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Marriage and Relationships in Art Spiegelman's Maus: The Erasure of the Female Experience

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The Erasure of the Female Perspective

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In his graphic novel, *Maus*, Art Spiegelman does not shy away from honestly portraying real life relationships that have been impacted by the Holocaust. While there has been considerable literary criticism about Vladek's relationship with his son, there is very little literary criticism focused on Vladek's romantic relationships with Lucia, Anja, and Mala. Focusing on these three women brings their often-forgotten stories to center stage.

The erasure of women's perspectives on the Holocaust is not a new phenomenon. For decades, "the memory of the Holocaust" was "confined largely to experiences, perceptions, and theoretical frameworks of men" (Mushaben 149). *Maus* is no exception to this trend. Everything is told through either Vladek's or Art's eyes; the reader never sees through a female perspective. In fact, of these three women, Mala is the only one whose voice we hear directly. For Lucia and Anja, we only hear their stories through Vladek's voice, so we rely almost entirely on his perspective to understand their characteristics and their relationships with Vladek.

In spite of its male-centered perspective, *Maus* "self-consciously . . . critique[s] the absence of female voices" from Holocaust stories (Duffy 140). While *Maus* only gives a male perspective on the Holocaust, it engages with the absence of Anja's story in a way that is very self-aware. In *MetaMaus,* Spiegelman says that Anja's story is "possibly, arguably the one [he] would have told if all else were equal in an alternate universe" (20). In *Maus* itself, the character Art laments the loss of his mother's story that could have given "the book some balance" because she "was more sensitive" than Vladek (134). Spiegelman recognizes that, without a female perspective, his story is naturally unbalanced. However, since Anja's story is lost forever and only fragments remain, we can only see her—and the other two women—through Vladek's often biased eyes.

Vladek is the character the reader gets to know the most throughout the novel. At times he is noble, brave, and protective, and at other times he is domineering, controlling, and demanding. He both "elicits and denies sympathy" from the reader (Smith 206) and complicates the idea of "the perfect [Holocaust] victim" who is "one-dimensional, innocent, heroic, and morally pure" (197). Spiegelman shows Vladek's heroic moments as well as his shortcomings, and he consciously avoids idealizing his father, even when he worries that he is playing into anti-Semitic stereotypes by portraying his father as a "miserly old Jew" (*Maus* 133). Vladek's motivations are sometimes pure, sometimes selfish. I will analyze how three of Vladek's character traits—his focus on money, his desire to control and protect, and his love of independence—create an imbalance of power in his relationships. Both when he is in relationships with all three women, and when he tells their stories, Vladek ignores their perspectives, making them one-dimensional.

To begin, I will examine how Vladek's focus on money impacts his relationships. When we examine Vladek's relationships with Lucia and Anja, we see how money influences his choice of wife. While dating Lucia, Vladek is not very invested in their relationship and he makes it clear that he has no plans to marry her. Lucia comes from a "nice" family, but they have "no money, not even for a dowry" (17). Although Lucia is a beautiful woman from a good family, she does not have the money or social standing to make it worthwhile for Vladek to marry her. At this point, Lucia and Vladek's relationship is already doomed to failure: while Vladek is content to mess around with Lucia, he does not see a future with her. Vladek defines Lucia's worth purely based on her monetary value. From the beginning, this relationship is imbalanced: Vladek, who knows that Lucia's family is too poor to provide a dowry, mostly dates Lucia out of convenience. As soon as he meets Anja, someone he likes better who comes from a wealthy and respectable family, he is no longer interested in his relationship with Lucia.

In contrast, Vladek is a lot more invested in his relationship with Anja for reasons that have nothing to do with money—or so he says. When Vladek talks about Anja, he focuses on her intelligence and sensitivity (*Maus* 20). Although he acknowledges her family's wealth, he does not cite this as the reason he leaves Lucia for Anja. When Lucia sends an anonymous letter to Anja claiming that Vladek is just marrying her for money, Vladek vehemently denies Lucia's accusations (24). In Vladek's mind, Lucia is just the jealous ex-girlfriend who is trying to ruin his new relationship by spreading lies. However, it would be unwise for us to dismiss Lucia's perspective like Vladek does. We are left to question Vladek's motivations for marrying Anja. Is he really marrying her for her sensitivity and intelligence? Or is he just in love with her money? Throughout *Maus*, Vladek shows himself to be very careful with his money, always scrimping and saving, so it would be foolish to think that he is not well aware of the monetary benefits that would come from marrying Anja. In Emily Budick's "Forced Confessions," she argues that Vladek is portrayed as "opportunistic and exploitative" and his "choice to marry Anja . . . is to some significant degree motivated by her father's money" (382). Clearly, no matter what Vladek claims, Anja's money is a strong motivation for him to continue the relationship.

