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A Tale of Two Lauries: Feminism and Sexism in the *Watchmen* Novel and Film

Now, and especially at its time of release, Alan Moore's *Watchmen* was a particularly progressive graphic novel, chiefly in its attempt to curtail the conventional misogyny long permeating comic book culture. In this respect, it was relatively successful due to an independent and multifaceted heroine in Laurie, but these efforts were lost on many comic book fanatics, including and especially one Zack Snyder. Instead of paying homage to Moore's creation, Snyder bastardizes the novel's feminist aspects, creating a visually pleasing but not contextually faithful recreation of Laurie. While Moore sometimes falls back on sexist tropes in his depiction of her through her physical appearance, his iteration of Laurie illustrates significant character growth in the novel. In Chapter IX, Laurie and Dr. Manhattan's debate on the world's fate epitomizes her dynamic development. Laurie takes center stage in this chapter, demonstrating her centrality to the novel and Moore's carefully evenhanded treatment of her through Laurie's extensive, intelligent dialogue, her memories, illustrated through several detailed flashbacks, and her agency as she independently realizes her father's identity. Unfortunately, Zack Snyder's interpretation of Laurie is far less sound. Snyder trims her dialogue to the point of superfluousness, skips her recollections entirely or reduces them to a single sequence, and renders her incapable of understanding the truth about the Comedian on her own, instead requiring Manhattan's physical assistance. While Snyder's creative choices objectify Laurie, they also fundamentally alter her character. Her diminished complexity and personality sacrifice her agency in favor of constructing a one-dimensional character whose most significant contribution to the film is wearing latex. Though Snyder's treatment of Laurie in the conversation on Mars is disturbing, his decision to periodically interrupt the scene, rather than allowing the interaction to

be one long chapter as in Moore's novel, undercuts her most critically and demotes her from the only significant female protagonist of the story to a secondary character.

In Moore's novel, Laurie's dialogue and her exchanges with Manhattan on Mars paint her as spunky, reflective, and intelligent. When she arrives on the deserted planet, she is unafraid to be angry with him for transporting her, calling him a "stupid bastard" when she regains her ability to speak, and snaps at him when he asks if she is alright (Moore 284). She continues her feistiness in the very next line, threatening Manhattan "this air supply, whatever it is, you better not forget about it" (284). Though Jon is an omniscient being, Laurie is not intimidated. She demonstrates her pluck through insulting his simultaneous perception of time, calling it "stupid" (285). Her suggestion that he, the "most powerful thing in the universe," is nothing but a "puppet following a script" illustrates her scornful viewpoint on his detached perspective of the world, and attempts to take away his agency (285). She consistently resists his certainty of the future, initially refusing to participate in the conversation about Earth to try to prove his foresight wrong, and her willingness to "screw all your predictions" insinuates his perspective is unimportant to her (285). Moore's complex version of Laurie does not hesitate to voice reflection, musing her stepfather's mistreatment of her is why she is "edgy in relationships with strong, forceful guys" (288). Her realization communicates astute self-awareness, and a healthy unwillingness to assume responsibility for this shortcoming. The chapter also displays Laurie's intelligence as she challenges and attempts to reason with Manhattan to save the planet. When he denounces humanity as unimportant and fruitless, superficially valuing humans based on what they accomplish in their lifetimes, she takes a philosophical stance, and argues the existence of life itself should garner respect and merit salvation. As her argument proves unsuccessful, she

quickly switches tack and appeals to Manhattan's reverence for the extraordinary, asking him to consider "the lives of artists, scientists, [and] poets" (293). He then measures humanity against the vastness and magnificence of Mars, so Laurie likens herself to the landscape, purposefully selecting words to illustrate how her mother "eroded" her adolescence and "chipped" her into the shape she wanted (294). She continues the metaphor later in the chapter, asserting humans know "abysmal chasms" perhaps not physically, but through depression and misery (299). Eventually, when Laurie feels she has failed to persuade him to save Earth, she laments he "obviously doesn't see anything terribly miraculous in life," and "maybe quantum physics doesn't allow miracles" (301). These statements reveal Laurie's belief that Manhattan's omniscience handicaps his perspective rather than expands it, and that her ability to see life as miraculous while he cannot makes her superior to him, creating her most significant quote in the chapter.

In the film version of the Mars conversation, Laurie lacks the sparkle Moore gives her; Snyder reduces her dialogue in both amount and impact. Instead of beginning the chapter as a mouthy firecracker who can hold her own, the closest she comes to anger in her conversation with Jon is her weakly uttered "That's comforting," when she learns he sometimes forgets about her human needs (Snyder 1:53:55). Her lack of frustration with him throughout the scene reduces her anger when it finally appears; when she realizes he will not help her and gets upset, her emotions seem more like petulance than righteous anger. The scene limits her to just fifteen lines, and pleading dominates her dialogue. Though Moore's Laurie also does this, it is sparsely interspersed between lengthy endeavors to debate with Manhattan. In contrast, Snyder's Laurie initially attempts to leverage Manhattan's feelings for her to persuade him, rather than reasoning with him, believing "you'll do it for me, if you really care" (1:57:09). This is her only effort at

