

Recreational Shakespeare



# SHAKESPEARE AND SUPERHEROES

By  
**JEFFREY KAHAN**

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Press

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## **SHAKESPEARE AND SUPERHEROES**

There is a divide between the energy and joy with which the public engages in Shakespeare and what we do as academics. The *Recreational Shakespeare* series crosses this divide with a series of new, playful, and challenging voices that look at public engagements with Shakespeare in popular culture and education.

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*This monograph is dedicated to my role models, literary and otherwise:*

*Bruce Wayne*

*Gandhi*

*Sarah Silverman*

*Ritchie Blackmore*

*Jimmy Carter*

*Daffy Duck*

*Winston Churchill*

*Flo*

*James Marshall*

*Mom*

*Stan Lee*

*Alvin Lee*

*Becky Sharp*

*Ben and Jerry*

*Robert Goren*

*Bill Gates*

*Muhammad Ali*

*Jeffrey "The Dude" Lebowski*

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## PREFACE

As a child, I read comic books incessantly. Every Monday, my local corner store would rack the new Marvel and DC Comics for the week. I'd go in, pick out those I liked best, *Captain America*, *Thor*, *Batman*, *X-Men*, and stash them on a bottom rung, behind the unenticing *Richie Rich*, *Disney*, and *Archie* comics (though still a kid, I felt that I was already too *big*, too advanced, for those titles). Then I would wait until Friday; my mom would give me a dollar, and I would ride my bike back to the shop and retrieve my buried treasure. I would read each issue cover to cover, then bag and board them. It wasn't the financial value that I was sealing up. I just wanted to keep and catalogue those issues, so that I could revisit them whenever I liked. Indeed, even as a kid, I understood that Marvel and DC were creating literary universes, and that any one story had an impact on the whole; storing back issues was just part and parcel of comic book reading.

While I lacked the formal language of literary criticism, comic books taught me the Aristotelian basics: I learned about character flaw (*hamartia*); I became expert in anticipating a reversal of fortune (*peripeteia*), in sharing with the hero a moment of tragic recognition (*anagnorisis*), and, in the price paid to vanquish evil, a spiritual cleansing (*catharsis*). Then I grew up a bit, went to college and took classes that fixated on distinct authors, or distinct genres, or eras. But, as my reading progressed, the comic book instinct took over: I began to see how some ideas and approaches were cycled and recycled, how the canon itself was interconnected. Another persistent aspect of comic book culture: I'd save up as best as I could and rove the used books stores, looking for old Shakespeare editions, biographies, criticism, or editions of plays by his contemporaries.

Now I'm 53, and I don't much look like that kid on a bike or that grad student living off canned beans and beer, but I am still a collector, regularly trolling the web for criticism, old editions, and comics alike. What I have discovered is that these forms of literature are just that: varying forms of the literary experience. If that sounds unremarkable, I guess I was (and am) slow; slow to rid myself of literary assumptions, interests, and, yes, pretensions. I don't, for example, get *Harry Potter*. But I do get that millions of people love those books, just as millions love Shakespeare and *Spider-Man*.

If you are the sort that can't look beyond arbitrary boundaries of high and low culture, then you are unlikely to pick up this monograph, but for those who have,

your openness and interest are appreciated. The chapters that follow are idiosyncratic, but my hope is that my insights or, in some cases, sheer passion, may pique your own literary interests. These essays are informed by a lifetime of reading, feeling, and thinking about two forms of influential literature: Shakespeare, embraced for centuries by academics, theater goers, and ordinary readers; and superhero comic books, now, arguably, the dominant literary expression of our era.

While making plenty of declarations, I make no definitive statements. Sometimes, you get the seven year old on his bicycle, sometimes the academic behind his lectern, but always a reader who is attempting to connect one story to another, one character to another, attempting to build out of many lands and peoples a coherent literary landscape. More often than not, I surprise my various selves, discovering in the act of reading new ways of accessing Superman's Fortress of Solitude or exiting Timon's cave of misanthropy. A literary life can be a path that leads inward to our deepest selves or outward to the unacquainted; but, ultimately, all reading is like any other aspect of life: relational. In the pages that follow, my hope is that in reflecting on my interconnected interests and eccentricities, you will know that you are not alone in yours. Welcome to the family.

