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Superhero Shakespeare in Golden Age Comics

Abstract: Albert Lewis Kanter launched *Classic Comics* in 1941, a series of comic books that retold classic literature for a young audience. Five of Shakespeare's celebrated plays appear in the collection. The popularity of *Classics Illustrated* encouraged Seaboard Publishing to issue a competitive brand, *Stories by Famous Authors Illustrated* (1949-51), which retold three Shakespearean dramas. Although both these enterprises aimed to reinforce a humanist perspective of education based on Western literature, the classic comics belie a Posthuman aesthetic by presenting Shakespearean characters in scenes and postures that recall Golden Age superheroes. By examining the Shakespearean covers of *Classic Illustrated* and *Stories by Famous Authors*, this essay explores how Shakespearean characters are reimagined as Superhuman in strength and power.

Keywords: Shakespeare, Superhero, Superpowers, Posthuman, *Classics Illustrated*, *Stories by Famous Authors Illustrated*.

In 1941, Albert Lewis Kanter launched *Classic Comics*, a series of comic books that retold classic literature in comic panels for a juvenile audience. Encompassing over 160 volumes, the series would eventually morph into the famously titled *Classics Illustrated* in 1947 (Jones, 9-16).¹ Printing a wide range of engaging adaptations in easy-to-read language—from Homer's *Iliad* to Cervantes's *Don Quixote* to Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*—the series brought a sizeable sampling of timeless masterpieces into the hands of young adults. Its motto, "Featuring stories by the world's greatest authors" (#1, October 1941), reinforced Kanter's initiative to deliver in an enjoyable format the works of prominent writers (predominately from the Western canon) to its readership. Five of Shakespeare's celebrated plays appear in the total collection, and they

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¹ I'm indebted to *Classics Illustrated: A Cultural History* for editorial information regarding artists, dates, and adaptors of the retellings.

represent a substantial contribution from a single-appropriated author: *Julius Caesar* (#68, February 1950); *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (#87, September 1951); *Hamlet* (#99, September 1952); *Macbeth* (#128, September 1955); and *Romeo and Juliet* (#134, September 1956). Although ghostwritten, the adaptations of Shakespeare's plays incorporated much of the playwright's poetic language into the text. Even so, Kanter wanted his audience to read the actual works themselves, so he appended the following recommendation to each edition: "Don't miss the added enjoyment of reading the original." Shakespearean drama adhered to the underlying ideology of *Classics Illustrated*, one that embraced the humanistic dictum of *utile dulci*: fiction should delight and instruct (Horace, 479).

The popularity of *Classics Illustrated*, which ran from 1941-69, sparked Seaboard Publishing to issue a copycat brand competitively called *Stories by Famous Authors Illustrated* (1949-51), later shortened to *Famous Authors Illustrated*. Out of the thirteen titles that saw print from this series, three included Shakespeare: *Macbeth* (#6, August 1950); *Hamlet* (#8, October 1950); and *Romeo and Juliet* (#10, November 1950). These comics promised "A Treasury of Celebrated Literature" for "easy and enjoyable reading." The inside cover of the first edition, "The Scarlet Pimpernel" (#1, January 1950), melodramatically promises to give its audience "the imperishables," which have stood "the severest test of all—the test of time." The publisher of *Classics Illustrated*, Gilberton Company, eventually cornered the classic comics market for adolescents by acquiring this rival series (Jensen, 97).² Their underlying agenda abided by the belief that Great Books impart invaluable human experiences that better the ethical constitution of the readers and advance their education: "The Great Books Good For You" creed of pre and postwar America (Beam, 57-74). However, just as "imperishable" books conjure up the "imperishable" men and women of comic books, *Classic Illustrated* and *Stories by Famous Authors Illustrated* belie a Posthuman aesthetic. By creating Shakespearean characters who resemble Golden Age superheroes (1938-58), classic comics reshape Shakespeare's Marc Antony, Romeo, Hamlet, Macbeth, and even Oberon, into caped personas who exhibit augmented strength and power beyond the ordinary.

² Gilbert extended its market control to include *Classics Illustrated Junior* (1953-62), which repackaged seventy-seven fairy tales, myths, and legends to a preadolescent audience. The only other successful comic book series that occupied an educational place in the market in the period was Maxwell C. Gaines's *Pictures from the Bible* and *Picture Stories from American History* (Jean Paul Gabilliet, 28).

