

IN THE WORLD

Under the Mask of Marvels

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By Rex Barnes

For nearly two decades Marvel Studios has crafted a powerfully imaginative universe of superheroes—often referred to as the MCU (Marvel Cinematic Universe). With the release of *Avengers: Age of Ultron*, *Ant-man*, *Fantastic Four*, and the Netflix adaptation of *Daredevil*, this year marks a wellspring of new characters, abilities, suits, and storylines. And the Marvel movie cosmos continues to expand. As we gear up for the future films, *Infinity War* (Parts I & II), we will soon witness the Avengers, the Guardians of the Galaxy, and others battle the shadowy figure, Thanos, for the Infinity Gauntlet. Marvel Studios and the MCU appear likely to remain a lucrative and unrelenting source of entertainment within contemporary popular culture.

That Marvel superheroes have captured such a substantial part of our collective imagination (and income) begs consideration of how “marvels” themselves can be understood. Like any cultural expression, marvels have a history—in this case, one specifically tied to premodern religious ideations of natural and supernatural occurrences. In fact, our responsiveness to cinematic Marvels *qua* marvels is the oblique product of a Christian interpretive framework. This may come as something of a surprise considering the majority of American superhero films glorify forms of scientific rationalism rather than religious systems of thought. Whether it’s Tony Stark, Peter Parker, or even Thor (yes, even the thunder *god* himself), advanced science and technology are consistently used to explain and legitimize superhuman abilities and their origins. Yet the manner in which this legitimization is formulated resembles much earlier western philosophical and theological systems of knowledge.

The Latin Middle Ages inherited a broad understanding of marvels from classical antiquity. Derived from the Latin term *mirabilia* (or *mira*) and related to the French *miroir* and *mirage*, marvels typically presented an inverted image of earthly regularity. They were considered naturally occurring events or phenomena for which the objective causation was obscure. Thus an individual born with, say, an extra appendage (e.g., a tail, limb, finger), heterochromic eyes, or dwarfism could be considered marvelous. More frequently, the occult properties of certain stones, liquids, plants, and animals—sometimes categorized under “natural magic”—were explained using the same criteria. The mandrake root, with its anthropomorphic form, was considered astonishingly fatal should its roots be fully drawn from the ground. Particular mountains, fountains, shrines, and other locations could similarly evoke wonder-full effects. In these examples, marvels are diffuse but integral to past perceptions of singularity.

That marvels were deemed “natural” or sometimes classified as magical means they were subject to the prescribed limits of divine creation. Indeed, marvels (and all magical arts) by definition exhibited exceptional attributes but never violated the natural order of the world. They presented elusive albeit profoundly meaningful boundaries for God’s creation. While premodern marvels were inexplicable by means of human reason, this was only because the objective cause for their existence was as yet unknown. The failure to understand occult virtues stimulated inquiry into how and why such things happened. Marvels marked an occasion to “wonder” (*admiratio*) at a universe replete with new, if confounding, signs and portents. This final point is crucial because marvels were pedagogically useful within the integrated schema of premodern Christian cosmology: one could be taught to marvel at the unknown for its moral and ontological significance in relation to God.



Illustration of a Mandrake Root circa 1390

Importantly, in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, marvels were contrasted with miracles (*miracula*); as we have seen, the former were defined by opaque origination and an emotive spark to investigate. For the latter, the trigger of wonderment was likewise paramount, although miracles were said to definitively transgress the ordinary workings of nature. Miracles thus differed from marvels by degree of divine involvement: God alone produced miracles through unmediated grace, whereas defects in nature or created agents (i.e., angels and demons) might engender marvels. The parting of the sea, resurrection of the dead, transubstantiation, and the postmortem deeds of saints were considered miracles that demonstrated the direct hand of God and the attendant suspension of natural operations. Attractive for their pastoral applicability, miracles and miracle-stories promoted ecclesiastically sanctioned sites for pious devotion (e.g., saints' relics and canonizations, the Eucharist, and various acts in the Bible).

