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Graphic Medicine: Navigating Cancer Narratives Through Comics and Visual Storytelling

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Abstract

Graphic illness memoirs, as a unique form of storytelling, utilize visual art alongside textual narrative to convey the complexities of living with chronic illness and disability. It explores the relationship between body and identity, illustrating how these narratives not only depict personal struggles but also enhance collective understanding of the human experience. Focusing on Miriam Engelberg's *Cancer Made Me a Shallower Person: A Memoir in Comics* and Marisa Acocella Marchetto's *Cancer Vixen: A True Story*, the study argues that comics offer a unique medium for articulating the intricacies of breast cancer experiences, using visual representation to depict bodily transformations. The paper argues that these graphic cancer narratives function as both aesthetic and sociopolitical instruments, challenging conventional cancer representations often dominated by biomedical perspectives. Engelberg's work employs humour and a cartoonish aesthetic to reframe her cancer journey, allowing for an exploration of absurdity and shallowness that enriches the reader's understanding of her experiences. By analysing key aspects of graphic cancer narratives—such as their minimalist styles, dynamic self-representation, and the integration of visual and verbal elements—the paper underscores their capacity to shift cultural perceptions of cancer and engage with broader issues of identity and resilience. Ultimately, this analysis of Engelberg's philosophy of shallowness as a coping mechanism demonstrates how graphic cancer narratives can reshape societal views on illness while embodying themes of resilience and agency.

Keywords: Graphic Medicine, Cancer Narratives, Visual Storytelling, Identity and Illness and Resilience.

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Graphic Medicine: Navigating Cancer Narratives Through Comics and Visual Storytelling

Introduction

The intersection of humour, visual storytelling, and illness has given rise to a distinctive subgenre within graphic narrative: the graphic pathography—memoirs that convey personal experiences of illness through comics. This paper explores how two seminal works in this genre—Miriam Engelberg's *Cancer Made Me a Shallower Person* and Marisa Acocella Marchetto's *Cancer Vixen*—subvert conventional illness narratives by weaving humour into the portrayal of breast cancer. These texts challenge dominant narrative tropes—such as sentimentality, melodrama, and heroic triumph—offering instead more complex emotional, cultural, and political engagements with illness.

By employing the comics medium, traditionally associated with humour or youth culture, these graphic memoirs disrupt expectations surrounding the representation of chronic disease. They use the interplay of image and text to render the emotional complexities of illness more accessible and resonant—not only for patients but also for caregivers and healthcare professionals. Engelberg's stark, minimalist illustrations underscore the absurdities of treatment and institutional care, using dark humour to resist the objectifying tendencies of biomedical discourse. In contrast, Marchetto's bold, fashion-inspired aesthetic transforms her cancer journey into one of self-reinvention, emphasizing the role of personal identity and empowerment.

Framed within the broader contexts of narrative medicine, graphic medicine, and feminist theory, this study investigates how these memoirs articulate resilience and selfhood in the face of bodily vulnerability. Graphic medicine—comics that depict illness, care, and healing—has emerged at the intersection of the humanities and medical sciences, promoting more empathetic and human-centered approaches to clinical practice. Unlike traditional medical literature, these narratives often bypass technical jargon in favour of accessible visuals and language that communicate nuanced emotional and experiential truths. The visual-verbal form of comics allows for layered storytelling, capable of expressing what language alone may not—engaging diverse audiences through narratives that are humorous, painful, intimate, and culturally textured.

Through close analysis of visual aesthetics, narrative form, and thematic content, this paper considers how humour and personal storytelling in *Cancer Made Me a Shallower Person* and *Cancer Vixen* enrich our understanding of illness—not as a singular biomedical event, but as a deeply human experience shaped by identity, culture, and the act of narration itself.

Objectives

This study aims to explore how graphic memoirs—specifically *Cancer Made Me a Shallower Person* by Miriam Engelberg and *Cancer Vixen* by Marisa Acocella Marchetto—use comics as a narrative form to represent the complexities of living with breast cancer. The research seeks to:

1. Analyse how visual storytelling in graphic cancer narratives subverts traditional illness narratives often characterized by sentimentality, tragedy, or heroic survival.
2. Examine the role of humour as a subversive tool in challenging cultural taboos, gender expectations, and institutional narratives surrounding illness.
3. Investigate the multimodal nature of comics as a medium that enables layered expressions of identity, embodiment, and emotional experience.
4. Understand the feminist and socio-political dimensions of these memoirs in critiquing the gendered and commercialized landscape of cancer discourse.
5. Assess the therapeutic and educational value of graphic medicine in reshaping medical humanities and fostering empathy in healthcare contexts.