While Vladek's focus on money in his relationships may seem mercenary, it reflects common perspectives on marriage from his culture and time period. In Sarah Wobick-Segev's essay on Jewish marriage advertisements, she examines what qualities Jewish men and women looked for in potential spouses both before and after the Holocaust. Before the Holocaust, "women [were to be] beautiful, (often) thin, and from good families" (45); however, "the central determining factor for arranging matches" was "social class" and "the bride's dowry" (40). Instead of being greedy, Vladek may just be acting pragmatically when he chooses to marry Anja. He knows that her family will continue to support them after their marriage, so he and Anja will not have to worry about money. In contrast to a marriage with Lucia, where they would receive no financial support, marriage to Anja guarantees (so Vladek thinks) his family's safety and security for years to come. In addition, Anja checks all of the other boxes for the perfect Jewish wife: aside from her valuable personal virtues—"education, intelligence, and practical skills (including languages)"—marriage to her comes with many "potential business opportunities" (45). Anja has all of the qualities that Lucia does not: wealth, social class, and education, which makes it clear why Vladek chooses Anja over Lucia.

Unlike with Anja and Lucia, we do not know much about Mala's wealth or social class, and it seems unlikely that Vladek married her for any direct monetary benefit. However, money is a frequent source of arguments and tension in their contentious relationship. Vladek believes that Mala "only . . . talks about money" and his "will" and that she is always trying to take his money (*Maus* 69). Vladek limits Mala's personality by saying that money is the only thing she cares about. In contrast, Mala feels that Vladek is cheap and miserly, even saying that "it causes [Vladek] physical pain to part with even a nickel" (133). Vladek brushes aside Mala's concerns about money and refuses to acknowledge her perspective. He believes he is being thrifty whereas Mala thinks he is being miserly.

In Vladek's relationships with Anja and Mala, he uses money as a form of control. Vladek severely limits Mala's spending by only giving her $50 a month. If Mala wants to buy something for herself, she has to use her own savings (132). He uses money to control Mala's actions and to keep her financially dependent on him. Because Vladek controls the money, he holds the power, which makes their relationship imbalanced. Vladek just wants to protect his own monetary interests, and to do so he silences Mala's opinions.

Vladek uses money to control Anja in a similar way. In *Maus*, Vladek does not mention whether he controls Anja's spending like he controls Mala's, but in *MetaMaus*, interviews with Anja's friends suggest that Vladek does control Anja's spending (at least to some extent). For example, when Anja goes on vacation without Vladek, Vladek gives Anja's money for the trip to someone else to manage, and he has all the money Anja should spend "figured out to the penny" (*MetaMaus* 288). Vladek does not allow Anja to manage her own money, either because he thinks she is incapable or because he does not trust her. We do not know whether this control leads to tension between Vladek and Anja like it does with Vladek and Mala, but it does show how Vladek limits Anja's autonomy over her own spending.

In addition to using money as a form of control, Vladek controls Mala and Anja in other ways that marginalize their perspectives and give power to Vladek. (There is not enough information about his relationship with Lucia to speculate whether or not Vladek is controlling.) We first see evidence of Vladek's controlling nature in his relationship with Anja. For example, when he visits Anja's house, he goes through her closet "to see what a housekeeper [Anja is]," (*Maus* 21). Vladek wants to ensure that Anja organizes her personal items in a way that Vladek likes. A "woman's ability to run a household" was also a very desirable trait for a future Jewish wife (Wobick-Segev 41), so maybe it is natural for Vladek to ensure that his future wife will be able to keep a good house. However, it also shows Vladek's tendency to be controlling and demanding—he has a particular way he likes things arranged and can be unwilling to compromise. Vladek expects his wife to clean and organize things exactly the way he likes.