Marvels, on the other hand, provided an alibi for the miraculous. That is, marvels worked negatively to illustrate where miracles were absent. For certain elite and Scholastically trained theologians this difference meant that unlike marvels, miracles operated literally above nature: they were technically "supernatural" rather than natural.

A similar logic operates for Marvels in film today. I am struck by how the origination narratives for the X-men, the Avengers, and many characters from the DC canon (e.g., Superman and Batman), typify marvelous causations rather than miraculous contraventions. The namesake, nature, and abilities of our superheroes empower them to bend, never break, the laws of creation. On this view a gamma radiation experiment gone awry or an orphaned alien from Krypton evoke wonder at an imaginative depiction of the extraordinary. The Hulk and Superman are fictional representations of abnormal phenomena always reconcilable within the framework of scientific rationalism. This does not mean "science" explains away fictional phenomena; rather, an unreal gadget, ability, or idea is accepted as possible but unrealizable within our current scope of knowledge. While we cannot recreate the exact fictions of Superman or the Hulk, superhuman flight, strength, and transformation are conveyed as resulting from exceptional forces of nature which science or technology only have yet to comprehend and harness. Even the idea that an undiscovered planet might foster powerful forms of extraterrestrial life suits the conceptual feasibility of the marvelous.

Consequently, the miraculous is all but dismissed in Marvel and DC origin stories. At the level of narrative device this makes good sense for twenty-first-century sensibilities. Dramatic storytelling predicates that a heroic figure's abilities be remarkable but also limited. Excitement rests in the portrayal of how a character with unprecedented gifts/insight/energy/adaptability responds to a challenge/crisis/threat within the ambit of amazing but still finite knowledge and dexterity. If the awareness and capacity of the protagonist were unlimited or godlike, there would be no drama and no tension. This being said, our Marvels could nonetheless be represented as the product of "supernatural" deeds or sent forth to enact marvelous means for miraculous ends without obstructing the story's use of suspense and conflict. Why not employ holy miracles to color and enrich the narrative environment in general or superhero origins in particular?

One ironic reason for this repudiation of miracle-working could be the unspoken taboo against overt religion in American superhero movies. Ostensibly more palatable than the *deus ex machina* of religion, idealized types of science and technology are creatively employed as sources of human or alien (never divine) power. For Peter Parker and Bruce Banner accidental mishaps with scientific experimentation transform the quotidian into the astonishing. Sometimes extra-evolutionary mutations serve this purpose, as in the example of the X-men, or a blinding mishap with toxic materials might enhance one's sensory faculties, as with Daredevil. Alien knowledge and design, such as that of the Kree or the Guardians of the Galaxy, can similarly act as a catalyst for advancement in science fictional settings. Tony Stark and Bruce Wayne are not inherently made superhuman; their expert comprehension of high-tech computers and engineering nevertheless affords them this privilege or burden. Particularly striking in these popular examples is that superhuman powers are never explicitly given by means of divine gift. Their abilities remain tacitly embedded in the conceptual realm of an ever-expanding universe — like our specialized knowledge thereof — lest religious doctrine and dogma (i.e., the miraculous) exclude so-called secular objectivity. Arguably, the subtext here is that we never eclipse the potential for further scientific or technological progress, perhaps even utopia.



