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Justice for All: moira, tyche and nemesis in the Marvel Cinematic Universe

Abstract

This article explores the ways in which the ancient concepts of *moira*, *tyche*, and *nemesis* permeate the films and series of the Marvel Cinematic Universe.

Keywords

MCU, Marvel Cinematic Universe, Mythology

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Author Notes

I hold an interdisciplinary PhD in Classics and History from the University of Iowa. Currently I teach courses in Latin, Greek, Mythology and Ancient History as part of the Classics Program at the University of South Carolina. My research interests are primarily church-state relations in Visigothic Spain, as well as Roman and Greek political/military history. Recently I have been working with a colleague on projects related to the Marvel Cinematic Universe and its relation to American culture.

Over the past few decades, a great deal has been written about gods and religion in the superhero genre. Terence McSweeney, for instance, considers Thor's divine nature in his article "Of Gods and Monsters: The Allegorical Narratives of Thor and the Incredible Hulk,"¹ and Don LoCicero explores the connection between modern representations of superheroes and mythic cycles in *Superheroes and Gods: A Comparative Study from Babylonia to Batman*. Ben Saunders offers a more general discussion of superheroes and divinity in *Do the Gods Wear Capes?: Spirituality, Fantasy, and Superheroes*.² The work of these critics—and many others—is important for two reasons. Primarily, their scholarship identifies the link between superheroes and gods and establishes a point of discussion for this genre and its diverse cast of characters and the roles they play in their worlds. Secondly, their body of criticism provides a foundation to simultaneously widen and focus our discussion; it invites us to ask larger questions about what this genre is actually doing at the intersection of superheroes and divinity, particularly regarding ancient theological concepts.

The Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) lends itself to such analysis. On the surface, we see exactly what scholars have already described—a universe where superheroes are, as Anne Billson suggests in her 2013 review of *Man of Steel*, the new gods.³ Upon closer inspection, however, we find several elements that set the MCU apart. Despite its breadth—MCU media ranges from film to network television, to streaming episodic series—it functions as a unified text, with each part building on the one before it. Moreover, the connection between superheroes and gods is more complex than critics have realized. The concept of divinity runs much deeper than the representation of gods and heroes or their archetypes; characters like Thor may originate in epic poetry and mythology, but they live in a Marvel universe that reinscribes an ancient worldview governed by immaterial divine concepts described by ancient authors and historians.

Poets such as Homer, Virgil, and Ovid discuss wars and incidents which, if they occurred at all, happened in the very distant past. They include supernatural episodes and personal interactions between gods and men. Ancient historians, on the other hand, focus on the world around them and historical events, some of which they and their contemporaries experienced. Although the gods are present in their histories, their influence is subtle and the universe itself is ruled by larger principles such as justice, fate, and retribution. We find a parallel in the MCU. Characters such as Captain America are driven and supported by the concept of universal justice; the *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* live in a world where outcomes are determined by fate; and Thanos meets with divine retribution because of his hubristic acts. Across the Marvel Universe, we find characters and narratives informed not by the abilities or representations of specific gods, but by larger forces such as *moira* (fate), *tyche* (fortune), and *nemesis* (retribution) depicted by ancient historians and authors.

Universal Justice

In 416 B.C., the Athenians tried to coerce the people of Melos to become part of their empire. When the Melians resisted, both sides entered into a dialogue in an attempt to resolve the dispute, which the historian Thucydides recorded in his history of the Peloponnesian War. In Thucydides' telling, the Melians argued, among other things, that the Athenians were unjust in trying to conquer peaceful cities and that the gods would punish them for this. In answer, the Athenians replied, "the standard of justice depends on the equality of power to compel and that in fact the strong do what they have the power to do and the weak accept what they have to accept."⁴ And later:

Our opinion of the gods and our knowledge of men lead us to conclude that it is a general and necessary law of nature to rule whatever one can. This is not a law that we made ourselves, nor were we the first to act upon it when it was made. We found it already in existence, and we shall leave it to exist for ever among those

who come after us. We are merely acting in accordance with it, and we know that you or anybody else with the same power as ours would be acting in precisely the same way. And therefore, so far as the gods are concerned, we see no good reason why we should fear to be at a disadvantage.⁵

The Melians resisted for as long as they could, but eventually the Athenians gained entrance to the city, slaughtered the men of military age, sold the women and children into slavery, and repopulated Melos with their own colonists.⁶ The massacre of the Melians horrified the Greek world at the time, but that was not the end of the story. After the atrocity, according to Thucydides, the Athenians began planning an invasion of Sicily which resulted in one of the great military disasters of antiquity. According to Strauss, Thucydides framed the story this way to paint a picture of how questions of justice are resolved in the world.⁷ Episodes such as this—and others in his work—lead many readers to conclude that whatever Thucydides says about the gods, or however much they are absent from his text, he believed there were divine forces at play. They may not necessarily protect the innocent, but they certainly did punish the guilty.⁸

