

## Gods and monsters: authorial creation in Gaiman's *Sandman* and McCreery and Del Col's *Kill Shakespeare*

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### ABSTRACT

In this article, I explore images of Shakespeare and his characters in Neil Gaiman's *Sandman* (1989–1996) and Conor McCreery and Anthony Del Col's *Kill Shakespeare* (2010–2014). Gaiman's series follows Morpheus, the personification of dreams, who endows Shakespeare with creative power he comes to regret. Alternatively, in McCreery and Del Col's series *Shakespeare* simply is a god, but one who shuns his creations and regrets his creative power. Worshipped and relentlessly sought, this Shakespeare is the mythic engine of a series that follows characters from across his plays who speak in a pastiche of Shakespearean lines through alternate story lines. I demonstrate that Shakespeare's coexistence with his characters in both series complicates our collective idealisation of Shakespeare in the contrast between a playwright-god and his monstrous character-creations through their problematic construction and shifting images as gods and monsters within and across both series. Illustrating the limitations and possibilities of divinity and monstrosity allows them to shift from creation to destruction through the multimodality of graphic novels, and the pitting of gods against monsters common to fantasy and science fiction. Through images of shifting power and frailty, both interrogate these constructions, and ultimately, question the consequences of our historical Bardolatry.

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That Shakespeare appears in every medium in popular culture is testament to the Bardolatry that has made the playwright, and his characters, easily recognisable cultural, social, and most importantly, *visual* icons. William Shakespeare's plays, in whole or in part, in reference or allusion, have long appeared as illustrated editions, comic books, graphic novels, and manga. However, Shakespeare as a character (depicted regularly in drama, fiction, film and television) is portrayed less often and rarely in the company of his characters. Yet they appear to a considerable degree in both Neil Gaiman's *Sandman* (1989–1996) and Conor McCreery and Anthony Del Col's *Kill Shakespeare* (2010–2014). The enduring influence of Gaiman's *Sandman* to the form is difficult to overemphasise, and McCreery and Del Col certainly borrow liberally from Gaiman's innovation with narrative, his blurring of fiction and history, and most saliently, his use of Shakespeare. Twenty years may separate the start of these series, yet both offer two literal examples of Bardolatry by reframing Shakespeare and his characters through constructs of divinity and monstrosity. In the first, Shakespeare wields divine powers he gains from a Faustian

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bargain, and in the second he simply *is* god. Yet it is an uneasy divinity in both because Shakespeare regrets his creative powers and the monstrous character-creations those powers yield. In this article, I consider William Shakespeare and his characters within and across these graphic novel series through their construction as gods and monsters, and their continual shifting between related binaries of divinity and monstrosity, creation and destruction, idealism and realism, and mortality and immortality. The multimodality inherent to graphic novels facilitates this interrogation through illustrations that convey divinity and monstrosity as images of power, frailty, beauty, and the grotesque. Ultimately, such interrogation grants insight into a historical Bardolatry built on troublesome binaries, and thereby how Shakespeare and his characters are more fluidly constructed in new mediums and narrative forms.

## I. Gods and monsters

In any context, discussing monsters invites questions of how we construct reality because *monsters are not real*. Yet we define people or actions that defy categorisation through monstrosity, often through some physical aspect, or what Asa Simon Mittman calls the ‘obvious markers’ of the monstrous (e.g. hybridity or physical extremes like bodily excess) (Mittman and Dendle 2013, 7). The word itself stems from the Latin *monstrare* which conveys a binary etymology meaning both ‘to show’ and ‘to warn,’ and the word has maintained this sense of ambiguity and otherness. After all, we are simultaneously repulsed and attracted by monsters – eager to see them even as we run away. As such, they are liminal and inhabit the ‘difficult middles,’ or dwell at the ‘gates of difference,’ as Jeffrey Jerome Cohen writes, in that they resist ‘classification built on hierarchy or a merely binary opposition, demanding instead a “system” allowing polyphony, mixed response (difference in sameness, repulsion in attraction), and resistance to integration.’<sup>1</sup> The monster threatens most by subverting our understanding of reality in that they do not exist, but we create monsters of who/what we cannot categorise. So, monsters exist because *we* create them. Put succinctly, the monster’s power is in its defiance of ‘the human desire to subjugate through categorization’ (Mittman and Dendle 2013, 7) and that power is expressed as a cultural and social influence that threatens the hierarchies by which we define reality.

Moreover, the monster must be considered through our comparably ambiguous construction of gods. Exploring monsters and gods through their connection to otherness, Richard Kearny defines gods as figures that are ‘benign’ and ‘cruel and capricious’ in turn and whose ‘numinous power and mystery exceed our grasp’ (Capoferro 2003, 3–4). Thus, one critical connection between gods and monsters is excess – of bodies, presence, or understanding. This parallel generated tension from our earliest illustrations of beings that defied nature. Studying medieval and early modern pamphlets that illustrated such monsters, Riccardo Capoferro explores the connection between gods and monsters, remarking on our need to *illustrate* this tension. Monsters, he writes, are vital ‘even in cases in which they actively threaten the world order. Sometimes they are manifestations of a destructive principle that is tightly interwoven with the creative principle embodied by benevolent gods who have in turn destructive sides so that good and evil bleed into each other.’ The interaction between creation and destruction so central to the construction of the binary figures of gods and monsters blurs as readily as form or genre. Moreover, monsters emerge

as ‘products of an unrestrained creativity that seem analogous to the creativity of God’ in that they are ‘presented as a principle of regularity’ appearing, like gods, as forces of nature ‘that can easily transcend human understanding’ (Capoferro 2010, 87). In exceeding boundaries, and thereby dismantling categories, *we* wield unrestrained creativity – be it through the creation of gods or monsters, or superheroes or villains. To this end, comic books and graphic novels have proven a rich medium for challenging such constructs through the interplay of narrative and image.

