian comic book industry, but two[6] of the fifteen volumes contain shorter stories. Although the pitch of the series – a little girl hiding a dog in her bedroom – generates burlesque situations, the adventure plots are told in a serious, rather than comic, mode.

This French-speaking series is less related to the American tradition of the family strip than to a model that is popular in the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium, but whose translations are poorly exported, except for a few series (such as *Suske en Wiske*, *Jommeke* or *De Kiekeboes*) broadcast in French, especially in the French-speaking part of the country. According to Michel De Dobbeleer (35), "the present-day comics market in Flanders remains dominated by mainstream long-running series commonly known as *familiestrips* [...] that have been widely read from soon after the Second World War". The Belgian comics scholar defines these comics series by their high productivity, since they grow by about two hundred comics pages a year, in the hands of small studios, even if the name of one founding artist still dominates the creations. As they were historically pre-published in the press, the stories still bear traces of the serial storytelling, even if they are now associated with the Franco-Belgian album format (44 comics pages, A4 format, full colour). This is why Michel De Dobbeleer proposes to call those series "family comics" (38) – as opposed to gag-based and press-related "family strips" (39–40) – whose albums contain one long narrative per book, "involving a central (surrogate) family, or at least departing from a family-life situation" (40), and combining "quick-superficial humour and an overarching adventure plot" (41). If the French-speaking series *Margot & Oscar Pluche / Sac à Puces* belongs to the family comics genre, it differs from the *familiestrips* by several features: a lower productivity (about forty-four pages per year), a different relationship to seriality, the children of the Duchêne family growing up (the youngest, Émile, learns to speak; the eldest, Julot, meets a girlfriend, etc.), and an unusual thematic ambition. Although the series tells of everyday adventures, it deals with topics such as the social life of older people (I3 and II8), the balance between family life and professional success for a woman (I4), the arrival of a new child among brothers and sisters (II1), the citizen mobilisation of the youngest (II2), the hospitalisation of a child (II4), the separation of a couple (II7), or the death of a close relative (II8), which had not been dealt with before, or only to a limited extent, in children's comics published in Belgium, both in the French and Dutch languages.

Yet this is a classic girl-and-her-dog narrative, like many others in children's literature,[7] linked to the vast tradition of boy-and-his-dog fictions. The very first short story, relating the meeting of Margot and Oscar Pluche, had been pre-published in 1990 in *Jet*,

a bench test for young authors;[8] it was redrawn and shortened from five to four pages, for the album. This short narrative presents a final scene, which was to become recurrent in the series, where the dog, having entered the house secretly, joins Margot in her bedroom, after which they talk and laugh while falling asleep together in the girl's bed. In this first story, the dog is not yet anthropomorphised: it moves only on all fours, and it barks and growls, except in the denouement of the narrative. In a panel of the original version that was deleted in the album, Margot wonders, "You… You talk?", and Oscar answers, "Of course… But not to anyone!" (Boulet and De Brab 11) This dog illustrates the ambivalence of anthropomorphisation in Franco-Belgian comics, which was already complex in the *Boule & Bill* comics series (see Delisle about this complexity), in which the dog Bill cannot speak. From one album to another, Oscar Pluche / Sac à Puces wavers between two of the categories of anthropomorphisation distinguished by the animation scholar Stéphane Collignon (47), as a "cartoony" pet living in a human environment, though "endowed with a human psyche" and "the ability of speech", and as an nonhuman character who is "fully anthropomorphised" (52). Indeed, its morphology can, at times, be distorted to the point of making it look like a human child, when it walks on two paws and uses its forelimbs as hands, or even when (in vol. II6) it wears clothes.