Whereas poets such as Homer and Hesiod included notions of justice as part of individual gods' reasoning process, historians and philosophers simply included it in their understanding of the dynamics of history, particularly regarding how the world works. Consider this passage from Livy, which is taken from a speech by a Carthaginian noble named Hanno. It is part of the debate that took place in Carthage regarding the question of supporting Hannibal and beginning a new conflict with Rome:

. . . soon Roman legions will be besieging Carthage, led by those same gods who in the former war blessed their [the Romans] revenge for the rupture of the terms of peace. Are you ignorant of Rome—and of Carthage—of the portion fate has decreed for them and for ourselves . . . because of that act the gods themselves shared in the victory, and the technical question of who it was that broke the treaty was decided by the result of the war, which, like a just judge, gave victory to those who had right on their side.⁹

Hanno is not suggesting that the gods took a literal or physical role in the war between Carthage and Rome, as Homer says they did in the Trojan war. Rather, he is arguing that the divine order dictates that justice eventually prevails; Rome won the first war with Carthage because of the greater justice of its cause, and it would win a second war for the same reason. The author of this passage, Livy, was a Roman who lived several centuries after these wars. He almost certainly had no reliable record of Hanno's speech, and he is interpreting events with the benefit of hindsight, but he retells the story for the point of emphasizing the way divine justice determines the outcome of human affairs, independent of the gods. As Plato asserts in the *Euthyphro*, concepts such as justice are of a higher order than the gods—they are separate from the gods themselves and are not created or restricted by them. Justice and holiness act as guidelines for gods and man, and both are subject to their principles.¹⁰

This emphasis on justice as a universal concept marks a divergence from the mythic tradition. From the perspective of poets like Homer, justice is not an overarching tenet; it is more of a tangential concern. In ancient poetry, gods punished mortals for specific crimes such as desecrating a temple, performing a sacrifice incorrectly, or dishonoring a priest, but they had little concern for human morality or the crimes men committed against each other.¹¹ There was no punishment for dashing Trojan babies against the rocks or for Odysseus and his men sacking a coastal town and raping the female inhabitants. In fact, the gods often engaged in similar behavior. According to the poetic tradition, Zeus was possibly the greatest rapist in existence and many women suffered the double indignity of his attention and the resulting punishment from his wife, Hera.¹² Epic combat was almost never decided by justice, as Hanno claims, but by the random favor of fate.¹³ One was fated to live or to die, just as one kingdom was fated to win and the other to lose. Justice rarely enters the conversation.¹⁴

This is the reason that Plato and other ancient authors rejected mythic stories as true representations of the gods.¹⁵ Historians and philosophers subscribed to a worldview based on a larger concept of justice and the good, and a similar philosophy both guides and controls the direction of the MCU. Corporeal gods such as Thor and Loki are bound by universal tenets. They are capable of affecting the physical realm, but they are not exempt from the strictures of justice and they cannot redefine the principle to suit their own ends. Thus, in *Avengers: End Game*, Thanos is frustrated that, after attaining divine power and destroying half of life in the universe, the survivors are not thankful that he has spared them. He can create and destroy in the physical, but he cannot change moral concepts. This is a serious limitation for a would-be god, and one that manifests itself in a number of ways in Marvel films.

Thor's hammer, Mjolnir, provides another example. Because Odin places a kind of curse on the hammer, it may only be wielded by those who are "worthy."¹⁶ Neither Odin nor anyone else on Asgard takes the trouble to define what it means to be "worthy," but the hammer instinctively knows and behaves accordingly. In fact, the entire plot of the first Thor movie focuses on Thor's inability to wield Mjolnir because he has become unworthy. He cannot lift it from the spot where it has fallen to earth. Nothing can—neither electrical nor hydraulic equipment nor any other human being. Loki, who is a fellow god, cannot lift it. We see much the same in the original *Avengers* movie when Hulk cannot lift the hammer, and in *Avengers: End Game*, when Thanos cannot do it. The hammer is guided by a force larger than either man or god, and it is only after Thor learns the lessons of humility and sacrifice that he again becomes worthy to wield it. In *Avengers: Endgame*, he rejects the hero's life and descends into despair as a result of his inability to stop Thanos, but then is able to go back in time to Asgard to retrieve an Infinity Stone. Before returning to his own time, he holds his hand in the air to summon Mjolnir, and when it flies to his

hand he smiles and says “I’m still worthy.” God though he is, Thor is bound by higher concepts over which he has no control.