The Imperishables

One definition of “Posthuman” that is especially applicable to comic book superheroes centers on the idea of “augmentation.” According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the word “Posthuman” can signify “a hypothetical species that might evolve from human beings, as by means of genetic or bionic augmentation.” Although not necessarily enhanced by genes or bionics, comic superheroes nonetheless perform extraordinary feats based on an array of remarkable abilities that transform them into mega entities of speed, stamina, and courage. They are, in essence, augmented. When, for example, the boy Billy Batson says “Shazam,” he magically metamorphoses into Captain Marvel, an adult with an arsenal of super capabilities, including flight (Fawcett Comics, 1939-53). Wonder Woman not only exerts exceptional force and brawn, she also possesses advanced mental and psychic energy, in addition to using her trademark bullet-proof bracelets, a Lasso of Truth, and an invisible plane (DC Comics, 1941). Superman, the Man of Steel (DC Comics), has the dual advantage of both human and alien status. Born on the planet Krypton, his legendary talents, which include Leaping-Over-Tall-Buildings-In-A-Single-Bound, moving Faster-Than-A-Speeding-Bullet, plus X-ray vision, give this superhero a superior advantage over his enemies. As such, comic book superheroes often demonstrate super or augmented potency and agency, and this archetypal trait bestows on these characters unassailable toughness and mastery over their opponents.

Scott Jeffery identifies Posthuman bodies in comic books as “Superhuman.” This term points to the augmented form of the superhero whose physical and cerebral capabilities far exceed those found in ordinary humans. It also refers specifically to “an assemblage of socially coded affects” that shape the “Perfect Body” of the superhero in Golden era comics (Jeffery, 228). This Superhuman hero is constructed by a network of socio-historical discourses (evolutionary theory, eugenics, industrialization, technology, medicine, and urbanization, among others) that seek to idealize and aggrandize the human body beyond standard dimensions and aptitudes (Jeffery, 69-91). Moreover, because the “superhero’s *mission* is to fight evil and protect the innocent,” as Peter Coogan states, the Superhuman relies on special powers to triumph over an endless number of evildoers (4). The Superpowers that these heroes wield to defeat villains—powers that derive from advance science, highly-developed aptitudes, the supernatural, or mystical sources—“emphasize the exaggeration inherent in the superhero genre” (Coogan, 4). This exaggeration speaks to the superheroes’ enhanced qualities that enable them to literally and figuratively stand above and beyond the average person in their attempt to redress wrongs and fight for justice.

Classics Illustrated and *Stories by Famous Authors* utilized the popular appeal of the Superhuman aesthetic to promote their projects. Imperishable and

enduring, classic literature (of which Shakespeare's plays are often viewed as the pinnacle) arise as the superheroes of the book world. Not only does reading classic stories engage the audience in a war against cultural illiteracy, but it also brings youth closer to the "Superpowers" of great works themselves. In *Classics Illustrated*, a full page advertisement appears in the back of the adaptation of "A Midsummer Night's Dream." The ad describes "The World of Books" as a "Remarkable Creation of Man," one that outlives "Monuments," "Nations," and "Civilizations." When empires fall, Books,

Yet Live On
Still Young
Still As Fresh As the Day They Were Written
Still Telling Men's Hearts
Of the Hearts Of Men Centuries Dead.
("A Midsummer Night's Dream," 50)

This above statement is extracted from the booklet *The Story of the Yale Press* (1920), written by the celebrated cartoonist Clarence Day. The author praises the labor and foresight of publishers and printing houses for providing the World of Books a "harbor" for "rich bales of study" and "jeweled ideas" (7). This humanistic viewpoint reflects what Rosi Braidotti in *The Posthuman* sees as "Faith in the unique, self-regulating and intrinsically moral powers of human reason" (21). Reading the classics contributes to the betterment of the individual self by allowing one to enter into the mysterious and mystical realm of "the Hearts of Men Centuries Old." Although adhering to this doctrine, classic comics controvert their own educational values by conferring on Great Books the enhanced and Posthuman Superpower of eternity: volumes, such as *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, "Live On," overcoming time itself to impart invaluable lessons and insights to new generations of humans. The personification of great books as imperishable creations (children) of men and women bears witness not only to their human origin, but also to their Posthuman evolution and advancement.

