

‘Shakespeare in the Park?’: William Shakespeare and the Marvel Cinematic Universe

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An early scene in the Marvel superhero film *The Avengers* (UK: *Avengers Assemble*) (2012) features the following encounter:

THOR : Do not touch me again.
IRON MAN : Then don't take my stuff,
THOR : You have no idea what you are dealing with.
IRON MAN : Uh ... Shakespeare in the park? Doth mother know you weareth her drapes?
THOR : This is beyond you, metal man. Loki will face Asgardian justice. (Whedon 2012)

When popular culture cites either Shakespeare's work or uses his name for cultural cachet, it rarely does so by coincidence or without reason: 'sometimes the challenge is bringing faint echoes into a clearer contrast. Some texts do not wear their Shakespeare on their sleeve, but carry him in their inner pockets' (Hansen and Wetmore, Jr. 2015: 17). Irrespective of its Shakespearean reverberations, an appraisal of the role of the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) as a cultural response to contemporary US politics must emphasize its aspiration to capture what is perceived as the zeitgeist. Consider, for example, *Star Wars: A New Hope* (1977) as a response to the 1969 moon landings, taking the western genre's prototypical exploration of early American expansionism and rendering this into a mythical narrative relocated to space, the site of America's next expansion. The original *Mad Max* trilogy (1979-85) achieved a similar effect by projecting public anxieties about nuclear war into a dystopian future, evoking images of a conceivable post-apocalyptic world faced by contemporary society.

Recent film adaptations of comic books similarly reflect the preoccupations of modern American culture. Films such as *Thor* (2011), *The Avengers* (2012) and *Captain America: Winter Soldier* (2014) deal with an existential threat, whether the menace of an alien outsider, or foes within an existing hierarchy or government. Arguably, a principal reason for the success of the MCU is due to *The Avengers'* focus on teamwork, comradeship and shared understanding. Contemporary audiences are increasingly drawn to diversity of gender and colour in their ensemble superhero teams, who work together against alien threats, rather than to the ubiquitous male action heroes of the 1980s, exemplified by actors such as Mel Gibson, Arnold Schwarzenegger and Bruce Willis. Finally, the directors and writers centre many of their storylines around bringing together an initially disparate group of individuals in order to oppose a

shared enemy, making possible a utopian reading of these films as the nation's drive to unite against external and internal forces.

My research into the MCU addresses the anomaly posed by Alden T. Vaughan and Virginia Mason Vaughan's *Shakespeare in America* (2012), in which they seek to present 'some new trends [which] are likely to reshape Americans' relationship with Shakespeare' (Vaughan and Vaughan 2012: 193), but acknowledge that 'the clearest contemporary trend is that it is increasingly difficult to identify a characteristically "American" Shakespeare' (200). Marjorie Garber also observes that 'what is often described as the timelessness of Shakespeare, the transcendent qualities for which his plays have been praised around the world and across the centuries, is perhaps better understood as an uncanny timelessness, a capacity to speak directly to circumstances the playwright could not have anticipated or foreseen' (Garber 2005: 3).

Adaptation theorists struggle to agree on Shakespeare's anticipation of his own legacy or capacity for appropriation, as demonstrated by the view expressed by Julie Sanders that, because 'Shakespeare's age had a far more open approach to literary borrowing and imitation than the modern era of copyright law encourages or even allows [...] Shakespeare would perhaps have expected to be adapted by future writers and future ages' (Sanders 2006: 47–8). Enforcing the principles of Shakespeare's age upon our own time runs the risk of bardolatry, rendering him as 'an all-purpose sage, a single author representing all the world's wisdom' (Garber 2005: 38). Douglas Lanier 'traces the process by which Shakespeare's plays were transformed from ephemeral popular entertainments to centrepieces of the literary canon, the process, that is, of Shakespeare's un-popularization' (Lanier 2002: 21–2). He further refutes the assumption that Shakespeare needs to be reclaimed from his ivory tower, in suggesting that 'we might more profitably imagine Shakespeare in less transcendental guise – as a player, both as an actor who dons and doffs roles in dramas written by others, and in the more contemporary sense, as a figure whose importance and survival depends upon skilfully navigating the ever-changing politics of the establishment and the street' (49). When thus focusing on his beginnings as a working writer and actor, it becomes less problematic to acknowledge Shakespeare as a prominent template for popular adaptation.

