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IT'S A (FE)MALE WORLD: MALE-ORIENTED REVISIONISM IN

WATCHMEN

BY KAYLA DERBYSHIRE

DISCLAIMER: This essay contains an analysis of content and imagery of sexual violence. We invite you to read at your personal discretion.

Alan Moore and David Gibbons' *Watchmen* has been deemed by many to be one of the first, and most important, revisionist¹ superhero texts. By using the graphic novel to hold a conversation with superhero comics' own history, Moore and Gibbons have amended common superhero tropes by applying real-world psychologies to the superheroes in an attempt to create a progressive superhero narrative. For the purposes of this argument, unless stated otherwise, the term "comic" refers specifically to those of the superhero genre. A majority of the current work on *Watchmen* recognizes the differences between the graphic novel and the comics before it. Yet, there is not much criticism that also recognizes the ways the text has not broken superhero tropes. Many of the elements in *Watchmen* appear to have changed in comparison to its predecessors, but once explored deeper, its elements can be seen to have stayed the same. These unchanging aspects of *Watchmen* that will be explored in this argument are those relating to the portrayal of female characters within the text; their role in *Watchmen* is unchanged from the nominal role of the female in comics. The representation of female characters in *Watchmen* is highly representative of a heterosexual foundation that can most easily be seen through their interaction with male characters within the text. *Watchmen* may indeed be a revisionist comic, but it is revisionist in terms of the

¹ A revisionist text is one that departs from a generally accepted doctrine or narrative.

straight, cisgendered² male. *Watchmen* fails to replace the damsel-in-distress trope with female characters that are not overshadowed by a male counterpart.

The heterosexual framework that *Watchmen* perpetuates is most obviously seen within the realm of superhero costuming within the text. As a graphic novel, *Watchmen* has the unique ability to visualize character appearance without leaving room for individual interpretation. Though Moore and Gibbons purport that their novel is critiquing the superhero concept, the visual rhetoric of the costumed superhero serves only to maintain an oversexualized society. In Figure 1, Dan Dreiberg (the second Nite Owl) and Laurie Juspezyk (the second Silk Spectre) are peering at a portrait of the Twilight Lady, a vice-queen who had been in operation in the late 1960s. Her costume in this photograph is just one of many examples of oversexualized female outfits; the tight black (what is presumably) leather, the extremely low-cut top, and the revealing bottom half are all common tropes in female costuming. The riding crop that she is holding brings the sexual nature of the photograph even more to

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the forefront. Now, this would not be inherently problematic if not for the reaction that Dan has to Laurie finding the photograph. He says, "She was a very sick woman" (Moore and Gibbons 7.5). There is nothing wrong with a woman dressing to play up her femininity and sexuality. If *Watchmen* were truly revisionist, a protagonist would not be shaming a female for her choices in clothing. Instead, there would be an attempt to correct the long-standing theory that women should not dress in revealing clothing in public, and if they do, it is for the benefit of the male eye.

The Twilight Lady is shown on only two pages in *Watchmen*, but she is not the only female with an oversexualized outfit. Both Silk Spectres (Laurie and her mother, Sally Jupiter) are drawn with very revealing outfits. It is important to note that both of these characters do refer to the sexualization of their costuming throughout the novel. Laurie often complains about it, whereas Sally embraces the choice that she made with her outfit. There are two main interpretations of the choice that Sally and Laurie make to wear these costumes. First, their use of the sexualized, stereotypical costume while performing hypermasculine "masked avenger" behavior is meant to show that it is ridiculous to believe in a dichotomous feminine/masculine relationship. Second, Sally and Laurie only serve to reinforce the stereotype that women must remain feminine—which in this case is shown by their hyperfeminine costuming (Donovan and Richardson 176). Unfortunately, it is the



FIGURE 1

² A gender identity wherein the individual's perception of their gender is the same as the sex they were given at birth.



FIGURE 2
SALLY JUPITER'S COSTUME

latter reading that is most suggested by the text; for the first to be true, both Sally and Laurie would need to demonstrate a conscious effort to challenge the masculine/feminine binary via their clothing choices. Instead, we are never given a reason to believe that their dressing in costume is anything other than a want to use their sexuality to draw male attention and advance their careers. It is true that Sally chose her own path in life that did not follow social norms—this is not the argument being made. The problem is that both iterations of the Silk Spectre are portrayed as sex symbols throughout *Watchmen*, and this is the archetypal role that females have always taken in comics.