Vladek's controlling behavior also raises questions about his motivations for dating Anja. When he goes through Anja's closet, he finds bottles of pills. He writes down the names of the medicines because "if she was sick, then what did [Vladek] need [Anja] for?" (*Maus* 21). Here, the reader has to wonder: Is Vladek really dating Anja because he loves her, or would he leave her if he finds out she's sick? Is he just waiting to move on to the next best thing like he did with Lucia? Similar to his relationship with Lucia, Vladek continually weighs the positives and negatives of his relationship with Anja, causing him to hesitate when he learns she takes medicine. When Vladek asks his pharmacist friend about the pills, his friend says the pills are just because Anja is so "skinny and nervous" (*Maus* 21). This illustrates how Vladek casually ignores Anja's perspective. Instead of talking about his concerns with Anja directly, Vladek goes to an outside source to learn about Anja's experiences.

Another example of Vladek's controlling nature occurs when Vladek discovers that Anja has been secretly translating communist documents into German. After he realizes Anja has been hiding things from him, he is "ready to break off the marriage" and tells Anja that "if [she] wants [him] [she] has to go [his] way" (31). Vladek has a way that he wants things done, and if anything goes against his system, he doesn't like it. He is unwilling to consider Anja's perspective and automatically assumes that he knows better. Vladek likes being in control: ultimately, he holds the power in his relationships, and he has the final word.

When Art comes to visit his father for the first time in several years, Vladek gets upset with Mala for giving Art a wire hanger instead of a wooden hanger for his coat (13). Nothing Mala does is good enough for Vladek; he always finds some problem to nitpick and complain about, which creates an unhealthy imbalance in their marriage and makes their relationship more like employer and employee instead of husband and wife. At one point, Mala complains to Art that Vladek treats her like his "maid" but "worse" because Vladek does not pay her or give her days off (282). She feels like she is at Vladek's "constant beck and call" (126). Vladek expects Mala to do everything exactly the way he wants, and he gets upset if things aren't done his way. He never considers his actions or words from Mala's perspective, so he never understands why what he does is hurtful. Vladek holds all the power in this relationship, and he uses money and his constant demands to keep Mala dependent on him.

Another way Vladek controls Mala is by comparing her to his perfect image of Anja. Vladek constantly talks about Anja, wishing she were still alive and "thinking always about her" (106). Vladek's focus on his deceased wife upsets Mala, who always feels like she is in second place. Mala says that Vladek "keep[s] photos of [Anja] all around [his] desk . . . like a shrine" while he has only one photo of Mala (106). In Vladek's mind, his marriage to Anja was perfect, and nothing else will ever be able to compare to it although, in reality, their marriage was not free from disagreements or difficulties. The ideal Anja that Vladek imagines is not the real Anja. According to Hamida Bosmajian, "Vladek denies Anja self-definition, except as he shapes his memory of her" (8). Because Anja is dead, Vladek has the power to reshape her memory and personality however he chooses. This inaccurate idolization of Anja hurts Mala because there is now a perfect example that Vladek can compare everything she does wrong to. No matter how hard Mala tries, she can never live up to Vladek's memories of Anja. This harmful comparison creates another imbalance of power in their relationship and erases Mala's true personality.

Although Vladek's controlling personality causes an imbalance of power in his relationships with both Anja and Mala, it does seem like he genuinely cares about Anja and values her happiness. His relationship with Anja is the only place where we see Vladek's protective side. Budick argues that, despite Vladek's controlling and self-protective tendencies, we have to credit Vladek "with a certain sense of decorum and protectiveness concerning his wife" (384). For example, when Anja experiences severe postpartum depression following the birth of their son, Vladek willingly accompanies her to the sanatorium, even leaving his new factory behind to help her (*Maus* 33).

Vladek's willingness to leave his new factory to be with Anja shows that he values Anja over his mercenary interests; while money is important to Vladek, his love for Anja is even more important.