Methodology

This study uses a qualitative, interdisciplinary approach combining literary analysis, visual semiotics, and medical humanities. It conducts close visual-textual readings of *Cancer Made Me a Shallower Person* and *Cancer Vixen*, comparing narrative styles and aesthetics. The analysis draws on feminist theory, narrative medicine, and graphic medicine frameworks. It also considers the pedagogical value of these texts in challenging cultural norms and fostering empathy in healthcare education.

Genre Disruption and the Tyranny of Narrative Expectations

Cancer narratives have long conformed to melodramatic or triumphalist arcs, often centered on the trope of the "heroic survivor." As Thomas Couser observes, "cancer narratives have happy endings—if only because the narrator lives to tell her story," revealing a cultural preference for stories of triumph over adversity. However, graphic memoirs such as *Cancer Made Me a Shallower Person* by Miriam Engelberg disrupt this convention by refusing tidy resolutions. Engelberg's collection of satirical gag strips defies the expected narrative of redemption or personal growth, replacing it with sardonic humour and self-aware irony. Her open mockery of genre norms—most notably in her declaration "Fuck Kübler-Ross!"—challenges the pressure to process illness through a prescriptive emotional sequence. Rather than elevate the illness experience into a cohesive, uplifting tale, Engelberg fragments it, drawing attention to its absurdities, contradictions, and existential dissonance.

The comics medium itself plays a crucial role in unsettling traditional narrative structures. Illness narratives rendered in sequential art reject the linearity and gravitas typically associated with prose memoirs, creating space for tonal variation, visual metaphor, and layered storytelling. This formal innovation is not just aesthetic—it is socially and politically charged. By defying the expected genre frameworks, particularly those that frame illness as passive suffering or moral transcendence, graphic memoirs assert narrative agency and challenge dominant cultural scripts. The inclusion of humour—a mode rarely aligned with serious illness—intensifies this disruption. It exposes the absurdity of imposed meaning-making and resists the sentimentalism that often flattens the lived experience of disease.

Nonetheless, comics' popular association with humour and juvenility can provoke discomfort when used to depict something as serious as cancer. This unease often stems from a misconception that humour trivializes suffering. Yet, comics like Engelberg's and Marisa Marchetto's *Cancer Vixen* demonstrate that humour can be deeply empathetic, subversive, and emotionally nuanced. Engelberg's blunt, dark humour addresses the awkwardness, fear, and social disconnection of living with metastatic breast cancer. In doing so, she undermines the "tyranny of genre" that demands coherence, growth, or catharsis from illness narratives. Instead, she embraces messiness and ambiguity, offering a more authentic representation of living with chronic illness.

Marchetto's *Cancer Vixen*, by contrast, adopts a visually vibrant, fashion-magazine aesthetic and a breezy, accessible tone. Though seemingly lighter in approach, it too subverts traditional expectations by situating cancer within a world of glamour, romance, and career ambition. Marchetto's protagonist is not reduced by illness but remains dynamic and stylish, asserting her identity through humour and visual flair. While the narrative loosely follows a survivorship arc, it simultaneously critiques genre conventions and challenges the notion that cancer exclusively affects the marginalized or elderly. By targeting a younger, fashion-conscious audience, *Cancer Vixen* broadens the imaginative and demographic scope of illness narratives.

Though differing in tone and strategy, both works confront the limitations imposed by conventional storytelling. Engelberg resists sentimentality and therapeutic closure through satire and fragmentation, while Marchetto makes illness narratives palatable and relatable without surrendering complexity. Together, they push back against the expectation that stories

of illness must be redemptive or linear, introducing irony, tonal dissonance, and formal experimentation as tools of resistance.

The emergence of graphic pathographies—autobiographical illness narratives in comic form—signals a broader cultural shift in how disease is represented and understood. These works move beyond therapy or education to engage critically with genre, representation, and power. Through the interplay of image, text, and visual metaphor, they convey the disjointed, surreal, and often contradictory experiences of illness with a depth and immediacy that prose alone can struggle to achieve.

As these texts gain recognition within the medical humanities, their relevance to healthcare extends beyond literary analysis. For clinicians and caregivers, graphic memoirs offer intimate insights into patient perspectives—illuminating emotional labour, stigma, and institutional barriers that often remain invisible in clinical encounters. Despite their marginalization in mainstream discourse, these narratives provide an invaluable lens into the socio-emotional landscape of illness.

In challenging dominant narrative expectations, graphic illness memoirs disrupt not only form but also the cultural assumptions underpinning health, suffering, and identity. They compel us to reconsider who gets to tell their story, how it is told, and what we demand from narratives of adversity. Through genre disruption and the embrace of ambiguity, irony, and humour, these works open new possibilities for representing illness in all its complexity.