It does not help Moore and Gibbons' case that despite both Laurie and Sally's self-awareness of their sexualized costumes, both women wear their costumes for the benefit of the men around them and not for themselves. We see Sally wear her costume to advance her career: "...former waitress and burlesque dancer Sally is such a hit with the hoods that they're practically tripping over each other in the rush to get nabbed by her!" (Moore and Gibbons 9.29). Laurie, the second iteration of the Silk Spectre, ends up wearing it in order to please the men in her life. When Dan Dreierberg

cannot perform sexually, Laurie realizes that wearing the costume will help him. As shown in Figure 3: "I loathe that Halloween suit. Obviously, I wore it to help you" (Moore and Gibbons 8.5). Although her response to Dan is lighthearted, it shows that Laurie, like her mother before her, is aware of her hypersexualized costume. What is worrying, however, is that she allows herself to be objectified by this costume, transforming into a sex symbol that is defined by the male gaze. As stated by Richard Gray, the female superhero's "rise to prominence has occurred, in part, as a result of her ability to capture... the sexual attractiveness... that she possesses" (Gray 77). As such, both Laurie and Sally's versions of the Silk Spectre costume are reiterations of the female sex-symbol archetype, not a revision of it. In a discussion of female archetypes in *Watchmen*, Erin Keating argues: "Laurie's recognition of her costume's sexual function lends a parodic element to its use, but it does not call the need to wear the costume into question" (Keating 1271). Her performative nature does not do anything other than echo the female tropes of the past. Even when



FIGURE 3

only looking at female costuming, *Watchmen* continues to perpetuate patriarchal, heterosexual hegemony. There is a clear social hierarchy formed from the dichotomous male and female in this novel; Laurie and Sally wear their costumes for men. It appears that the Twilight Lady mentioned previously could be wearing her costume for herself, but when she tries to do this she is defined as a “sick lady” by a masculine figure. What *Watchmen* is arguing here is that women should only transform themselves into sex symbols if it is for the benefit of a man.

Before moving on, it is important to address the arguments that scholars have made about this point in previous criticisms of *Watchmen*. Many of the articles that address hypersexuality in superhero costuming claim there is an “explicit eroticism in both superhero and superheroine” (Taylor 346). This is true. In comics, a majority of male costumes are just as gendered as those of the female. Even just taking cues from Superman and Captain America, the reader is given a hypermasculine superhero body: tight pants, tight shirt, rippling muscles; male costuming “succeeds in signifying industrial strength associated with the ideal hyper-muscular superhero body; the look of power, virility and prowess” (Karaminas 2). There is a fetish embodied within superhero costuming that is displayed on both sides of the feminine/masculine duality that comics have perpetuated. Aaron Taylor argues that male costuming is “a reversal of sex roles, with the [hero] taking a traditionally female role: body as object” (Taylor 352). This fetishization is not strictly limited to the female body, but that does not mean it serves the same role when directed towards the male rather than the female. When a male superhero is costumed, the outfit is playing up their power and prowess. When a female is put into a costume, it plays up her sexuality and femininity. This is not equality, and this is where we come to see the problematic nature of superhero costuming that *Watchmen* has failed to correct. There is an imbalance of power between the feminine and masculine that can be drawn back to masculine Western logic. Moore and Gibbons seem to have taken two steps back

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FIGURE 4
OZYMANDIAS' COSTUME

when it comes to costume revision because the majority of the male characters within the text are not fetishized in regards to their costuming, so the sexualized nature of the female costume is doubly problematic. Ozymandias' costume is the only male costume that becomes a method of objectification and fetishization. The power that comes from his costume is reflected in the plot, as Ozymandias holds the power for the majority of the graphic novel. Rorschach is not given a skin-tight costume, nor is Nite Owl. Yet every female avenger within the text has been given a costume that turns her into an object of sexual fetishes by playing up her femininity. Once again, *Watchmen* has placed its females in positions of subordination to the men within the text. It is this subordination that takes away from any power Laurie and Sally supposedly have within the text. In most critical evaluations of *Watchmen*, Laurie and Sally are shown to be revisionary because their

actions shaped the text so profoundly. The problem is that everything Laurie and Sally do is only important in relation to the men around them. Neither of them do anything that is only important for themselves or for each other.