In the first short story, before the girl knows that the dog talks, she gives it a name, Oscar Pluche, as if it were a human child. The name also links it to toys. French-speaking Belgian children use the word *pluche* (in this pronunciation) to refer to a *peluche* [cuddly toy], which is an animal made of plush, such as an *ours en peluche* [teddy bear].[9] The dog is therefore introduced as a playmate for Margot, who immediately develops a special relationship with it. By adopting the dog, without being able to expect any help from her family, since she disobeys her parents by making this choice, Margot feels invested with a responsibility towards her friend. She develops a protective relationship with the dog, evident in their role playing, for example, when she plays the prehistoric mother watching over her "baby mammoth" (vol. I1, p. 26). On the title page of the album *Super maman* (vol. II1), Margot is carrying Sac à Puces, who is sucking on a pacifier, in her arms, echoing a scene from the episode where she is babying the dog, saying "Don't cry, baby. Here's your pacifier! Sleep well, my big baby love!" (vol. II1, p. 27) Margot not only mothers the dog in their role playing but also in their daily life, for example when she organises the clandestine convalescence of the dog, which has a broken leg, in the house of the Duchêne family (in vol. I2). Of course, Oscar Pluche brings something to her in exchange for her care: unfailing friendship. Nevertheless, the relationship between the girl and her male canine companion is indicative of the relationship between women and men in this series.

A Daughter and Sister in a Large Family

The staging of a large family was rarer in French-language comics in the 1990s than in children's literature and on the small screen. De Brab, Falzar and Zidrou's series appeared in a decade when television series, even if they were still far from achieving gender parity among their characters, began to show mostly collective mixed protagonists, whereas they had been dominated, since the 1950s, by solitary male heroes (Sepulchre 94). For a first approach to the gendered characterisation of the characters in *Margot & Oscar Pluche / Sac à Puces*, I borrow a traditional method of analysis from television studies, which has been tested and criticised by the narratologist Sarah Sepulchre, and which is based on a dichotomous classification, predefining "rather male" and "rather female" character traits.

Let us observe a page of presentation of the Duchêne family[10] (**fig. 2**), published in *Spirou* magazine in 2000, reproduced in most of the albums of the *Sac à Puces* series (vol. 11 2–7), then transcribed and completed in the introduction of the chidren's novel *Pique-nique panique* [Picnic panic] (Falzar 5–7), a novelisation of the comics series published in 2004. The title of the page published in *Spirou*, "Viens chez moi, j'habite chez une copine…" [Come home, I live at a friend's place…], echoes that of a song by Renaud Séchan, evoking an idle young man who spends his life seducing women while bunking temporarily at friends' houses. We find some of these traits in Sac à Puces, who is greedy, dirty, fugitive and kept (by Margot). The introduction to the novel, as well as the comments in the (pseudo-)photographic portrait of the family, are uttered by the dog. He attributes a variable number of qualities to each member of the family. Three of them have at least four character traits: Margot is loyal in friendship, committed, secretive and indifferent to her dog's hygiene, while her parents are (in the dog's view) authoritarian, united, house-proud and dull, but considerate of their children nonetheless. Then there are three siblings with three qualities: the baby, Marine, "has the pleasant odours of soap, milk and poo"; the youngest, Émile, is grumpy and stubborn and does not express affection (except to Marine); and finally, the oldest sister, Sandra, is a mediator, a peacemaker and a know-it-all. The three remaining children are the least qualified: Josette is cheerful and boisterous, the eldest, Julot, is greedy and driven by an exclusive passion (video games), as is his brother Lucien (role playing).

If we compare the portraits of the children of the Duchêne family with the list of supposedly masculine or feminine traits of fictional characters on television (Sepulchre 96), we realise that the three brothers, Lucien, Julot and Émile, are defined by qualities associated with the televisual representation of the male gender (respectively, strength denoted by appetite, passion for fighting games and unawareness of others' feelings), while Sandra, tactful, and Josette, childish, are defined by qualities associated with the representation of the female gender in television fiction. Margot has as many qualities assigned to the two genders (altruism supposedly feminine and toughness supposedly masculine)

