The Masculine Masquerade of Superheroes in *Watchmen*

Yen-Lian Liu, National Cheng Kung University, Taiwan

Abstract

The image of many American male superheroes is always represented as being 'phallic' in their costumes. Even though it is a long-term reality that the representation of superheroes often connotes an ideally mythic but essentially un-realizable embodiment of men, such a costuming more often than not involves, as Harry Brod sees it, a process of men's conscious self-masquerade.[1] How well, or how falsely, do male characters accommodate themselves to their masculine costuming as superheroes? How does this costumed heroism affect men's lives, both in public and in private? This article is inspired by Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons's graphic novel, *Watchmen*, with regard to the metaphorical representations of the bodily images of men and their associations with justice and masculinity. If the actualization of superheroes in the reality of *Watchmen* debunks heroism itself, then the graphic representations of those male superheroes' masculine but masked bodies also belie an apotheosizing but simultaneously dehumanizing dimension through such a male masquerade. By juxtaposing the different representations and embodiments of male superheroes in *Watchmen*, the article focuses on how men's negotiations between a performative identity and an unmasked selfhood are relentlessly exposed and problematized. Accordingly, the artificiality of men's masculine images is not only highlighted in the graphic representations of *Watchmen* but also subversive to the conventional notions of super-heroic male embodiments.[2]

"Who Watches the Watchme…"
(*Watchmen*, II:18)[3]

"Vanishing is no big problem when you're a costumed hero —
you just take your costume off."
(*Under the Hood* 12)[4]

[1] Brod, Harry. "Masculinity as Masquerade." *The Masculine Masquerade: Masculinity and Representation*, edited by Andrew Perchuk and Helaine Posner, MIT Press, 1995, pp. 13-19.

[2] An earlier version of this article was orally presented at the 7th Asian Conference on Arts and Humanities, held by the International Academic Forum (IAFOR) in Kobe, Japan, in April 2016.

[3] For the citations of *Watchmen*, the Roman numeral signals the volume while the Arabic numeral signals the page number in that volume.

[4] The excerpts of the fictional *Under the Hood*, written by Hollis Mason (a.k.a. the first Nite Owl), are from the many intercalary chapters scattered between the 12 volumes of *Watchmen*. The citation signals the exact page number of Mason's book printed in *Watchmen*.

1 Arthur Flannigan-Saint-Aubin, in response to the conventional focus on the phallic image of male bodies as the masculine model, proposes an alternative understanding of men through another bodily feature —through testicles. Flannigan-Saint-Aubin associates what he terms the "testicular masculine" (250) with such connotations as "patience, stability, and endurance" (250) and differentiates it from the "testerical" one (250) that emphasizes the "[s]taying power and steadfastness" which "might become stubbornness or intractability…" (250). That is to say, while the "testicular masculine" represents the positive side of manhood derided from the metaphorical meanings of testicles, the "testerical" one represents its negative side, and both are further contrasted with the phallic model of aggression and dominance. These models are not mutually exclusive; instead, the combined images of erection (the penis) and containment (the testicles) serve to enlarge and subvert our perspective of "a fantasied version of the male body" (Flannigan-Saint-Aubin 240) that has long been associated only with the penis and its potent significance. Similarly, Susan Bordo, looking for a wider representation of male bodies, uses the image of an aroused penis — instead of emphasizing a hard and pulsing one —to contend that the biological arousal of the penis needs not be conventionally equated with the domination of the female sex but rather be viewed as the exhibition of human affection —of "someone or something that has aroused another" in an intimate relationship (67). The penile arousal thereby functions to counteract and to implement the dominant discourse of phallic authority as the sole perspective of men.

2 Accordingly, the representations of male bodies have much more dimensions than the conventional focus on the phallic image as the sole model of male masculinity. In this sense, the configurations of male superheroes, especially those that magnify a visibly muscular body and a supra-human capacity, need a second consideration. Flannigan-Saint-Aubin contends that the dichotomy of Superman and Clark Kent can exemplify "the plasticity of masculinity" (254) if we highlight Kal-El's interchangeability between different modes of masculinity. 'Superman' stands as a true identity while 'Kent' functions as its human camouflage, and

‘Superman’ is attributed with a more masculine authority, especially when Kal freely exerts his power in public, whereas ‘Kent’ is a humanized containment of such super-heroic prowess. In other words, ‘Superman’ embodies the phallic stage of masculinity while ‘Kent’ embodies the testicular/testerical one. These two forms of male presentment seem mutually exclusive on the surface, but their combination in fact corresponds to a man’s sexual and social functions: “Superman is episodic; he ‘rises’ to the occasion ‘like a speeding bullet’ and then disappears with only a trace of his former self. Clark Kent ‘hangs in there’ until the Man of Steel, driven by crises, springs into action” (Flannigan-Saint-Aubin 252-53). The two modes are thus configured in one male body and demarcated by the change of context and clothes. More importantly, the humanized undercover of Kent is necessary for Kal to fit into the society: “Although the patriarchal ideal is a phallic one…the phallic…need not be normative” (Flannigan-Saint-Aubin 254). Accordingly, the dichotomy of Superman and Kent exhibits a revised version of conventional manhood: a man only reveals his phallic power when necessary not only because its arousal, as biology tells us, cannot last forever, but also because a proper containment of such a power is the key to a man’s adaptation into society.

3 Nevertheless, as the boundary between an alien man of steel and a cover of human flesh is ideally interchangeable and functional for Superman, many Earthen heroes do not share such a privilege of being naturally born a superhuman. Kent knows when he can be his real self, who only needs to take off his camouflage to break out of the mundanity as Kent and to establish himself again at the top of the world —a free-willed shift of identities that involves no sense of confusion for him and for his watchers. By contrast, the pairing of a normal man with the notions of costumed heroism and supra-human masculinity turns out to be inherently problematic, as Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons’s graphic novel, *Watchmen*, attempts to expose.[5] Mason, a retired costumed hero, thus notes in *Under the Hood*: “Dressing up in a

[5] Moore is the novel’s story writer; Gibbons is its illustrator and letterer, and John Higgins is the colorist. The front cover and the back cover of *Watchmen* show only Moore’s and Gibbons’s names, while Higgins’s name shows up on the inside front cover. I retain Higgins’s name on my Works Cited page.

costume takes a very extreme personality…" (9). As Kal's blue-and-red costume stands for his true identity that demarcates itself from a restrained selfhood, in *Watchmen*, the imaginary identity in masquerade is simultaneously fulfilling and disorienting for the novel's human heroes. As Mason avers: "Vanishing is no big problem when you're a costumed hero —you just take your costume off" (*Under the Hood* 12). Mason's paradoxical statement —in which a celebration of one's visible, heroic but extreme façade of masculine exhibition is combined with a degradation of one's human, 'invisible' body stripped of one's costume —thus reveals how a costumed man's achievement in masculine and heroic embodiments is suspended in-between a dehumanizing negation of a part of his selfhood and an embrace of a self-alienated invention of an apotheosized mask. To borrow Flannigan-Saint-Aubin's terms, as a man accommodates himself to the phallic mode of self-representation in public, he is also attempting to escape the testicular mode of his body —of the essentially inescapable reality of a contented, inconspicuous, and 'wrapped' substance always commonly 'hanging' underneath his costume.