Vladek also demonstrates his genuine love for Anja by comforting and emotionally supporting her. At the sanatorium, Vladek says that he would "always [help] calm her down" and when he would tell stories, she would be "laughing and so happy" and kiss him (36–37). Vladek's love and support is essential for Anja's recovery. Dr. Amy Wenzel, an expert in postpartum depression, says that "a positive social support system is crucial for a woman who is recovering from any form of perinatal [before and after birth] distress" (Starr 92). This "emotional support" comes in the form of "a person . . . who [is] truly there for her, providing her with warmth, care, and validation" (92). Clearly, Vladek provides the emotional support that Anja desperately needs following the birth of their first child, allowing her to make a full recovery. While Vladek is a miserly and controlling man, he is also a doting and attentive husband.

Later, when Anja and Vladek have to hide or risk being captured, Vladek shows his care as he continues to venture outside and find food and shelter for Anja and himself. For example, one time when they are hiding in a cellar and feel rodents running over their feet, Vladek tells Anja they are mice instead of rats because he "wanted Anja to feel more easy" (*Maus* 149). Vladek does everything he can for Anja's comfort and security. Renya Ostry, a woman who was with Anja in the camps, says that Vladek "fathered Anja" and "always protected her" by bringing her food (*MetaMaus* 279). She is no longer the wealthy heiress she once was, but Vladek still loves, values, and helps her. Vladek is with Anja for more than just the money; he is with her because he loves her. Perhaps Vladek's perspective is different now that Anja is dead, but based on his stories and the way he talks about Anja, he truly loves and cares for her. Although Vladek's controlling nature and Anja's dependence on him does create an imbalance in their relationship, his protectiveness towards Anja decreases this imbalance.

Vladek's desire to protect is closely linked to his need to be independent. Vladek is accustomed to having women depend on him while he remains independent. When he describes Lucia's personality, he characterizes her primarily by her dependence and her desire to be with him, ignoring her other traits. When Vladek dates Lucia, she continually follows him around wherever he goes (*Maus* 16). Lucia keeps "insisting" that Vladek "show her [his apartment]" and eventually they have a sexual relationship that lasts several years (16). Although Lucia pressures Vladek, she is not the one in control of the relationship. By remaining indifferent and independent, Vladek is the real person calling the shots. When Vladek tells Lucia that he is seeing someone else, Lucia "[falls] on the floor and [holds] strong" to Vladek's leg, trying to get him to stay with her (22). However, Vladek turns away from Lucia and has no regrets about leaving her. From the beginning, Lucia is obsessed with holding onto Vladek and cannot imagine him being with someone else. The more indifferent Vladek acts, the more involved and invested in the relationship Lucia becomes.

However, considering Lucia's motivations and aspirations allows us to speculate about why she so desperately pursues Vladek. Perhaps, Lucia sees in Vladek an opportunity for her to escape from her poorer upbringing by making a favorable match. After all, "the ideal husband's worth was based on his socioeconomic potential" (Wobick-Segev 41), and Vladek is a savvy businessman. Instead of viewing Lucia as clingy, we can view her desire to marry Vladek in the same way that we view Vladek's choice to marry Anja: motivated by a pragmatic concern to have a financially secure marriage. Unfortunately, we can only guess at Lucia's true motivations for pursuing Vladek. Vladek's story limits her role to the jealous and clingy ex-girlfriend, and her true thoughts are hidden forever. In this relationship, all we know for sure is that Lucia cares too much, and Vladek cares too little. Vladek has no patience with Lucia's dependence.

Vladek portrays Anja as being similarly dependent, although not to the same extent as Lucia.. His perspective of a dependent Anja is partly supported by their different experiences in the camps. While Vladek remains "self-sufficient," Anja "creat[es] a fabric of interdependent people who [help] each other" (*MetaMaus* 21). For instance, when Vladek gives Anja bread, she "shares it with her friends as if she isn't hungry" which makes her friends "protective of her" (21). Anja sharing her food with her friends reflects the experience of many women during the Holocaust. Outside the camps, women were "more likely to share their rations with children," and inside the camps, "their ability to sustain themselves with less often led more to outlive men" (Mushaben 156). Although Anja is never completely independent in the way that Vladek is, her survival strategy is no less viable than Vladek's. Relying on others to survive in no way makes her weaker than Vladek.