In the MCU, forces such as justice and worthiness emerge through universal (or “multiversal,” if we consider *What If?* and *Dr. Strange in the Multiverse of Madness*) plot structures. Regardless of the film, the viewer can be certain that heroes will win and villains will lose—because even if a villain such as Thanos does succeed, he will be subverted in the sequel. Going back to Thucydides, this does not necessarily mean that the innocent will be saved or that the just will never suffer, but that the overriding power of justice will eventually bring defeat upon the guilty. This plot structure was built into Marvel comics themselves. Heroes succeeding and villains paying for their crimes is an important part of the superhero genre, one that Taliaferro and Lindahl-Urben rightly identify as “a central point of contact between the Marvel Universe and the best ancient philosophers. They both believe that, like basic physical laws such as gravity, the moral rule of justice will eventually prevail. It’s built into the fabric of things.”¹⁷

The only other hero in the MCU worthy enough to lift Thor’s hammer is Captain America.¹⁸ This makes sense because Captain America is the ultimate MCU symbol of justice, virtue, and everything else that befits a hero. His “worth” is introduced in the first Captain America film when viewers meet him as Steve Rogers, a young man who starts a fight with a bully in a movie theatre and receives a substantial beating for his efforts. The point is not that Rogers is physically weak before becoming Captain America (which he is), but that physical suffering is easier for him to bear than the emotional anguish of not acting against injustice.¹⁹ He is not bound by law or regulation so much as by a higher calling to do good in the world.²⁰

It is this need to do good that makes it possible for Rogers to become the first bona fide superhero when he receives Dr. Abraham Erskine’s Super Soldier Serum. This serum does not

give new qualities but magnifies those that already exist; because of Rogers' outsized sense of duty, he receives an appropriate measure of superpowers to aid him in his quest for justice. It is important to note that Rogers' sense of duty and justice is larger than himself and even his own sense of patriotism.²¹ In *Captain America: The Winter Soldier*, we see Rogers openly question governmental authorities, Nick Fury in particular, for their desire to eliminate threats to peace through preemptive strikes on potential enemies. In *Captain America: Civil War*, Rogers openly breaks with the Avengers, S.H.I.E.L.D., and the United States government because the Sokovia Accords would make the Avengers a quasi-governmental agency and limit their ability to pursue justice. Rogers cannot allow this to happen; his own sense of justice will not allow him to follow an unjust path.²² His higher calling makes him worthy of wielding Mjolnir and this is why he is a terror to the powers that would enforce the Sokovia Accords on the world.²³

We find a similar scenario in *The Falcon and the Winter Soldier*. John Walker, who takes up the mantle of Captain America, is a hero in his own right and has many fine qualities, however, he can never become more than what he has always been: a soldier in the service of the US government. In the end, it is Sam Wilson (the Falcon) who becomes Captain America because he, like Steve Rogers, feels called to fight injustice. In a word, it is not Captain America as a superhero that is able to use Thor's hammer; it is Steve Rogers who is bound by his belief in the higher cause of justice.

Yet this concept of justice does not only apply to mortals in the MCU; it reaches beyond the worldview of ancient authors and historians and binds the gods as well, creating an equality between the two that does not exist in the poetic tradition. In mythology, Zeus never suffers consequences for raping women because he is a god and they are humans and, thus, unequal beings. Holding both to the same standard would be a false equivalency. In the MCU, on the

other hand, gods and humans are bound by the same requirements. As we see with Mjolnir, gods must be worthy to lift it. In *Thor: Love and Thunder*, a lesser being is raised up to become the god killer for the purpose of enacting justice. In a word, media in the MCU holds the gods accountable for their acts in a way the ancient tradition does not.

Fate and the Inevitable

In addition to justice, the concept of fate plays an important role in the works of ancient authors. At times, fate decrees the order of the divine realm, as in Zeus' overthrow of Cronos.²⁴ It plays a role both in large political events such as the destruction of Troy and the founding of Rome, and in more personal issues such as Oedipus' murder of his father and marriage with his mother. Historians also use fate as a means of explaining history, as does Herodotus in his story of Croesus, king of Lydia. After losing his kingdom to Cyrus the Great, Croesus sent a message to the Delphic Oracle asking why he was being mistreated by the gods. The oracle, interpreting the answer from Apollo, explained that "None may escape his destined lot (*moira*), not even a god."²⁵

The ancients employed a number of terms to describe the irresistible fate which neither human nor god can thwart. Herodotus uses the term *moira*, related to the Moirai, who were the goddesses of fate and typically involved with the fates of individual people. *Tyche*, which is sometimes synonymous with fate, has greater nuance and is most useful here. In addition to *moira*, *tyche* ("fortune"), and its Latin equivalent *Fortuna* ("fortune") were taken quite seriously as philosophical, theological and historical concepts.²⁶ Ancient historians featured *moira*, *tyche* and *fortuna* prominently in their works not as singular deities, but as a means of understanding the flow of events that seemed, at times, improbable. *Moirai*, *tyche*, and *fortuna* became universal concepts for explaining divine causation.

