

Jeffrey Kahan, Independent Scholar

Bio:

WHY AND WHEREFORE: I've been reading comic books for 50 yrs running. Of late, I've been publishing on this as well, as reflected in this the back-cover blurb that I've been using: Jeffrey Kahan reads and writes widely on all manner of speculative fictions. He's edited (or guest edited) the *New Ray Bradbury Review* and *The Dark Man*, as well as *Studies in Gothic Fiction* and the *Ben Jonson Journal*. He is the author of *Reforging Shakespeare* (1998), *The Cult of Kean* (2006), *Bettymania and the Birth of Celebrity Culture* (2010), *Getting Published in the Humanities* (2011), *Shakespiritualism: Shakespeare and the Occult, 1850-1950* (2013), *The Quest for Shakespeare: The Peculiar History and Surprising Legacy of the New Shakespeare Society* (2017), and *Shakespeare and Superheroes* (2018). An updated third edition of his *Caped Crusaders 101* is forthcoming. He works in California but quips that he lives in his own world.

Abstract:

"Doth mother know you weareth her drapes?": Shakespearean Mirth in *The Mighty Thor*

This article considers the relationship between Shakespeare's second tetralogy and Stan Lee's comic book, *The Mighty Thor*. Lee has stated that he borrowed liberally from Shakespeare in crafting Thor's speech patterns. Moreover, Thor's sidekick, Volstagg, a fat, cowardly knight, is obvious modeled on Shakespeare's Falstaff. More than simply borrowing from Shakespeare, Lee suggests a variety of answers to puzzles that have stumped many Shakespeareans. Additionally, the article explores of "The Tragedy of Loki," a Shakespearean playlet in the movie *Thor: Ragnarok* (2017) and the recent reconfiguration of Volstagg in *Avengers: Endgame* (2019). Rather than using Shakespeare as a form of legitimation, there is a growing sense that, when filming spandexed and caped heroes, Shakespearean dialogue is at best a distraction and a worst an embarrassment.

Danielle Sanfilippo, Independent Scholar

Bio:

My name is Danielle Sanfilippo, and I graduated from the University of Rhode Island in May. As someone who dedicated my dissertation to Tom Hiddleston in *The Hollow Crown*, I knew that this was the seminar for me. The idea of writing a Shakespearean reading of Thor and Loki has been circulating for a very long time. I have long dreamed of teaching a course on Shakespeare and modern adaptations. My latest obsessions are the Shakespeare Star Wars plays. I cannot wait to read everyone's work and I really wish we could meet in person.

Abstract:

"That's What Heroes Do": A Shakespearean Reading of Thor and Loki

(Sanfilippo, cont.)

Thor's story arc in the Marvel Cinematic Universe begins with *Thor* (2011), directed by renowned Shakespearean adaptor Kenneth Branagh. Branagh crafts the beginnings of a new Henriad as Thor is stubborn and arrogant, much to the dismay of his father Odin. The father-son conflict is underlined by the Edmund-like figure of Loki, whose jealousy drives much of the plot. Like his Shakespearean counterpart Prince Hal, Thor spends much of his time drinking and socializing with lewd company. Branagh capitalizes on his long experience directing Shakespeare to create a character-driven plot that is equally accessible to both Shakespeare buffs and comic connoisseurs.

The second film of the saga, *Thor: The Dark World*, though often considered underwhelming by Marvel fans, drives the two main characters, Thor and Loki, to new heights. Thor, like Hal, has grown more self-aware, but continues to struggle with the expectations placed on him. Loki, imprisoned for his crimes, grows more bitter. With the death of their mother, Frigga, Thor grows into a Shakespearean hero while Loki develops into a Shakespearean villain.

Thor: Ragnarok (2017) treats its audience to a Marvel version of *Henry V*, complete with high drama and broad comedy. Thor feels more self-assured in his place in the universe as a hero, complete with his own mantra; "That's what heroes do." Loki, despite the fact that he has usurped Odin, does not represent a great threat, much like the beleaguered French in *Henry V*. Despite their differences, the two work together to attempt to save Asgard and the end of the film represents a reconciliation of a hero and a villain that is Shakespearean in scope.