Neil Gaiman’s *Sandman* follows the tales of Dream, one of a group of divine siblings who preceded the gods. They are not gods, or supernatural beings, but rather manifestations of human experiences known collectively as the Endless. They include the witty Death, the wretched Despair who is twin sister to the fluidly gendered Desire, the erratic Delirium (who used to be Delight), the oddly peaceful Destruction, and the stoic Destiny. Each has purview over their own quality but also give rise to its opposite in that Destruction creates and Death defines life.<sup>2</sup> Dream himself is melancholy and pensive and often works in tandem with his more engaging sisters. At one point in *Sandman* #43, Dream joins Delirium to search for Destruction who has been missing for centuries. They are aided by a travel agent who owes Dream a debt, and when Delirium asks about him, Dream responds: ‘He used to be a God. When last we met in Babylon, his sacrifices were dwindling and many of his shrines had already been abandoned. I merely suggested that he find another occupation.’ Delirium then asks, ‘Oh, I didn’t know you could stop being a god?’ and Dream replies: ‘You can stop being anything.’ Their conversation grants us insight into the nature of divinity and immortality in *Sandman*. For even the Endless are not given that in the course of the series, Dream dies and is replaced. There is a sense of renewal, coupled with an acceptance of the inevitability of impermanence, in Gaiman’s series. Indeed, the final words in ‘Exiles’ (*Sandman* #74), the last issue of the series proper and before the Shakespearean epilogue that chronologically precedes it, assures us that change is the only absolute as the *new* Dream declares: ‘Only the phoenix arises and does not descend. And everything changes. And nothing is truly lost.’ Moreover, Dream’s answer to Delirium grants divine creation to god and mortal alike. To have the power to *stop* being something suggests the possibility of *becoming* something else, just as creating something requires destroying something in the endless tug of war of opposing binaries. In both series, divinity is closely connected to creation, often rendered as the power of an authorial creation that is easily granted, sometimes forced, and always desired or stolen by god and mortal alike. Divinity is creative in its limitless metamorphic potential yet threatening in the destruction those creations cause. That same creative potential repeatedly threatens with the reality that nothing is fixed – not our dreams, nor our myths, nor our gods, and most certainly never the gods we make of our authors.

At the close of one of *Sandman*’s most intriguing storylines (*Sandman* #73), Death appears to Robert Gadling (a mortal made immortal in a wager between Dream and Death). Death informs him of Dream’s demise, and then offers to take him after centuries of life. He declines but observes of the passing of Dream: ‘He wasn’t the only constant thing in the world. But Almost. And I liked him.’ Gadling, a very human immortal, survives the death of Dream, a very mortal divine being. This is just one example of how divinity repeatedly materialises as a human trait. Gods are never merely fantastical or powerful and become travel agents as easily as mortals become divine, and shift between mortality and immortality in their expression of divinity. Gadling and Dream meet

a hapless Shakespeare despairing over his poor writing in one of their centennial meetings. It is then that Dream grants Shakespeare, a mortal, *his* divine power to ‘create new dreams to spur the minds of men’ (*Sandman* #13), and thereby, the ability to disrupt the real and the ideal. This creative power further allows the metaleptic blurring by which Shakespeare coexists with his characters. By wielding that divine authorial creation, Shakespeare also unwittingly gains immortality in becoming the Bard of our Bardolatry. Indeed, our Bardolatry is troubled by nothing more than the suggestion that Shakespeare’s work was not the result of his inspired genius.<sup>3</sup> Here he is no genius, but rather a failed playwright eager for the power Dream offers. The bargain is struck, and he agrees to write two plays for Dream that reveal the power of dreams: *Midsummer Night’s Dream* (*Sandman* #19) and *The Tempest* (*Sandman* #75).

At *Sandman* #75, at the close of the series, Shakespeare reflects on his regrets, comparing himself to Prospero and a host of other characters in the play, only for Dream to compare himself to Prospero, and the island to his realm. Through this divinely created play, both a ‘Character-God’ and a ‘Human-God-as-character’ become Shakespeare’s characters. When Shakespeare wakes having concluded his contract with Dream, only then does he write Prospero’s poignant epilogue. In those final, lyrical words at the end of this epic series we witness the un-tempered, mortal Shakespeare wielding divinity through authorial creation. As easily as a god can choose not to be a god so mortal Shakespeare can choose to divinely create. The boundaries between human and god blur in a reality that looks much like our own, but to which the physical presence of divinity is integral. As Emily Ronald has argued, encounters with divinity in *Sandman* display ‘a peculiar double effect’ that simultaneously make ‘religion, or any interaction with divinity, irrelevant and disenchanting, while also encouraging wonder at the re-enchantment of the world. Gods as characters lose their divine wonder, but that wonder is instead distributed throughout the ordinary world [and] the gods themselves change in order to survive among humans’ (Ronald 2010, 310). Drained of their ideality, gods can choose the monstrous human mortality they granted to their creations, while humans, imbued with divinity, can become gods and monsters.