4 Such a deliberate and purposeful costumed heroism is not without its risk. Inventing oneself as a superhero not only signifies the inconsistence between a man's vision of the world (in which the world needs the 'I' in costumes) and his original life in the same world (in which I am basically an invisible nobody), but it further indicates how a man can suffer in-between the real and the fictional sense of his selfhood. For Harry Brod, the notion of male masquerade has similarities with Judith Butler's idea of gender as stylized forms of performance;[6] however, whereas performance focuses on the naturalized practices of constructing one's gender, masquerading oneself by costumes focalizes its superficial and fictional dimensions, "for masquerade invokes a distinction between the artificial and the real" (Brod 17). As the acceptable forms of costumed heroism very often visibly magnify this

[6] For more details on Butler's idea, see her groundbreaking books, *Gender Trouble* (1990) and *Bodies That Matter* (1993).

artificiality of manliness, the whole idea of a man's super-heroic embodiments of justice, power, and masculinity should be thus called into question. Not until recently does the problem of super-heroic embodiments have revealed itself to the audience's eyes, as *The Dark Knight Trilogy* (directed by Christopher Nolan) and the Iron Man series (played by Robert Downey Jr.) have shown us.[7] Yet, before the popularity of superheroes on the big screen begins to reveal its commercial potential, Moore and Gibbons's *Watchmen*, among other superhero fictions that use graphic pictures instead of motion ones, has critically examined the conflict between a masqueraded and an unmasked self as well as between the ideal heroism and the all-too-real humanity. *Watchmen*, by highlighting the visual representations of (super-)heroism, thus reflects on the intricate correlation between male bodies, masculine embodiments, and the conventional notions of justice and power.

5 The fictional dimension of costumed heroism and its problematic outcome are directly alluded to through the novel's title. Jamie A. Hughes cites the famous phrase in *Watchmen* — "Who watches the Watchmen?" (n. pag.)[8] —as the focus of her argument that the answer to the cited question "is simple: we are all subjected to that same power — that of ideology" (556). For Hughes, each of the costumed heroes in *Watchmen* is driven by different motives that have not only "prompted them to become superheroes" (550) but also led to the reflection on how superheroes "are nothing more than individuals caught up in an ideology" (549-50). However, Hughes fails to notice that, in one iconic scene of *Watchmen*, in which Edward Blake (a.k.a. the Comedian) and Daniel Dreiberg (a.k.a. the second Nite Owl)[9] discuss how the American Dream has been realized and embodied in a group of people protesting against costumed vigilantes (II:16-18), the phrase that Hughes emphasizes is in fact deliberately

[7] Nolan's *The Dark Knight Trilogy* consists of *Batman Begins* (2005), *The Dark Knight* (2008), and *The Dark Knight Rises* (2012). The Iron Man series played by Robert Downey Jr. refer to *Iron Man* (2008), *Iron Man 2* (2010) (both directed by Jon Favreau), and *Iron Man 3* (2013) (directed by Shane Black).

[8] The complete sentence shows up only after the whole novel is finished, both in its original Latin (taken from *Satires* by Juvenal) and in its English translation. No page number is available.

[9] Henceforth, in this article, 'Nite Owl' refers to Daniel Dreiberg while the first Nite Owl is referred to by his real name, Mason.

interrupted by the Comedian when a woman paints it on a wall, thus rendering it forever incomplete: "Who Watches the Watchme…" (II:18).

6 If the complete sentence indicates how the costumed heroes have to be 'watched' for their existence to be recognized and judged, its incompleteness suggests the partial and un-finish-able nature of costumed heroism and its aspiration. In the words of Peter Y. Paik, "the superheroes constitute a practice of violence legitimated by its essentially reactive and belated character, as a form of always 'striking second'…" (55). Costumed heroes often convince themselves that their masqueraded identities can bring an end to the very social transgressions that motivate their acts; however, these ideal motivations are in fact reactive to the long existence of violence and injustice surrounding them. This is the paradoxical nature of costumed heroism: like how the Joker repetitively shows up before Batman, the existence of costumed heroism can never be the harbinger of peace because, if there is a real peace, then there is no need for costumed or superhuman heroes. Milton Glass's introduction to his book, *Dr. Manhattan: Super-Powers and the Superpowers*, directly points this out: "The suggestion that the presence of a superhuman has inclined the world more towards peace is refudiated by the sharp increase in both Russian and American nuclear stockpiles since the advent of Dr. Manhattan" (III).[10] Accordingly, in the process of what Iain Thomson calls the "hypertrophic deconstruction" (106), the actualization and aggrandizement of heroes in reality can lead to the destruction of heroism itself, making heroism inherently doomed to fail at reaching its ideal destination. As Nite Owl realizes it at the end of *Watchmen*: "We're damned if we stay quiet, Earth's damned if we don't" (XII:20). The choice to involve oneself in costumed

[10] Dr. Manhattan, an American superhuman created by an experimental accident, is used by the U.S. government as a threatening propaganda against the Soviet Russia, which leaves the Soviet government with no choice but to boost its nuclear power to defend against such a being. Like Mason's *Under the Hood*, Glass's introduction is also one of the intercalary parts in *Watchmen*. The citation signals the exact page number of Glass's book printed in *Watchmen*. Alfred Pennyworth, in Nolan's *The Dark Knight* (2008), also points this out: as Bruce Wayne (a.k.a. Batman) is frustrated by the death of Rachel Dawes and asks: "Did I bring this on her? I was meant to inspire good. Not madness, not death," Alfred responds: "You have inspired good, but you spat in the faces of Gotham's criminals. Didn't you think there might be some casualties? Things were always gonna get worse before they got better." Alfred's statements indirectly suggest that the existence of superheroes is not exempted from the responsibility for making things worse.

heroism is a double-edged sword that can never vanquish its enemies: if one does not perform as a hero, he will be consumed by the mundanity and the corruption of everyday life; if one does, he will be engaged in a never-ending war that potentially consumes the whole world.