Men of Steel

Superman's well-known nickname, Man of Steel, gives prominence to his immense toughness and durability. With his first appearance in Action Comics in 1938 (created by Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster), Clark Kent's Superpower of iron strength coincides with a body image that exudes muscle and might. Likewise, the Shakespearean male heroes who appear on the covers of classic comics show an augmented and enhanced physicality that conforms to the Superhuman corporeality of Golden Age heroes. The physiques of Marc Antony,

Romeo, Hamlet, Macbeth, and Oberon, are modeled on the perception of white male power and privilege of which Superman is the exemplar of the period. Although Superman is fashioned as an alien outsider, and although he was created by Jewish-American immigrants, “whiteness,” as Aldo J. Regalado reminds us in *Bending Steel*, “remained operative in superhero fiction”(9). Thus, the early genre of classics comics avoids adaptations of *Othello*, for instance, in which the main character is a black warrior, as well as the General of the Venetian army. Moreover, it is the able and active Shakespearean characters who become larger-than-life figures: the “superability of empowered heroes” (Foss, 7). The ageing and decrepit King Lear does not make the cut, nor do the likes of the stout and ale-chugging Falstaff. In keeping with what Scott Jeffrey terms the “Perfect Body” of the Superhuman, Shakespearean male characters smack of Men of Steel, fighters who wage battles to right wrongs—whether justified or not in the plays.³

The first Shakespearean retelling issued by *Classics Illustrated*, “Julius Caesar” (1950), features Marc Antony eulogizing the assassinated Caesar at the forum. Illustrated by H. C. Keifer, who helped define the in-house style of the series, Marc Antony is pictured on the cover in the throes of his iconic funeral oration. Smoke from an incense resin pours across the page. He holds Caesar’s purple *pallium*, a large square mantle (Croom, n.p.) in his hands to indicate the “three and thirty” (5:1:54) stab wounds that the conspirators inflicted on Caesar’s torso. This piece of clothing looms gigantic in the drawing. We can imagine that the Roman General, Antony, addresses the crowd of plebeians with “Friends, Romans, countrymen, lend me your ears” (3:2:75), or other prominent Shakespearean lines from the scene that describe Caesar’s blood-stained and torn covering. In the illustration, Marc Antony towers over Caesar’s pyre, hands outstretched, in a red tunic with a green mantle, or cloak, across his shoulder. While the illustration portrays a critical and highly dramatic moment in the storyline, it also shows Marc Antony costumed in a manner that evokes the caped costume of the superhero, especially since in modern usage “mantle” and “cloak” both can connote a sleeveless cape. Not only does Antony wear a type of cape, as well as cuffs, but Caesar’s *pallium* takes center stage in the picture. In the iconography of comics, “The cape alone,” writes Peter Coogan, “stands for the idea of the superhero”(7).⁴ Both Marc Antony and Caesar—the man in Shakespeare’s words who bestrode “the narrow world / Like a Colossus” (1:2:135-36)—project a larger-than-life image.

³ For discussions of the non-Perfect body, or disabled body, in comics, see Scott Thomas Smith and José Alaniz, 69-91.

⁴ Although depicted with a mantle on the cover, the inside picture of Marc Antony shows him dressed in Lupercal attire to suggest his role as the New Dionysus.