Alternatively, McCreery and Del Col’s Shakespeare is never mortal though he suffers mortal failings. In the world of this series, he is not a historical figure granted divinity, but god, the creator, who is worshipped and sought by his ‘children’ – acolyte and apostate alike. He shuns them and spends his days perpetually drunk and scribbling on the walls of a derelict cabin as they unceasingly seek him and the creative power of his golden quill.<sup>4</sup> In the first two volumes of *Kill Shakespeare*, we follow Hamlet who has recently escaped from Denmark. King Richard needs him to find Shakespeare, but those fighting against Richard’s rule (known as the Prodigals) rescue Hamlet so that he can find Shakespeare to deliver his people from Richard. Hamlet is the prophesied chosen one – the ‘Shadow King’ – destined to find Shakespeare. Thus, the creatures seek their creator to defend themselves against fellow creations and can succeed only by using Shakespeare’s creations – his words – against him. *Kill Shakespeare*’s characters come from across the plays and speak in fragmented lines from across the canon, and we follow them through story lines that satisfy our desire to know Shakespeare’s characters beyond the limits of their plays through alternative story lines, prequels, and sequels. Much separates the two series, and yet both reify the rich Shakespearean textual heritage idealised and deified even as we recognised it as borrowed or plagiarised. Both series

also demonstrate the textual\visual construction of divinity and monstrosity through key characters, and most saliently with Shakespeare himself. Some transform within a series, others connect innovatively between series, but all exemplify the ongoing reconstruction of Shakespeare and his characters.

## II. Puck

Puck is the clearest example of divinity and monstrosity in that he shifts constantly between them and is an instrumental agent in the resolution of both series. In performance, adaptation, and interpretation, Puck stands at the thresholds between audience and players throughout, but particularly in his epilogue. Unsurprisingly, he appears only at literal and contextual thresholds in both series. From his first appearance, Gaiman's Puck represents a strained-*metalepsis* in *Sandman* in that the 'real' Robin Goodfellow arrives from the Faerie realm to attend a performance of Shakespeare's *Midsummer Night's Dream* (*Sandman* #19) during which an actor is playing the part of Puck before an audience that includes Puck. Midway through the performance the 'real' Puck overcomes the player-Puck declaring 'and Puck meets Puck is that not preposterous' as he joins the players to perform himself while wearing a Puck mask. The final scene of the 'play' blurs the performance into the graphic novel's narrative when Puck removes the Puck mask and recites the epilogue alone to the reader as he closes a threshold. We are left to wonder if the words were ever Shakespeare's or always Puck's as it foreshadows the same moment in *The Tempest* (*Sandman* #75) when Shakespeare writes Prospero's epilogue. Both scenes are moments of liminal authorial creation: one by Shakespeare (the 'ideal' author-character) the other by Puck (the 'real' character-author). The threshold between the real and ideal blur in the authorial creation of two epilogues (a liminal text-form) set in the liminal space between dream, performance and reality. In his monstrous creativity, Puck performs the first until Shakespeare recreates him as trickster pet in his play. While the mortal again Shakespeare, released from his contract with Dream, writes the other until *we* recreate him as divine.

'A Midsummer's Night Dream' opens with a glorious double-page spread in which Dream welcomes the fairies into the real world. The 'real' fairies are far less ethereal or magical than clownish and bestial, and as the story progresses, they become increasingly monstrous and threatening. King Oberon is horned, redirecting the hybridity of Bottom's ass head from the original play's performed fairy magic to Gaiman's reconstructed fairy realism. Bounding ahead of Oberon and Titania at the portal, Puck names Dream of the Endless not for who he is but in relation to *Puck's* role in what is to come: 'They say the Seven Endless are forever, mighty Dream. You and the other six, until the death of time itself. What say you to that, King of the Riddle-Realms?' This naming (and suggestion of the future) is particularly telling given that Daniel, the child Puck steals, becomes the new Dream. And this is not the only child-stealing fairy of folklore that materialises in *Sandman*. The death of Shakespeare's son, Hamnet is granted a similar explanation that blurs fiction and history. Queen Titania watches Hamnet perform, covets him, and then tempts him with promises of the Fairy realm. Saddened by his distant father, Titania's descriptions captivate Hamnet suggesting that he was taken and replaced with a changeling-Hamnet who dies a few years later.



**Figure 1.** 'Midsummer Night's Dream' *Sandman* #19, written by Neil Gaiman, illustrated by Charles Vess.

Consequently, 'Midsummer Night's Dream' follows Hamnet closely and progressively equates him with the fairies. We first see the divine fairies in their monstrosity from Hamnet's perspective. In [Figure 1](#), Hamnet recites Bottom's words as he discovers the fairies lurking in the dark as shadowy, black figures, with glowing red eyes that are slanted to evoke predatory animalism ([Figure 1](#)). This is the first significant appearance of the fairies as monstrous, and tellingly, they are depicted as such in both series.<sup>5</sup> Hamnet stares into a darkness lit only by fairy eyes thereby generating an important double textual echo in that he, outside of the performance, recites the same words Bottom recites upon awakening from a dream in Shakespeare's play. Furthermore, Shakespeare's words are a paraphrase of Paul's first epistle to the Corinthians (2:9) when *he* awakens from a dream.<sup>6</sup> This multi-layered, multi-textual moment reveals Dream's command, introduces divinity through the biblical reference, and further associates the moment with legend, mythology, and ultimately literary and divine creation through Gaiman's own mythmaking. Moreover, the fairies with glowing red eyes staring out of the dark visually connect this scene to the epilogue, which belongs to Puck alone.

In [Figure 2](#), Puck delivers the epilogue in progressively darkening panels that tighten into a close-up until he fades into the shadows that now certainly offend ([Figure 2](#)). Puck sits on his haunches, monstrously bestial yet Shakespearean-divine staring at the Puck-mask like Hamlet regarding Yorick's skull. The panels are blue-washed, and Puck's red eyes appear as prominent as his sharp teeth and open raised claws. The panels darken and his body is lost utterly to shadows until all that remains are his eyes, teeth and words. The shadows win in the complete darkness of the final panel. The familiar melancholy language of Puck's epilogue is unmoored from its conventional performative suggestion as the monstrous visual overshadows the divine language, leaving the reader wondering what 'restoring amends' might entail. This Puck is dark and dangerous and conveys none of the light humour or whimsical melancholy of Shakespeare's 'honest' Puck. Moreover, while Puck is named 'pet' in both *Sandman* (*Sandman* #66) and *Kill Shakespeare* ('Volume 2: The Blast of War'), the innocence and subservience this moniker denotes is dismantled in both series. Just as he has done on stage, page, and screen, Puck allows for changeability. He shifts between divine powers and monstrous actions that *both* realise creation. Gaiman's Puck blurs Shakespearean characterisation with legend and myth, and moreover, embodies and dramatises binary distinctions. The epilogue



Figure 2. 'Midsummer Night's Dream' *Sandman* #19, written by Neil Gaiman, illustrated by Charles Vess.

highlights a monstrosity that sharpens significantly as the series progresses. Puck, now loose from both the Fairy realm *and* the constraints of Shakespeare's text, reappears throughout the series to become instrumental to each resolution.