7 These concerns affect not only the Watchmen but also their predecessors, the Minutemen, whose notion of costumed heroism is similarly haunted by the collapse of its original aspiration. As Mason puts it in his recollections of the Minutemen: "One of the big problems that faced costumed heroes at the time was the absence of costumed criminals of any real note. I don't think any of us realized how much we needed those goons until they started to thin out" (*Under the Hood* 12). Mason belatedly admits that the function of costumed heroism cannot afford the total disappearance of its villains, but, ironically, he also ignores the fact that it was the Minutemen who were actually outlived by those very 'goons' whose persisting existence substantially supports and subverts the Minutemen's heroic vision.[11] The inheritance of similar concerns for costumed heroism from the Minutemen to the Watchmen points out how the conventional ideals of masculine embodiment and heroism can function as universal aspirations that drive generations of men into similar actions and cause shared problems for them.

8 The Comedian thus sees costumed heroism as nothing but a gathering of "masked adventurers" (II:10) performed by a group of immature adults attempting to fulfill their dreams of world peace and social order. The American Dream does come true — people can freely costume themselves as the embodiments of justice or protest against those embodiments — and the Comedian is its best spokesperson when he actualizes the eternal partiality of 'Watchme…' and expresses: "I seen that written up all over durin' this last two

[11] The ends of the members of the Minutemen are anything but heroic and glorious: "The first Nite Owl runs an auto-repair shop. The first Silk Spectre is a bloated, aging whore, dying in a Californian rest resort. Captain Metropolis was decapitated in a car crash back in '74. Mothman's in an asylum up in Maine. The Silhouette retired in disgrace, murdered six weeks later by a minor adversary seeking revenge. Dollar Bill got shot. Hooded Justice went missing in '55. The Comedian is dead" (I:19). In Mason's recollection, Hooded Justice allegedly dies a gruesome death: "…a badly decomposed body…was pulled from the sea after being washed up on the coast of Boston…shot through the head" (*Under the Hood* 12). Mason himself is also murdered by a local gang, the Knot Tops (VIII:27-28).

weeks! They don't like us an' they don't trust us….Well, me, I kinda like it when things get weird, y'know? I like it when all the cards are on the table" (II:18). As costumed heroes may regard themselves as the full guardians of freedom and order, it is in fact the already existing freedom that guarantees their choices of vigilantism — a freedom that also justifies any attempt at undoing costumed heroism. Indeed, when all the cards are openly spread on the table, there is no need to discern who has a higher standing or not. For the Comedian, those in costumes should stop pretending that they are standing on a morally higher ground or that they still stand a chance of winning the game of good versus evil.

9 Accordingly, in the "meeting of the crimebusters" (II:9) that Captain Metropolis convenes for the Watchmen, the Comedian expresses his contempt for the godly vision of the costumed heroes, describing them as the adults who "wanna go on playin' cowboys and Indians!" (II:10), and sneering at their disregard for the substantial meaninglessness that supports their heroic façades. The Comedian then burns the map (on which the topics of heroic achievements are displayed), averring that "inside thirty years the nukes are gonna be flyin' like maybugs…" (II:11). Such a swaggering perception of heroism's ultimate futility explains how come the Comedian is capable of continuing his indulgence in a self-amusing vigilantism first as a member of the Minutemen, then as one of the Watchmen, and finally as an agent for the U.S. government. As shown in the reflective words of Dr. Manhattan: "Blake's different. He understands perfectly…and he doesn't care" (IV:19). The Comedian sees that costumed heroism is to be consumed by itself even as its ideal is practiced in different contexts, and he chooses to enjoy this laughable progression into a total annihilation of men's dreams.[12]

10 Costumed heroes thus connote an anachronism in their imaginations of an ideal future to

[12] Ironically, it is this behavior that triggers Ozymandias's plan of fulfilling the destination of costumed heroism, at whatever cost it takes. At the end of *Watchment*, it is revealed that Ozymandias conducts not only multiple murders of the members of the Watchmen but also a massacre in New York City, which kills half the city's citizens and successfully transforms humankind into one unified entity longing for the continuity of humanity. Ozymandias, an Earthen hero, thus succeeds in creating a period of world peace.

come ─ a future that is forever delayed by their very existence. This self-deconstructive nature is reflected in *Watchmen* by the repetitive and self-conscious references to the costumed heroes as romantic embodiments of childish illusions. In *Under the Hood*, Mason depicts how he identifies himself with costumed heroism and later puts it into action: "I like the idea of adventure, and I feel bad unless I'm doing good….[T]he super-heroes had escaped from their four-color world and invaded the plain, factual black and white of the headlines" (5-6). Mason not only directly associates acts of justice with boyish wish-fulfillments, but he also envisions how a world of bland blackness and whiteness can be enriched and energized by the actualization of costumed heroes from colorful, graphic figures on pages into life-form players in reality. The other heroes in *Watchmen* are less extreme than Mason is, but they also respond to costumed heroism with reservation. Adrian Veidt (a.k.a. Ozymandias) thus disparages the essentially impractical existence of costumed heroism:

> My new world demands less obvious heroism, making your schoolboy heroics redundant. What have they achieved? Failing to prevent Earth's salvation is your only triumph. And yet that failure overshadows every past success! By default, you usher in an age of illumination so dazzling that humanity will reject the darkness in its heart…. (XII:17)

Ozymandias thereby justifies the massacre conducted by him in contrast to the futility of other men's allegedly heroic standing. Nite Owl, in forced retirement, also frustratingly reflects upon his past: "Looking back it all seems so…well, childish, I guess. Just a schoolkid's fantasy that got out of hand. That's, y'know, with hindsight…on reflection" (VII:4).[13] These statements not only strengthen the unrealistic dimension of costumed heroism, but they further suggest the split nature between what these men want to achieve and how their costumed covers really function in a world they deem in grave need of them. These belated statements remind us that heroes are no more than normal humans in a phallic/masculine

[13] In *Watchmen*, before the story begins, the U.S. government passes the Keene Act, which outlaws any form of vigilantism and forces many heroes into retirement.

masquerade that is imbued with internal contradictions, subjective emotions, and male bigotries.