The *Classics Illustrated* cover of “Julius Caesar” undergoes a change in the revised edition to enlarge on Marc Antony’s position as a “cape,” a proverbial Man of Steel (artists George Evans with Reed Crandall, adaptation Alfred Sundal, revised 1962). According to Mike Benton, “after 1951 new covers were done in a painted style in contrast to the cartoon-line drawing covers of the 1940s” (124), though the interiors basically remained the same. This updated and upscale cover depicts two centurion Roman soldiers battling hand-to-hand. Each wears the standard Roman military gear: cuirass, or breastplate, red-plumed helmet, wrist guards, a shield, and the all-important cape, or *sagum* (D’Amato and Sumner, 54). Their flowing red capes, rippling muscles, and explosive fighting all dominate this action frame, making it reminiscent of the dynamic energy and sensationalism of superhero comics. The two soldiers on the cover of “Julius Caesar” represent the two opposing armies at the Battle of Philippi in which Marc Antony and Octavius Caesar gain victory over Brutus and Cassius. The soldier on the cover who faces the reader, I would suggest, symbolically embodies the potent vigor of Antony, whose super charisma not only overshadows the rhetoric of others in the play, but whose desire to retaliate for the murder of Caesar catapults him into the superhero arena, a righter of wrongs, standing, in the words of Shakespeare, like a “triple pillar of the world” (*Ant*, 1:1:12), eyes glowing “like plated Mars,” the Roman god of war (*Ant*, 11:1:4).



Fig. 1. “Julius Caesar.” *Classics Illustrated*, 1962

Marc Antony's Superhuman characterization in Shakespeare carries over into the comic book realm. As stated in *Superhero Bodies*, "The superhuman body is a site of possibility; its mutability through costume, pose, or literal, physical transformation is key to its enactment of fear and desire (3). The tension between fear and desire, between invincibility and powerlessness, undergirds the superhero's materiality, though hope and indestructability win out in the early comics. The fact that the historical Antony does not survive—eventually suffering suicide as related in Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*—remains outside of the imaginative purview of "Julius Caesar." However, the cover of "Romeo and Juliet" recast the tragedy of star-crossed love into a Superhuman battle that pits unshakable passion against the villains who want to crush and destroy it (artists George Evans with Reed Crandall). Romeo is portrayed on this *Classics Illustrated* cover with Man-of-Steel confidence and grit, clashing swords in the hot streets of Verona with his nemesis, Tybalt. This realistic interpretation boasted "handsomely drawn Italian Renaissance costumes and architecture, [with] carefully observed principal characters" (Jones, 186). In a deadly skirmish that sets right against wrong, love against hate, Montagues against Capulets, Romeo fights not only to avenge the death of Mercutio, but to assert the invincibility of his undying devotion for Juliet.



Fig. 2. "Romeo and Juliet." *Famous Authors Illustrated*, 1950. "Romeo and Juliet." *Classics Illustrated*, 1956

The cover of "Romeo and Juliet" from *Famous Authors Illustrated* (illustrated by H.C. Kiefer, adapted by D.E. Dutch) once again pictures the infamous duel between Romeo and Tybalt. It also suggests Romeo's obsessive dedication to Juliet. In fact, this cover may have influenced George Evan's

artistic rendering above of the tragedy for *Classics Illustrated* issued six years later. The Superhuman passion that fuels Romeo in this version is enhanced by his appearance as a “caped” revenger. Costumed in purple doublet and hose, plus a red Cavalier Shoulder Cape with yellow accoutrements, Romeo has just thrust his flashing rapier into the trunk of his enemy, Tybalt. Benvolio also appears on the cover in the position of a side-kick. He is pictured with his arm on Romeo in a futile attempt to stop the violent feud and protect his friend from the wrath of the Prince. As a side-kick, Benvolio is paired with Tybalt, the “hot tempered nephew of Lady Capulet,” as his foe (“Romeo and Juliet,” 2). In the comic panels of the story, the rich color scheme of Romeo’s clothing (his purple outfit and magnificent red cape) mirrors the royal habiliments of his kin, Prince Escalus, to imply prestige and powerfulness. As Elizabeth Currie writes, clothing in the Renaissance “could bind individuals into a carefully structured hierarchy” (7). Yet Romeo moves beyond the socio-political system of Verona to transform into a Superpower emblem of timeless love. The apocalyptic description of Romeo and Juliet’s forever-enduring commitment to each other points to its indestructibility beyond cosmic life: “a love that out-shines the sun—until life’s candles are snuffed out” (“Romeo and Juliet,” 2). This language of adoration raises Romeo’s zeal (as well as Juliet’s) to a Superpower intensity and height.⁵

