

SHAKESPEARE AND WITCHCRAFT IN NEIL GAIMAN'S *MARVEL 1602*

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Representing the cultural phenomenon of witchcraft and showcasing liminal existence was of great importance in the literature of 16-17th-century England. From political pamphlets to Shakespearean stage plays, the character of the witch and the marginalized have become a central topic of conversation in early modern texts. The primary goal of this research paper is to examine how Neil Gaiman's comic book series, *Marvel 1602* adapts aspects of certain early modern English works to create a graphic narrative that explains liminality and the modern 'witchcraze.'

Keywords: William Shakespeare, early modern England, witchcraft, liminality, comic book

“By the pricking of my thumbs,
Something wicked this way comes.”
— William Shakespeare, *Macbeth* (4.1.44–45)

”Omnia mutantur, nos et mutamur in illis.
All things change, and we change with them.”
— Neil Gaiman, *Marvel 1602* #2 (3:2)

1 Introduction

In early modern popular culture, the presence of witches and witchcraft was of great significance in both political and religious affairs, as well as in works of art in England, particularly in literary texts, such as pamphlets, stage plays and prominent ballads. Besides creating a captivating, fictitious tale that is set during the early years of the 17th century, Neil Gaiman's and Andy Kubert's eight-part graphic narrative *Marvel 1602* (2003-2004) does not solely introduce the Shakespearean era, with all its English cultural peculiarities, to the modern reader, but it also delves into the phenomenon of witchcraft and the psychology behind living on the threshold. This liminal existence is exemplified by the

Weird Sisters in *Macbeth*, and, in the case of Marvel Comics, the X-Men, who are here referred to as the so-called “witchbreed.” With the introduction of the “witchbreed,” the writer, in collaboration with the artist, provides an in-depth look into the lives of a group of outcasts, who live on the edge of society, falsely stigmatized or branded by the common people. As graphic narratives are both textual and visual at the same time, which will be elaborated upon later in this text, they are perfectly capable of conveying complex messages through a specific mingling of text and image, as well as expressing corresponding human emotions, including states of awe, wonder or horror.

First of all, as the essay focuses on the analysis of liminal characters and the state of being on the threshold, the concept of ‘liminality’ itself needs to be addressed and properly defined. Victor Turner’s *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual* (1967) describes it as a marginal period or an “interstructural situation,” an in-between state when one individual undergoes a process of transformation, a rite of passage (Turner 1967, 93). The emphasis is on the very transformation that occurs in one’s status, indicating a change from the past self to the future self. By analogy, a liminal character is, as explained below, a figure who is still in a state of constant flux until the rite of passage is finally completed. Bjørn Thomassen, who refers to liminality as a universal concept involving both experience and performance, reiterates that moments of transition are an integral as well as unavoidable part of our lives that not only transform society on a cultural level, but also affect us on an individual level, changing our very existence as human beings (2014, 4). The experience, which is gained by the end of the rite of passage, leaves a distinctive mark that forever alters one’s personality. Gaiman’s words, which are quoted at the beginning of this article from *Marvel 1602*, relate not only to the graphic narrative and its fictional characters, but also echo Thomassen’s theory on liminality. As society conforms to the inevitable changes of time, the individual has to adapt and change too for the sake of self-preservation.

However, what happens to those individuals, who remain trapped in a perpetual state of change, stuck between their old and new selves? Turner argues that members of society do not tolerate or accept by any means the so called “transitional being” or the liminal persona, due to the fact that they cannot be placed under the well-established societal norms. They become indefinable and unclassified (1967, 95). In this manner, the figure of the outcast is born, who, despite not necessarily being evil, is forced to live a life on the peripheries. The outcast is stigmatized and marginalized by the community for being different from what the governing majority categorizes as natural. This unnatural state of in-betweenness, which may or may not be visible for the human eye at first glance, makes the liminal persona simultaneously wonderful, unique, but also terrifying and disruptive from the

point of view of a society that is bound by its norms. The strange complexity of these characters, who exist on the peripheries of life, is a worthy and rich topic of discussion. Therefore, the objective of this paper is to examine liminality within the narrative of the chosen comic book series, to see how liminal situations and the power of storytelling affect the development of liminal characters, and at the same time explore a plethora of allusions to William Shakespeare and his oeuvre.