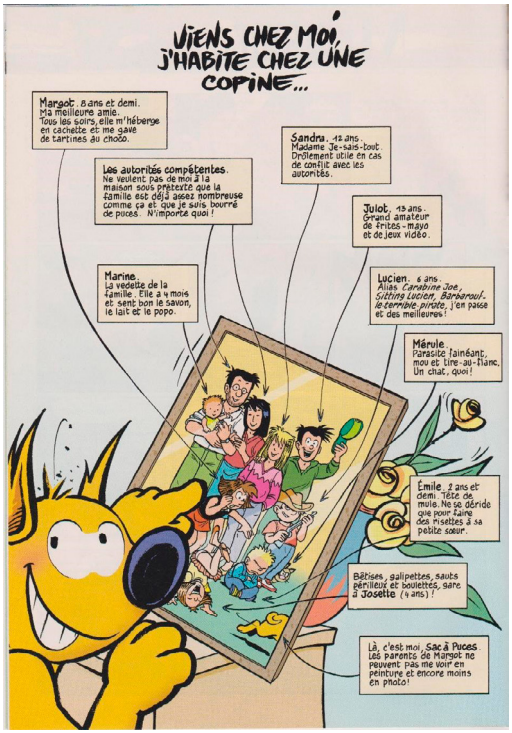

Figure 2 De Brab, Falzar, Zidrou and Veerle Swinnen. "Viens chez moi, j'habite chez une copine..." *Spirou*, no. 3225, 2000, p. 10. *Sac à Puces* by De Brab, Zidrou and Falzar, reproduced with the authors' permission.

as character traits not assigned to a specific gender (secretive, faithful in friendship), just as Sac à Puces has qualities supposedly feminine (passivity, weakness, dependence) and others, supposedly masculine (appetite, no fear of getting his paws dirty). We can conclude that the portraits of Margot's brothers and sisters are more polarised than those of the hero tandem, that the latter are more finely characterised than the former and that Margot avoids the polarisation of fictional gender representations. As far as the dog is concerned, beyond the assimilation of male and female stereotypes, the essential issue is anthropomorphisation. His problem is less to be male or female than to be dog or human.

This cursory approach to the system of characters in *Margot & Oscar Pluche / Sac à Puces* is not satisfactory, on the one hand, because the use of a dichotomous model contributes "to an essentialization of [so-called] male and female characteristics" (Sepulchre 104), and on the other hand, because the study of a (pseudo-)family photo taken in 2000 does not account for the evolution of the characters over the whole existence of the series (1990–2010). The remainder of this study will take an alternative route, focusing on the relationships between characters, that is, on their functional characterisation – the role of characters in the narrative, particularly through their verbal interactions – even though individual properties such as age and gender will be taken into account.

To describe the fifteen albums as a whole, I calculated the average number of speech units issued or received by each member of the Duchêne family[11] in the first four comics pages of the fifteen albums of *Margot & Oscar Pluche / Sac à Puces* (**fig. 3**). I take the speech bubble as the unit of measurement for the speakers' utterances. I assume that the first four comics pages of each album, which average forty-four pages, set up the main characters, especially for readers who may begin reading the series with any album. For most of them, which contain a single long story, these initial pages constitute a narrative incipit,

Character	Gender	Age	Nb of incipits where the character is present	Avg nb of monologues	Avg nb of issued communications	Avg nb of communications to everyone present	Avg nb of conversation partners individually contacted	Avg nb of received communications	Avg nb of conversation partners who have contacted the character	Nb of incipits where the character produces bubble(s)
Marine	F	baby	9	0.0	0.4	0.1	0.3	2.8	0.4	4
Emile	M	2	12	0.0	1.0	0.0	0.6	0.8	0.4	6
Josette	F	4	13	0.6	1.6	0.3	0.8	1.7	1.0	8
Lucien	M	6	13	0.1	0.9	0.1	0.6	0.6	0.6	6
Margot	F	8.5	15	0.1	7.6	1.3	1.9	6.2	2.2	14
Sandra	F	12	13	0.0	2.6	0.5	1.4	1.3	0.8	9
Julot	M	13	14	0.0	1.2	0.1	0.9	1.4	0.9	8
Mother	F	adult	14	0.4	3.4	0.2	1.8	3.5	1.9	14
Father	M	adult	14	0.6	6.4	0.9	2.2	4.5	2.0	13
Oscar	M	dog	15	1.4	3.0	0.1	0.7	3.9	1.2	13

Figure 3 Average numbers of speech units issued or received by each member of the Duchêne family, in the first four comics pages of the fifteen albums of *Margot & Oscar Pluche / Sac à Puces*.

setting out the initial situation, but for two albums (vol. I1 and II5), the first four pages cover most of a short story. In all the cases, the main characters enter the scene in these pages and receive an enunciative qualification, which I will study from a quantitative point of view.