With Laurie, this can most obviously be seen with her inability to maintain a non-romantic relationship with the male heroes. She begins *Watchmen* as Jon's girlfriend, and only a few pages after their breakup, she becomes romantically involved with Dan. This is a continuation of the permanent girlfriend status invoked in female superheroes in previous comics. Erin Keating demonstrates how this is in line with comic history by touching on the Wonder Woman comics: "The Amazon Wonder Woman's love for a 'mortal male' links her to humanity. This heterosexual linkage undermines the female superhero in that the Amazon may at any moment be eclipsed into the conventional wife and eventual mommy" (Keating 1271). There is a traditional association of the female superhero with male characters, and *Watchmen* has not given its female characters any more power than the comics that came before it.

Some may argue that Laurie has the most power in the whole novel; she is, after all, the one that convinces the all-powerful Dr. Manhattan to come back to Earth. "I changed my mind," Dr. Manhattan says, to Laurie's confusion (Moore and Gibbons 9.26). This entire chapter has only reinforced Jon's God-like character and thusly the dependence that Laurie has on him throughout the entire novel. Even though Laurie is acting as a representative of the entire human race by pleading with Jon on the surface of Mars, it indicates that she is "valuable as the bond between Jon and humanity" (Keating 1282). *Watchmen* seems to give Laurie power, but this power is only in relation to the men she is surrounded with throughout the novel; she does not have her power, and any power that she seems to have is only there because a masculine figure — Jon — considers her valuable.

Laurie is not the only female in *Watchmen* to be tied to a man for her most important plot points within the text. Her mother, too, is a re-envisioning of a female superhero's inability to not be associated with one or more male characters. Throughout the text, we are given some of Sally's backstory and can see her full transition from a female hero to a wife and mother. She left her job as a masked avenger in order to marry her agent and raise Laurie. This is a reiteration of the heterosexual framework that *Watchmen* is written under. What is most upsetting, however, is that Laurie's father is not truly Sally's husband.



FIGURE 5

JON CHANGES HIS MIND

Because of this, "the female hero is withdrawn from her position of power in favor of the maternal, while the father is shown as completely free from any familial ties" (Keating 1272). The male is able to retain his power, while the female had to give hers up in order to raise a child. Though there is nothing wrong with being maternal and raising a family, there is a problem when the male is able to retain all of his power and give nothing up without the text showing any repercussions.

Sally also held a position similar to Laurie's within her own group of superheroes, the Minutemen. As Hollis Mason writes of the Minutemen: "The real mystery is how the hell we managed to stay together" (Moore and Gibbons 2.31). However, it isn't really a mystery at all; it is Sally Jupiter, the original Silk Spectre, who keeps the group together. As her daughter Laurie formed the bond between Jon and humanity, it is Sally that forms the bond between the Minutemen. She is the connection between her agent and the male heroes, and



FIGURE 6

more important, she is the alibi for Hooded Justice (an implied homosexual member of the group in a world where homosexuality is frowned upon). Like Laurie, Sally seems to have power. But “although Sally is figured as integral to the Minutemen, it is not as an individual; it is her function that is important” (Keating 1272). Just as Laurie’s power was only power because Jon viewed it as such, Sally’s power is only in her function as the glue that keeps the male heroes in the group together. There is no doubt that Sally plays a valuable role, but she is given no respect by the male figures in the group. The biggest incidence of this disrespect is the attempted rape of Sally by the Comedian.

After a meeting of the Minutemen, Sally goes to a private room in order to change into different clothing. The Comedian comes in and immediately starts telling Sally that she must have a reason for wearing her outfit (Figure 6). Although Sally starts off strong by hitting him, he quickly pushes her to the floor in order to

rape her. Before he is able to complete the deed, Hooded Justice comes in to find him kneeling over Sally and proceeds to beat and restrain the Comedian but not before the Comedian gets a jab out about HJ’s sexuality.