The covers of *Stories by Famous Authors Illustrated* depict the actual book covers of each literary piece, so that the classic comic book draws attention to itself as a literary artifact. This metafiction—reading about reading a great book—becomes accentuated in “Hamlet” where the work itself is marketed as a Superpower book (illustrated by Henry Kiefer, adapted by Dana E. Dutch). The back matter of the volume reads: “Enjoy the thrills and excitement which have made HAMLET the outstanding story of all times, the world’s most popular play” (“Hamlet,” back cover). Shakespeare’s Danish tragedy excels all other literature due to its universal appeal and global reach, being “the most magnificent and powerful of Shakespeare’s plays” (“Hamlet,” back cover). The greatest of the great, the literary masterpiece of *Hamlet*, as well as the immortal character, possesses a shield of invincibility that corresponds to the Man-of-Steel ethic of durability and endurance. Concomitantly, the image on the comic book cover utilizes what Terrence R. Wandtke calls the standard “iconographic style” of superhero comics: “caricature, exaggeration for impact, motion-related transitional effects, the regular use of visual clichés, and the absence of background material” (92). Hamlet is thus fashioned as a muscular man of action, rather than the legendary thinker who compulsively ruminates on death.

⁵ Although female characters from Shakespeare’s plays are usually not put on the cover of the comic books, later *Classic Illustrated* editions feature Juliet and Ophelia, alongside their male counterparts (“Romeo and Juliet,” 1969; “Hamlet,” 1969). This alteration reflects the growing female readership in the Silver Age of comics.



Fig. 3. “Hamlet.” *Stories by Famous Authors Illustrated*, 1950. “Hamlet.” *Classics Illustrated*, 1952

The cover of “Hamlet” (adapted by Samuel Willinsky) reimagines the grave scene of Act Five as a slug fest between Laertes and Hamlet. The illustrator, Henry Kiefer, was a “sometime Shakespearean actor” who “sport[ed] a cape and declaimed rather than spok[e]” (Jones, 64). Kiefer’s theatrical experience and bearing, along with his eccentric cape (not unlike a superhero’s) brings a dramatic energy to the artwork that deepens the intensity of Hamlet’s portrayal. As the Prince of Denmark duk[es] it out in a hand-to-hand dogfight with his adversary, Laertes, both men are illustrated wearing long capes: Hamlet in black, Laertes in red. The different shades of the costumes underscore the antagonism between the two fighters, while the “striking, idiosyncratic” capes constitute a chief part of the superhero’s “signature outfit,” as Glen Weldon notes (13). Moreover, this action-filled illustration conforms to the iconographic style of superhero comics. The two brawlers have jumped into Ophelia’s grave in a titanic contest of wills, their blows stunning the distant, small-figured onlookers in the picture’s backdrop (Claudius, Gertrude, and so on). Ophelia’s corpse is the site of male aggression and frenzy where each character believes himself to be the champion of right, an avenger of a perceived injustice against a sister, ex-lover, or even a father. In the cover picture, Hamlet gains the victory by overwhelming his opponent in a stranglehold. In Shakespeare’s story, however, it is Laertes who has the upper hand in the rumble, as evidenced in Hamlet’s plea, “Prithee take thy fingers from my throat” (5:1:246). This modification by the illustrator enhances Hamlet’s strength. Although this comic book “Hamlet” attempts to stay true to the origin text, the cover subtly alters the storyline to augment Hamlet’s supercharged grief and feelings of reprisal.

Kryptonite

Based in myth and religion, the Superpowers of comic book characters exhibit the “strength and extraordinary abilities” found in mythological heroes and religious persons (Arnaudo, 130 and Fingerroth, 31-45). For instance, Superman’s enormous vigor and toughness are rooted in the fortitude and sway of the biblical Samson, or Wonder Woman’s roots can be located in Greco-Roman Amazonian mythos (Cocca, 25-55, Lepore, 190-91). Equally, the Man of Steel’s vulnerability to Kryptonite, his heel-of-Achilles, resembles Samson’s analogous hair weakness, and Wonder Woman’s strength evaporates in the Golden Age when her Bracelets of Submission are chained together by men. In constructing Shakespearean characters as Superheroes, classic comics also imbued their illustrations with touches of their vulnerabilities, or what might be called their tragic flaws. For example, A. C. Bradley in his famous study of Shakespearean tragedy defines the hero as an augmented being:

His nature is also exceptional, and generally raises him in some respect much above the average level of humanity [. . .] desire, passion or will attains in [tragic heroes] a terrible force. (19-20)

This “terrible force” ignites the action of the drama, propelling heroes to their catastrophic, ground-shattering downfalls. Perhaps due to their “Super” attributes, Shakespearean tragedies were generally adapted by *Classic Illustrated* and *Stories by Famous Authors Illustrated*, rather than the comedies or histories. They may have even aided in shaping the Superhero genre itself.⁶ Not dissimilar to Kryptonite, the terrible force that impairs and ultimately destroys Shakespearean tragic heroes is suggested on the very covers of some of the comic books. It is no wonder that “Kryptonite” in modern slang denotes a person’s weakness, or “particular threat to one who is otherwise powerful,” over and beyond Superman’s powerlessness to it (the free dictionary, n.p.).

The cover of *Classics Illustrated* “Hamlet” (illustrated by Alex A. Blum) depicts Hamlet’s troubled encounter with the Ghost, the spirit of Old Hamlet, in Act 1, scenes 4-5. Blum’s artistic flair favored clean and sculptured line work that, in its simplicity, imparted “compositional balance” and “pictorial clarity” (Jones, 77). The strikingly sharp-hewn scene of the cover captures the “terrible force,” in Bradley’s words, that will shortly erupt in Hamlet’s bosom to ignite the plays’ spiraling cascade of mayhem and disaster. He has been running frantically up the castle’s stone bulwarks to catch up with a golden specter, the

⁶ For the ways in which classic literature shapes and is shaped by comics, see George Kovacs and C. W. Marshall.

Ghost. Prince Hamlet wears a regal purple cape over his blue doublet and hose, and he also sports weaponry, a dagger and rapier: the embodiment of Superhero perfection. Yet his disturbed countenance, drawn in profile, suggests a dark stirring of anger and revenge, the Kryptonite unleashed. Upon hearing in amazement the gory details of his father's killing,

Sleeping, by a brother's hand
Of life, of crown, of queen at once dispatched,
.....
Oh, horrible! Oh, horrible, most horrible! (*Ham.*, 1:5:76-81)

Hamlet's impassioned longing for vengeance begins in earnest. The duality of the sky on the comic book cover foreshadows Hamlet's anguish and future perplexities. Half of the firmament is colored in black to visualize nighttime, the other a pinkish yellow of daylight. The hours in which the Ghost visits Elsinore and departs in Shakespeare's play run the gamut from midnight to dawn. Blum's vision of the ghostly encounter between the armed phantom and son uses a mix of pigments to specify this compressed timeframe; however, the dichotomy of the heavens also suggests Hamlet's split persona: his new masked identity as a madman with an "antic disposition" (*Ham.*, 1:5:181). Embedded within the cover of "Hamlet" lies the Kryptonite of this profoundly distraught and unstable character, caught in an excessively tormented battle between performing deeds of valor and living in crippling doubt.

The cover of "Macbeth" in the *Classics Illustrated* series (illustrated by Alex Blum, adapted by Lorenz Graham) reveals "the terrible force" brooding in the thoughts of the Scottish thane. It depicts Macbeth's soliloquy, "a dagger before the mind" speech, right before the murder of King Duncan (2:1:34-65). Dressed in a blue medieval tunic with a red cape, Macbeth wears a horned helmet to emphasize his role as a warrior. In Shakespeare's play, Macbeth's (and Banquo's) superiority on the battlefield is compared to "cannons overcharged with double cracks." Both men "double redoubled strokes upon the foe" (1:2:37-8). Their martial prowess and agility exceed human capability and are thus described in non-human terminology. But it is Macbeth who is invested with other-worldly Superpowers, as Ross likens him to "Bellona's bridegroom" (1:2:56), or husband to the Roman goddess of war. In some accounts, she is married to the god of war himself, Mars. Macbeth's expression on the cover of *Classics Illustrated*, however, shows the extent to which his legendary ambition, his Kryptonite, has propelled him down a path of destruction. Once untouchable, Macbeth's dread and apprehension now dominate the page, as he contemplates the dagger before his eyes, or the "false creation / Proceeding from the heat-oppressed brain" (2:1:39-40). A glowing red and gold light illuminate the dagger, and the ghastly image presages Duncan's "silver skin laced with his golden blood" (2:3:114). This vision in the play prompts Macbeth to question

not only his sanity but the “bloody business” of the regicide (2:1:49). The stark picture of a weakened Macbeth on the cover of the same issue diminishes the notion of his Superhuman might, but it nonetheless aggrandizes Macbeth’s “vaulting ambition, which o’erleaps itself” (1:7:27): his Kryptonite.