Polybius, a Greek taken hostage by the Romans after they destroyed his hometown, considered the sudden rise of Rome from obscure city-state to dominant world power to be something that defied explanation; it could only be understood in terms of an irresistible divine force which had decreed it so. How could such a people overcome Carthage, Macedonia, the Seleucids and the rest of the Greek world? It defied human logic. Only the divine force of *tyche* could explain such a turn of events.²⁷ The concept of *tyche* allows for an aura of divine control which can aid in understanding the things that inherently defy comprehension while also de-anthropomorphizing the gods—this way, one need not entertain the idea of one single human-like deity picking and choosing winners and losers in life. There is only the unseen divine force of *tyche* and everything else is her servant.

Much the same is the case in the MCU; there is no escape from the dictates of fate. This comes through most clearly in the ongoing saga of the Asgardians. The film *Thor: Ragnarok* begins with Thor attempting to thwart the coming of Ragnarok and the destruction of Asgard, which has been prophesied by the demon Surtur. By the end of the film, however, Thor has embraced the prophecy of Ragnarok as a means to overcome Hela, his sister who has returned to rule Asgard and conquer the nine realms. Thor regards Hela as a greater threat than Surtur and plots with Loki to rejuvenate the demon and unleash him on Asgard itself, thus bringing about the fate that he initially attempts to block. Even Hela, who has the power to destroy Mjolnir, is incapable of preventing Ragnarok.

Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D. uses fate quite often, especially in connection with prophecy. Multiple Inhuman characters have the ability to see into the future, including Raina and Charles Hinton. Hinton has a specialized form of prophecy which allows him to foresee people's deaths when he touches them. Throughout the course of the series we see that prophecies are not able to

be overcome, but in true mythological fashion, are often fulfilled through the actions of characters who are attempting to thwart them. The portrayal of prophecies in the MCU points to a prewritten path for all characters who perpetually learn the lesson of Oedipus: there is no escaping fate.

There may be no escape from *moira*, but the MCU does give characters the ability to change it in a way that figures like Oedipus never can. Season five of *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* explores the confluence of fate, prophecy, and inevitability through Charles Hinton's daughter, Robin, who has inherited a form of her father's prophecy (though she sees more than a person's death). Robin lives in a dystopic future where the earth has been split into pieces and the remnants of humanity survive as slaves to an alien race called the Kree. Robin prophesies that S.H.I.E.L.D. agents will come from the past to save humanity, which sets in motion a chain of events that leads to the agents being brought into the future. They learn what event brought about the destruction of the earth and then return to the past to thwart a future they have already seen. Armed with the knowledge of mistakes made in the dystopic timeline, they correct their errors and stop the impending planet-destroying event from occurring. This means that Robin's prophecy was that the agents would come into the future to go back into the past and stop an event which they had already helped to cause. Ultimately the prophecy required two timelines, in which one served to correct the other.

This altering of timelines is not unique to *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* In *Avengers: Endgame*, the Avengers travel through time to reverse the genocide perpetrated by Thanos in *Avengers: Infinity War*. When the heroes are planning their strategy, they discuss returning to the past in order to stop Thanos and thus retroactively alter their own timeline, but decide that once established, a timeline cannot be altered from the past. Instead, they use time travel as a means of gathering the Infinity Stones so that they can undo Thanos' actions from their own point in time,

but in doing so create variant timelines which they then also have to reverse. The series *Loki* involves one of the variant timelines, and we learn that both timelines are part of the greater timeline, which suggests that time travel to correct mistakes is part of *moira* itself.

Thanos best expresses this chain of events when he introduces the concept of “inevitability” in *Avengers: Endgame*. At multiple points in the film, most notably when Thanos from the past travels into the future to take up the Infinity Gauntlet once again, and states “I am inevitable,” we are forced to consider that some events are beyond the control of characters either to accept or refuse. Inevitability also exists in *Loki*, which introduces a Time-Keeper character who guards the timelines and determines which ones to allow but has not yet given any explanation for the reasoning for his decisions. (At the time of this writing, *Loki* has only completed season one.) Although the plot revolves around *Loki* breaking free of the constraints of his own timeline, in the season finale, we learn that even his anomalous existence is part of a time-script held by the Time-Keeper. Thus, once again, the audience is faced with inevitability and a lack of self-determination.

This all seems a bit messy and the logic behind time-jumping can appear haphazard. Yet this is exactly why the MCU fits into the ancient paradigm—its writers continue to grapple with a problem ancient authors never solved. Laius and Jocasta, the parents of Oedipus, learn of an unbearable fate which, through their attempt to thwart it, actually cause it to occur. Zeus learns that fate has determined that a nymph (Thetis) will bear a child greater than its father, and is scrupulous to avoid a relationship with her, even going so far as to force her to marry a mortal, Peleus.²⁸ Peleus eventually fathers Achilles, who, indeed, is a man greater than his father.