Despite this, Vladek takes Anja's tendency to work with others and sees it as a crippling dependence that means she needs Vladek to survive. From the beginning of his story, Vladek presents Anja as "far more intellectual, impressionable, and neurotic than the down-to-earth Vladek" (Gonshak 4). While Vladek admires Anja's intellect, it's clear he thinks she is fragile and dependent on him. Vladek views himself as Anja's knight in shining armor, her savior and rescuer, and Anja has no other role in Vladek's stories. He portrays Anja as "his charge, vaguely helpless, dangerously weak, and in constant need of his care and protection" (Elmwood 709). Vladek refuses to give us a different perspective of Anja. We can only see Anja through Vladek's eyes, and in his memory, she is completely dependent on Vladek.

However, it is hard to reconcile the woman who secretly translated communist documents and survived Auschwitz with the helpless damsel-in-distress that Vladek lovingly describes. From Vladek, "we hear no examples of [Anja's] capacity for survival or psychological endurance," and, because Vladek burned her diaries, we do not even have "a first-person account of her own frailty" (Elmwood 709). Vladek can create in his mind a "perfect" Anja who always needs him and is always dependent on his support. From Vladek's depiction of Anja, we learn "more about Vladek as a person" than "about Anja's consciousness and perspective" (712). We learn about Vladek's proud independence and his ingenuity, but Anja's character begins and ends with her dependence on Vladek. We have only Vladek's memory to paint a picture of her character and their relationship, and this makes it impossible to know to what extent Anja is truly dependent on Vladek.

Unlike Vladek's memories of Lucia and Anja, Mala stubbornly refuses to be needy and dependent on Vladek. Perhaps one reason that Mala and Vladek's relationship is doomed to contention and rancor is that Mala refuses to become the weak and frail wife that Vladek holds in his memory. In fact, it is *Vladek* who becomes the dependent one in his relationship. Unlike Lucia, who begs Vladek to stay with her, and Anja, who depends on Vladek for support, Mala proves that she can live without Vladek. Sick of Vladek's constant demands, Mala leaves Vladek, and Vladek is left "alone" as a "sick man" (*Maus* 177). While Vladek's stories of Lucia and Anja show his independence and their dependence, Mala's leaving shows her independence and Vladek's dependence. After Mala breaks away from Vladek's control, he has no more power over her.

When Vladek has a heart attack, he realizes he can no longer be entirely independent. He needs Mala to help him, but dependence does not suit Vladek. He is accustomed to being the caregiver in the relationship, but now he needs to be taken care of. Even though Vladek has "saved . . . for [his] old age" he is "so weak with [his] heart and [his] diabetes" that he "can't live anymore alone" (262). For so long, Vladek has saved every penny so he could remain independent, but ultimately he realizes that he still needs someone else. Instead of being his wife's protective hero, he needs the wife he hates to take care of *him* and nurture *him*. Much to Vladek's chagrin, Mala demands a large sum of money before she will return, effectively loosening Vladek's financial hold over her (262). However, instead of giving Mala more power in the relationship, Mala's new status as full-time caregiver makes Mala feel more "trapped" because Vladek is "confused and dependent" but "just as difficult as ever" (282). Although she is financially independent, Mala is still stuck taking care of an ungrateful husband who ignores her feelings and perspective.

Maus does an exceptional job of portraying real life and real relationships with all of their intricacies and complexities. All three of Vladek's romantic relationships reveal his controlling personality and his desire to be independent, but only his relationship with Anja shows his desire to protect and rescue. However, our interpretation of these relationships is heavily skewed by the male perspective. Even Mala, the only woman who exists outside of Vladek's memories, has to tell her story through Art. Similar to the way the male perspective erased women's stories and experiences of the Holocaust, Vladek's perspective erases the true personalities and motivations of Lucia, Anja, and Mala. Even when this erasure is done lovingly (for example, to preserve a perfect image of Anja forever), it harms the women by denying them the power to tell their own stories. Addressing the missing female perspective in *Maus* helps us recognize the gaps in Vladek's story as well as the gaps in the female experience of the Holocaust. The current lack of literary criticism about the women in *Maus* shows how we continue to ignore and set aside women's experiences. However, these women's stories provide a window into different perspectives and experiences. Examining the erased or ignored female experience brings a new perspective to Holocaust literature. Without these perspectives, our version of history will always be lopsided.

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