11 Accordingly, for Kevin Alexander Boon, "the man who is labeled 'hero' is always other" (303) because the sublimation of heroes to larger-than-life figures can seriously disfigure their images and distort their functions in society. This is exactly what *Watchmen* shows us, with its allegedly functioning heroes suffering different forms of masculine anxiety and identity crisis. As Mervi Miettinen observes, *Watchmen* "deconstructs the superhero genre…by exposing the inherent contradictions within these gender-bound tropes from the fascist undercurrents of violent patriotism to the often-hinted sexual dysfunction of the costume-fetish variety" (104).[14] Miettinen does not probe further into this "often-hinted sexual dysfunction" in *Watchmen*, but the conflict between a man's masculine costume and his unmasked selfhood is without doubt a gateway to debunking the artificiality of heroic manhood as the 'real' embodiments of masculinity, justice, and humanity.

12 Ozymandias occupies a peculiar position in this correlation between male self-perception and costumed heroism, who establishes himself as a model dissociated from any humane concern and disconnected from any intimate interpersonal relation: "I recognized the fragility of our world in increasingly hazardous times….My first step was to stand back as far as I could, to view the problem from a fresh perspective, my vista widening with my comprehension….Gradually, I closed upon the heart of the dilemma" (XI:21). In Ozymandias's conception, only through an extremely distanced stance can the core problem be closely examined. With Boon's notion of heroes as otherness (303) in mind, Ozymandias stands as the ultimate 'other' in contrast to the remaining male characters in *Watchmen* — an 'otherness' that is best exhibited in his personifications of "Rameses the Second's Greek name

[14] It is a great pity that Miettinen only focuses her discussion on "the misogynistic vigilante Rorschach" (104) to support her argument. Besides, Miettinen somehow contradicts her own criticism of Rorschach's vigilantism by concluding that "the way he [Rorschach] embodies these [masculine] ideals even in the most extreme can also act as reaffirming those ideals among readers, as his popularity among readers clearly suggests" (107).

and Alexander's free-booting style" (XI:11) in order "to apply antiquity's teachings to today's world" (XI:11). Nevertheless, the perspective that Ozymandias only "incarnates the costumed hero as a Homeric or Aryan ideal…a star in his own right…" (Paik 37), needs a further deliberation. Ozymandias does not simply want to conventionally impersonate his ideal ancient predecessors; he wants to exceed their halfway achievements and to transform himself from 'another' male model into an 'other' one. This heroic excess not only secures Ozymandias's sense of a manifest masculine selfhood that is distinct from all the other humans,[15] but it further transcends a conventional heroism that is always halfway through its destination. "I was determined to measure my success against his [Alexander's]" (XI:8), Ozymandias thus claims and, concluding that Alexander the Great had "not united all the world, nor built a unity that would survive him" (XI:10), begins his own path to "conquest not of men, but of the evils that beset them" (XI:11). Ozymandias's full embrace of an embodiment that is completely 'other' to his time and to his comrades consequently leads to the novel's outcome: he establishes a sense of alienation from society and humanity (while adopting the camouflage as a humanitarian), shows how that establishment reasonably helps him transcend the futility of costumed heroism conducted by other men, and eventually initiates a massacre that no hero can overpower. In this sense, Ozymandias is the opposite incarnation of Superman: while Superman adopts a humanitarian approach in his never-ending battles against evilness, Ozymandias exposes the humanitarian camouflage of costumed heroism in order to fully vanquish that evilness.

13 Ozymandias does not make himself as he is without any internal conflict, but he disallows himself to be visibly disturbed by any mental discomfort in his pursuit of world peace. For Ozymandias, any doubt in mind can only be faced indirectly (for example, in a dream) or after the massacre is executed.[16] Ozymandias's peculiarity as an unaffected,

[15] As Ozymandias himself expresses: "A life such as mine offers many things worthy of celebration, my friend. You need only look about you" (XI:7).

[16] Thus, we only see Ozymandias's internal conflicts at the end of *Watchmen*, and he only partially

objective man, extremely devoid of any trace of humanitarian concern or subjective emotion, contributes to his establishment as the one 'true' hero in *Watchmen* —the one who fulfills the 'duty' as a performing hero to prevent a global disaster and to maintain the social order (of which the other Watchmen, apparently because of their 'humanitarian' stance and their failure at stopping Ozymandias, do not acknowledge). Ozymandias's decision to conduct a massacre also shows that it takes an extreme character as he is and an extreme project as he does for the romantic dreams of peace and justice to be practically realized. Ozymandias is thereby the axis by which the story of heroism proceeds: *Watchmen* begins with his murder of the Comedian, the one who sees the essence of costumed heroism, and it ends by his accomplishment that irrevocably obsoletes other heroes.

14 Another dimension of Ozymandias's otherness concerns his style, which is described (by Rorschach) as being "pampered and decadent" (I:19) and associated with homosexuality (I:19). This sexual otherness is not explicitly highlighted in the novel; however, in the film adaptation, Ozymandias is associated with gay men and sexual liberations in the opening sequence, which, combined with the fact that Alexander the Great also had a homosexual liaison with another man, suggests that Ozymandias's measures of realizing the destination of costumed heroism may be an extreme defense against the conventional labels of feminization and immorality upon gay men. In fact, Ozymandias is the only hero that 'comes out' of his façade, reveals his identity in public, and lives on his masculine image.[17] Ozymandias's 'coming out' as an idol of masculine embodiment thereby both subverts and strengthens the conventional coding of heroic manhood as sexually 'normal' and publicly recognizable, while the ultimate vision of world peace as he sees it and the measures he employs to realize it

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acknowledges them: "…I know people think me callous, but I've made myself feel every death. By day I imagine endless faces. By night…well, I dream, about swimming towards a hideous….No. Never mind. It isn't significant" (XII:27, ellipsis original). After the massacre, Ozymandias somewhat redundantly asks: "I did the right thing, didn't I? It all worked out in the end" (XII:27). This redundant expression shows the gravity of the massacre on Ozymandias's mind, but he still manages to emotionally alienate himself from the execution of such a mass killing.