***Thor's* Shakespearean Substructure**

As an example of adaptation, *The Avengers'* status is not in doubt; it borrows from and builds upon the Marvel comic book series of the same name, as well as following the standalone films which preceded it within the MCU, thus serving as both sequel and dénouement. However, as a commercial product that co-opts Shakespeare, a superficial view of the film reveals it to be no more

a Shakespearean adaptation than many other contemporary screen franchises, in a long list stretching from *Star Wars* to *Game of Thrones*, where there exists a thematic synthesis of revenge, comic farce, magical wonder and familial conflict.

However, what if one digs beneath these surface comparisons to investigate what Shakespeare is doing in this work of popular culture and, indeed, which 'Shakespeare' is being referenced? The appellation is used here in quotation marks since Shakespearean adaptation theory often omits to differentiate between whether his name is being used to describe the work, the man or his afterlife. Ayanna Thompson notes, for instance, that 'Shakespeare is often used to mean his now-canonical body of work: a synecdoche of sorts in which the name stands for his entire career output' (Thompson 2011: 4). Shakespeare's myriad roles as a cultural entity mean that he cannot be cited without invoking any number of these connotations: canonical writer; critical adjective; one-man heritage industry; a bard of the streets; or a gentleman of the court.

In addition to the application of Shakespeare as a catch-all term, his 'name is also employed to signify a mythical fantasy about the author as a symbol for artistic genius, or as a symbol for the difficulty of the work created by that genius' (Thompson 2011: 4). This ambiguity is problematic, for how do we begin to quantify and define the Shakespeare equation in relation to perceived notions of highbrow and lowbrow forms of culture if we fail to acknowledge his presence in both of these? His legacy is so far-reaching and open to interpretation that such a task is clearly challenging. Therefore, an analysis of how different 'Shakespeares' reverberate throughout American popular culture, as observed in the MCU, seems fitting as a way to reframe an understanding of his continuing purpose and value for both contemporary artists and audiences.

If critics omit to acknowledge the value of partial reference within a hypertext, then they may fail to recognize the shifting and often unconscious process of adaptation. Therefore, when Shakespeare's name is raised by Iron Man, in his mocking of fellow Avenger Thor's outmoded speech patterns, flamboyant costume and noble gait, like Lanier, I am inclined to ask 'what is Shakespeare doing here? Why allude to Shakespeare in a work directed at a mass audience...?' (Lanier 2002: 2). Iron Man's allusion draws attention both to the deliberately heightened tone and appearance of Thor, in contrast to his own colloquial and technocratic interpretation of the modern superhero, and also to the famous Shakespeare festival of the same name, held each summer in New York's Central Park.

This has, further, become a generic term for all festivals of its kind, where 'like baseball games and Fourth of July parades, Shakespeare in the park has become an American summer ritual' (Vaughan and Vaughan 2012: 176), allowing the quotation itself to serve as a term applicable to the American

adoption of Shakespeare as their own national icon. It also makes explicit the Shakespearean subtext of the Kenneth Branagh-directed *Thor* itself, which was released a year before Joss Whedon's *The Avengers*. Discussing the relationship between these two films, their respective directors and this point of reference, Whedon commented that 'basically, Branagh was doing Shakespearean drama [...] and then I got to make fun of it by having Tony Stark call it "Shakespeare in the park"' (Nicholson 2013).

Shakespeare's influence on Marvel's developing cinematic universe is also present in the choice of specific directors for the films themselves, as the case of Branagh ably illustrates. He was hired, in part, to lend *Thor* the tone and gravitas of his earlier Shakespeare film adaptations, the first of which was his much-praised *Henry V* (1989). A closer inspection of *Thor*'s substructure reveals much about the film's use of both Shakespearean allusion and dramaturgy. Tom Hiddleston, the actor who had previously found critical acclaim onstage in Declan Donnellan's *Cymbeline* and Michael Grandage's *Othello* (both 2007), portrays Thor's villainous brother, Loki, and reportedly cited both Cassio and Iago, respectively the antagonists of *Julius Caesar* and *Othello*, as touchstones for his performance as the God of Mischief. He also explains that he and Branagh 'talked about Edmond [*sic*] the bastard son [*as*] someone who's grown up in the shadow of another man [...] the illegitimate, the one who's less loved... underloved, which feeds his lack of self-esteem' (Weinberg 2014), drawing clear lines of influence between *King Lear*'s Gloucester family sub-plot and *Thor*'s central focus on King Odin's acceptance of his son and rightful heir, Thor, contrasted with his rejection of his adopted son, Loki.