The table (**fig. 3**) shows the average numbers of bubbles issued or received by each member of the Duchêne family, including the dog, in the fifteen albums' incipits of *Margot & Oscar Pluche / Sac à Puces*. Quantitatively, I distinguish a main group of speakers composed of Margot, her dog and her parents, and a secondary group formed by the other children. The irregular presence of the brothers and sisters is amplified by their greater tendency to be mute: the baby, Marine, and the boys, Émile, Lucien and Julot, remain mute in one episode out of two where they appear, but the girls Josette and Sandra are less often mute than they are. All these secondary speakers have a stereotypical enunciative portrait. For example, the little Émile starts to speak from the seventh album (vol. II1) to address almost exclusively his parents, to whom he complains in the third person (saying, for instance, "Nân! Mimile veut pas bébé!" [Nah! Mimie no want no baby!]). A more obvious example is the little Josette, who, of all the siblings except Margot, receives on average the most communications and from the most different interlocutors, but it is often the same reproving injunction: "Arrête, Josette!" [Stop, Josette!]. The same separation between primary and secondary speakers is found in the attribution of inner speech. The sixty pages analysed contain only one thought bubble, but some characters speak for themselves in two different ways: on the one hand, Josette and Lucien develop a solitary speech by living centred on their own childish world (they play aloud alone or sing solo at the top of their voices); on the other hand, Margot, her dog and her two parents tend to

say out loud what they think, which gives them an intellectual activity that the secondary characters seem to lack.

Regarding communications – in other words, speech bubbles addressed to an addressee – the parents naturally play important receiver roles: they receive many communications from various interlocutors. However, the mother has a weaker enunciator profile than her husband and their daughter Margot. The latter two characters stand out strongly from the others in terms of the amount of communication they send out, particularly the amount of talk they deliver to everyone present – which makes them the main leaders of groups (i.e. the family, in the case of the father, but the siblings or the group of friends, in the case of Margot). Moreover, of all the Duchêne family, Margot is the champion of reception: she receives the most communication and is contacted by the greatest number of different interlocutors. This can be explained by several reasons: she is the one who expresses herself the most, and she therefore provokes more verbal interactions; moreover, she is the only one to discuss with a group of friends outside the family, and finally she is the only human to whom Oscar / Sac à Puces speaks. Quantitatively, the enunciative portrait of the dog is different from all the others: he soliloquises more than everyone else and emits less verbal communication than he receives. Many characters address him, as is the case with the baby Marine, without expecting a verbal response.

Compared to my first approach of the system of characters, this one confirms the separation of the enunciative portraits, between (1) the dog, (2) Margot and her parents and (3) her brothers and sisters. The latter have more stereotypical verbal interactions and are devoid of inner speech (except Josette and Lucien). The sisters Sandra and Josette are less often silent than their brothers. Without being talkative (except with her canine confidant), Margot has an enunciative profile as complete as that of her father: they are verbal leaders who have an inner life, who speak a lot and to whom everyone else speaks. Although the mother also has many conversational partners, she speaks less than her daughter Margot and her husband, and she is also less spoken to. From an enunciative point of view, the patriarch occupies the position of the head of household, even if this modern father is involved in the education of the children.

The Girl-and-Her-Dog Relationship

I move on to an analysis of the evolution of the two main characters, the girl Margot and her dog Oscar Pluche / Sac à Puces, through the relationship they have. Is it a girl-and-her-dog series with a couple of inseparable heroes, or is it the adventures of a little girl accompanied by a nonhuman sidekick, or is it a funny animal comic strip centred on a dog? As announced by the title of the very first album, *Sac à puces*, and as confirmed by the change of name of the dog, linked to the change of title of the series, from *Margot & Oscar*

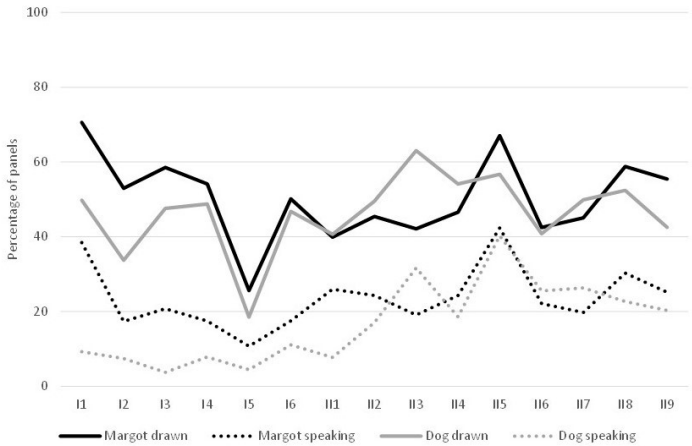

Figure 4 Proportion of panels where Margot and her dog are drawn, and of those where they speak, in each of the fifteen albums of *Margot & Oscar Pluche / Sac à Puces*.