[17] While many heroes choose to retire into an everyday life because of the Keene Act, Ozymandias decides to reveal his identity, builds a corporation, and becomes extremely rich by merchandising his heroic image.

render him both the most representative and the most inhuman hero.

15 Through Ozymandias's achievement, the destination of costumed heroism is revealed to be an uncanny combination: it makes a man both manly and inhuman when heroism meets its destiny and end. By contrast, Nite Owl demonstrates how the problem of such a combination cannot be easily solved for an ordinary man. As Nite Owl describes it when nakedly standing before his costume: "It's this war, the feeling that it's unavoidable. It makes me feel so powerless. So impotent" (VII:19). Nite Owl here expresses how the unstoppable violence and the perception of his human body make him feel incompetent, but he seems not to notice how his involvement in heroic costuming also precipitates this sense of emasculation. Nite Owl is so attracted by the owl's power of night hunting as to make the animal his prototype of crime-fighting; however, such an obsession, as the story reveals, eventually consumes him. Identifying oneself with a nocturnal animal already suggests one's seclusion from the public gaze, and the more Nite Owl is confident at performing as an owl heroically hunting at night, the more he feels insecure as a retired normal man by day. As Nite Owl expresses in his article: "Is it possible…to study a bird so closely…that it becomes invisible?" (n. pag.).[18] Nite Owl's costumed heroism is thus a performative paradox ― while the advantageous capability of invisibility when hunting criminals at night is highly regarded, to face this invisibility as an everyday man is unbearable. Accordingly, Nite Owl falls prey to the fictional image that he identifies with and further traps himself within an ideal performance connecting masculinity with invisibility.[19] The descriptions of Nite Owl's lover, Laurie Juspeczyk (a.k.a. the second Silk Spectre), of him as a "self-deprecating" man (VII:9), who is "more sort of receptive" in human relationship (IX:8), exacerbate this masculine crisis, which is unintentionally but

[18] Nite Owl's article, "Blood from the Shoulder of Pallas" (published in the fictional *Journal of the American Ornithological Society* in Fall 1983), is another intercalary chapter in *Watchmen*. No page number is available.

[19] In his article, Nite Owl describes how he was inspired by an owl that hunts at night: "Not knowing which of us had been selected, I stood frozen along with the rodents of the field, my heart hammering as it waited for the sudden clutch of sharpened steel fingers that would provide my first and only indication that I was the predetermined victim" (n. pag.). Here, Nite Owl unwittingly reveals that it was he who 'predetermined' himself both as the invisible hunter and the vulnerable prey.

relentlessly exposed when she mentions how he is good at keeping personal privacy by building a base underground: "It must be great for you, having a secret identity, a secret place nobody knows about…and there's nobody checking up on you, nobody watching you" (VII:10). In contrast to how Batman invites unpredictability and fear, what Nite Owl creates is a masculine obscurity that hinders others' recognitions of him.

16 Nite Owl has some moments of insight concerning the problems of his costumed heroism and masculine embodiment, but these fleeting moments cannot absolve him from a sense of self-degradation as he leads a retired life, especially in the face of other heroes of recognition and visibility. For example, when Laurie visits his secret base, Nite Owl suddenly laments his "being a crimefighter and everything" (VII:7) as well as his past involvement in "this adolescent, romantic thing" (VII:7). Nevertheless, as Laurie later expresses how Nite Owl's night vision goggles function like the power of her superhuman ex-boyfriend (Dr. Manhattan), thus unwittingly comparing Nite Owl's adolescent equipments with a formidable supernatural man-power, he is visibly unnerved for the next few panels (VII:9-10). Afterwards, as he fails to get hard and sexually perform with Laurie, the television ironically shows Ozymandias's muscular potency and gymnastic capability for a charity group (VII:14-15). Nite Owl's male selfhood is at these moments doubly deprecated: as a man, he fails physically and sexually; as a Nite Owl in retirement, he feels the threat of "this mask killer thing" (VII:20) and his own masculine obscurity.[20] Nakedly standing before his costume, he is thus "worried, confused," feeling "this anxiety, this terror bearing down" (VII:20). In order to dispense with his impotence, Nite Owl turns away from his earlier reference to his costumed heroism as an "adolescent, romantic thing" (VII:7) and accepts Laurie's suggestion of resuming their past

[20] The "mask killer" here (VII:20) refers to Ozymandias's murders of the Watchmen one by one in case they intervene his plan of massacre. As the killer's identity is still unknown to the Watchmen, they can only surmise that the killer knows well how to deal with the former costumed heroes. As Nite Owl's impotence is paired with other heroes' masculine capacities, his exhibitions of potency is paired with, and thus only stressed by, other heroes' powerlessness. For example, when Dr. Manhattan feels vulnerable in front of the reporters' questioning him in an open interview, Laurie and Nite Owl together defeat a gang of youngsters in a hidden alley (III:11-16).

nighttime adventures. After heroically saving a group of residents from a burning building, Nite Owl regains his masculine potency, makes love to Laurie, and expresses: "Yeah, I guess the costumes had something to do with it. It just feels strange, you know? To come out and admit that to somebody. To come out of the closet….Oh, yes. Jesus, yes. I feel so confident it's like I'm on fire" (VII:28). The building on fire is here directly paired with Nite Owl's heroic achievement and sexual arousal, though he does not see that a building on fire is never a stable structure to rely on for one's existence. Moreover, Nite Owl views his identification with a costumed identity as coming out of the closet, thereby equating his camouflage with a masculine (hetero-)sexuality and treating his hidden human body as being unfit for public attention and only fit for sexual gratification. At this moment, Nite Owl temporarily keeps the causes of his masculine anxiety at bay and is fully consumed by his costumed heroism.[21]

17 As the story proceeds, Nite Owl has to face Ozymandias and to establish himself as a 'true' hero who should stop the massacre, both of which depend on casting the most heroically-driven Ozymandias as the arch-villain. Nite Owl thus expresses his commonality, insignificance, and emasculation when facing the formidable Ozymandias: "Well, my stomach feels weird and my balls are all shrivelled up, so, yeah, I guess 'nervous' will do. Y'know, this must be how ordinary people feel. This must be how ordinary people feel around us" (XI:14). Even though Nite Owl here attempts to differentiate himself from the ordinariness of other people, what he does not expect is that it is actually the failure to stop Ozymandias that exposes the superficiality of his costumed heroism and reveals how ordinariness befits his vulnerability. Accordingly, after the massacre is executed, Nite Owl remorsefully strips himself naked, sexually unites with Laurie again, and tearfully faces his selfhood as an un-heroic man by responding that he now only smells of nostalgia (XII:21-22, 25). Thus facing his fragility and lamenting the irreversible failure at fulfilling "this adolescent,

[21] Nevertheless, we should also note that Laurie becomes more and more intimate with Nite Owl because she has difficulty living with her ex-boyfriend, Dr. Manhattan. Nite Owl's relationship with women is thus always at the mercy of other men.

romantic thing" (VII:7), Nite Owl embraces what he originally is, leaves his costume forever behind, and potentially transcends his entanglement of an ideal manhood with a real humanity.