Puck is rendered in a variety of artistic interpretations through the series, and at one point, he closely resembles Loki, the Norse trickster god. The two visually echo each other as they toy with the stolen child who will become Dream. He floats along holding a magical phoenix feather while Puck pulls at him like a balloon on a string. The playfulness of this image contrasts sharply with the monstrousness of the kidnapping, and the increasing suggestion of what awaits, which is only amplified by Puck's close resemblance to Loki.<sup>7</sup> Yet perhaps the most telling detail of Puck's shifting presence is the scope of his power. By monstrously purging Daniel of his mortality, Puck is creating a god by making it possible for him to become Dream. Furthermore, in Puck's final appearance Puck declares 'I'll return to Fairy, perhaps, for a short while. Vex my Lord Auberon, Plague Mab, Maeve, Titania, or one of the other facets of the Queen ... *Creation* is my Playground, after all.' Puck offers a *new* epilogue standing at another threshold where he, as the knowing monster, wields creative power and acknowledges his access to the thresholds of *all* creation revealing Puck as perhaps the most powerfully divine being in the series.<sup>8</sup>

Initially, *Kill Shakespeare's* Puck is closer to the popular expectations of a fairy and Shakespeare's original who was ever a bungling trickster helper to the King. He is small and blue, has wings, a pointed goatee, and long twigs for arms and feet. He also flies around in a cloud of light and sparkles and speaks in rhymed couplets (Figure 3). However, we do not get to revel in the language as we do with Gaiman's Puck who darkens the character in his subtler adaptation through text and image. This Puck is loyal to Shakespeare, the Father-God who here is also the Fairy-God, yet he is still a liminal being appearing at thresholds. Hamlet and Falstaff encounter Puck in the forest and he offers them only poetic clues to Shakespeare's location. They must hurry, he says, 'if Shakespeare's rebirth you shall ring,' maintaining a language of 'rebirth' in keeping with the Biblical narrative of Hamlet-the-redeemer-son and Shakespeare-the-creator-father that *Kill Shakespeare* follows. Hamlet eventually convinces Shakespeare to help defeat King Richard, but when he arrives with his fairies, General Othello doubts such 'pets' can help in the war. On Shakespeare's command Puck reveals his shifting nature by growing across two pages and tearing open his chest to reveal numerous shining red eyes and teeth (Figure 4). Puck transforms into a snarling monster with ravenous teeth and a serpentine tongue whose red, glaring eyes multiply even into his hands. No longer framed by blue sparkles or speaking in poetry, he is encircled by bright red flames that repeat in his gums and flickering tongue as he towers over Othello. This Puck is no wise trickster as in Shakespeare's original nor does he convey the divine creative power of Gaiman's Puck. His monstrosity is a hidden, violent grotesquerie revealed only by the divine creator who commands and re/creates his form connecting him to other characters.

### III. Despair, Desire, Sycorax

One figure in *Sandman* introduces a uniquely monstrous presence that connects closely to another figure in *Kill Shakespeare*. Only Despair of the Endless is physically monstrous, reflecting what Renaissance art defined as the grotesque, and encompassing what





Figure 3. 'Volume 1: A Sea of Troubles,' *Kill Shakespeare*. written by Conor McCreery and Anthony Del Col, illustrated by Andy Belanger.



**Figure 4.** 'Volume 2: Blast of War,' *Kill Shakespeare* written by Conor McCreery and Anthony Del Col, illustrated by Andy Belanger.

Mikael Bahktin would later identify in his reading of the Carnavalesque as the grotesque body: an ambiguous figure that reduces ideality into material real, and most vividly in *Sandman*, as the maternal-grotesque – simultaneously monstrous and nurturing. Despair's divine body is distorted and exaggerated, a monstrous woman who simultaneously elicits empathy and disgust. She is pale and heavy, with large pendulous breasts and short dark hair worn in a top knot. Her image shifts depending on the artist, so at times she is rendered more human, at others more bestial, but her face is always broad, with an over-large, exaggerated mouth and sharp teeth that are fang-like in some interpretations. Yet her body also recalls the corpulent maternal bodies of the goddesses in several theologies such as the stone-age carving of the Venus of Willendorf, or the Hindu goddess of misfortune, Jyeshta.<sup>9</sup>

In action, the Endless often behave with varying degrees of divine monstrosity, particularly Desire, Despair's twin. Of the Endless, Desire most closely resembles the monstrous fairies. When s/he engages her/his power, s/he darkens and gains the same predatory red eyes suggesting that the fairies may be incarnations of desire as both dwell in the threshold. Desire locates the place of desire as 'there [...] in the longing, the lust, the breath of desire, the caress of the threshold.'<sup>10</sup> At the threshold of Desire is Despair, and so they are fittingly twinned as they move between binary poles of impetus and hindrance. Desire is the Endless most destructive and violent to others, while Despair's

violence is entirely self-directed. She regularly tears open her body with her hooked-ring sigil, and her realm is infested with rats who nibble on her as mirrors infinitely reflect her wounded body back to her. As such, she is a liminal divine monster whose actions are monstrous to herself, yet divine in her sacrifice.