Humour as Subversive Tool

In *Cancer Made Me a Shallower Person* and *Cancer Vixen*, humour functions as more than just a coping mechanism—it serves as a sharp, subversive strategy that actively challenges dominant narratives about illness. Engelberg and Marchetto use comedy not to soothe or distract, but to confront and critique the sanitized, pathologized portrayals of breast cancer perpetuated by biomedical discourse and mainstream media. Their comics disrupt expectations by resisting the cultural scripts that demand female cancer patients embody relentless optimism and strength. Engelberg's irreverent voice and deliberately childlike, minimalist drawings highlight the grotesque absurdity of illness, pushing back against sentimental tropes. Marchetto's glamorous, fashion-forward style contrasts strikingly with the rawness of vulnerability, satirizing the commercialization of survivorship and the pressure on women to maintain aesthetic ideals even while ill. Through this calculated use of humour, both artists dismantle ingrained assumptions, spotlight systemic failures, and reclaim narrative control. Their work transforms laughter into a political gesture—asserting agency, challenging stigma, and reshaping how illness can be represented.

Comics as Multimodal Narrative: Juxtaposition and Metaphor

The comics medium, with its intrinsic multimodality, provides a dynamic and layered narrative form through which illness experiences can be conveyed with immediacy, nuance, and metaphorical resonance. Through the interplay of image and text, sequential structure, and spatial arrangement, comics articulate emotional and psychological dimensions that often elude traditional prose. In *Cancer Vixen*, Marisa Marchetto utilizes consumerist imagery—such as stilettos, lipstick, and designer handbags—not merely as decorative elements but as potent visual metaphors for autonomy, resistance, and self-assertion. These symbols of femininity become charged with meaning, asserting bodily agency in the face of medical objectification and the depersonalizing effects of treatment. By placing glamorous, fashion-centric visuals alongside depictions of physical decline, Marchetto destabilizes binaries of illness and beauty, fragility and empowerment. In a contrasting yet complementary approach, Miriam Engelberg's rough, minimalist drawings and jarring visual transitions embody the unpredictability and surreal nature of life with cancer. Her use of visual metaphor communicates the existential dislocation inherent in the illness experience. The comics form's ability to layer temporalities,

tones, and meanings within a single page makes it a uniquely effective medium for capturing the fragmented, paradoxical realities of living with illness.

Comics Language and Bodily Representation

Graphic illness memoirs use the unique visual language of comics to transform the body from a purely biological entity into a powerful symbol of identity, meaning, and resistance. Through stylistic techniques like distortion, fragmentation, and visual exaggeration, artists such as Engelberg and Marchetto give form to invisible internal states—pain, fear, alienation—in ways that challenge the limits of clinical language. Engelberg, for instance, portrays her radiologist as a puppeteer controlling her with strings, a darkly humorous image that captures both the dehumanizing aspects of institutional medicine and a sharp critique of power dynamics. Marchetto's grotesque, screaming depiction of Death functions as a visual metaphor that transcends words, encapsulating terror, anger, and defiance in a single frame. These visual strategies are immediately accessible, yet semantically rich, offering multiple layers of interpretation. By rendering the ill body as porous, unstable, and symbolically charged, graphic narratives invite readers—especially those outside medical or academic contexts—to engage with illness on emotional and imaginative terms. In this way, comics articulate what might otherwise remain unspoken, fostering a deeper, more embodied empathy for the lived experience of disease.

Feminist and Socio-Political Dimensions of Cancer Comics

Graphic cancer memoirs such as *Miriam Engelberg's Cancer Made Me a Shallower Person* and *Marisa Acocella Marchetto's Cancer Vixen* move beyond personal testimony to engage with broader feminist and socio-political critiques of illness, care, and representation. Centering on breast cancer—a disease deeply entangled with gendered expectations and the commodified symbolism of “pink ribbon” culture—both texts challenge dominant narratives that sentimentalize and commercialize women's experiences with illness. Through the distinct affordances of the comics medium, these authors interrogate how gender, class, and cultural capital shape the lived reality of disease.

Engelberg's stark, minimalist artwork paired with dry, deadpan humour represents a deliberate departure from the polished, inspirational tone often associated with cancer narratives. By rejecting conventional survivor tropes and aesthetic refinement, Engelberg enacts a feminist refusal of the emotional labour frequently expected of ill women. Her self-proclaimed “shallowness” becomes both a coping mechanism and a subversive stance—exposing and resisting the cultural script that demands gratitude, courage, and emotional generosity from female patients.

In contrast, Marchetto embraces a glossy, fashion-infused visual style that does not reject femininity but reclaims and reconfigures it. Her bold, designer-laden illustrations serve a dual purpose: they both camouflage and reveal the classed and gendered contours of healthcare access. As Judy Z. Segal notes, *Cancer Vixen* is undeniably shaped by socioeconomic privilege, yet it also expands the reach of cancer narratives to include younger, style-conscious audiences. The glamour at the heart of Marchetto's work is ambivalent—it risks aestheticizing or trivializing illness, but it also offers empowerment through self-advocacy, emphasizing early detection and survivorship as forms of agency.