18 If Nite Owl's end embodies a man's difficult reconciliation with his costumed selfhood, Walter Joseph Kovacs (a.k.a. Rorschach) demonstrates how a man is so identified with his mask of unswayed justice as to deny his human aspect. In Rorschach's own self-assertive words: "My things were where I'd left them. Waiting for me. Putting them on, I abandoned my disguise and became myself, free from fear or weakness or lust. My coat, my shoes, my spotless gloves. My face" (V:18). Indeed, we do not see any display of human flesh when Rorschach is in his costume, which is the only identity he acknowledges: "All Kovacs ever was: man in a costume" (VI:15). As Nite Owl also describes it: "Over the years, that mask's eaten his [Rorschach's] brains" (VII:9). Rorschach's notions of heroism and justice are thus directly presented on his outward display, especially on the shifting patterns of blackness and whiteness of his masked face, which reveals his perspective of a world continuously changing but without any gray zone: "Black and white. Moving. Changing shape…but not mixing. No gray. Very, very beautiful" (VI:10). As Ozymandias puts it in an interview: "I believe he's a man of great integrity, but he seems to see the world in very black and white, Manichean terms" (10).[22] Consequently, evilness and villainy become not only the basic elements in Rorschach's perception of the world but also the necessary grounds on which he relatively conditions his selfhood, which gradually becomes responsive, abstract, and extreme; as Rorschach thus describes his (un-)masked selfhood in costumes: "Without my face [mask], nobody knows. Nobody knows who I am" (V:11).

19 Whereas Nite Owl is haunted by such an obscurity from visibility, Rorschach feels

[22] The printed interview is also one of the intercalary chapters in *Watchmen*, "After the Masquerade: Superstyle and the Art of Humanoid Watching," in which Ozymandias is interviewed by Doug Roth from *Nova Express* (a fictional magazine in *Watchmen*). The citation signals the exact page number of the printed interview in *Watchmen*.

protected by it. Indeed, Rorschach seldom uses any subject in his speeches throughout *Watchmen*, which suggests the deliberate disconnection from any substantial being in his costumed identification with an abstract idea of impartiality. Accordingly, the public have difficulty recognizing Rorschach's heroic aspect, especially when he is caught and stripped of his mask: "Who is he? This ugly little zero is the terror of the underworld…" (V:28). The world is revealed to be essentially contradictory to Rorschach's imagination; as Nite Owl describes it: "It's just so hard, reaching him. I mean, all this stuff, this horror and madness, he attracts it. *It's his world*. This is where he lives…in this sordid, violent twilight zone…under this shadow" (VIII:18, emphasis added). Rorschach's mask of shifting patterns is thereby a living paradox, signaling how the society will not stop changing and how the attempt to pinpoint the exact boundary on this shifting reality is of no avail, except for arbitrarily defining one's heroic standing and masculine appearance.

20 Such a bigotry in costumed heroism makes Rorschach the most dangerous character in *Watchmen* to be reckoned with, especially when we look into how his self-evident commitments to justice and vigilantism are anything but impersonal and impartial; as Rorschach describes it: "Existence is random. Has no pattern save what we imagine after staring at it for too long. No meaning save what we choose to impose" (VI:26). Rorschach's conception of the world is originated from his personal experience when investigating a little girl's abduction and murder. After this frustrating event ― in which Rorschach, after discovering that the missing girl is dismembered and fed to dogs, burns the murderer alive (VI:18-26) ― Rorschach comes to identify himself only with his costume: "Then I was just Kovacs. Kovacs pretending to be Rorschach. Being Rorschach takes certain kind of insight. Back then, just thought I was Rorschach. Very naïve. Very young. Very soft" (VI:14). Rorschach thus leaves his human aspect behind and invents himself in opposition to his former immaturity and tenderness, and comes to be consumed by the evilness that his vigilantism attempts to dissipate in the first place. Moreover, Rorschach's ideal world order is

deeply rooted in his fantasies of his missing father and the American nationalism, and the ominous correlation between a self-proclaimed justice, the battles against evilness, and the nationalist patriarchy thus underlies his costumed heroism. As exhibited in his childhood diary: "I think he [the missing father] was the kind of guy who would fight for his country and what was right….I like President Truman, the way Dad would of wanted me to….I think it was a good thing to drop the atomic bomb on Japan" (n. pag.).[23] Rorschach's notion of sexuality —especially when it is associated with women —also constitutes a major part of his personality. When Malcolm Long, a psychiatrist, is assigned to evaluate Rorschach's mental state, he shows Rorschach a black-and-white picture (VI:2), the pattern of which reminds Rorschach not only of the silhouette of two persons having sex but also of the humiliations that traumatize him when he, as a boy, is punished by his mother when intervening her whoring (VI:3-4) and accosted by other teenagers taunting him as a "whoreson" (VI:6). Rorschach thereby shows a direct revulsion towards the female sexuality, whose association with other forms of defilement establishes the division between his masculine self-righteousness and the sinfulness of other men. Accordingly, as Rorschach convinces himself that it is the world of good versus evil that compels his costumed heroism, *Watchmen* relentlessly exposes how such a conviction is molded out of personal bigotries, nationalisitc imaginations, and psychological traumas in childhood.