The question then becomes whether Zeus is master of fate or if he is subject to its whims in the same manner as every other creature. In the *Iliad*, Zeus presides over the final duel of his son Sarpedon. Zeus considers altering fate so that Sarpedon can live, however he ultimately allows

Sarpedon to die, partially out of an understanding that abusing his authority in this way would anger his fellow deities.²⁹ Although the story suggests that Zeus has some sort of control over fate, this does not account for his need to avoid a relationship with Thetis. It also does not account for Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound*, in which Zeus chains Prometheus to a rock partially in an attempt to compel Prometheus to reveal the prophesy of Zeus' own downfall. In Hesiod's *Theogony*, fate is portrayed as master over the immortals; Cronos is incapable of thwarting his own fate of being overthrown by his children, led by Zeus. These authors are not unique in their treatment of this topic, and the subject is a common point in ancient literature, which most often suggests that the gods themselves are subservient to the greater power of fate and time.

Retribution

Fate works in concert with retribution, which ancient authors often coupled with *tyche/fortuna* as the grand but unseen force which kept a guiding, controlling hand on events within the universe. It often involved the divine hand ordering events to bring punishment to a person or people for crimes both recent and long past.³⁰ It is this aspect of Fortune which Hanno refers to when he cautions the Carthaginians to avoid a new war with Rome, asking “Are you ignorant of Rome—and of Carthage—of the portion fate [*fortuna*] has decreed for them and for ourselves . . .”³¹

It was not just that the Carthaginians were pursuing an unjust cause by supporting Hannibal, but also that fortune favored the Romans and would crush anyone who stood against them. The poet Virgil wrote that Romans were divinely ordained to “impose the custom of peace, to spare the vanquished and to overthrow the arrogant,” and many Romans agreed.³² They were the avenging hand of the gods who brought punishment onto those who deserved it (like the Carthaginians) and the blessings of peace to those who needed it.

The author of the first book of Maccabees wrote in praise of the Romans who, at that time, both made themselves available to help the oppressed people of the Mediterranean world and helped the Jewish people fend off the Seleucids and establish a semi-independent state.³³ This sentiment harks back to Livy, Herodotus, Thucydides and other ancient historians. In times of oppression and injustice, the divine hand raises up a great power to restore freedom and justice.

The idea of “retribution” often involves *nemesis*, another aspect of the ancient understanding of fate. *Nemesis* is frequently translated as “righteous indignation” and appears in Homer as the verb *nemesao*, which means “to feel just resentment.” *Nemesis* is also the name of the goddess who avenges hubris. Although she was worshipped as an individual goddess, especially before the Hellenistic era, she also came to be associated with the goddess Tyche, as the justice meted out by fate.³⁴ In some authors Tyche and *Nemesis* are so closely connected as to be indistinguishable. This concept clearly fits into the MCU in that the ancient view of hubris is related to the Greek verb *hybrizo*, which has to do with wanton and outrageous violence. One may think of hubris as committing the kind of violence that one would only commit if there were no god to avenge it, or no comeuppance, so to speak. It is the sentiment behind atrocity. Ancient historians loved stories of hubris and *nemesis*, even when they did not use those specific terms, and wove the discussion of human arrogance and divine retribution into their narratives.

Herodotus tells the story of King Croesus who was arrogant because of his great wealth and power, but nevertheless succumbed to the divine hand: “*Nemesis* fell upon Croesus, presumably because God was angry with him for supposing himself the happiest of men.”³⁵ It was more than that, though. It was not just Croesus who was being punished, but his entire family line and his entire kingdom for injustices that took place generations before he came to the throne. Herodotus constructs his entire history around the twin concepts of cycles of vengeance and divine

retribution. Human hubris leads to violence, which leads to vengeance, which leads to a never-ending cycle of more and more outrageous violence in order to gain vengeance. Human arrogance and violence incite divine retribution as a corrective act.

Herodotus sets this pattern in motion from the first page of his work, but his treatment of the role of hubris and *nemesis* in human affairs has its fullest expression in the story of Xerxes, the king of Persia, who, through his arrogance, even challenged the gods themselves and suffered a catastrophic defeat at the hands of the Greeks.³⁶ For Herodotus and many others in the Greek world, the loss of the Persian army to the Greeks—and the magnitude of that loss—defied human explanation and could only make sense if the gods were involved. Unlike most other ancient historians, Herodotus makes reference to deities appearing to Greeks at times of great need, underscoring the idea that the gods supported the Greek cause against the Persians, and that the Persians were destined to pay for the hubris of their king, Xerxes.

Strauss argues that Thucydides explores the same themes in his history of the Peloponnesian War, with the Athenians taking the role of Persia. The story about the Athenian massacre of the Melians is one of the great examples of the hubris/*nemesis* theme in ancient history. The Athenians literally tell the Melians that they do not fear divine retribution for committing atrocities; they see nothing in the natural world to suggest that the gods punish the unjust, or that justice is even a valid concern for the powerful when facing the weak. Although Thucydides does not make this point explicitly, Strauss shows that Thucydides believed that the Sicilians uniting to destroy a massive Athenian army was the gods' answer to Athenian hubris against the Melians. This was the *nemesis* that arises from human arrogance when it extends too far.

