

'Tis I, The Hulk

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ABSTRACT ♦ REFERENCES

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In this note, I take a look at the actor Mark Ruffalo's invocation of *Hamlet* while promoting his role as Bruce Banner/The Hulk in the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) television series *She-Hulk: Attorney at Law*, released on the streaming platform Disney+ in the autumn of 2022. Referring to a joke on the show that references his predecessor in the role (Edward Norton), Ruffalo quipped that the Hulk is "like our generation's Hamlet. Everyone's going to get a shot at it" (Bucksbaum n.pg). Rather than reading for Shakespearean allusions in Marvel films, this note is more interested in why actors like Ruffalo reach for Shakespeare as a comparison instead--and whether such comparisons actually fit.



(To Dad, Barry, and Adrian. I hope you get a kick out of this.)

I used to get excited when I heard that an actor that I liked was announced for a role in a Marvel Cinematic Universe (hereafter MCU) film. I grew up stealing my brothers' Marvel comics—at one point we had all of Frank Miller's run on *Daredevil* thanks to *The Mighty World of Marvel* serialising it all; I only wish we still had those comics in storage. My father, himself a lifelong *Spider-Man* fan, brought us to see the Sam Raimi *Spider-Man* films, *Daredevil* with Ben Affleck and Jennifer Garner, even that *Fantastic Four* where Chris Evans plays the Human Torch. There's something very thrilling about watching the stories and storylines I read (and read up about) being rendered into cinematic form: *yes, this is from when they did Civil War in the comics! Oh, I remember Dormammu from when he appeared in the 500th Amazing Spider-Man*. Marvel was a corporate empire long before 2012's *The Avengers* cemented the MCU as a credible franchise and Marvel Studios as a profitable film production company: now, casting the great and good in Hollywood in a MCU film (Florence Pugh! Kumail Nanjiani! Brie Larson! Whoever ends up being cast as Mr Fantastic!) is as ubiquitous as a very annoying meme on Twitter. Won an Oscar, got good notices for that small indie you starred in? Expect

Kevin Feige to knock on your door sooner than later. In this note I don't want to partake in the lazy kind of scholarship that effectively argues that *this Marvel film is clearly like this Shakespeare play* without accounting for the fact that well, you're a Shakespeare scholar, of course you're going to read for those allusions, because Shakespeare is a cultural entity that's even more ubiquitous than Marvel. I am much more interested in how those appearing in these films use Shakespeare as a cultural entity in relation to their work in MCU films.

Which leads me to Mark Ruffalo, better known for playing the Hulk/Bruce Banner since *The Avengers*. Ruffalo himself had inherited the role from Edward Norton, who had played the Hulk in 2008's *The Incredible Hulk* — which is still the only standalone Hulk film in the MCU franchise, due to Universal Pictures still holding the distribution rights. (I could talk at length about the reasons *why* Marvel dropped Norton in favour of casting Ruffalo, but that isn't really the point of this note.) Because of this, the Hulk has become a sort of sidekick in many of the MCU films and TV shows, whether it's Thor seeing him as his chance to get off the planet Sakaar in *Thor: Ragnarok* or acting as his cousin She-Hulk/Jennifer Walters's confidante and sounding board early on in *She-Hulk: Attorney at Law*. It remains to be seen as to whether Marvel will regain the distribution rights in the future, and if they do, would Bruce Banner and his alter ego take centre stage again? Or would he continue in this quasi-sidekick/troubled-but-brilliant best friend role?

She-Hulk, regardless, is instructive for our purposes here: Banner (as "Professor Hulk," in that he is very big and green but still has Banner's critical and emotional faculties) speaks to Walters on the phone about her representing Emil Blonsky/The Abomination in an upcoming legal case. The crucial detail here is that Blonsky is played by Tim Roth, who also played Blonsky opposite Norton in the 2008 *Incredible Hulk* film. Banner tells Walters that "Actually Blonsky wrote me a really nice letter a while back. A really heartfelt haiku. So I put everything behind us. That fight was so many years ago, I'm a completely different person now. Literally" ("Superhuman Law"). Ruffalo, of course, was then asked about this moment in a recent interview with *Entertainment Weekly*:

Ruffalo loves that this show is finally acknowledging the Hulk's complex history in the MCU. "I think it's really funny. It's just the reality that we all are often dancing around, but it's true," he tells *EW*. "I actually joked with Ed about this. I was like, It's like our generation's Hamlet. Everyone's going to get a shot at it. And there'll probably be another couple before it's all over. People will be like, 'Remember when the Hulk used to look like Mark Ruffalo? Now it looks like Timothée Chalamet.'" (Bucksbaum 2022)

(Pause for a moment while I try to imagine Timothée Chalamet as the Hulk.) Ruffalo's joke about the Hulk as Hamlet throws up a specific question: *why* the Hulk as Hamlet? Is it that Ruffalo jokingly sees Bruce Banner's story as tragic as Hamlet's? Does Ruffalo envision the Hulk — and perhaps other Marvel roles — as Tony Howard does *Hamlet*, as "Everest" and "the part male actors traditionally *must* play" (2007, 11)? At first glance, it's a more fitting comparison than, say, Iron Man (Robert Downey Jr) or Captain America (Chris Evans). Surveying both Bruce Banner's life story across the comics and films, it is enough to place his name under the

dictionary definition of “tragic”: abused by his father (whom Banner later killed “by accident”); a murdered mother; forced to go on the run due to the unpredictability of his alter ego; and a broken marriage to Betty Ross. And of course Banner has a tragic flaw: his anger (or, as he famously tells Captain America in 2012’s *The Avengers*, “that’s my secret, Cap: I’m always angry” [*The Avengers*]). The tragedy of Banner’s life, particularly in the comics, is that he will never know stability or a family life like many of his Avengers contemporaries do, and will always be at war with himself. Perhaps this is true of the earlier Marvel films, but I’m not so sure it’s true now.