manipulation before she devolves into asking loaded questions like “So, it’s too much to ask? For a miracle?” and informing him he must stop the nuclear apocalypse because “everyone will die” (2:02:51-03:47). While this claim is not unsound or inadmissible logic, it lacks any dimension or philosophical inclination. Earth’s imminent doom has also already been inescapably established by this point in the story, making her words seem redundant and diminishing her intelligence. Laurie’s only moment of self-reflection compounds this marginalizing effect when she considers how “my life is just one big joke” after realizing the Comedian is her father (02:07:14). While Laurie utters the same line in the novel, the film scene affords her no other opportunity for self-awareness until this piece of dialogue invalidates her life and self-worth as she’s known it until this point. Though Manhattan attempts to convince her otherwise with a speech about the miraculousness of human conception, validation by a male character only devalues Laurie further, and inextricably damages the audience’s perception of her.

The graphic novel continues to develop Laurie’s character through important flashbacks and memories. In her earliest memory, Laurie’s narration not only adds depth and a definite perspective, but allows the reader to empathize and relate. While her parents’ argument wakes her, she chooses not to focus on them, but instead on a snow globe on top of the television, and calls these moments she plays with it “mine” and “secret and enchanted,” imagining herself “somewhere else” in spite of the discord (Moore 286). These coping skills developed early in Laurie’s life demonstrate resilience learned at a very young age. In her next recalled memory, Laurie is older, and her displeasure with her mother’s vicarious treatment of her reveals their difficult relationship. Her mother’s enthusiasm coupled with Laurie’s reluctant “yeah, I guess,”

response when her mother asks if she is "gonna be a big, tough super-lady like mom," communicates how the two women view crime fighting from oppositional viewpoints (291). While Laurie's public protests at her mother's refusal to allow her to read Hollis Mason's book seem typical of a thirteen year old, her shock as she sees the unbalanced Byron Lewis makes her reluctance seem less sullen, and instead grounds it in valid self-concern. She asks her mother fearfully if instability is what she "has to look forward to" at the end of her vigilante career, and her resentment of her mother's willingness to push her into such a harmful lifestyle becomes legitimate (292). A flashback recalling her teenage encounter with the Comedian demonstrates Laurie's defiance, as she smokes while flirting with an older man; however, her most poignant memory is from a few years later in her life. She confronts the Comedian at a party thrown in his honor, unafraid of causing a public scene in a sensitive, political atmosphere. After challenging his compliments, she refuses to back down when he gives her an out and instead questions his masculinity since he "force[d] her [mother] into having sex against her will" (301). Though Moore makes alcohol rather than Laurie's righteous anger the catalyst for the confrontation, and somewhat undercuts the legitimacy of Laurie's fury by acknowledging Manhattan's irritation with her for the incident, the scene still allows Moore's chief heroine to hold a man accountable for his misconduct. Laurie's vehement rebuke of the Comedian's friendliness exhibits her loyalty to her mother, her brash boldness, and a tinge of idealism Moore does not begrudge her.

While Moore considers elements of Laurie's past significant and worthy of inclusion in this pivotal chapter, Snyder does not. He erases or abbreviates Laurie's developmental flashbacks, effectively expunging her character of the complexity they afford her in the novel

and crippling her portrayal in the film. The movie trims the length of the scene with her parents' argument, and focuses entirely on them with no mention of Laurie's moments with the snow globe. The adults are oblivious to their young child watching, and her mother does not see her until the very end even though the door is wide open. Even her parents fail to notice her, an oversight that further lessens Laurie's importance in the film. This version also nixes Laurie's narration, which literally silences her in the scene, but also deprives her of the agency of her own voice, and prevents her from editorializing to refocus the memory from her perspective. Because she is not afforded any modicum of control, she is reduced to a bystander who can only watch a scene no longer about her. The film adds a recollection to her flashbacks not included in the chapter in the novel, when her mom informs her "even the grimy parts" of the past "keep on getting brighter" (Snyder 02:05:09). The placement of this snippet legitimizes the Comedian's attempt at raping her mother through her mother's reverence for the past, and makes her perception of the Comedian seem favorable after the viewer just witnessed her bitter argument with her husband. During Laurie's brief initial interaction with the Comedian, the scene skips several details that portray Laurie as a multifaceted character, such as her smoking, the sympathy she expresses for the Comedian in the novel, and her mother's confession of what transpired between them. The movie also discards two flashbacks entirely. In the first flashback, Laurie expresses her distaste at her future of vigilantism; the film's cutting of this scene robs her of a more nuanced comprehension of the potentially negative results of a lifetime of fighting crime. The omission also means Laurie is not explicitly compared to her mother; thus, the film plays down her reluctance to become the Silk Spectre, making her more compliant rather than defiant. The final scene of Laurie at the party is the most important elimination. In the novel, the scene is

partly significant because it humanizes Laurie through flawed management of a social situation she herself describes as idiocy, while the reader can still empathize with her actions due to her motivation as she defends her mother. She is also the only character who holds the Comedian accountable throughout the story, and the only character he cares enough about to have any impact. Without this scene, there is very little sense of loyalty to her mother, and even less of her idealism and feistiness. But since she is the only character in the *Watchmen* universe who manages to visibly affect the Comedian at the end of the memory, the omission of this flashback reduces her significance as an effective character.