21 Rorschach's self-perception is eventually disrupted by Ozymandias's plan and risks a serious disintegration. Against the other Watchmen's agreement to remain silent, Rorschach determines to expose Ozymandias's plan, and the pattern on his mask focalized in the panel (XII:23) becomes the same as the former black-and-white picture that reminds him of his childhood humiliations. The re-appearance of this same pattern, with its allusions to male

[23] As one of the intercalary chapters in *Watchmen*, the diary is written when Rorschach was young, in which he mainly describes his problematic relation with his parents. No page number is available. Rorschach still keeps writing his diary when he grows up (and he names it "Rorschach's journal" in *Watchmen*), the contents of which also compose the major part of his storyline.

potency, human corruptions, and interpersonal frustrations all mingling together, reveals how Rorschach is now haunted for the disintegration of a male selfhood he has constructed in childhood and practiced for life.[24] Ozymandias's success thereby renders Rorschach's manly presentment intolerably meaningless, which leaves him with no option but to bring chaos again by exposing the plan or to face himself as how the world has defined him —an "ugly little zero" (V:28) and a "whoreson" (VI:6). In the end, Rorschach takes his mask off, asks Dr. Manhattan to stop him from exposing Ozymandias's plan, and is killed with a human face full of tears (XII:23-24). Moore thus comments in an interview: "At the end this is not the mask talking, it's not Rorschach, it's the actual human being that is somewhere under there" (n. pag.). As the meaning of being Rorschach is made obsolete, Kovacs returns and faces what has obsessed him all along —a self-invention that has deprived Kovacs of his human aspect — and this deprivation is eventually paralleled by his death.

22 In contrast to Rorschach's being consumed by his costume, the Comedian is his own costume incarnate, and the boundary between a man and a costume thus collapses in the Comedian's personification. If Ozymandias establishes himself as a 'true' hero on a high moral ground, then the Comedian is the 'most real' one down on Earth. The Comedian's costume is thereby directly associated with the American ideologies through its colors and patterns borrowed from the American flag, embodying and subverting a powerful stereotype of modern manliness that, as George L. Mosse describes it, can be "seen, touched, or even talked to, a living reminder of human beauty, of the proper morals, and of a longed-for utopia" (6). The collapse between a costumed self and a real one is also shown in how the Comedian perceives the essential flaws of costumed heroism but, simultaneously and consequently, indulges himself in the corrupt violence that his costumed identity justifies. In the words of

[24] Nevertheless, in one small scene, Rorschach shows a different attitude towards sexuality. When questioning his landlady about a "serious business" of her sexual "slur on [his] reputation" (X:6), Rorschach, seeing the frightening faces of the landlady's children, refrains from getting even with her. This is the one rare occasion that Rorschach, seeing his own shadow of childhood vulnerability on the faces of the children, responds with silence and remorse. In fact, as Rorschach puts it, the landlady reminds him of his mother (V:11).

Paik, "the Comedian has always reveled and taken immense pride in his readiness to face up to the ugly truths of human existence…" (60). Since the true peace is out of the question, the most practical and satisfying way to maintain a temporary façade of order is to enjoy oneself in the employments of violence against social transgressions. The Comedian thus claims: "…once you figure out what a joke everything is, being the comedian's the only thing makes sense" (II:13), while also expressing that: "Hey…I never said it was a good joke! I'm just playin' along with the gag…" (II:13). Accordingly, the Comedian's seeming transcendence beyond the futility of costumed heroism paradoxically makes him the most obsessive performer, and his seeming superficiality and banality further make him the most worldly costumed hero, which is also demonstrated in how his costume is the least covered-up one among the human heroes in *Watchmen*.[25]

23 Nevertheless, the Comedian's outright acceptance of humanity and its heroic façade does not guarantee him a better association with human beings. In fact, this outright-ness always borders on a sense of masculine self-complacency, which, along with his indulgence in his own amusement, renders it difficult for this worldly hero to build any intimate relation with other people, especially with women. The broken sexual relationship literally and metaphorically leaves marks on the Comedian's smiley and manly face, which is first injured by Hooded Justice's beating him up when he attempts to rape Sally Jupiter (a.k.a. the first Silk Spectre, also the mother to Laurie) (II:5-7). The same face is then severely scarred by his pregnant Vietnamese girlfriend with bottle glass for his shedding responsibility to be the child's father; after the scarring, the Comedian immediately shoots her dead (II:14-15). The scarred face is again focalized and humiliated when Laurie, after the Comedian responds to her accusation of the attempted rape of her mother with the causal answer: "only once" (IX:21), splashes water over his face in public.[26]

[25] I here emphasize the 'human' heroes because Dr. Manhattan, a man transformed into a superhuman being, is mostly naked in *Watchmen*. Dr. Manhattan's extraordinariness will be discussed later.

[26] As both the Comedian and Sally Jupiter refrain from revealing the truth, Laurie knows quite late in *Watchmen*

24 Accordingly, even though the Comedian unabashedly enjoys in his own masculine embodiment, his cracked face not only implicitly betrays what he embodies, but it further demonstrates how the ceaseless miscommunications with women can render his masculine façade ugly and fragile. In fact, when knowing that the world is about to end in Ozymandias's hand, the Comedian has no one but his arch-enemy, Moloch the Mystic, to turn to and to express his feeling with a tearful and helpless face: "…I thought I knew how it was, how the world was. But then I found out about this gag, this joke…" (II:22). As Ozymandias tears down the very essence of costumed heroism that the Comedian sees through and lives on, the Comedian's self-amusing life, his egotism, and his masculine self-confidence thus become real-life jokes. As Ozymandias describes it: "Blake understood, too. He knew my plan would succeed, though its scale terrified him. That's why he told nobody. It was too big to discuss...but he understood" (XI:25). In the end, it befits the retired and desolate Comedian to show us his sorrowful and scarred face right before Ozymandias murders him by throwing him out from a tall building, breaking both the window and the Comedian's face (I:3) ─ a disfigured face that triggers the story of *Watchmen* and presages the downfall of the seemingly promising ideals of costumed heroism.

25 Jon Osterman (a.k.a. Dr. Manhattan), a man transformed into a superhuman being due to an incident in a scientific experiment, occupies a similar position as Ozymandias does: a superhero that disables other men and exposes the essential ineffectiveness of their costumed heroism. As Mason describes it: "The arrival of Dr. Manhattan would make the terms 'masked hero' and 'costumed adventurer' as obsolete as the persons they described" (*Under the Hood* 13). However, different from Ozymandias's motivation to bring peace, Dr. Manhattan's superhuman existence (and his alleged alliance with the U.S. government) instead precipitates the violence and chaos in the world; as Ozymandias describes it: "Jon's presence accelerated this….As tensions rose, the elevation of costumed heroes became a descent" (XI:22).

(IX:23-24) that the Comedian is her biological father.