Fig. 4. “Macbeth.” *Classic Illustrated*, 1950. “Macbeth,” *Stories by Famous Authors Illustrated*, 1950

The cover of “Macbeth” in *Stories by Famous Authors Illustrated* (illustrated by H. C. Kiefer, adapted by Dana E. Dutch), presents a strikingly similar rendering of the Scottish thane. He dons a blue tunic, red cape, and horned helmet. He wears golden cuffs and displays daggers on his double-wrapped belt. The cover focuses on Macbeth receiving the prophecies of the witches in Act 4, scene 1 of the play, and it foregrounds the Weird sisters’ bubbling cauldron replete with Paddock and Grimalkin, toad and cat, not to mention other reptilian familiars. The face of Macbeth is contorted into a horrified demonstration of shock and terror, as an armed head emerges from the witches’ concoction. In the play, this apparition is accompanied by “Macbeth! Macbeth! Macbeth! Beware Macduff, / Beware the Thane of Fife” (4:1:71-2). Although this cover depicts a different dramatic scene than that of *Classics Illustrated*, both illustrations show a vulnerable, debilitated and enfeebled Macbeth. In fact, the deterioration of Macbeth’s mind and body is reinforced in the full-page panel that introduces the Scottish play. The Shakespearean lines printed in the opening of the comic book, “Sleep no More! Macbeth does murder sleep” (“Macbeth,” 1), exemplify Macbeth’s fallen state. Even so, the narrator attempts to make Macbeth into a Superhero, one who has not succumbed completely to the Kryptonite of vaulting ambition:

He might have escaped the consequences of his brutal crimes if he had chosen to flee. Instead, he charged madly onto the field of battle to meet an enemy whose sword was keen for vengeance! (“Macbeth,” 1)

This interpretation supports Macbeth as a courageous and dauntless thane who faces the onslaught of Macduff’s army in retaliation for the assassination of Duncan. His over-the-top mettle and daring recalls Macbeth’s Superhuman role as the husband to Bellona, the goddess of war.

Conclusion

The aim of *Classics Illustrated* and *Stories by Famous Authors Illustrated* was to introduce youth to great books, the Superpowers of the literary world. On the one hand, classic comics followed a humanist trajectory that saw excellent fiction, the books that stood the test of time, as a way to encourage children and young adults to read more, as well as to make delving into books more enjoyable. The adaptations would often contain biographies of the author or other curious or historical information. Although critics such as Frederic Wertham believed that Shakespeare in comic book form was harmful—“Shakespeare and the child are corrupted at the same time” (143)—publishers like Albert Kanter viewed the comic book structure as a redeeming medium for engaging youth with the figurative “invincibles,” or literary masterpieces. Yet portrayals of Shakespeare’s tragic heroes, especially the images that appear on the covers, invoke the augmented and enhanced bodies of Superheroes in Golden Age comics and, at times, their Kryptonite vulnerabilities. The cover of *Classic Illustrated’s* retelling of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* (illustrated by Alex A. Blum, adapted by Samuel Willinksy) illustrates Titania fawning over Bottom with her attendant fairies. While the focus is on the lavish, beautiful figure of the fairy queen, it is the caped Oberon who most resembles a superhero, bronzed with a rippling physicality that represents the mastery and sovereignty over all who inhabit the Athenian forest, including mortals. And although in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* Duke Theseus ultimately marries Hippolyta, an Amazonian warrior, in the inside comic panels that retell Shakespeare’s play the character does not resemble her Superhero counterpart, Wonder Woman, whose mother was the Amazonian Queen Hippolyta. Rather, it is the augmented Oberon who is portrayed as both human and not human, fairy and man, existing in an imaginative, Posthuman realm, which, according to the doubter Theseus, is “more strange than true” (5:1:2).

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