Avengers: Infinity War (2018) and *Avengers: Endgame* (2019) creates a tragic denouement for these larger than life figures. The once proud Loki is strangled by Thanos, leaving Thor broken. In what became a controversial choice, Thor becomes overweight and depressed, unable to cope with his failings. From Prince Hal, Thor has become Falstaff: outwardly jolly with immense pain inside.

The complete character arc of Thor and Loki can thus be read as a comic book Henriad for the modern age. Beginning with Kenneth Branagh, the directors of the Marvel Cinematic Universe take these figures of myth and create parallels with another grand figure in storytelling: Shakespeare. From his early spoiled beginnings as Prince Hal, Thor goes through a hero's journey, only to emerge profoundly saddened. Loki takes the path of a Shakespearean villain. Much like Edmund, he is driven by jealousy, and he too begins to repent as his death nears. Their stories translate and update Shakespeare's histories for the 21st century.

Amy Scott-Douglass, Marymount University

Bio:

I am an Associate Professor of English, Media, and Performance Studies at Marymount University, and I have been teaching and writing about Shakespeare spinoffs, and especially superheroes and villains, for a couple of decades.

I am very excited that this seminar "Marvel-ous Shakespeares" (I love that title) exists, and I feel like I have been waiting for something like this for a while. It was 2006 when I started

(Scott-Douglass cont.) teaching *Star Wars Episode 3* as *Othello* in my Shakespeare and Adaptation classes, and though my students always "got it," even 10 years later scholars were reluctant to recognize Shakespearean borrowings in the Marvel and Star Wars films, to the point where I couldn't get my scholarship on it published: the comics scholars thought it was too Shakespearean and the Shakespeare scholars thought it was "not Shakespeare enough." I put together a roundtable on Shakespeare and comics at SAA 2013 ("Shakespeare Redrawn: Comic Books and Adaptation"), but I have been out of the loop a bit since that. I think that might be the seminar question/topic that I would be interested in discussing: this category of Shakespeare that is not Shakespeare, or Shakespeare that is not Shakespeare first, and what we envision as the future of our profession and how Shakespeare superhero studies fits into that.

Abstract:

"Shakespeare and the Infinity Saga: Stark, Sherlock, and Spidey in Far from Home"
Released July 2019, *Spider-Man: Far from Home* marked the ultimate film in Marvel's Infinity Saga, the 23 Marvel films produced to that point starting with *Iron Man* (2008). *Far from Home* borrows from Shakespeare's *Henry IV* from early on, and directly so, when Nick Fury delivers a message to Peter Parker, who is reluctant to take on the Iron Man responsibilities and technologies that Tony Stark selected Peter to inherit after Tony's death. "'Uneasy lies the head that wears the crown,'" Fury tells Peter, and then deadpans, "Stark said you wouldn't get that because it's not a Star Wars reference." Borrowing from Shakespeare's *Henry IV* plays as well as recent screen adaptations of the Moriarty-based Sherlock Holmes stories that themselves allude to the *Henriad* (particularly the 2009 adaptation that stars Robert Downey Jr.—who plays Tony Stark as well as Sherlock—and Jude Law, who played Henry V as well as Dr. Watson), *Spider-Man: Far from Home* captures Gen Z's predicament: being told that it is up to them to repair the messed up, broken world that they have inherited from Boomers. If heir-to-the throne Peter is shirking his duties, it is because he is overwhelmed by the task—being expected to relinquish his adolescence and become the superhero that everyone—even the adults—depends upon to save the world. This is a Gen Z Prince Hal, and appropriately the supervillain he takes on, Mysterio, is a thinly veiled version of Trump, a narcissist who uses illusion technology to trick people into thinking he's their superhero, an unethical businessman and failed showman rejected by Hollywood who manipulates media technology in order to cultivate a fan base who will believe his illusion. The Shakespearean performance of political identity trope from the *Henriad*, then, is enlarged and heightened in *Far from Home*, redirected as a Gen Z critique of Trump's presidency of lies. Marvel's embracing of Shakespeare in *Far from Home* is a significant change from the attitude in most of the previous films in the Infinity Saga which were characteristically absent of Shakespeare or even anti-Shakespeare. Inserting Shakespeare into the major plotline of *Far from Home* affects not only all of the *Spider-Man* movies and appearances before *Far from Home*, it also converts the larger Tony Stark / Iron Man oeuvre into the *Henry IV* narrative, which, in turn, makes the entire Infinity Saga—all 23 films—Shakespearean.