Moreover, similar to the Comedian's self-incarnation, the boundary between Dr. Manhattan's human life and costumed life also collapses ―not because he fully embodies his costume, but because he does not need one. As shown in the reflections of his now break-up girlfriend, Laurie:

> The way he [Dr. Manhattan] looks at things, like he can't remember what they are and doesn't particularly care. This world, the real world, to him it's like walking through mist, and all the people are like shadows. Just shadows in the fog….And he doesn't care how people dress. (III:9)

Dr. Manhattan's supernatural power thus renders him visibly distinct from all the other men, and, unlike Superman, he does not need any costume to demonstrate that. However, as Laurie's descriptions of him reveal, such a nakedly masculine distinction also hinders him from building proper relationships with other human beings, especially with women. Janey Slater, Dr. Manhattan's first girlfriend, thus says to him with awe: "They say you can do anything, Jon. They say you're like God now" (IV:11). Laurie also expresses her uneasiness with his formidable power: "…but Jon, how did you know? I need to see you, you appear…I mean, it's all so deus ex machina…" (VIII:23).

26 Accordingly, instead of a story of peace on Earth maintained by a super-heroic being, what we have through Dr. Manhattan's story is a superhuman trapped in an all-too-human reality, and the combination of the two extremities embodied in his figure ―of an almost perfect male body with an almost perfect but inhuman superpower ―only leads to awry outcomes that even the God-like hands cannot keep hold of; as Dr. Manhattan thus reflects: "It's all getting out of my hands…" (IV:12). Indeed, when Dr. Manhattan tries to please Laurie sexually with a foreplay through his hands, he increases the number of his muscular body and attempts to 'magnify' her pleasure with more than two hands, which ends up frightening her out of bed (III:4). In fact, Dr. Manhattan's nude and masculine but eerily shining blue body is another issue that is emphasized in *Watchmen*. As Laurie expresses: "I

remember staring at you. I just couldn't get used to you. I mean, you had a great body, but, y'know, it was blue" (IX:15). Even though this naked exhibition of Dr. Manhattan is demanded by the U.S. government to be covered up (to which he later opposes), such a costumed covering-up does not stop people from paying attention to his spectacular body, to the potent sexuality it connotes, and to the scandalous gossips its blueness brings. When interviewed by *Nova Express*, Janey slanders Dr. Manhattan by saying: "He couldn't relate to me. Not emotionally. Certainly not sexually" (III:6); when Janey is publicly revealed to be "suffering from lung cancer" (III:14), one reporter asks Dr. Manhattan: "[D]o you think you gave Ms. Slater cancer by sleeping with her?" (III:15). Accordingly, compared to Superman's double identities and his predictable but functioning life, Dr. Manhattan can only lead a dysfunctional life due to the collapse between his human and superhuman aspect. Dr. Manhattan's seeming transcendence beyond human capacities thereby renders him the most vulnerable man when faced with the complexity of humanity. This vulnerability also exposes the conventional fallacy of relating superheroes with sexual potency and public recognition — a fallacy that is highlighted in the uncanny image of Dr. Manhattan's exposed muscular flesh with a blue color.

27 Dr. Manhattan's God-like super-heroic power is further downgraded by the fact that he is neither omnipotent nor omniscient, but only almost so. Dr. Manhattan's alleged clairvoyance turns out to be surmountable; as he describes it: "We're all puppets….I'm just a puppet who can see the strings" (IX:5). The fact that even a man as imaginably powerful as Dr. Manhattan is cannot stop Ozymandias's plan of massacre unrelentingly points to the ultimate incredibility of any conventional heroism, be it costumed or supernatural. Therefore, at the end of *Watchmen*, in response to Ozymandias's doubt of whether the plan really "all worked out in the end" (XII:27) to correct the wrongs in the world, Dr. Manhattan only responds: "Nothing ever ends" (XII:27), thus acknowledging that any form of heroism is not the final answer to how the world should proceed. Dr. Manhattan then decides to leave for another

"less complicated" galaxy (XII:27), leaving the Earth's fate to its non-superhuman beings who attempt to regain their beliefs in humanity after the massacre. After Dr. Manhattan's absence, Laurie and Nite Owl (now using his real name, Daniel) together work through their lives in alias while facing the probability of another chaos caused by the potential exposure of the truth of the massacre by Rorschach's journal.[27] This final uncertainty suggests that the cycle between human transgressions and reactive heroism will repeat itself for eternity, with or without such a superhuman as Dr. Manhattan. This uncertain ending, along with the fact that it is Dr. Manhattan who eventually confronts and kills Rorschach in *Watchmen*, further reveals that the complicated humanity and the justification of practicing justice are the core issues we should emphasize, not a man of bigoted heroism or of supernatural power.

28 Accordingly, the complex stories of costumed heroes in *Watchmen* collectively demonstrate such underlying issues of conventional heroism as a man's masculine embodiment, his justification of heroic behavior, and his responses to sexuality and interpersonal relations. If an ideal combination of manliness, heroism, and humanity is revealed to be a romantic fiction in *Watchmen*, then we may consider adopting a different form of heroism that is life-based and quotidian but actually worth more attentions and celebrations than the conventional stories of superpower are. Indeed, as Rorschach's journal remains undisclosed at the end of *Watchmen*, the novel shows us the peaceful reconciliation between Laurie and her mother (for the involvement with the Comedian) at the time of Christmas ― of celebrating a rebirth after the era of heroism. The conflicts originated from men's masculine and heroic embodiments are thus not resolved through more demands on the realizations of justice and manliness, but rather through two women's mutual recognitions of each other's emotion and humanity. Accordingly, the recognition of small-scale but humanly acts conducted by common, anonymous persons in everyday life can show us what to believe

[27] Before Rorschach (with Nite Owl) confronts Ozymandias, he writes down all he knows about Ozymandias's plan in his journal and sends it to a small publishing company (the Pioneer Publishing Inc.). We never know how the company is going to handle Rorschach's journal because the story simply ends here.

in at a time of post-heroism —a time that signals not the end of heroism, but a return to its potentials. Desmond Doss and Alan Turing were both recognized as wartime heroes, and both did not conform to the figure of conventional superheroes: while the former refused to use weapons, the latter was prosecuted for his homosexual acts. The public recognitions of such contributions can not only debunk the myth of super-heroism but further lead to a future in which face-to-face interactions and empathic concerns, not ideal displays of one's body and power, should last long and be appreciated.

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