Through these qualities, Despair connects critically to Sycorax in both series. Gaiman's series closes with Shakespeare dreaming each scene of *The Tempest* as he writes it. In one image, Sycorax traps Ariel in a tree while holding the infant Caliban. Shakespeare's dream-Sycorax closely resembles Despair, but one who is far less monstrous than the Sycorax of the original play.<sup>11</sup> Sycorax is not the witch of Shakespeare's textual rendering whose absence is most telling, but a maternal presence protecting Caliban from an Ariel who is more suggestive of Gaiman's threatening Puck than of Shakespeare's airy spirit (Figure 5). Closely connected to Gaiman's Sycorax-as-Despair is Shakespeare's problematic monster, Caliban, who sits smiling in Sycorax's arms. The red-eyed fairies threaten at the fringes here as they did earlier, and Ariel resembles them as the true monster that Sycorax must confine to the cloven pine.

*Kill Shakespeare's* third volume, 'Tide of Blood,' follows the aftermath of the battle after which Shakespeare disappears again. Disillusioned after meeting his flawed god, Romeo leaves to wander the realm where he saves Miranda from wild dogs. Prospero and his 'Island of Cannibals' are 'but an ancient children's tale' in this world, yet Miranda proves the truth of the story and warns them that Prospero 'means to end this world.' They journey to a Prospero's island which Miranda and Caliban have peopled the island with bestial children, while Prospero has gone mad with vengeful desire to wield Shakespeare's creative divinity. He becomes the monster confronting his maker in a critical reversal of the play in which the monstrous Caliban confronts Prospero about the well-spoken monster he has made of him (Figure 6). Del Col and McCreery give us intriguing adaptations from two directions with Sycorax and Caliban as they reimagine both characters in an alternate origin and future that anchors the loose ends of their narrative with a nod towards some of the subtler subtexts of Shakespeare's text. Gaiman's *Tempest* avoids giving the play's characters' new sources, and instead focuses on the imagined sources for Shakespeare's divine skill in writing the plays, including textual realisations – the ideal text, here realised as 'real.' After all, Caliban appears in *Sandman* just as Shakespeare encounters him: a stinking 'Indian' mummy exhibited at Shakespeare's local pub as a curiosity, or the very fate Trinculo and Stephano plan for Caliban. Yet in Shakespeare's imagination, he is less monstrous than the true 'pet' that Ariel-as-Puck and the fairies never were.

In *Kill Shakespeare*, it is Sycorax who is trapped in the tree, and she in turn traps others. Originally exiled because of her threatening power, and thereby free to rule over her island, this Sycorax is both monstrous and divine. She is immortal and able trap others, yet her captivity renders her monstrous while Caliban, in action *and* body, is absolute monstrosity. He is a ravenous werewolf whose language is rough and ungrammatical in contrast to Shakespeare's always-lyrical thing of darkness. Sycorax reveals the reversal to Juliet, thereby shifting the monstrosity from monstrous creation to divine creator: 'My own sweet son named Prospero enemy on my behalf. As punishment, the warlock tore away his thoughts. Now my Caliban is little more than beast' (Figure 7). The reversal of Caliban's bestiality is telling. In Shakespeare's play he is monstrous in body and action, yet commands as much pity as fear with Prospero



Figure 5. 'The Tempest' Sandman #75, written by Neil Gaiman, illustrated by Charles Vess.



Figure 6. 'Volume 3: Tide of Blood,' *Kill Shakespeare*, written by Conor McCreery and Anthony Del Col, illustrated by Andy Belanger.



Figure 7. 'Volume 3: Tide of Blood,' *Kill Shakespeare*, written by Conor McCreery and Anthony Del Col, illustrated by Andy Belanger.

acting far more monstrosity. Caliban's monstrosity is repeatedly ascribed to his lineage – born of a witch and the devil – granting him divinity and monstrosity at once. With *Kill Shakespeare*, Caliban's monstrosity is entirely Prospero's doing. His real father is the ravenously ambitious Prospero who curses both Sycorax and Caliban into monstrosity. Accordingly, Sycorax and Caliban both have the glowing red eyes that emerge as a determining signifier of monstrosity, but they were not always thus.

*Kill Shakespeare's* 'Tide of Blood' includes bonus gallery 'Revenge Shall Have No Bounds,' a brief story that opens on the 'remnants of Prospero's island' where a tree-bound Sycorax reminisces with the similarly cursed Ferdinand to tell the tale that led to their fate. A young, beautiful Sycorax attended Shakespeare's school where he taught 'bright minds and impassioned hearts' who had 'traveled legions to study at his feet.' Back then, he did not reject his creations, and in fact 'Will's desire to understand the world of his creation was infectious.' Prospero was his librarian while Sycorax tended his gardens, and both were his star apprentices. Shakespeare notices that Sycorax's powers are 'worth beyond measure,' leading Prospero, her lover, to grow jealous. He accuses her of betraying him, and aided by the villainous Lady Macbeth, Prospero curses her into the cloven pine leaving her weeping as she waits for the birth of their son. The monstrous Caliban that Prospero begrudgingly acknowledged as 'his own' in the play is his 'true' son. Sycorax does not have red eyes until the final frame where the threshold of her transformation is caught with one eye green in divine, creative power and the other red, slanted, and monstrous (Figure 8).