Pluche to *Sac à Puces*, this character acquired, little by little, a prominent heroic stature. For all that, the narration does not refocus on the animal.[12] For an overall view (**fig. 4**), I have counted in each of the fifteen albums the proportion of panels where the girl is drawn (at least partially) and the percentage of those where she speaks (i.e. where handwritten words can be attributed to her). I have proceeded in the same way for the dog.

In the first version of the series, entitled *Margot & Oscar Pluche*, the girl was more represented than the dog, but later, when the series was retitled *Sac à Puces*, the characters were neck and neck, with even a slight advantage for the animal. In terms of speech the pattern confirms that neither character is particularly talkative. In the fifteen albums, the proportion of panels in which Margot appears is twice as high as the proportion of those in which she speaks; the same can be said of Sac à Puces if we consider only the last eight volumes (II2 to II9). In contrast, in the first seven volumes, on average, the dog appears six times more often in the panels (46 per cent) than he speaks – to be precise: he speaks in only 7 per cent of the panels in volumes I1 to II1. Indeed, the dog speaks much more in volumes II2 to II9 than he did in the seven previous ones (**fig. 4**) – even exceeding Margot in some albums (vol. II3, II6 and II7).

This quantitative survey shows that the couple of heroes are increasingly close, but a qualitative study would show that their relationship is not equal. Although the girl-and-her-dog relationship takes the form of a very strong friendship, it is asymmetrical. Margot protects, accommodates and feeds a dog, who could do without this care, but in return gives her his loyalty and affection. This friendship can become a burden for the child. Since she does not have the autonomy of an adult, she does not have the means to assume responsibility for a pet, which often puts her in two difficult situations: separation and punishment. Regularly, the father (or less often the mother) catches the dog in the house and throws it out, accusing it of being a parasite. Inevitably, this separation makes

Margot cry, because she suffers from seeing the dog on the street. In another repetitive scene (vol. I1, II1, II2, II4), the girl is punished by her parents – generally, she is deprived of an outing with the family – because of the dog's mischief in which she did not participate. She herself has no regret or shame, and she never has a guilty conscience about disobeying the adults when she believes she is doing it for the good of her dog. Margot even confronts authorities outside the family. When she cannot find any more meat or chocolate spread – her dog's favourite food – in the family fridge, and she has used up her pocket money, she sometimes steals to feed him (vols. I2, II5, II9), but she is always caught by adults. In addition, when she cannot stand the frustration of her parents, she tends to run away, which does not last more than a day (vol. I3, I4, I6, II8), but worries the adults. Margot explains her first time running away as follows:

> My parents have nothing more to say to me. [...] My parents are mean. Because of them, Oscar Pluche has to sleep in the street [...] He will be cold. He will be sick. And I love him. And they don't care. (vol. I3, p. 24)

In sum, separations and punishments exacerbate Margot's empathetic and protective concern for her dog. The cyclical experience of attachment and loss causes her great frustration, which is not without risk for a child, as psychiatrist John Bowlby studied in his "attachment theory" (synthesised by Tribunella 154–155):

> Since the interaction between attachment figure and child determines the internal working models of the self and the other, the lost figure and the inability to regain it will alter how a child represents itself to itself and how he perceived any subsequent attachment figures.