2 The Witch in Early Modern England

Gaiman's "witchbreed" from *Marvel 1602* are fictional, transitional beings, who are modelled after the early modern practitioners of witchcraft. Witches, who are prominently featured in early modern English texts, are outcasts and liminal characters themselves, because they are caught in a perpetual state of transformation. Stigmatized and hunted by the common folk for their unusual practices as well as their occasionally unusual physical traits, individuals who were branded as witches inevitably created mass hysteria due to their 'otherness.' They were sent to trial, where they were ultimately found guilty and sentenced to death by hanging or, as it happened more commonly on the continent, to death by fire. As stated by Natália Pikli, although there are no precise records at our disposal, out of approximately one-hundred thousand European witch trials, which occurred between 1450 and 1750, an estimated number of forty thousand defendants were actually sentenced to death, with a staggeringly high percentage of those accused witches being women (2018, 21). There is a vast amount of literary texts from the early modern period that provide examples for such cases, enabling a detailed insight into the method of investigation, as to how and why the accused were prosecuted by the superstitious and witch-hating communities of early modern Europe, specifically that of England and Scotland.

One such popular example is a witchcraft pamphlet from the end of the 16th century, *Newes from Scotland* (1591), detailing the case of Doctor Fian and his alleged coven of witches, as they confessed their unholy crimes to a court, which also included King James VI of Scotland. The text, which was printed before the release of James's *Daemonologie* (1597), a book on contemporary necromancy written and published by the Scottish king himself, offers insight into the infamous North Berwick witch trials (1590), where, among others, the likes of John Fian and Agnes Sampson were accused of practicing the dark arts. The aforementioned individuals were suspected of—besides having committed other malevolent crimes—conjuring a storm that threatened the very life of the Scottish king and his wife:

Againe it is confessed, that the said christened Cat was the cause that the Kinges Maiesties Ship at his comming foorth of Denmarke, had a contrary winde to the rest of his Ships, then being in his companye, which thing was most strange and true, as the Kings Maiestie acknowledgeth, for when the rest of the Shippes had a faire and good winde, then was the winde contrarye and altogether against his Maiestie [...]. (Carmichael 1816, 16)

According to Normand and Roberts, the aforementioned trials were a product of a large-scale conspiracy in which a number of seemingly interrelated cases were connected on the basis of witchcraft to form a complex narrative event. They argue that the witch hunt itself began with banal accusations made by suspicious and frightened neighbours, ultimately culminating in a series of stories about the stigmatized individuals that warranted the attention of the state and the church (2000, 3). The most striking aspect of these reports appears to lie in their level of attention towards the details regarding the sinful act as well as the suspect. The vivid and detailed descriptions have the power to convince even the most sceptical minds about the truthfulness of the testimony, no matter how absurd they may seem at first glance. As Normand and Roberts also discuss, witch trial cases of early modern England and Scotland can be regarded as fabricated narratives, especially when considering that the accused were forced, through various forms of physical torture, to confess to every false allegation, regardless of whether the suspected crimes were actually committed or not (2000, 3). This undoubtedly proves the power of storytelling. Regardless of their truth value, stories have the ability to completely rewrite one's identity.

The Witch of Edmonton (1621), a drama written by William Rowley, Thomas Dekker and John Ford, exemplifies such a change of public perception and the transformation of identity through its narrative. The Jacobean play, which drew inspiration from Henry Goodcole's text, *The Wonderful Discoverie Of Elizabeth Sawyer, A Witch, Late Of Edmonton* (1621) and capitalizes on the misfortunes of the eponymous witch, tells the tale of Elizabeth Sawyer, who, after being accused of practicing the dark arts, becomes the most hated and feared person within the parish of Edmonton. The metamorphosis occurs when the false word of mouth of the neighbours spreads and through these fabricated stories she is unwillingly stigmatized and forced to become an outcast, living on the fringes of society. The pamphlet of Henry Goodcole, which immediately begins with the author's apology towards the Christian readers of the text for what they are about to discover, describes the witch's grotesque bodily appearance with meticulous detail:

1. Her face was most pale and ghost-like without any blood at all, and her countenance was still dejected to the ground.
2. Her body was crooked and deformed, even bending together, which so happened but a little before her apprehension.

