

SHAKESPEARE IN *SHANG-CHI*: TO REFERENCE OR NOT TO REFERENCE

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Abstract

Trevor Slattery, played by Ben Kingsley, holds an uncomfortable subject position within the Marvel Cinematic Universe. He was introduced as the Mandarin in *Iron Man 3* (2013), and this appearance occasioned significant criticism for its racist tropes. Slattery was recently re-introduced in *Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings* (2021), accompanied by the short film *All Hail the King* (2021). The racist elements within Slattery's characterization have been justified in two specific ways: his role as an actor and his portrayal as a clown. With his most recent appearances, both of those covers have been deliberately intertwined with Shakespeare. Long before Harold Bloom asserted Shakespeare as Author-God, the Bard was used as a tool of colonialization around the world; the assumption was that his words and poetry would solidify English as a lingua franca and have a "civilizing," "gentling" effect on the masses. As Ruben Espinosa states: "Shakespeare is, and always has been, invariably connected to discourses about oppressive structures" (Espinosa 2021, 159). And yet what is especially curious about the Marvel Cinematic Universe's most recent use of Shakespeare is the seeming willful ignorance of this complex history.



There is a certain irony in popular culture's reliance on Shakespeare as a neutral text to be borrowed, referenced, and alluded to. Long before Harold Bloom asserted Shakespeare as Author-God, the Bard was used as a tool of colonialization around the world; the assumption was that his words and poetry would solidify English as a lingua franca and have a "civilizing," "gentling" effect on the masses. As Ruben Espinosa states: "Shakespeare is, and always has been, invariably connected to discourses about oppressive structures" (159). And yet what is especially curious about the Marvel Cinematic Universe's most recent use of Shakespeare is the seeming willful ignorance of this complex history.

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When Slattery appears in *Shang-Chi*, he is quoting Macbeth. A mystified Katy Chen, played by Awkwafina, asks, "Who are you?" and Slattery explains his presence via a monologue so obviously designed to acquit Marvel in the court of viewers' minds it manages to feel even more pandering than the all-female Avengers moment in *Endgame* (2019). Slattery tells the group:

Well, sometime ago, I was offered the role of a terrorist. I know, facile, trite. I couldn't agree more. But times were lean, you know what I mean? Anyway, the producer told me he worked for the BBC. But, ironic twist, it turns out he, in fact, was a terrorist, and I wasn't playing a character at all but what I now recognize to be a rather unflattering portrait of your father. We all got our just desserts. The producer got blown up by Iron Man, and I served time in federal prison, which turned out to be the best thing for me. I got clean. I rediscovered my passion.

Slattery's explicit acknowledgment of his role as "a rather unflattering portrait of your father" to Shang-Chi, played by Simu Lui, and his claim that "we all got our just desserts" implies that the racism can just as easily be swept away—as if the relationship between representation and systemic racism in Marvel movies could be undone by way of a quick soliloquy.

Slattery admits that Shang-Chi's father, the "real" Mandarin, broke him out to kill him and explains, "But just as his men were tying me up for my execution, I launched into a performance of my Macbeth: 'Whence is that knocking? Wake Duncan! With thy knocking, I would'st though could'st.' They couldn't get enough of it. I've been doing weekly gigs for the lads ever since." The whole scene imports Shakespeare and the colonial overtones of Shakespearean texts as if Slattery were Prospero, wielding his words to tame Caliban. By positioning Shakespeare as Slattery's savior, the movie—intentionally or not—reinforces "how Shakespeare has been utilized to perpetuate colonial discourses" (Espinosa 2021, 161). This scene does not read as a critique or demonstrate self-awareness of Shakespeare's colonial history and instead feels uncomfortably like Trevor Slattery is urging his audience, "Don't worry about the racism! I'm just a harmless clown, a bit of a laugh." A point driven home when Katy asks, "So you're like a jester?" and Trevor answers, "I can give you a preview if you like. Nuncle, nuncle, nuncle"