This type of hubris also explains what it takes to become a supervillain. Thanos seeks out, uses, and then destroys the Infinity Stones because he believes that he alone is worthy of wielding divine power, and that the destruction he brings to half of the universe was actually a blessing for all living creatures. Like the Athenians, he believes that his ruthlessness is justifiable and his actions are necessary. His claim of inevitability underscores the point that he believes his decisions are beyond reproach. Thanos fits every description of what it would take to invite divine retribution, which the plotline of the Infinity Saga shows exists. Thanos may have attained the status of a small “g” god, but he could never overcome the true divine forces that guide and control the universe.

Whether it be Thanos, the Red Skull, or Kingpin, the pattern is the same; supervillains rely on violence and atrocity as their primary means of achieving their goals, while heroes are noted for their restraint and the moral quandaries they experience while trying to stop the supervillains.³⁷ As agent Coulson is fond of reminding his agents in times of crisis, the preservation of human life—frankly, even alien life—is a primary goal of the agency and one of the most prominent features which distinguishes S.H.I.E.L.D. from HYDRA. In a similar fashion, the basic urge to protect the weak and avoid atrocity is the primary reason Captain Marvel breaks with the Kree.

There may be no better examples of retribution in the MCU than the Ghost Rider in *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* and the Punisher in his titular series. The Ghost Rider knows the secret sins of the people he encounters and is seemingly unstoppable in his mission to punish the guilty. The role of *nemesis* is just as prominent with the Punisher. Frank Castle does not show much concern for justice, but he is obsessed with retribution. Although his mission is personal because he is avenging the deaths of his family, the result is the same. He tracks down and destroys everyone

involved in the murders, including the wealthy and powerful who, like the Athenians, believed that success required ruthlessness and later learned that violent behavior brings a cost.

Thor: Love and Thunder, the most recent addition to the *Thor* franchise, offers a particularly interesting take on the idea of retribution as one of the primal forces that holds precedence even over the gods. In that film the character Gorr meets Rapu, his ancestral god, and learns that Rapu has no concern whatsoever for the people who worship him. When Gorr renounces his worship of the god who let his own people die, Rapu attempts to kill him. Just before he is about to die, though, an ancient god-killing weapon, the Necrosword, comes into Gorr's hand and enables him to kill Rapu. Gorr's experience with Rapu convinces him that gods are inherently unjust and that the universe would be better without them. He then sets out to destroy all of the gods in the universe. What is interesting is that in Gorr's moment of anguish, when his god had insulted and abused him—a classical showing of hubris—the Necrosword chooses him to become the hand of retribution. The hubris of Rapu transformed Gorr into the embodiment of *nemesis*.

It goes further, though, because this is the first MCU film to include Zeus and gods from other mythologies. When we encounter those gods they all appear to be similar to Rapu: selfish, petty, arrogant, and even cowardly. They are beings who exceed humans in power, but never in virtue, and are in no way deserving of worship. The Necrosword enables average beings to act as the avenging hand of *nemesis*, destroying even gods. This expands the idea of retribution even further than ancient authors did, whether historians, philosophers, or poets. Although for historians and philosophers the gods embodied virtue and justice, the poets portrayed them as embodying the worst traits of human beings, but never paying for their sins. In the MCU, the gods have been

reduced to just one more group of beings living alongside the rest of us. And just as in the pages of so many ancient authors, there is a universal principle that eventually, everyone pays.

Conclusion

The presence and function of ancient concepts such as *moira*, *tyche*, and *nemesis* in the Marvel Cinematic Universe allows for the establishment of a universal framework that brings the Marvel world together into a cogent and lasting narrative that films and small screen streaming series continue to expand. Even more noteworthy, though, is the way in which Marvel has reinscribed and revised ancient worldviews into a fictional universe that continues to find both popularity and relevance. Rather than simply recycling Homer's stories, the MCU brings mythical gods and heroes into a world ruled by concepts such as universal justice, ultimately creating a more level playing field. Thanos cannot destroy the existing order without consequence, and Olympians such as Zeus and Hera cannot rape and punish whomever they want. The MCU puts them in a world where they have to play by universal rules. This is Marvel's most overlooked accomplishment; its creators have built an ever-expanding multiverse based on ancient views of how the world works. We know that even if the monsters do win for a while, divine forces will intervene and justice always will prevail.

¹ Terence McSweeney, *Avengers Assemble!* (New York: Wallflower Press, 2018).

² Ben Saunders, *Do the Gods Wear Capes?: Spirituality, Fantasy, and Superheroes* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2011). Don LoCicero, *Superheroes and Gods: A Comparative Study from Babylonia to Batman*. (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2008.)

³ Anne Billson, "Man of Steel: Are Superheroes the New Gods?," *The Daily Telegraph* (UK), June 17, 2013, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/film/10125441/Man-of-Steel-Are-superheroes-the-new-gods.html>

⁴ Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, trans. Rex Warner (New York: Penguin Books, 1972), 5.89.

⁵ Thucydides, 5.105.