Further thinking with genre, a tragedy dictates that the tragic hero must die. Let’s compare Banner’s trajectory to Tony Stark. Stark is a Lockheed Martin-style nepotism baby whose years as a POW completely changes his perspective on working in the arms industry. He then—if I’ve got this right—ends up dressing up as an armoured superhero and forming a team of armoured superheroes who fight global and intergalactic threats. (There is literally a plot point in *Captain America: Civil War* that the Avengers’ battles are causing mass destruction worldwide. Poh-tay-to, poh-tah-to.) After dealing with multiple trials and tribulations including Loki; PTSD; villains such as Justin Hammer, Obadiah Stone, and the Mandarin; building a very smart but very homicidal cyborg voiced by James Spader; the return of his parents’ killer who happens to be Captain America’s best friend, who is also being protected by a very stubbornly loyal Cap; and eventually the eradication of half of the world’s population due to the Snap—our hero dies saving the world from Josh Brolin’s Thanos in *Avengers: Endgame* several films later. His tragic death is given the multiple endings treatment: a tearful farewell from his protégé Peter Parker/Spider-Man and from his wife, Pepper Potts, who reassures him that “you can rest now”; a sombre funeral attended by the Avengers and their allies; and a heartfelt video message left to his daughter Morgan before Steve Rogers departs their timeline, having decided to remain in the past with his long-lost love, Peggy Carter (*Endgame*). So far, so tragic hero.

What about Banner’s trajectory, in comparison? The closest thing we have to character development for Banner is the controversial romantic attachment he has to Natasha Romanoff/Black Widow (Scarlett Johansson) in *Avengers: Age of Ultron*, as well as the drawn-out internal war over his body in *Thor: Ragnarok* and *Avengers: Infinity War*. After prolonged periods where the Hulk takes dominance in *Ragnarok* and then recedes from view in *Infinity War*, *Endgame*’s introduction of Professor Hulk signals a compromise between both Banner and Hulk, a truce between the two personas. As Banner explains to his comrades:

Five years ago, we got our asses beat. Except it was worse for me, ‘cause I lost twice.¹ First Hulk lost, then Banner lost, then we all lost. [. . .] For years, I’ve been treating the Hulk like he’s some kind of disease, something to get rid of. But then I started looking at him as the cure. Eighteen months in

1 I dunno mate, at least your family didn’t dematerialise in an instant while your back was turned like Hawkeye’s did. Or you didn’t get stuck in space with limited oxygen and a mildly homicidal Nebula. Or get stuck in the Quantum Realm while your girlfriend and her parents turn to dust . . . oh, you get the idea. Also isn’t that three losses, rather than two?

the gamma lab; I put the brains and the brawn together. . . and now, look at me. Best of both worlds.
(*Endgame*)

There is no longer a division between the two: but it's never shown how Banner was able to achieve this. How Banner was able to master this arguably life-changing procedure isn't part of the larger narrative: other than his brief explanation above, we are introduced to Professor Hulk via a smash cut to a diner in *Endgame*, as Banner jovially enjoys brunch with Rogers, Romanoff, and Scott Lang/Ant-Man before being accosted by adoring fans. Banner/Hulk simply isn't given the same screen time, or character development, as his teammates.

But, whereas "our generation's Hamlet" jovially adds gravitas to the Hulk's story, it also implies that "our generation" is missing a Hamlet prototype, when several of Ruffalo's MCU co-stars (Benedict Cumberbatch, Tom Hiddleston, Oscar Isaac, I should hope we will be spared Chris Pratt's. . .) have played Hamlet to sold out audiences in London and Broadway. It also implies that the Hulk is not of past generations, given that the character has been in print since 1962, and that the 1978 *Incredible Hulk* television series starring Bill Bixby and Lou Ferrigno is one of the most successful and well-known pre-MCU Marvel adaptations in cultural history. Does the Hulk need to be Hamlet? He can simply just be the Hulk.

So, is a role in a MCU film now a rite of passage for an actor? The line of succession in the MCU has already begun, with Florence Pugh's Yelena Bulova replacing Natasha Romanoff as Black Widow and Anthony Mackie's Sam Wilson replacing Steve Rogers as Captain America. But as in the comics, these replacements are more so a continuation of a story, rather than the likes of Pugh and Mackie being expected to put their own stamp on these superheroes' alter-egos as well as the superhero persona itself. Hamlet, and other Shakespearean roles, have no such continuation. But Ruffalo's replacement of Norton differs from that of Pugh and Mackie in that he replaced *both* Banner and Hulk.² If I invoke a clumsy Shakespearean metaphor, it's that Scott Shepherd in the Wooster Group's *Hamlet* comes to mind for me now, as he leaps across the stage to try to mimic Richard Burton's performance in the role. But after more than a decade of MCU films, there's no attempt at mimicry on Ruffalo's part: it is he, instead of Norton, who is primarily associated with the role. Perhaps there's more to Ruffalo's comment than I thought, but then maybe he might pick up this article one day and think that I am simply nitpicking. And perhaps I am.

Anyway, I personally think they should cast Timothée Chalamet as Nightcrawler.

2 In addition, so too did Don Cheadle quietly replace Terrence Howard as James "Rhodey" Rhodes/War Machine.

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