Similarly, Chris Hemsworth, who plays Thor, recounts how Branagh 'gave him a copy of the St. Crispin's Day monologue from Shakespeare's *Henry V* and told him he needed to be ready to perform it on camera the next day as part of a "regal diction and cadence exercise"' (THR Staff 2011). Although lacking the Shakespearean stage background of his co-star, this directly informed Hemsworth's performance as the unstable prince, whose trajectory from youthful rebellion to acceptance of kingly responsibility mirrors that of Prince Hal in *Henry IV Parts 1 and 2*. To intensify this allusion, *Thor* even has its very own Falstaff in Thor's similarly-named ally, Volstagg.

This Shakespearean relation is not exclusive to *Thor*, though, but also features in other instalments in the MCU. For example, in *Spider-Man: Far from Home* (2019), Stark's assistant Harold 'Happy' Hogan (Jon Favreau) passes on a significant piece of technical equipment to Peter Parker (Tom Holland). The box in which it comes contains the inscription, 'uneasy lies the head that wears the crown' (*2 Henry IV*, 3.1.31). Stark's choice of allusion not only continues his intertextual interaction with Shakespeare but also underlines the film's themes

of inheritance and responsibility, evident also in *Thor*. The trope within the Spider-Man films that ‘with great power comes great responsibility’ is here given greater heft by not only being compared with Henry IV’s weary pronouncement on the burden of kingship but also by being contextualized within Stark’s tragic ending in *Avengers: Endgame* (2019).

Joss Whedon’s Shakespearean Satire

In Whedon’s DVD commentary for *The Avengers*, the director revealed that “‘Shakespeare in the park’ was a line that [he] threw to Downey on the day of filming. Downey then ad-libbed “Doth mother know you weareth her drapes?”” (Asher-Perrin 2012). The purposeful inclusion of Shakespeare’s name during a pivotal scene of conflict, coupled with the improvised parody of Thor’s Shakespearean speech patterns by Iron Man actor Robert Downey Jr., serves to satirize Branagh’s Shakespeare-inflected take on *Thor*, explicitly acknowledging Shakespeare’s influence on both Whedon’s product and process of adaptation: ‘both Marvel and the Bard cranked out stories about heroes, betrayals and passionate, implausible romances. [...] Bringing the Incredible Hulk to life is just like resurrecting Hamlet: fans already know the character – they want to see a personal twist’ (Nicholson 2013).

However, the reference point is typical of the level of subtlety prevalent in some directors, amongst whom Whedon stands as a prominent exponent of intertextual practice. A follow-up to this Shakespearean reference is seen in the film’s sequel, *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (2015), where Tony Stark muses that ‘it’s been a really long day. Like, Eugene O’Neill long’ (Whedon 2015). This intertextual quip comes after the enemy, Ultron, successfully wreaks havoc on the minds of the Avengers and further establishes Stark as the sardonic satirist of the group. Whedon is not simply paying homage to Shakespeare and Branagh by aligning his work with theirs; at the same moment, he is able entertainingly to reflect their heightened flamboyance through lampoonery, inverting Thor’s self-serious stereotype of the archaic Shakespearean hero with the typically sardonic wit of the most contemporary Avengers character, who breaks with superhero tradition in his first solo film by publicly revealing his dual identity as Stark and Iron Man.

Shakespeare’s allusion in *The Avengers* film operates by placing the playwright in a context which Marvel believes their entire audience will understand and, crucially, will pay money to experience. Shakespeare here serves as a meme, a cultural synecdoche in the broadest possible sense, enabling Iron Man to cast the farcical situation as ‘Shakespeare in the park’, thereby conjuring up the festival spirit which began with its inaugural performance in 1954 and has been central to the popularization of Shakespeare in America ever since. Thus,

the character's derisive use of the appellation, swiftly followed by his quasi-Shakespearean ad-lib concerning Thor's 'drapes', offer a parodic reading of *Thor* to represent the combination of self-aware pastiche and knowing homage that has become the tonal blueprint for the MCU's commercial dominance and critical success.