What Slattery leaves out in his narrative is the trail of bodies left in his wake. In *All Hail the King*, Slattery is served and protected by Herman, a large Black man who apparently dies when the Mandarin's henchman breaks Slattery out of prison. The relationship between Slattery and his "butler" Herman is played for laughs because the viewer is instructed to view Slattery's character as fundamentally harmless, despite consistently holding power over those around him. Herman could murder Slattery in an instant,

but he won't because of Slattery's abilities as an actor. "Do the voice!" a group of inmates beg Slattery in an earlier scene prompting Slattery to resurrect his terrorist role. Slattery's "so potent art" (*Tempest* 5.1.2071) enraptures the audience, including the inmates prepared to attack him only moments before. Repeatedly, Slattery escapes physical harm through this "rough magic" (5.1.2071) as he works his "end upon their senses" (5.1.2074). No matter how much of Slattery's behavior is played for laughs, the result is his continued survival and increasing quality of life. Just as many Shakespearean comedies end in complicated ways that threaten to undermine the domestic containment of the genre, it is Slattery's ending(s), not only his actions, which challenge any reading of him as a harmless clown.

Slattery's "just desserts" result in him getting clean, being broken out of jail, and not dying at the hands of the Mandarin before being rescued by Shang-Chi and the others. He is a bumbling fool, a character too entertaining to kill, and this alignment of Slattery with the figure of Shakespeare's clown appears to be used, ironically, as a "Get Out of Jail Free" card. Certainly, the acting skills of Ben Kingsley bring Slattery to life in an entertaining way, but little is done to meaningfully address Marvel's ongoing issues with Asian representation or the complicated backstories of characters like the Mandarin who are no longer viewed primarily through the white supremacist, European lens of the mid-twentieth century. The choice to attempt to remythologize these characters through Shakespeare is foolish: how do we remove white supremacy, after all, when the narrative continues to portray these characters through an Anglocentric framework?

Returning to the problem of humor, Slattery's role as a clown implies that the Mandarin and his henchmen let Slattery live not because Shakespeare is civilizing but because Slattery is such a joke. Here is a clown performing Shakespeare, feed your dancing bear. Even the joke, however, is dependent on the idea of Shakespeare as "high" art. What would be humorous about Slattery's *Macbeth* unless that performance of *Macbeth* was ridiculous? And why would a ridiculous performance be worth preserving except that the original text is understood to be *very serious* and one to be performed with *refinement*. Both are characteristics that Slattery lacks and that speak to Shakespeare's positioning along hierarchies of class; what's more, those hierarchies of class gain meaning and power from British colonialism and the elevation of their most famous writer to the status of "universal." A universality that was built from an understanding of "human" as defined through the experiences of wealthy, educated, straight, white men—a subject position that Shakespeare critiques in a number of works, but one he also upholds as ideal.

In her book, *Stealing the Language*, Alicia Ostriker states that, "Whenever a poet employs a figure or story previously accepted and defined by a culture, the poet is using myth, and the potential is always present that the use will be revisionist . . . the figure or tale will be appropriated for altered ends, the old vessel filled with new wine" (212). The Marvel Cinematic Universe is clearly attempting this move not only with characters like the Mandarin being imported from a comics history going back to the 1960s, but simultaneously with characters like Slattery as they move from Phase One onward. Shakespeare, however, is not new wine and, while Shakespeare can be revisionist and appropriated for altered ends, wielding him as

justification for Slattery to continue to exist as a signifier for The Mandarin (especially following Marvel's missteps with *Dr. Strange* (2016) and predominantly white casting choices in Phase One) is neither new nor revisionist. The appearance of Shakespeare in *Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings* does not challenge our colonial stereotypes of Shakespeare—it reinforces them.

All of this doesn't even begin to touch on the problems of addressing racist portrayals through comedic monologues designed to break the fourth wall. The issues of colonialism, race, and the military-industrial complex of Marvel's Cinematic Universe cannot be dismissed "with the help of [our] good hands" and the borrowing of Shakespeare should be done with more thoughtfulness. Shakespeare is not a neutral text or author; his positioning in popular culture is one that must be considered with the history of colonialism that created it. Postcolonial theory offers multiple routes for corporations to consider using Shakespeare in ways that don't reinforce systemic inequities and they must because white supremacist, colonial Shakespeare cannot be used to laugh it all away. The key to better storytelling isn't trying to represent your characters *against* historic stereotypes but presenting characters that represent real, complex, and contradictory human beings. And while Shakespeare got a lot wrong, that, at least, he sometimes got right.

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