Gaiman's *Sandman* ends with the decided finality of the death (and rebirth) of Dream, and with Shakespeare (and thereby Gaiman) finally laying down their authorial creative power. But the *Lucifer* storyline continues in several series, the latest of which includes a Sycorax that closely resembles *Kill Shakespeare's* beautiful sorceress.<sup>12</sup> In this series, Sycorax plans to unite with the moon and is stopped by Lucifer, the light-bringer, who becomes her lover. Her Caliban is indeed a 'poisonous slave, got by the devil himself' (1.2.321) like Prospero names him. Lucifer exiles both to an island he hides from the heavenly hosts who would not suffer his heir to live. After escaping from the endless torture of Sycorax's mindscape, Lucifer raises Sycorax from the dead and reunites her with Caliban – a large, sullen man seemingly made more of stone than flesh who has been searching for his absent father throughout his long life. The island is 'real,' the events of the play occurred, but Shakespeare is wholly absent – though both the bargain and the play are mentioned. This suggests *The Tempest* was history not fantasy, blurring dream and reality once again. Shakespeare and his characters inhabit the *Sandman Universe*, making this a revision not of imagination, as in *Sandman* where we see Despair as Sycorax and child Caliban through Shakespeare's imaginative creation, but of truth.

#### IV. Shakespeare and Prospero

Following suit, Shakespeare himself appears in both series with divine creative authorship, and always in close parallel to Prospero. In *Kill Shakespeare*, Puck tells Hamlet that as the Shadow King he is 'both scorned and rightly feared,' leading him to ask, 'But why wouldst Shakespeare, a God, fear me?' Puck declares that Shakespeare fears 'thou are some form of test. About thee lies the stink of death.' As with Sycorax and Caliban, Hamlet – the chosen one – becomes monstrous as he grows more divine just as



**Figure 8.** 'Volume 3: Tide of Blood, Bonus Gallery: Revenge Shall Have No Bounds,' *Kill Shakespeare* Written by Carrie J. Cole, Illustrated by Vivian Ng.



Shakespeare – god – becomes more human. Indeed, the two series diverge most tellingly in Shakespeare’s divinity. Gaiman’s Shakespeare is mortal until Dream grants him divine creative power by which he dreams the characters he creates, and through this introspection, yearns to understand their presence. But this Shakespeare is a lonely god hiding from his creations with any desire to know them abandoned long ago.

In endless contemporary readings, the Shakespeare we idealise is the one we connect to Prospero: successful, retired, hoping to lay down his pen, his talent, and his magic. *Sandman* emphasises this parallel with the act of creation rendered as divine authorial creation, and it becomes the central distinction between mortality and immortality in the series. Dream sees himself as a mage exiled to his island of dreams while Shakespeare dreams himself as Prospero while sharing a space with his daughter Miranda, who resembles Judith. In Figure 9, this parallel is forced as the panels alternate between the real Shakespeare and his Prospero-dream-self. Both are in the same position, both are holding a paper, and both exchange lines as if they were performing together (Figure 9). *Kill Shakespeare* then takes up this quality and writes it larger with a regret that is less dreary melancholy and divine retirement than monstrous self-destruction. Shakespeare is a fallen god who has succumbed to mortal failings capturing the inevitable failure of our ideal icons ever living up to our perceptions in the real, a quality later emphasised in the disappointment of his children meeting him. He fails by rejecting his creations and refusing to wield his creative power, and his image is at once familiar and monstrous even in his divinity – for his ending is despair.

Only Hamlet can take up the mantle as god’s only worthy son to convince Shakespeare to take up his quill. This textual connection repeats in the illustrations leading to Hamlet reaching Shakespeare. Like Christ, he must face demons in a descent into hell becoming monstrous himself when a rotting creature rises from the marsh appearing to him first as

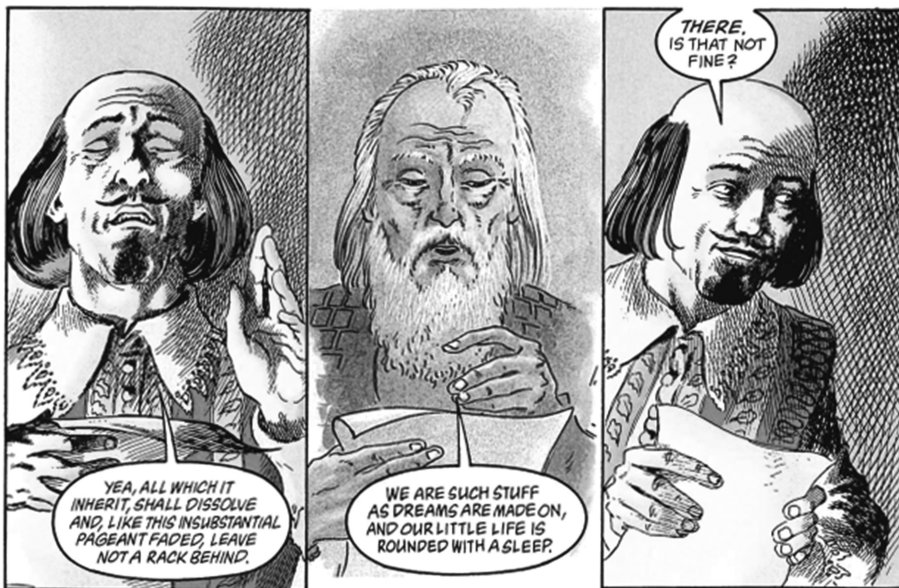


Figure 9. 'The Tempest' *Sandman* #75, written by Neil Gaiman, illustrated by Charles Vess.



**Figure 10.** 'Volume 2: Blast of War,' *Kill Shakespeare*. written by Conor McCreery and Anthony Del Col, illustrated by Andy Belanger.