⁶ Thucydides, 5.116.

⁷ Leo Strauss, *The City and Man* (Chicago: Rand McNally & Company, 1964), 153. Thucydides' view of the gods and their role in his history is still controversial and still debated. I believe that Strass and others who make similar arguments are correct, though, and that Thucydides intended his readers to see the influence of divine forces on history.

⁸ In his account of plague that infects the Athenians he notes that the good and the bad, the religious and the irreligious all suffered from its effects. Thucydides, 2.53.

⁹ Livy, *The War with Hannibal: Books XXI-XXX of The History of Rome from its Foundation*, trans. Aubrey de Sélincourt (New York: Penguin Books, 1972), XXI.10.

¹⁰ Plato, *Euthyphro*, in *The Last Days of Socrates*, trans. Hugh Tredennick and Harold Tarrant (New York: Penguin Books, 1993), 11e-12e.

¹¹ Hesiod disagrees, but the pages of Homer, Apollonius of Rhodes and Ovid are replete with examples of the gods ignoring human outrages yet punishing disrespect to themselves. For instance, in the Iliad Apollo sends a plague to punish the Greeks at Troy because Agamemnon dishonors the priest of Apollo who then prayed for him to punish the Greeks, not because Agamemnon had captured the priest's daughter and intended to keep her as a concubine. Achilles does not receive punishment because he desecrates the body of Hector. According to Apollodorus the gods scatter the Greek fleet leaving Troy not because Ajax raped Cassandra, but because he did so while she was clinging to a statue of Athena. So far from being punished for her many murders (including her brother and her own children), Medea returns to her homeland, and helps her father retrieve his throne. Some traditions even hold that she became an immortal and reigned in the Elysian Fields. Homer, *Homeri Ilias*, ed. Martin L West (Monachii et Lipsiae: München und Leipzig, 2000), 1.94-100. Apollodorus, *The Library of Greek Mythology*, trans. Robin Hard (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), Epit. 5.23-6.6. Robert Graves, *The Greek Myths: Complete and Unabridged Edition in One Volume* (Mt. Kisco, New York: Moyer Bell Limited, 1988), 157.c.

¹² This is not to say that the gods do not care about justice, but their sense of justice does not seem to extend to themselves. The gods lie, cheat, steal, commit adultery and rape without shame or apology. See Ovid's *Metamorphoses* for an epic treatment of the nefarious activities of the gods, especially the story of Callisto. Ovid, *Metamorphoses: A New Verse Translation*, trans. David Raeburn (New York: Penguin Books, 2004).

¹³ In Homer's view, neither the Greeks nor the Trojans had any special claim to justice over the other. In individual duels, Zeus holds the balancing scale of fate which reveals the victors and vanquished in combat, as he does for Hector and Achilles. Homer, *Ilias*, 22.208-212. There is never a sense that the scales balance the virtue of any warrior over his opponent. Priam, the king of Troy, does not even seem to blame the war itself on his son Paris seducing Helen away from her family in Sparta. Although many people blamed Helen for bringing about the war by abandoning her family and running away with Paris, Priam says that it was just an act of the gods, and that no one was really to blame. Homer, *Ilias*, 3.164-165.

¹⁴ Venus finally convinces Aeneas to stop resisting the Greek attack and to flee by showing him that it was the gods themselves who were destroying Troy and not the Greeks. Sometimes the human part of a large event was incidental. The gods themselves were the main actors. Virgil, *Aeneid: Books I-VI*, ed. R. Deryck Williams (London: Bristol Classical Press, 1972), 594-623. On the other hand, throughout his works Hesiod shows no doubt that the gods defend justice and punish injustice on earth, though they do so in their own time. Hesiod, *Works and Days*, trans. M. L. West (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

¹⁵ Plato, *Euthyphro*, 6.a-c.

¹⁶ This is an interesting interpretation of the “sword in the stone” motif, whereby Arthur becomes king of the Britons because he is the only one who can lift the sword Excalibur. In this version, the power of Thor transfers to anyone who is worthy to lift the hammer, which eventually leads to alternate Thor characters, such as Jane Foster in *Thor: Love and Thunder*.

¹⁷ Charles Taliaferro and Craig Lindahl-Urben, “The Power and the Glory,” in *Superheroes and Philosophy: Truth, Justice, and the Socratic Way*, ed. Tom Morris and William Irwin (Chicago and La Salle, Illinois: Open Court, 2001), 66.

¹⁸ In *Thor: Ragnarok*, Hela, Thor’s sister, was able to stop the forward motion of the hammer but could not stop it from trying to hit her and ended up destroying it. *Thor: Love and Thunder* reveals that at some point before Hela destroyed Mjolnir, Thor had given his hammer a second directive to “always protect” Jane Foster, which enabled her to wield Mjolnir and take on Thor’s powers. Although Thor tells Jane explicitly that the hammer chose her because she is worthy, Mjolnir did not seek her out until she had developed cancer, so it is unclear whether it chose her because of her worth, or because it was trying to protect her, or a combination of both. Whatever the case with Jane Foster, Captain America has the ability to use Mjolnir based entirely upon his own intrinsic worth.