Together, Engelberg and Marchetto highlight how gendered bodies navigate the institutional and cultural landscapes of illness. Their divergent visual strategies—subversive minimalism versus stylized glamour—demonstrate the versatility of comics as a medium for feminist expression and critique. Ultimately, these graphic narratives function as socio-political interventions, revealing how identity, privilege, and systemic structures shape not only the experience of illness, but also the way it is represented, interpreted, and understood in contemporary culture.

Therapeutic and Educational Value: Graphic Medicine

Graphic illness memoirs such as *Cancer Vixen* and *Cancer Made Me a Shallower Person* serve not only as deeply personal narratives but also as powerful pedagogical tools within the expanding field of graphic medicine. By blending visual storytelling with autobiographical accounts of illness, these works convey what scholars like Maria Vaccarella term "non-propositional knowledge"—an embodied, experiential understanding that often eludes conventional clinical language. The unique multimodal composition of comics—including handwritten text, fragmented panel structures, and emotionally charged illustrations—effectively mirrors the disorientation, vulnerability, and fractured sense of self that often accompany serious illness.

These graphic pathographies resist the simplified arc of diagnosis, treatment, and recovery, instead portraying illness as a complex, ongoing process of negotiating identity, agency, and care. In medical education, such narratives perform a dual role: they humanize the clinical encounter by centering the patient's voice and simultaneously highlight systemic shortcomings within healthcare structures. By immersing readers in the lived experiences of illness, comics foster empathy in future healthcare professionals and prompt critical reflection on dominant assumptions about care. The visual and emotional immediacy of the medium invites a more nuanced, compassionate engagement with suffering—one that prioritizes the messy realities of human health over reductive clinical categories.

Patient Voice and Medical Authority

Both Engelberg's and Marchetto's graphic memoirs illustrate the power of comics to reframe the patient's voice in direct opposition to institutional medical authority. Their portrayals of healthcare professionals—often overly cheerful, emotionally distant, or comically indifferent—underscore the disconnection that can exist between caregivers and patients. Engelberg accentuates the absurdity of medical interactions through her intentionally crude illustrations and sardonic narrative tone, challenging the presumed objectivity and infallibility of the medical establishment. Marchetto, meanwhile, interrogates the societal expectation for women to perform cheerful resilience, even in illness, while also critiquing the bureaucratic impersonality of healthcare institutions. Despite her polished visual style, her work exposes the emotional and systemic strains patients endure.

In both memoirs, the patient is repositioned not as a passive recipient of care but as an active, critical narrator with emotional insight and experiential authority. These works disrupt the traditional, paternalistic model of medicine by validating lived experience as a crucial form of knowledge. They suggest that healing encompasses not only physical recovery but also narrative reclamation—a means of restoring agency through storytelling. By centering patient perspectives, these texts advocate for the integration of narrative medicine into both clinical practice and medical education, promoting a more empathetic, responsive, and inclusive model of care.

Conclusion

Miriam Engelberg's *Cancer Made Me a Shallower Person* and Marisa Acocella Marchetto's *Cancer Vixen* demonstrate the distinctive capacity of graphic illness memoirs to challenge dominant narratives surrounding cancer and survivorship. These works depart from conventional representations—often structured as linear stories of personal growth or heroic overcoming—and instead offer fragmented, ironic, and emotionally nuanced depictions of the illness experience. Engelberg's memoir, in particular, resists the prescriptive logic of the Bildungsroman and the cultural pressure to attain moral or spiritual depth through suffering. By embracing a self-declared "shallowness" and maintaining a stance of critical detachment, her narrative aligns more closely with the picaresque tradition, characterized by episodic structure, marginal perspective, and social critique.

Both authors utilize the formal affordances of the comics medium—such as the interplay of image and text, the strategic use of the gutter, and the visual representation of bodily

transformation—to convey the psychological complexities and sociocultural dimensions of illness. Their use of humour serves as a critical device that not only disarms prevailing taboos around cancer but also exposes the limitations of institutional and gendered responses to the disease. Through this fusion of visual storytelling and feminist critique, Engelberg and Marchetto reframe cancer not as a singular narrative of suffering or redemption, but as a multifaceted experience shaped by social, emotional, and political contexts.

These graphic narratives thus function as both aesthetic and sociopolitical instruments, expanding the expressive possibilities of illness memoirs. They contribute meaningfully to the field of graphic medicine by foregrounding the therapeutic, educational, and representational power of comics. Ultimately, their work challenges prevailing cultural scripts and invites a more empathetic, embodied, and critical engagement with illness—redefining not only how we understand breast cancer, but also how we tell stories about the body, identity, and care.

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