This attempted rape is sickening because the Comedian tells Sally that her clothing choice means she is asking for it, but what I find even more problematic is Hooded Justice’s reaction. As Sally is crying on the floor, blood pouring out of her mouth, all Hooded Justice has to say is “Get up... and for God’s sake, cover yourself” (Moore and Gibbons 2.8). Even though Sally has been acting as an alibi for Hooded Justice’s supposed homosexuality, the only thing he says post-assault is that she needs to cover up. *Watchmen* could have done great things with an attempted rape scene; there could have been a way to show that Sally was not the person in the wrong. However, all Moore and Gibbons did was reiterate the social view of rape; even Sally seems to believe it was her fault, as we



FIGURE 7

HOODED JUSTICE’S REACTION

see in an interview: “You know, rape is rape and there’s no excuse for it, absolutely none, but for me, I felt... I felt like I’d contributed in some way” (Moore and Gibbons 9.32). The problem with *Watchmen* is not the inclusion of a scene like this. The problem is that there is never any resolution or message that explains why this violence is wrong. There is nothing provided in the text that gives power back to Sally after this scene happens. She remains a trope: a weak female, a damsel in distress that is saved by Hooded Justice. Even after the attempted rape she was convinced by the Minutemen not to press charges because it would ruin the group’s image; the identity of the group is more important than Sally’s personal experiences, underscoring that she is only important to the group for her function and not as a person that is given respect.

Even when Laurie finds out about the rape and confronts the Comedian, the same thing happens. “I mean, what kind of man are you, you have to take some woman, you have to force her into having sex against her will,” Laurie says. “Only once,” the Comedian responds, before Laurie throws her scotch into his face (Moore and Gibbons 9.21). After this, Jon is angry about her actions and subsequently takes her home. All Laurie did was talk about the violence against her mother in a public setting, something that only Hollis Mason had previously done in his biography. Once again, this allowed the man who created the violence to get away with what he had done and puts the female into a position that is subordinate to all of the men around her.

This rape is not the only scene of violence against women in *Watchmen*. In fact, it’s hard to think of a female character within the text that does

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not experience violence in some form. Though Laurie and Sally have already been analyzed thoroughly, there are other females that have small but important roles in demonstrating that *Watchmen* does not give revisionary treatment to women. To begin, there is the case of Rorschach’s mother. She is a known prostitute, and we only ever see her through the eyes of Rorschach. A telling scene is one wherein Rorschach walks in on her having sex with a customer. As seen in Figure 8, the customer leaves after the young Rorschach walks in, telling the mother “I said forget it. Here’s five bucks. It’s more’n you’re worth” (Moore and Gibbons 6.4). The next thing we find out about Rorschach’s mother is that her pimp forced her to ingest cleaning fluid and dumped her body in a back alleyway (Moore and Gibbons 6.30). Never in *Watchmen* did this woman have any power at all; even her sex appeal was regulated by another man.

Even women who do not appear within the text are put in subordinate positions; Kitty Genovese, featured only as a newspaper article, is made a part of Rorschach’s story. Kitty was



FIGURE 8
RORSCHACH'S MOTHER

"Raped. Tortured. Killed. Here in New York. Outside her own apartment building" (Moore and Gibbons 6.10). Rorschach goes on to explain that her neighbors did not do anything, even though they could see it and hear the violence that was happening. All Rorschach did was take the remains of her dress and turn it into a mask. This is a prime example of how *Watchmen* maintains a world where violence against women is never published but instead made into something that ends up empowering a man. In the case of Sylvia Kovacs (Rorschach's mother), she is only an object to be used by a man, whereas in Kitty Genovese's case her violent death only served to propel Walter Kovacs' transformation into Rorschach by providing an excuse for him to make a mask.

From a male perspective, *Watchmen* is the revisionist text that everyone claims it to be. Granted, there are good things done in *Watchmen*. For example, male characters raise several powerful questions throughout the book, but there are even more important questions raised by the lack of a non-traditional female character within the text. If one only looks at male character displacements, half of a story is missed. Comic books reflect society, and this is why it's so troubling that even in a graphic novel that claims to be revolutionary and progressive, there has been no change from traditional, heterosexually-based gender roles. *Watchmen* is a progressive narrative in many ways, but its representation of female characters is not one of them.

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