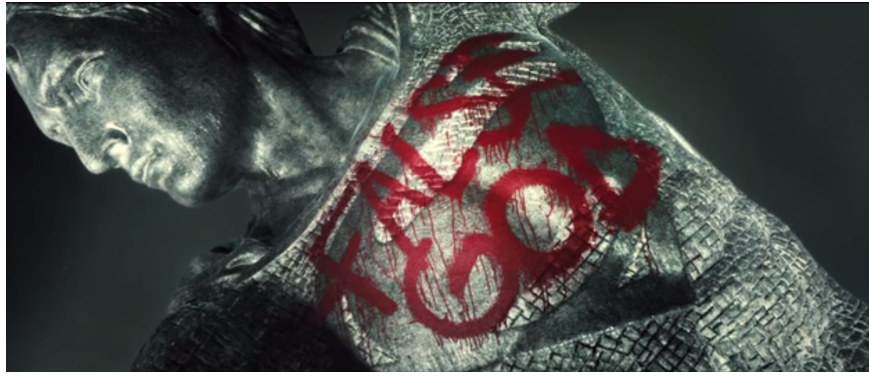
Thor

In fact, few from the familiar superhero order can be said to exhibit religious provenance. True, characters like Daredevil or Nightcrawler may voice their confessional backgrounds. These quirks, however, rarely develop as a centerpiece for our superheroes' adventures and certainly not their superhuman skills. Instead, predominant themes of transformation and hybridization are governed by vaunted depictions of secular science and any overt religious values are generally sidelined or given over to vague allegory. One might suggest that the mythological figure, Thor, is the prime example of an archaic religious system. As the Norse thunder god explains to the astrophysicist Jane Foster (played by Natalie Portman) in the first *Thor* film: "Your ancestors called it magic, but you call it science. I come from a land where they are one and the same." Whether the Asgardian deity's insight bespeaks the historical values I am highlighting remains to be seen. Most recently, the crowning moment for futuristic technology in *Age of Ultron* collapses any religio-magical equivocation with the character Vision—an incarnate form of Stark's supercomputer Jarvis—who impossibly lifts the magical hammer of Thor, Mjölfnir. In effect, the scene underscores the heightened, even salvific, function that good science (Vision) enacts in its domestication of religion and magic (Thor), alongside the impending destruction of bad science (Ultron).

To be clear, recent superhero films are never totally devoid of religious symbols, themes, and meaning. On the contrary, they often provide a rich source of playful ambiguities from which religious motifs can be drawn. As is well known, the manner in which super-abilities are wielded and how our heroes rebound from their often traumatic origins, carries much more importance. Spider-man, for example, deserves the epithet "Amazing" for the onus of complicated moral choices he must confront and not just his webslinging adroitness. His famous motto "with great power comes great responsibility" emphasizes this point. Were Peter Parker the Amazing Spider-man for his powers alone, his supervillain assailants could share in this title. The first preview for next year's *Batman v Superman* movie similarly highlights the polyvalent nature of superhero morals, and in this case with explicit religious imagery. As [the first trailer](#) begins, the audience observes a monumental statue of Superman—graffitied with the words FALSE GOD in red paint—and hears a voice of admonishment bemoaning that we have "been so caught up with what he *can* do that no one has asked what he *should* do." Complex ethical considerations framed in relation to extraordinary powers typically present the most suggestive narratives for Marvel and DC superheroes. Modern cinematic Marvels, in this sense, display a composite portrait of religious and secular discourses.

My point is that the use of science and technology in the above examples frequently serves to disguise, not erase, the historical qualities of the marvelous. This may well be an inherent element of our subject. As noted above, in premodern Europe marvels pointed away from their epicenter to show that the miraculous was not "here" but somewhere else. The difference is that in centuries and millennia past, divine meaning was never wholly displaced in marvelous encounters, phenomena, and storytelling. Medieval and early modern interpretations of wonders retained a mixed esteem of fear and respect for the mysteries of nature and, therefore, God. Certain superhero movies play on the detriment of unbridled science appropriating nature—Tony Stark and

Bruce Banner are labeled “mad scientists” in *Age of Ultron*—although more often they foreground acquisitive ideals of technological advance in order to explain superhuman abilities.



Still from a trailer for “Batman vs. Superman”

Despite this modern appropriative tendency, it is helpful to think of Marvels as “marvels” because the physical, metaphysical, and ethical worlds such characters inhabit are embedded within complex systems of representation. Rather than proffering a rigid binary of science vs. religion in which the former is always privileged over the latter, these stories are replete with overlapping social, political, and indeed spiritual concerns. From this perspective, our favorite superheroes are effective as contemporary icons in light of the challenge they pose to extreme dichotomization. That is, they exemplify a profound if furtive interplay of both religious and nonreligious expressions; they assume a variety of uncanny identities in the popular imagination. What the good, evil, and the ambivalent share in these extraordinary narratives is an *ability* to provoke response to what is and could be. In many ways, to be a Marvel is to wear the mask of advanced knowledge *and* embody astonishing religious potential.

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