Laurie's discovery of her parentage is the climax of Chapter IX, and in Moore's novel, she realizes the Comedian is her father on her own through consideration of the memories recalled earlier in the chapter, without requiring anyone else's aid. Manhattan only prompts her epiphany verbally, suggesting she is "shutting out understanding" before explicitly accusing her of "avoiding something" (Moore 303). However, the chaotic, disjointed nature of the six previous frames communicates she has already begun to realize the truth. Mentally, this places her a step ahead of the omniscient Manhattan, and allows her to have the realization before he does, meaning the pivotal moment belongs exclusively to her. She rejects Manhattan's help, in a gesture of independence, finished with "looking back at all my stupid memories," and insists she is not avoiding anything before physically turning away in a further form of rejection (303). She continues to rail at him, mocking his belief in humans' insignificance through a sarcastic show of holding up her mother's most cherished memorabilia and calling it "meaningless" (303). Even late in the chapter, when she believes he will not save Earth, her sarcasm indicates she does not agree with his viewpoint, and considers it ridiculous. Laurie is the focal point of the frames for

the duration of her epiphany, placed in the center of them, with close-ups of different parts of her, while Manhattan is relegated to the background. As her father's identity sinks in, Manhattan is depicted as confused and helpless and is forced to stand idly by while Laurie melts down. The situation underscores Manhattan's impotence through his only word of dialogue after her realization, which is simply her name in question form, while wearing a confused expression. Laurie does not quietly accept this disturbing new alteration to her self-image, but instead acts out in rage, shattering Manhattan's only creation on the deserted planet, his enormous glass castle. Laurie needs Manhattan's logic about the miracle of human coupling after she shatters the glass structure to convince her that her life is not meaningless, but because Laurie realizes who her father is of her own volition, without an external catalyst, Moore indicates his respect for Laurie's intelligence. In addition, Moore allows Laurie to preserve her agency during this critical exposition which otherwise seems to undermine her life, through her ability to remain in control of her own cognition.

Perhaps the most compelling evidence of Laurie's simplified personality in Snyder's film is her loss of agency during the most critical realization of her life. Because Manhattan must show her what she is hiding from, Laurie is not only objectified, but she loses her dimensionality. While in the novel Laurie is able to make sense of the Comedian's role in her mother's life on her own, the epiphany in the film is only possible through Manhattan's physical help, and not simply verbal coercion. Instead of suggesting Laurie's repression of something already present at a subconscious level, Manhattan expresses frustration at Laurie's inability or refusal to see things from his perspective, before he finally convinces her to relent. Laurie's simple syntax when she capitulates to Jon's wishes to help her understand, illustrates her loss of depth and lack of

intelligence. When she implores Manhattan to "do that thing you do," her clumsy word selection insinuates the experience is too complex for her to comprehend or even properly articulate (Snyder 02:04:42). Because Manhattan's assistance requires that he touch Laurie's face, their interaction is sexualized, adding to Laurie's objectification. Along with removing her agency, Snyder's needless shift from Laurie realizing the truth herself to requiring external help from a male character further undermines Laurie's intelligence; she is not left to her own devices to make sense of the connection after reviewing key memories. Laurie also experiences a loss of privacy during her revelation; Manhattan views the memory sequence and experiences the conclusion as Laurie does. He then becomes the "expository mouthpiece in the film, telling her and the audience about the familial connections," and does not allow Laurie to divulge this traumatic piece of information on her own terms, thus concretizing Laurie's complete dependence on him during her pivotal moment (Petrovic). Laurie's cursory treatment in the film reduces her to a "subjectless object," who ultimately exists in the scene to help Manhattan make a decision about the fate of Earth, so the all-powerful male character can save the world (Petrovic).

Throughout her confrontation with Manhattan on Mars, the film's portrayal of Laurie reveals several choices exemplifying sexism, through diminishing her agency and undermining her complexity. She becomes an object, who appears to only be on the planet to listen to Manhattan's philosophizing and rhetorical questions. But the most crucial decision Snyder makes with regard to Laurie is his fragmentation of the scene. While in Moore's novel, the interaction takes place during an entire chapter with an uninterrupted flow, it is disrupted twice in the movie. Instead of concentrating solely on this scene in which Laurie is the focus, at the most significant

moment of her life, Snyder defers to the development of other, entirely male-driven story lines, including the villain and nonessential characters such as the president, for stretches of time outlasting those of the previous segment of the scene on Mars with Laurie. This hinders the audience's focus on Laurie, and communicates she is not important enough for this scene to receive the viewer's attention, or the same amount of screen time as her male counterparts. Laurie's time on Mars functions as her character's climax, and Snyder's decision to undermine her through disruption at her most pivotal moment not just cripples her character traits, but proclaims her demotion from the film's leading lady to firm entrenchment in a supporting role.

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