*Jeffrey Kahan, reading comic books and Shakespeare, 2018*

## INTRODUCTION

On December 11, 2015, the pop culture news outlet the *Nerdist* reported on a new Kickstarter campaign: “Shakespeare Fights Crime Like Batman in NO HOLDS BARD.” The concept is simple. Take “everyone’s favorite literary hero even further, by portraying him as an actual superhero fighting crime in Elizabethan England. Game on!” Along the way, the bard, Pirandello-like, will encounter and partner with his own characters. The enthusiasm for the project is in part based on the juxtaposition of literary and pulp materials. As one delighted academic commented on my Facebook reposting, “Shakespeare as a superhero! What a concept!”

Similar to the aforementioned *No Holds Bard*, this short book will offer readers a series of thought experiments. The goal is not to popularize Shakespeare or valorize comic books—in both regards, it’s difficult to imagine a more golden or brazen age<sup>1</sup>—but to explore the values in both. *Shakespeare and Superheroes* does not argue that comic books (in all their media platforms: books, video games, newspaper serials, cartoons, TV and radio series, movies, etc.) can or should replace Shakespeare. Instead, the aim is to think of comics as allusively Shakespearean,

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<sup>1</sup> Comic books are generally listed historically as follows: Golden Age (1930–1956); Silver Age (1956–1985); Bronze Age (1985–present). The ranking has little to do with popularity or even collectability. Aside from the original issues of *Captain America*, *Batman*, *Wonder Woman*, or *Superman*, the most valuable books are generally Silver Age, especially Marvel books from 1961–1970. One might argue that we are now in a digital age, but downloaded comics have yet to replace printed copies. Judging by 2016 comic books sales, digital has a long way to go. At the latest count, digital downloads generated \$90 million in sales annually; print generated \$995 million in sales. “Yearly Sales,” *Comichron.com*, accessed November 11, 2017. Many comic book buyers generally see e-comics as “gimmicky.” See “AXEL-IN-CHARGE: SXSW Wrap Up, Digital Initiatives and Marvel’s New #1s,” *Comic Book Resources*, accessed March 14, 2014.



Figure 0.1. Shakespeare and sidekick, Romeo.  
*No Holds Bard* (2015).

telling similar stories, expressing similar concerns, exploring similar values. But, to be clear, comics and Shakespeare are not the same or even separate but equal. You don't buy *Batman* to study *Macbeth*. Not only are the aesthetics of the respective reading experiences very different, so too are the speeds with which we read these materials. Cultural dynamics dictate that we take our time reading Shakespeare—there is an inherent presumption of depth; the comic book panel is inherently more visceral; comics demand action, not reflection.

That said, it is my contention that Shakespeare and comic books, however unequal, are at present in dialogue with each other. Those conversations, while real for our generation, are almost certainly ephemeral. Thinking about *Hamlet* and the television show *Arrow* will make perfect senses *only* to the current crop of comic book fans, movie goers, and gamers, and not simply because of the recent Shakespeare manga adaptations or the distressingly jejune but popular *Kill Shakespeare* graphic series. A seeming tsunami of adaptations, YouTube parodies, and daily Facebook memes have trained the computer literate to re-contextualize and revitalize seemingly ordinary objects. Comics, while not changing Shakespeare's words, are challenging our perceptions of his meaning, actively demonstrating that great art, or, rather, its influence, is always irrepressible and unpredictable. But there is no guarantee that this dialogue will continue or, if it continues, that it will be of any interest to a wider audience. Some discussions are cheek by jowl or moment by moment.

*Shakespeare and Superheroes* is perhaps best understood as coming out of a relatively rare subspecies of criticism, what Joyce Carol Oates dubs the "bibliomemoir"—a

recent, intimate, and often irreverent form of autobiographical reading. Her examples include Geoff Dyer's "very funny if despairing account of the writer's failure to produce [a] sober, academic study" of D. H. Lawrence's work; Christopher Beha's "warmly personal account of a young man's intensive reading of the Harvard Classics (51 volumes) amid a season of familial crisis and loss," and Rick Gekoski's chatty *Outside of a Dog: A Bibliomemoir*, which traces the influence of 25 books on the English bookseller-author's life."<sup>2</sup> Not surprisingly, this subgenre also has its fair share of Shakespeare-related confessionals: Herman Gollob's *Me and Shakespeare* (2002), which includes his father's profane impressions of the bard: "'Son,' he'd say, 'when you grow up, you're going to discover that the world is filled with mean selfish bastards like these vicious hombres in Shakespeare'"; Dominic Dromgoole's *Will & Me: How Shakespeare Took Over My Life* (2006), in which the author, a well-regarded English theatre director and writer, offers his story of "how I have stumbled, shambled and occasionally glided through life with Shakespeare as a guide"; and Jillian Keenan's depressingly flaccid *Sex With Shakespeare* (2016), a memoir that purports to discuss "themes and events that reflect the Shakespeare canon" but often reads like a pseudo-Elizabethan rewrite of *Fifty Shades of Grey*:

King Lear winked.  
My skin crawled ...  
"Shut up, bitch," I shouted at Lady Macbeth, fighting to free myself from  
the Friar's grip.  
"You just want to watch the world burn."  
"Deep down, isn't that what you want, too?" Goneril purred.  
I froze.<sup>3</sup>

In terms of traditional academic studies, stylistically, *Shakespeare and Superheroes* is indebted to Theodora Papadopoulou and William McKenzie's recent collection of essays, *Shakespeare and I* (2012), which eschews "familiar stylistic decorum," and Judith Pascoe's *The Sarah Siddons Files* (2013), which includes archival study, analysis, and anecdotes of doing the dishes.<sup>4</sup> These works may seem idiosyncratic and intellectually uneven, but, collectively, their growing acceptance

<sup>2</sup> Joyce Carol Oates, "Rebecca Mead's 'My Life in Middlemarch,'" Sunday Book Review section, *New York Times*, January 23, 2014.

<sup>3</sup> Herman Gollob, *Me and Shakespeare* (New York: Random House, 2002), 10; Dominic Dromgoole, *Will & Me: How Shakespeare Took Over My Life* (London: Penguin Books, 2006), x; Jillian Keenan, memoir, *Sex With Shakespeare* (New York: William Morrow, 2016), 270–71.

<sup>4</sup> Theodora Papadopoulou and William McKenzie, "Introduction: The 'I' Has It," *Shakespeare and I* (London: Continuum, 2012), 1; Judith Pascoe, *The Sarah Siddons Files: Romanticism and the Lost Voice* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2011), 20

suggests an important stylistic turn in academia. By making themselves more relatable to their readers, the aforementioned authors are not dumbing down their thought processes; quite the opposite. They are complicating their (and our) sense of the interconnected, approaching the canonically sanctioned and, thus, culturally sacred, by way of the ordinary—and, in the case of this study, what's more ordinary than a comic book? *Shakespeare and Superheroes* seeks to re-democratize criticism itself by encouraging all readers to engage in and to respond to literary arguments using their own common language. As explained by Wolfgang Iser, the task of reading critically consists in honing our “deciphering capacity,” in questioning “consistent patterns,” and in bringing “to the fore an element of our being of which we are not directly conscious.”<sup>5</sup> This process demands that readers of Shakespeare and *Superman* alike reevaluate their assumptions and hierarchies; in some instances, it may call on both constituents (or, perhaps more accurately, loyalists) to unwind longstanding critical assumptions in favor of personal tastes, interests, or experiences. In all instances, the more readers trust themselves, the more they bring of themselves to the text or texts, “the greater the discovery.”<sup>6</sup>

The *greater*, in this instance, is synonymous with the *intense* or the *particular*, and the *particular* is never very far from the *peculiar*. In rereading the chapters of *Shakespeare and Superheroes*, I readily admit that the results are often less nuanced than most academic studies, but also more grandly operatic, tectonic, lion-hearted. An epic sweep can, potentially, dustbin traditional critical debate, but I doubt we need to worry inordinately here. Comic book readers, intrigued by what they encounter in *Shakespeare and Superheroes*, may well seek out alternative perspectives and explanations in both primary texts and supplementary studies. Likewise, if this monograph introduces traditional Shakespeare readers to a world of literature which they might have previously overlooked or snappily dismissed, it will also provide them with topics to engage a hitherto slighted readership.

It's probably best to think of this short book as a map, and a map is not a substitute for a journey. In the pages that follow, you'll be required to put your superhero t-shirt on and read some Shakespeare, to watch some *Arrow* (especially Season 1!) and target some *Hamlet*, to thumb through some *Wonder Woman* and snap some literary selfies in a forest of cross-dressers; to explore Deadpool's existential one-liners and reassess Iago's comedic cruelties. All things are ready, if our minds be so.

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<sup>5</sup> Iser, *The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974), xiv, 294.

<sup>6</sup> Iser, *The Implied Reader*, 39.