¹⁹ Stevens notes that Captain America in the film version is far more concerned with justice than in the original comic book version, who is more concerned with patriotism and opposing Nazism. “Rather than jingoistic patriotism, the movie Cap’s motivation is that he simply doesn’t like bullies, and his humility and compassion are his enduring traits.” Richard J. Stevens, *Captain America, Masculinity and Violence: The Evolution of a National Icon* (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 2015), 261.

²⁰ It is also worth noting that he is the only Avenger who admits a belief in the Judeo-Christian God, which is revealed in *Avengers* when Black Widow tells him that Thor is a god. He replies, “There’s only one God, ma’am—and I’m pretty sure He doesn’t dress like that!”

²¹ Stevens goes into great detail discussing the moral dimensions of Captain America’s character and the particular moral struggles which he endures. Stevens, *Captain America, Masculinity and Violence*, *passim*.

²² It is interesting to note that the comic version of the Civil War storyline is much more ambivalent about the virtue of Rogers’ position. At the end he has a moment of clarity when he realizes that he is wrong and that Iron Man is right. He stops his resistance, disbands his team and vows to follow the Sokovia Accords. This is a path that the film never takes. *Civil War*, no. 7, Jan. 2007.

²³ *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* explores some of the darker aspects of the Sokovia Accords, especially in its requirement of creating a registry for enhanced people, but none of that is apparent in the Captain America films, nor is it necessary to know those things in order to understand the moral dilemma of *Civil War*. For our purposes, the important point is that Steve Rogers as Captain America is the ultimate symbol of the good, the right, the just, and that he can only act according to the feeling inside of him that compels him to serve his higher calling.

²⁴ Hesiod, *Theogonia*, in *Hesiodi: Theogonia Opera Et Dies Scutum*, ed. Friedrich Solmsen (London: Oxford University Press, 1970), 463-465.

²⁵ Herodotus, *The History*, trans. Aubrey de Sélincourt and John Marincola (New York: Penguin Books, 2005), 1.91. For the Greek, consult Herodotus, *Herodoti Historiae*, ed. Haiim B. Rosén, vol. 1 (Leipzig: Teubner, 1987), 1.91.

²⁶ I have italicized these words when using them as philosophical or theological concepts but have not italicized when using them as the names of deities.

²⁷ Polybius, *The Rise of the Roman Empire*, trans. Ian Scott-Kilvert (New York: Penguin Books, 1979), 1.4. Also see F. W. Walbank, *A Historical Commentary on Polybius* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1957).

²⁸ Apollodorus, *The Library*, 3.1.4.

²⁹ Homer, *Ilias*, 16.431-470.

³⁰ The use of concepts such as fate, fortune, retribution and other such terms is common in Herodotus, who is often called “the father of history,” and were featured in the works of many historians, philosophers and poets thereafter. The bibliography on Herodotus is immense, but a few examples of works discussing his method of history are Sean Sheehan, *A Guide to Reading Herodotus’ Histories* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), Ewen Bowie, ed., *Herodotus: Narrator, Scientist, Historian* (Boston: Walter de Gruyter, 2018), Donald Lateiner, *The Historical Method of Herodotus* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1989).

³¹ For the Latin, consult Livy, *Titi Livi: Ab Urbe Condita*, ed. Charles Flamstead Walters and Robert Seymour Conway, vol. 3 (London: Oxford University Press, 1929), XXI.10.

³² Virgil, *Aeneid*, 6.851-853.

³³ Naturally the Romans did not mention that they viewed people who asked for or accepted their help as permanent dependants. Eventually, however, the people of the Mediterranean came to understand this—but too late for them to resist. *1 Maccabees*, 8:1-31, (New Revised Standard Version).

³⁴ Michael B. Hornum, *Nemesis, the Roman State, and the Games* (Leiden: Brill, 1993), 20. In his book, Hornum discusses the various manifestations of Nemesis as a focus of cult worship, her role as a literary motif meting out divine retribution, and as a symbol of imperial justice. He also includes the other divinities who become associated with Nemesis, such as Adrasteia and Tyche.

³⁵ Herodotus, 1.34.

³⁶ According to Herodotus, when a storm destroyed the bridge which Xerxes had ordered constructed for his army to march across the Hellespont, Xerxes commanded his officials to give 300 lashes to the Hellespont and throw shackles into the water to bind it so that it would know that Xerxes was its master. The god of the Hellespont learned its lesson and did not destroy the next bridge which Xerxes had constructed. Herodotus, 7.35.

³⁷ Chris Yogerst (2017) “Superhero Films: A Fascist National Complex or Exemplars of Moral Virtue?,” *Journal of Religion and Film* 21, no. 1 (April, 2017): 5, <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol21/iss1/37>.

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