The half-maternal, half-friendly relationship that Margot weaves with her dog tends to isolate her, as much as is possible in a large family, or at least to reduce her social relations. We have already studied the family roles of daughter and sister that define the character through her dominant enunciative place in the Duchêne family, without her being particularly talkative. She is also the only member of the siblings who develops an extra-familial sociability (apart from Julot with his girlfriend, from vol. II5 onwards). In the first three albums, and again in volume II2, we see her leading her group of friends and convincing her class – including her teachers – to help her take care of her dog. However, as the albums of the first phase (vol. I1–I6) of the series progress (**fig. 4**), she is increasingly less often represented and she speaks less and less. This can be explained by the exclusive friendship she develops with her dog, which grows in the second part of the series. The heroes define themselves as "clandestine lovers" (vol. I4, p. 37). The climax of their love affair is reached in the short story "Vive la mariée" [Long live the bride] in the album *Les*

Lundis au soleil (vol. II5), where Margot and her dog organise, in play, their wedding ceremony and their honeymoon. At the beginning of the story, the Duchêne siblings discuss who they dream of marrying. Margot declares that she dreams of "a handsome Prince Charming". Once alone with her dog, who has been listening to the conversation and is consumed with jealousy, the girl reassures him: "Come on, Sac à Puces! You know very well that I'll marry you when I grow up!" (vol. II5: 35) Her response to her siblings is indicative of the social roles she knows she can and must play. At the beginning of *Gare à ta truffe* (vol. II3), Margot announces to her parents that she wants to join a football club, a ploy she has devised to see the dog in secret, instead of sports training. The father, who played soccer in his youth, supports her, but the mother is surprised[13]: "it is a boy's sport", "our Margot always has to do things differently than the rest!" (vol. II3, pp. 3 and 4)

To understand this last sentence, we can bring Margot closer to an adult who, like her, does not do what others do. In *À l'abordage!* (vol. I4), she gets to know her godmother, who lives in Boulogne-sur-Mer. This young, single, militant woman has great professional responsibilities, which lead her to neglect her family, as well as to keep a romantic relationship with one of her employees secret. Researchers in television studies (quoted in Sepulchre 97) have expressed concern about "the masculinization of women who have men's jobs", worrying that heroines in television dramas might lose their "mothering side" as they climb the career ladder. Without debating these questionable statements,[14] it is clear that Margot's godmother does not fit the model of motherhood that the girl finds in her mother and reproduces towards her dog. The denouement of *À l'abordage!* allows the young woman to reconnect with her family and to publicly reveal her love for her employee, without having to "feminise" herself. The parallel with the secret couple formed by Margot and Oscar Pluche shows that, in the case of the girl too, the balance between the success of her sentimental life and the fulfilment of her roles as daughter and sister requires clandestinity. The solution that the comics series suggests, as most girl-and-her-dog or boy-and-his-dog stories do, is a definitive separation that would allow each of the heroes to live a "proper developmental trajectory" (Tribunella 161) that leads them (separately) towards heterosexuality and reproduction.

Indeed, the last volume of *Margot & Oscar Pluche* (vol. I6) puts the sentimental couple to the test, since Margot falls in love with a boy of her age who gives the album its title: *Balthazar*. He lives clandestinely in a department store, fending for himself, since his mother abandoned him there. Margot cannot tolerate the dog's jealousy of the boy: "Balthazar has been on his own for six years. I know others who couldn't say the same! [...] Parasite!"; "And first of all, what can you possibly understand about all this? You're just a dog!" (vol. I6, pp. 21 and 28) However, the character of Balthazar disappears after this album, which allows for the restoration of the exclusive relationship between Margot and the dog, renamed Sac à Puces. Another album, *De l'orage dans l'air* (vol. II7), starts from an argument between the parents and develops into a quarrel between the couple of Margot

and Sac à Puces. When the father reproaches the mother for wanting to practise a sport in the evening, she answers "I remind you that you, you have your work at the nursery. I'm at home all day long. I need to go out, you know?" (vol. I6, p. 7) In a scene modelled on the previous one, the dog absurdly complains to Margot: "I remind you that YOU have your work at the school. MYSELF, I'm out on the street all day long. I need to go out, you know?" (vol. I6, p. 17) Their argument goes much further than that of the adults: Margot pushes the dog to the limit, he bites her, she breaks off their relationship and he takes revenge by vandalising her room, after drinking some beers. This time again, the couple of heroes reconciles. The last volume of the series, *Miss Wif Wif* (vol. II9), reverses the plot of *Balthazar* (vol. I6): this time, Sac à Puces falls in love with a bitch, and they start a family with their first litter of seven puppies. Contrary to Oscar's first reaction to Balthazar, Margot shows no jealousy towards Miss Wif Wif; Margot protects the bitch until the end of her gestation, saying "As for me, I'm not in love!" (vol. II9: 9) In the very last comics short story of the series, the girl proposes to the dogs and to her parents, the two couples being overwhelmed by their seven respective offspring, to babysit while they spend a romantic evening together (De Brab and Falzar 25–26).