Shakespearean Shorthand for Superhero Thespians

This shift in tone has become increasingly prevalent as the MCU has grown, particularly with the release of more recent Marvel films such as *Guardians of the Galaxy* (2014) and *Thor: Ragnarok* (2017). In the latter case, Marvel took the creative decision, after the relative disappointment of *Thor: The Dark World* (2013), to hire the New Zealand director Taika Waititi, known for his work on the satirical comedy show, *Flight of the Conchords* (2007-9), and vampire mockumentary *What We Do in The Shadows* (2014). His appointment introduced a less serious, more comedic tone to the *Thor* franchise, shifting the film away from what Hopkins had derisively termed 'Mock Shakespeare' (Hiscock 2013). This remark was made in the course of an interview during which he admitted that he had not seen *The Dark World* and had already forgotten about it. He further explained that 'all I was concerned about [...] was to turn the dialogue that I had into something that was more human instead of too overwritten' (2013).

The symbolic comparison between Odin's (Anthony Hopkins) banishment of Thor and Lear's dismissal of Cordelia, or the division between a legitimate and a bastard son, are unlikely to have been lost on Hopkins who had twice played Lear, once onstage in 1986–87 at the National Theatre, and, more recently, onscreen in Richard Eyre's 2018 film adaptation. The explanation that he found it necessary to tone down the heightened dialogue rather than amplifying any Shakespearean allusions is indicative of the fact that actors such as Hopkins are able to bring their experience to bear, while also adding a level of prestige to augment the stature of superhero projects as cultural entities in their own right. This is clear in the frequency with which seasoned Shakespearean actors such as Patrick Stewart and Ian McKellen feature in comic book films as, respectively, Prof Charles Xavier and Magneto in the X-Men series.

Gregory Doran, artistic director of the RSC, indicates a correlation between the Shakespearean actor's experience of delivering heightened language and emotion, and the way in which this is mirrored in modern superhero narratives, suggesting of such performers that they 'have the capacity to scale the heights of human emotion that Shakespeare charts in roles like Lear, Hamlet, and Cleopatra. [...] He challenges an actor to go to the limits of human experience, and find the surprising elements of humour and pathos, the absurd and the

pathetic, at the very edges of catastrophe. Perhaps that's why they have the ability to play the almost superhuman scale that science fiction and fantasy demand' (Schou 2014). Colm Feore, who portrays Laufrey, King of the Frost Giants, in *Thor* and had previously appeared alongside Hopkins in Julie Taymor's 1999 film adaptation of *Titus Andronicus*, noted that he had 'just finished playing Macbeth and Cyrano de Bergerac in repertoire [...] They all feel, interestingly enough, as if they cross-pollinate, because everything that I've done in the theatre, Branagh is using' (Weintraub 2010). Feore explained further that 'during the breaks, Tony, myself and Ken would be talking in Shakespearian shorthand about what the characters were doing, what we thought they may be like, and how we could focus our attention more intelligently' (Seeton 2011). His responses indicate that, like Hiddleston, he was aware of the comparisons to be made with *Lear*, particularly through the presence of Branagh as a director whose Shakespearean background would inevitably influence the film's execution, development and reception.

Audiences at the Globe in Shakespeare's time would have equally been alert to connections between Shakespeare's plays, such as the comic inversion of *Romeo and Juliet's* tomb scene within *A Midsummer Night's Dream's* retelling of Pyramus and Thisbe. Marvel's audiences are equally conscious of references within films to previous releases in the studio's ever-increasing canon. For instance, in *Thor: Ragnarok*, Waititi included a self-referential moment of parody akin to 'Shakespeare in the park' at the beginning of his film. During Thor's return to Asgard, he discovers that the public are watching a play which re-enacts the apparent death of Loki during the Second Battle of Svartalfheim, which took place during *The Dark World*. The play is performed as a melodrama in exaggerated language that venerates Loki:

Loki, my boy ... 'Twas many moons ago I found you on a frost-bitten battlefield. On that day, I did not yet see in you Asgard's saviour. No. You were merely a little blue baby icicle that melted this old fool's heart (Waititi 2017).

Thor immediately realises that Odin, who is watching the play whilst eating grapes and surrounded by women, is Loki in disguise. Prior to unmasking him, he asks his brother the name of the play, to which Loki replies 'The Tragedy of Loki of Asgard' (Waititi 2017). Waititi thus parodies the previous *Thor* films, and their archaisms in particular, and in the same manner as Iron Man's mockery of Thor in *The Avengers*, invites the audience to laugh at the Asgardian sense of self-aggrandisement through this histrionic play-within-a-film.