Polonius, then his father, and finally himself. Yet his last obstacle is most telling. In [Figure 10](#), Hamlet survives a baptismal rebirth in the waters surrounding Shakespeare's cabin in which he escapes a textual monster attempting to drag him down ([Figure 10](#)). This scene is likely the most sublime in a series that is rarely subtle. The Shakespearean text we try to sustain as pure and unassailable, even divine, imprisons the characters and prevents their escape – the monster threatening the fluid adaptation of Shakespeare and his characters. Jason Tondro discusses this scene in detail, describing the creature as 'not a single monstrous text, but rather an assemblage of chapters, books, and plays made faceless and mute' and notes, astutely, that the critical suggestion is that Hamlet does not 'defeat' the paper monster, but rather escapes it (Tondro 2012, 22). This is not monstrous destruction, but a divine creation that ultimately grants us literal and figurative access to the 'real' Shakespeare. Hamlet emerges from the waters now free from the text and thereby worthy to reach god. In the issue's dramatic conclusion, Shakespeare addresses the troops with quill in hand and finally creates. Words appear across the sky upon which his face is emblazoned. Transforming into an angry god in the heavens, he demands that his 'children' break their weapons ([Figure 11](#)). Thus, only through Hamlet the son, can Shakespeare the father, wield his words with divine creative force. As demonstrated, *Kill Shakespeare* follows the Christian story on several levels, and in this takes from Gaiman the premise of Shakespeare and his characters only to recast them in a single mythology.

Prospero offers a final example of how the construction of divinity as authorial creation results in monstrosity through Shakespeare's presence with his characters. Gaiman equates Shakespeare with the dream of Prospero in *Sandman*, and Prospero in *Kill Shakespeare* once again reverses the direction of that divinity. He is Shakespeare's powerful, yet jealous, 'child' who wants to wield Shakespeare's creative quill. As such,



Figure 11. 'Volume 2: Blast of War,' *Kill Shakespeare*. written by Conor McCreery and Anthony Del Col, illustrated by Andy Belanger.

Prospero is not the regretful, exiled magician, but a Lucifer-figure. He becomes Shakespeare's fallen angel cast out because of his ambitious desire to wield the power of divine creation. When Shakespeare appears to challenge Prospero, the focus of the series shifts to evoke not *Sandman* but Gaiman himself as the god-like creator of other worlds.<sup>13</sup> This visually and textually mimics the Lucifer storyline from *Sandman* along with the 'pale nothingness' of his novella *Coraline* (2002) which includes an empty space waiting to be filled by a monstrous creation. *Kill Shakespeare* specifically uses the language and action of the Other Mother from Gaiman's *Coraline*: 'If thou doth pull down this world all that shall remain is this ceaseless, hungry void.'<sup>14</sup> In *Coraline*, the Beldam tears down the world every night and rebuilds it to Coraline's desire, and in Henry Selick's film adaptation of *Coraline*, this is rendered as complete whiteness, an 'other' world that is nothingness.<sup>15</sup> At one point in *Kill Shakespeare*, Shakespeare and Prospero stand on slender cliff overlooking cloud figures that form into monstrous, fluid beings coming into creation. The image very closely resembles Lucifer and Dream standing on a cliff overlooking the demons in Hell in *Sandman*, and yet again also resembles Gaudium and Spera, fallen cherubs from *Lucifer*, standing on a cliff overlooking another hellscape at the behest of a new god.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, so closely do these images repeat that one might consider *Kill Shakespeare* an adaptation of *Sandman*'s universe.

*Kill Shakespeare*'s Prospero and Shakespeare battle in this 'airy nothingness' that *Midsummer Night's Dream*'s Theseus noted would hold 'the forms of things unknown' emerging from 'the poet's pen' (5.1.15). Prospero learns that with the power to create comes the unquenchable monstrous hunger of that void. At one point, Prospero recreates his wife's face resulting in a monstrous blank face and says, 'everything I would seek to build would be obscene.' When he then tries to recall Miranda, she takes form only in words that almost form her shape but refuse to stay (Figure 12). She is lost to him, Shakespeare declares, and Prospero realises that only the failure to write, the failure to create, is monstrous.<sup>17</sup>

In Gaiman's 'Midsummer Night's Dream,' we witness a moment of performative creation with the fairies attending the play, and with *The Tempest*, we witness a moment of textual creation as that issue follows each scene as it is written. As the play takes shape Shakespeare moves closer to losing his divinity at the conclusion of the bargain. Regretfully, he admits that the play contains his divine dreams as well as 'real' aspects of his life, his family, and his monstrous use of Hamnet's death to find greater depths for his plays. Their time in the Dreaming visually and textually recall Dream's visits with Gadling with whom Dream discussed Shakespeare's play. Now in the Dreaming, the mortal-again Shakespeare discusses his life and regrets with Dream. From history to personal reflection, the role of the author-as-creator across time in these parallel meetings mimic how we render Shakespeare, through our Bardolatry, immortal and able to speak across time. The authorial creation of the plays, their social presence in pub and divine realm alike, is consistently in the presence of an immortality Shakespeare possesses even after the bargain ends.

Just as divinity allows for creation, monstrosity comes to reveal the endless change in stories and characters, in icons and authors that both series – and their spinoffs – posit as the only reliable truth. It is a levelling captured best in Shakespeare's presence as anchor to both series in which his characters and plays shift easily into new stories and revisions. Shakespeare is one of the few authors to have achieved divinity not through his creations, but through our creation of him as an icon and



monstrous is a desire that denotes a threshold, and monstrous desire defines potentiality or becoming (1996, 3–25).