Graphic Reproduction and Social Reproduction

To conclude, let us look at two scenes that summarise how the comics series combines graphic reproduction[15] with social reproduction. In the episode *La Gratouille du pedzouille* (vol. I5), the children of the Duchêne family take in abandoned dogs and hide them to prevent them from being thrown in the dog pound. At first jealous, Oscar Pluche is touched by a puppy that Margot puts in his arms (**fig. 5**). The elder sister, Sandra, then becomes the voice of practical reason, asking: "All that is well and good, but how are we going to feed

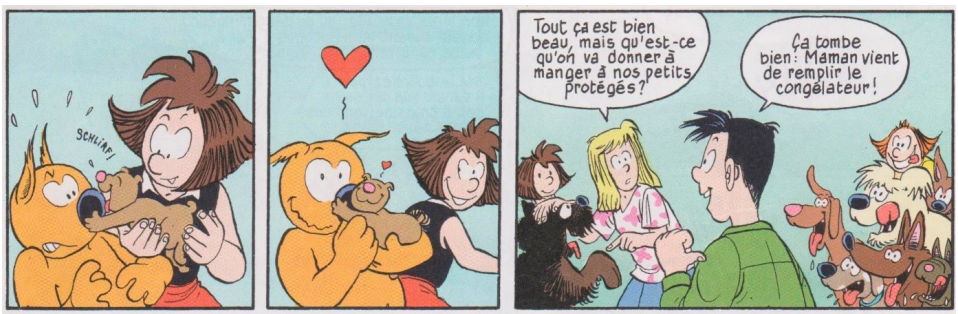

Figure 5 De Brab, Falzar, Zidrou and Veerle Swinnen. *La Gratouille du pedzouille: Margot et Oscar Pluche 5*. Casterman, 1996, p. 30, panels 3–5. *Sac à Puces* by De Brab, Zidrou and Falzar, reproduced with authors' permission.

our little protégés?", to which the elder brother, Julot, answers: "Great timing: Mom has just filled the freezer!" (vol. I5: 30) This scene synthesises the nurturing, not to say maternal, relationship that the female characters (Margot, Sandra, the mother) in this comics series play towards the male characters, including the dog Oscar Pluche / Sac à Puces. Even if Margot discovers the model of emancipation of her godmother, she knows above all the sentimental and parental model of her parents, an ordinary couple of the 1990s and early 2000s that does not completely break with the conventional roles of patriarch and housewife. In a way, she reproduces this in her relationship with Sac à Puces.

Throughout the series, the girl is constantly worried about her pet, waiting for his return, caring for and feeding him, while the dog remains carefree. In the 2004 children's novel, *Pique-nique panique*, the dog-narrator summarises his passive posture in relation to his mistress:

> Every night, she secretly hosts me in her bedroom and feeds me with bread and chocolate. [...] Margot wants me to live with her, to be together all the time. It would save me the trouble of slipping away every day at 7 a.m. before her parents wake up. (Falzar 6)

The album *Super maman* (vol. II1), relating a pregnancy of Margot's mother, goes even further in the symbolic assimilation of the relationship between the girl and her dog as a maternal one. The pregnant woman catches her children playing out a childbirth scene in the attic of the house: Sandra is the midwife, Margot is the mother, the dog is the newborn. The mother catches the unwanted pet and says, "Say goodbye to your baby" (vol. I1: 21), then she cuts with a pair of scissors the rope, acting as an umbilical cord, that the dog wears tied around his waist. Thanks to her privileged relationship with her dog, Margot is able to experience emotional life with a canine companion, and even motherhood, without breaking the social taboo of premature sexuality. The albums concluding the two parts of the series (vol. I6 and II9) ensure that the "properly gendered children achieve heterosexual adulthood", as girl-and-her-dog stories do (Tribunella 153). These types of stories logically end with the loss of the child-and-his/her-dog exclusive relationship, replaced by multiple human attachments.