Black Panther and the Ghost of Hamlet

Black Panther (2018) is an unusual instance of a comic book-based film which was already regarded as an important cultural document before its release. Beyond its many firsts for the MCU, including the franchise's first black director (Ryan Coogler), black lead actor (Chadwick Boseman) and a predominantly black ensemble cast, the film made a number of acute comments on contemporary American politics. For instance, its post-credits sequence took aim at Trumpian isolationism and, to quote the film's protagonist, how 'in times of crisis, the wise build bridges while the foolish build barriers' (Coogler 2018), possibly a veiled reference to Donald Trump's election campaign promise to build a wall on the US-Mexico border. This particular entry into the MCU canon, therefore, has an especially timely resonance because of the ways in which *Black Panther* addresses issues of race and representation when intolerance and hostility have increased with the current administration.

The plot of *Black Panther* follows a young African prince who returns home after his father dies in tragic circumstances, for which he had previously sought revenge in *Captain America: Civil War* (2016), and finds himself conflicted about his royal status as well as his responsibilities as both a monarch and son. He encounters opposition on all sides while attempting to assume his father's mantle, and in the film's closing section, meets a rival, Erik Killmonger, who is partially motivated by his own father's death. It is possible, then, to read *Black Panther* as a film structurally influenced by *Hamlet*, but reclaimed for a black protagonist and ensemble cast, just as the play itself was in the RSC's 2016 production starring Paapa Essiedu.

However, the connections extend beyond the specifics of plot and character motivations to the cast members' research and performance background. For instance, in a discussion with National Book Award-winning author Ta-Nehisi Coates, Andy Beta reports that Boseman explained how 'in creating the character of King T'Challa, he looked to William Shakespeare and one of his most famous characters, the indecisive Prince Hamlet. There's a parallel between the dead fathers and a sense of indecision about leading [...] but there's also a sense of privilege in T'Challa and an unawareness of other perspectives' (Beta 2018). This suggests that Boseman was not only aware of the parallels that audiences might draw between *Hamlet* and *Black Panther*, but also consciously drew on this comparison in his portrayal of T'Challa. Moreover, T'Challa's deceased father T'Chaka is played by South African actor, director and playwright John Kani, who had previously played both Claudius and the Ghost in Janet Suzman's 2006 production of *Hamlet* as part of the RSC's Complete Works Festival at the Swan Theatre. Although Kani does not deliver any lines that directly allude to Shakespeare's text in *Black Panther* it is inconceivable to imagine that the

experience of performing in *Hamlet*, especially as the Ghost, did not indirectly influence the scenes which he shares with Boseman in the Wakandan Ancestral Plane:

T'CHAKA : Stand up. You are a king. What is wrong my son?
T'CHALLA : I am not ready.
T'CHAKA : Have you not prepared to be king your whole life?
Have you not trained and studied, been by my side?
[...]
T'CHALLA : I am not ready ... to be without you.
T'CHAKA : A man who has not prepared his children for his
own death has failed as a father. Have I ever failed
you?
T'CHALLA : Never. Tell me how to best protect Wakanda. I
want to be a great king, Baba. Just like you.
T'CHAKA : You're going to struggle. So, you'll need to surround
yourself with people you trust. (Coogler 2018)

This extract from their dialogue can most effectively be interpreted as an evocation of *Hamlet* if viewed through the lens of Kani's Shakespearean background as well as *Black Panther's* intertextual connections to *The Lion King* (1994), which is itself a *Hamlet* adaptation. Nonetheless, for particular audience members who are familiar with both Shakespeare and superheroes, the scene yields additional meaning by means of its connection to Hamlet's conversation with his dead father, when the Ghost compels Hamlet to act rather than bemoan his loss:

HAMLET : Whither wilt thou lead me? Speak! I'll go no further.
GHOST : Mark me.
HAMLET : I will.
GHOST : My hour is almost come
When I to sulphurous and tormenting flames
Must render up myself.
HAMLET : Alas, poor ghost.
GHOST : Pity me not, but lend thy serious hearing
To what I shall unfold.
HAMLET : Speak, I am bound to hear.
GHOST : So art thou to revenge when thou shalt hear.
(*Hamlet*, 1.5.1–7)

In this scene, the Ghost's immediate reaction to Hamlet's expression of pity at his father's imminent return to the purgatorial flames is to quell any sympathy in favour of the need for his son to hear of the nature of his demise, and to take action to avenge his murder. His hurried delivery is in keeping with

his abrupt dispatch at the hands of his own brother. This provides a further connection to *Black Panther* through T'Chaka's murder of his brother N'Jobu, father of Killmonger, at the beginning of *Black Panther*, albeit for honourable reasons. Killmonger's decision to return to Wakanda and challenge for the throne is partially motivated by his desire for power as well as his determination to overthrow white oppressors, but, like Laertes, is also deeply rooted in his grief over his father's death and desire to avenge him.