2. In *Sandman* #47, Destruction, now devoted to a peaceful life, describes the duality of the Endless: ‘Our sister [Death] defines life, just as Despair defines hope, or Desire defines hatred, or as Destiny defines freedom.’ On this duality, Ally Brisbin and Paul Booth’s reading brings much to the discussion: ‘In constructing this series of oppositions, Gaiman enacts a similar mode of discourse as deconstructionism presented in Derridean thought. For Derrida [...] the analysis of any text, be it literary or cultural, is based on inherent contradictions. To claim a deconstructionist reading is to describe ways in which specific texts constitute systems without inherent meaning, and to describe paradoxical or ironic practices that come from those systems that are taken as normative. [...] In *Sandman*, Destruction is both an act and a representation of that act, yet he is also his opposite, creation. To analyse this fluidity is to deconstruct critically the meaning in the text’ (2013, 31–32).
3. ‘Like Mozart and Einstein, Shakespeare is regarded not as a craftsman, but as inspired, gifted with an entirely different way of viewing the world [yet] people have a mixed relationship to the idea of genius. While we admire it, we also resent it and the shadow it casts over our much more meagre accomplishments.’ Since we cannot easily categorise Shakespeare’s genius, we classify it as divinity through Bardolatry, thereby rendering him monstrous in his unknowability (Castaldo 2004).
4. Gaiman’s *Sandman* begins with Dream imprisoned and his tools of divinity stolen – a ruby, a bag of sand, and a helm that is also his sigil. He spends much of the early series hunting those who stole and wielded these tools, leading to several examples of humans wielding divine tools with monstrous results.
5. Julia Round in ‘Transforming Shakespeare: Neil Gaiman and *The Sandman*’ writes that ‘Vess depicts the character as animalistic and demonic’ and ‘monstrous in both appearance and behavior’ and as such ‘returns Shakespeare’s fairies to their folkloric roots.’ Round’s use of ‘demonic’ is insightful in that ‘demonic’ is suggestive of both divinity and monstrosity, something that will come to the fore in *Sandman*’s later story arcs, most clearly in the *Lucifer* storyline and its spinoffs (2010, 101).
6. Sarah Annes Brown describes this quote as effective allusion in both content and nature in that ‘both Paul and Bottom, in very different ways are describing something beyond normal human experience’ but also ‘the Biblical quotation has the power to imply or suggest something above rather than below reality because of its uncannily anachronistic presence in ancient pagan Athens. In other words, it seems like a message from another world.’ Hamnet’s use of the quote, outside of the play proper, applies this to the scene as well. I would add it further dismantles the primacy of a single mythic story through the singular thread of dreaming given that all three characters, layered across history and genre – religious text, play, and graphic novel – awaken from dreams. The words apply contextually across multiple levels and forms (2009, 167).
7. ‘The Kindly Ones: 3’ *Sandman* #59, written by Neil Gaiman, illustrated by Marc Hempel.
8. ‘The Kindly Ones: 10’ *Sandman* #66, written by Neil Gaiman, illustrated by Marc Hempel.
9. Jyeshta appears in the *Sandman Universe Lucifer* storyline and Lucifer recognises her and calls her Despair. ‘The Problem with Old Blood Magic,’ *Sandman Universe: Lucifer* #10, written by Dan Watters, illustrated by Max Fiumara, Massimiliano Leomacs, and Dave McCraig.

10. 'Doll's House: Part 1' *Sandman* #9, written by Neil Gaiman, illustrated by Mike Dringenberg and Malcolm Jones III.
11. Incidentally, Despair also resembles Sycorax in Derek Jarman's film adaptation of *The Tempest* (1979), played by Claire Davenport. In the film, she sits naked on a dais breastfeeding an adult Caliban who is more carnival geek than monster. The film subverts her monstrosity in that she suggests both the Buddha and maternal Pieta in the scene, which endows her with divinity.
12. *Lucifer* (2000–2006) ended after 75 issues, although it was rebooted in 2015 as Volume 2. *Sandman's* Lucifer also appears in *The Sandman Universe: Lucifer* (2018-), which includes a Sycorax and Caliban storyline.
13. Critics and fans alike have long written of Gaiman's visual resemblance to Dream, a valid observation adding a rich *mise en abîme* to *Sandman*, but there is also a popular connection of Gaiman to Shakespeare. As Clay Smith writes, 'As with his other works, critics often cite Gaiman as Shakespearean in his authorial capabilities [...] While consistent with the larger body of criticism about Gaiman and his works, such comparisons also emphasise one of the primary ways that Gaiman maintains his celebrity. Through explicit and implicit Shakespearean quotes and references throughout his works, Gaiman invites a comparison with The Bard: he, like Shakespeare, creates a body of works that incorporate, reference, and otherwise (re)articulate an encyclopaedic range of cultural events and other sources, thereby demonstrating their author's creativity: he, like The Bard, deserves accolades and credit for his innovative works.' As such, Gaiman plays the same role as Shakespeare in both series, becoming the Bard we worship as he creates his gods and monsters (2008, 20–21).
14. 'Volume 3: Tide of Blood,' *Kill Shakespeare*, written by Conor McCreery and Anthony Del Col, illustrated by Andy Belanger.
15. This repeats in the final issue of *Lucifer*, when he leaves creation into the freedom of the void, refusing even his father's powers. 'All We Need is Hell,' *Lucifer* #75, written by Mike Carey, illustrated by Peter Gross and Ryan Kelly.
16. 'A Hope in Hell,' *Sandman* #4, written by Neil Gaiman, illustrated by Sam Keith and Mike Dringenberg and 'The Gaudium Option' *Lucifer* #73, written by Mark Carey, illustrated by Dean Ormston.
17. It is a premise that the *Lucifer* series also invokes when Lucifer is granted the means to creation. He is known only as the maker in his creation, and his only commandment is that they never worship anything. In his divinity, he refuses the divine, and so chooses not to be a god, nor the monstrous Satan we made of Lucifer, as easily as he chose not to be an angel. 'A Six Card Spread, Part 3 of 3' *Lucifer* #3, written by Mike Carey, illustrated by Chris Weston and James Hodgkins.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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