Notes

1. All citations from French-language works included in the bibliography have been translated for the purposes of this chapter.
2. To temper this harsh judgement, I must point out that all of the series mentioned have been published in the mainstream weekly *Spirou*.
3. Casterman and Dupuis published albums in French and in Dutch, respectively under the series titles *Margot et Oscar Pluche / Margo en Oscar Pluis* and *Sac à Puces / Vlooienbaal*.
4. From now on, I will refer to the albums, listed in the bibliography at the end of the chapter, by the number of the corresponding series (in Roman numeral, I: *Margot & Oscar Pluche*, II: *Sac à Puces*), followed by the order of publication of the album (in Arabic numeral, thus from I1 to I6 and from II1 to II9).
5. In the last volume (vol. II9), she takes care of the bookkeeping of a butcher shop, without ceasing to ensure the daily management of the household. She does not manage to fulfil herself in both tasks. Her family life does not leave her enough time for a job that is anything but enviable (her boss harasses her even at her home).
6. These are volumes I1 and II5. At first glance, volume I2 also appears to be a collection of short stories, but it actually contains a single narrative divided into chapters.
7. For a study of a contemporary example of our corpus, see Eric Tribunella's analysis (162–163) of Kate DiCamillo's girl-and-her-dog novel *Because of Winn-Dixie* (2000).
8. Even if Carine De Brabanter had already had the experience of drawing a series in *Spirou* (1988–1989), after her artistic training at the Institut Saint-Luc in Brussels. The editorial board of the magazine *Jet*, published by Le Lombard, was composed of in-house editors and authors: Jean-Luc Vernal, André-Paul Duchâteau, Bob De Moor and Georges Pernin.
9. Although the word *pluche* also refers to a teddy bear in Dutch, the translation of the series published by Casterman was entitled *Margo en Oscar Pluis*, which emphasises the meaning of clingy pet. The Dutch *pluis*, like *peluche* in French, refers to a fluff that comes off a plush fabric and remains temporarily stuck to it.
10. Translation of **fig. 2**: Margot. Age 8 1/2. My best friend. Every evening, she shelters me in secret and feeds me with chocolate spread on bread.
    The competent authorities. They don't want me at home on the pretext that the family is already big enough and that I am full of fleas. Nonsense!
    Sandra. Age 12. Know-it-all. Very useful in case of conflict with the authorities.
    Julot. Age 13. Big fan of fries and mayo, as well as video games.
    Marine. The star of the family. She is 4 months old and has the pleasant odours of soap, milk and poo.
    Lucien. Age 6. Alias *Carbine Joe*, *Sitting Lucien*, *Barbarouf-the-Terrible-Pirate*, the list goes on and on!

Mérule. Lazy, sluggish and slacker parasite. A cat, you know!
Émile. Age 2 1/2. A stubborn child. He only loosen up to smile at his little sister.
Mischiefs, somersaults and blunders, beware of Josette (age 4)!
This is me, Sac à Puces. Margot's parents cannot stand the sight of me, let alone in a photo!

11. Of all the characters, the dog and the family members, including the newborn, are those who speak in the most incipits. Only a handful of secondary characters speak at the beginning of more than one album: one of Margot's classmates, Lorenzo (II2, II6), her friends Clara and Mousse (I1, I3) and especially Zoé (I1, I3, II6, also present, but without speaking, in the incipit of episode II2), her teacher Ms Nadine (II2, II6) and the newsagent in the Duchêne family's neighbourhood, Mr Bourru (I3, II6).
12. Except in the literary prose that has been derived from it. For instance, the novel *Pique-nique panique* (2004), mentioned above, uses the plot and title of a literary short story that appeared ten years earlier in *Dauphin*. Both versions, told in the first person – the short story, by Margot, and the novel, by her dog – adopt fixed internal focalisations. By contrast, the overwhelming majority of the comics' panels are presented in external focalisation.
13. The initial scene is replayed by the parents, with similar dialogue, when they organise a family table-football match, pitting the girls against the boys (vol. II3, p. 9).
14. The godmother develops another motherhood, in the context of her work, which recalls the relationship between Margot and her street dog. As the director of a revalidation centre for marine animals, she has to take in and care for wild animals, in a sense mothering them, assisted in this task by the employee with whom she is in love.
15. Jenell Johnson (4) coined the concept of "graphic reproduction" to gather comics that address human reproduction.

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