The constraints of time are different within the Ancestral Plane to which T'Challa journeys, where he meets the ghosts of previous Wakandan kings who bore the mantle of the Black Panther. T'Chaka's response to his son's admission of grief and longing is akin to that of King Hamlet's ghost: T'Challa must overcome these emotions in order to be a successful monarch and maintain the safety of his nation. Although *Black Panther* cannot be perceived as a *Hamlet* adaptation, its links to Shakespeare's play through its performers, structure and interview comments make it a useful example of how, both for economic and artistic reasons, the MCU continues to foster an intertextual relationship with the playwright.

Conclusion: The Limits of Comparison

In examining Shakespeare's place in American popular culture, it is important to note that the playwright represents more than just a cultural and artistic template to be embraced or critiqued: rather, he remains the prominent example of a universal figure, language or set of principles through which the society seeks to understand itself. Shakespearean references in MCU movies enable audiences to understand how the culture which they absorb is part of a universal historical tradition that repurposes real-life problems. These might include issues such as divided families and questions of legacy, interpreted as popular entertainment, as they have done since long before Shakespeare set quill to parchment. A further bonus for consumers of both Shakespeare and superheroes lies in the sense that the worlds which they inhabit are of equal intellectual significance.

It is wise to remain cautious about labelling any art form as 'Shakespearean' without reference to direct links to the playwright's life, work or influence. This was apparent in the response to the unexpectedly sombre ending of *Avengers: Infinity War* (2018), during which many of Marvel's heroes are killed by the villain Thanos, whereupon a number of reviewers and bloggers rushed to describe the ensemble film as both 'a full-fledged Shakespearean tragedy' (Truitt 2018) and 'an old-fashioned Shakespearean tragedy' (Bundel 2018). Unlike *Thor*, *The Avengers* and *Black Panther*, this film contains no direct allusions either to Shakespeare's name or to tropes common to his work: indeed, there are no scenes that can be interpreted as variants on particular plays. These writers

attribute the expression 'Shakespearean tragedy' to *Infinity War* in order to express the manner and suddenness with which these characters are brutally discarded. Not unlike the actors who compare Marvel with Shakespeare, they intend this reference to elevate the tragedy wrought by the actions of Thanos to lend *Infinity War* a sense of epic grandeur. In these responses, the Shakespeare synecdoche is being used in the same way it would feature in a news broadcast; to help express mass destruction or loss on a large scale.

In this article, three different types of Shakespearean allusion in the MCU have been examined in order to argue that, in specific instances, the playwright is invoked for both serious and ironic purposes. *Thor* is a cocktail of different Shakespeare plays, drawing as it does from *Lea*'s familial division, Prince Hal's redemptive arc in the *Henriad* and the deceptive practices of myriad Shakespeare villains, from Iago to Cassius. *The Avengers* took this Shakespearean template and directly parodied it in order to reflect both Branagh's directorial interpretation and Hemsworth's performance as the character of Thor. *Black Panther* is more specifically indebted to the individual text of *Hamlet*, but is also linked to *Thor* through connections of uncertain heirs to the throne, lost fathers and threats to their isolated kingdoms.

Shakespeare and Marvel are such prominent expressions of contemporary culture that it is unlikely that the comparisons or allusions will end soon. Marvel has released twenty films in ten years to become the highest-grossing film franchise of all time, with twelve more titles in various stages of production. With a vast array of source material from which to adapt, such as Neil Gaiman's *Marvel 1602* (2003), in which the superheroes are relocated to Elizabethan England and Shakespeare himself appears as a character, it is entirely plausible that the playwright will re-emerge as a figure within the cinematic universe. It is my hope that, by presenting an analysis of the most explicit references to Shakespeare within the MCU to date, this article has laid the ground for an ongoing consideration of how the playwright continues to intersect with this franchise.

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