3. That tongue which by cursing, swearing, blaspheming and imprecating, as afterwards she confessed, was the occasioning cause of the Devil's access unto her, even at that time, and to claim her thereby as his own by it discovered her lying, swearing and blaspheming. (Goodcole 1999, 137)

The distinctive physical features of the apprehended criminal, as illustrated by the detailed description of the pamphleteer, emphasize the character's malevolence and the allegiance to her unholy master, the Devil himself. While the heavily distorted and monstrous body signals the witch's 'otherness,' the woman's cursing and blasphemous tongue further strengthens her wickedness, and they provide additional and irrefutable proof for the Christian reader that she is not solely a simple sinner, but, more importantly, also a devilish practitioner of witchcraft.

Unlike Goodcole's text, the drama showcases the unfairly treated Mother Sawyer in a more sympathetic manner. Her contract with the devil and her subsequent actions against the accusers are presented as a rightful response towards cruelty. Despite chronicling the tale of the same character, the pamphlet retains its 'objective' stance regarding the subject. In light of all the evidence, which was collected during the investigation, Goodcole's accounts unambiguously announce her as a wicked and sinful woman, who has sold her soul to the devil for no apparent reason, but to cause destruction and harm in the community of Edmonton. The report determines two heinous acts of crime as the final decisive reason for the alleged witch's arrest. First of all, she reportedly threatened to curse her neighbours' children as well as their cattle to death, because they refused to purchase her brooms. Secondly, in another act of revenge, Elizabeth Sawyer also supposedly bewitched Agnes Ratcliffe, who, on the evening of her verbal argument with the elderly woman, fell extremely ill and passed away in excruciating pain within a matter of four days. Ratcliffe, whose death-bed confession was recorded by her husband and presented before the court, named Sawyer as the primary cause for her suffering and apparent death (Goodcole 1999, 138). The pamphlet continues to gather evidence to prove the guilt of the alleged criminal by declaring that the unnatural transformation of the elderly figure, which resulted in the growth of a third breast (the devil's pap), which supposedly functioned to nourish the familiar spirit, is a dreadful sign of practicing witchcraft. Despite the prisoner's objection to comply with the investigating authorities, the three female witnesses, who were randomly selected for this inspection by the appointed officers of the Bench, each confirmed the existence of this strange deformity on the body of the accused witch:

And they all three said that they a little above the fundament of Elizabeth Sawyer, the prisoner there indicted before the Bench for a witch, found a thing like a teat, the bigness of the little finger and the length of half a finger which was branched at the top like a teat and seemed as though one had sucked it, and that the bottom thereof was blue and the top of it was red. (Goodcole 1999, 140)

The aforementioned mark or malformation itself signified the connection, the unholy alliance that existed between the subject and the malevolent supernatural forces that were at her command ever since the deal was sealed with a kiss on the devil's buttocks. As Goodcole notes, in the eyes of the Court the discovery of this slight deformation or growth on her aging body, which could have been a wart or a lump, and the prison confession were enough evidence to prove the guilt of the alleged witch (1999, 149).

Contrary to the pamphlet, the Jacobean stage play's goal is to provide more context to the tragic events that unfolded in the community of Edmonton. Rowley, Dekker and Ford's drama explains Mother Sawyer's reasons for aligning herself with the Devil, whose assistance allows her to punish all those who have falsely accused her and marginalized her. Although her actions, which lead to her eventual arrest and execution, remain despicable, the reason for committing those acts of revenge becomes more justified. As exemplified by the play, she is marginalized and cast out, due to her physical appearance, by the parish of Edmonton before she even attempts to practise any kind of witchcraft:

MOTHER SAWYER: And why on me? why should the envious world
 Throw all their scandalous malice upon me?
 'Cause I am poor, deformed, and ignorant,
 And like a bow buckled and bent together
 By some more strong in mischiefs than myself,
 Must I for that be made a common sink
 For all the filth and rubbish of men's tongues
 To fall and run into? Some call me witch,
 And being ignorant of myself, they go
 About to teach me how to be one; urging
 That my bad tongue – by their bad usage made so –
 Forspeaks their cattle, doth bewitch their corn,
 Themselves, their servants, and their babes at nurse.
 This they enforce upon me, and in part
 Make me to credit it; and here comes one
 Of my chief adversaries. (Thomas, Ford and Rowley 2006, 2.1, 1–16)

The title character of the drama questions whether she should be judged and ridiculed by the members of the parish just because she lives under poor conditions and has a crooked and decaying body, due to her old age. The role of a witch is enforced upon the aging woman, rather than voluntarily assumed by her. Since they have already branded her as a servant of the Devil, instead of trying to prove her innocence, the alleged criminal starts to give credit to the accusers' charges, to ultimately confirm their suspicions regarding her true nature. Sawyer's monologue, which is quoted above, clearly suggests that the witch is not a self-created figure,

but rather a product of society's hatred and its fear of the unknown, the 'other.' Thus, they create a scapegoat, an individual, who, according to them, is responsible for all of their misfortunes, including the failed harvest, the death of their cattle and the passing of their loved ones. Despite their vastly different approaches regarding the character's agenda, which is reflected in the sympathy or lack thereof of the authors demonstrated towards Elizabeth Sawyer, both the pamphlet text and the Jacobean play operate with the exact same stereotypical representation of the witch, who is characterized as a poor, old, grotesquely disfigured and (in most cases) female figure. Signs of natural aging and social status are misinterpreted and placed into a different context by these early modern texts. Ultimately, it is the narrative, which is crafted by the accusers, that transforms the accused woman into the character of the witch.

William Shakespeare's *Macbeth* (cc. 1605) also follows the aforementioned traditional depiction of witches with the introduction of the Weird Sisters as they meet the eponymous tragic character at the beginning of the drama. Their arrival in Act 1, Scene 3 of the Shakespearean play is marked by the sound of thunder, lightning and rain, as they approach the battlefield where Macbeth, the thane of Glamis, and Banquo stand. Before delivering their prophecy, the witches give a detailed list of their previous wicked punishments or "*maleficia*" that they have delivered to various members of society, who have wronged them in some form. Banquo, while questioning the true sex of the three women, who have beards and thin lips, promptly classifies the sisters as otherworldly creatures. The witches, whose prophecy sends Macbeth on his destructive journey to insanity, qualify as perfect examples of liminal characters. Their physical appearance, which emphasizes that they are not inhabitants of the mortal world, strongly suggests that these mysterious clairvoyants are stuck in an in-between state of being both alive and dead. In addition to this, they also appear to be trapped between two sexes. They are neither women nor men, despite possessing attributes of both. Moreover, as both Banquo and Macbeth clearly indicate after the sudden vanishing of the supernatural forces, the Weird Sisters are not solely in control of the weather, but they are also strongly connected to the four basic elements, such as earth, fire, wind and water:

BANQUO: The earth hath bubbles, as the water has,
And these are of them. Whither are they vanish'd?

MACBETH: Into the air; and what seem'd corporal melted

As breath into the wind. Would they had stay'd! (Shakespeare 2015, 1.3, 181–184)

Pikli points out that the seemingly missing fourth basic element, fire, is still present and it is marked by the verb "melted," as heat is required for any solid matter to become either a liquid or a gas like substance (2018, 26). The witches' sorcery,

which allows them to shift from one state of matter to the other, not simply signals their otherworldly status, but also showcases their capability of transgressing the boundaries of the body and the mind, essentially making them transitional beings. This sudden and unusual disappearance yet again reiterates the liminal as well as ambiguous nature of the three hags, who have seemingly surfaced from the water like liquid, were at one point tangible and afterwards simply vanished, melted into thin air, leaving the two Scotsmen to wonder whether they were actually witnessing a meeting with the denizens of the supernatural world or not:

BANQUO: Were such things here as we do speak about?
Or have we eaten on the insane root
That takes the reason prisoner? (Shakespeare 2015, 1.3, 185–187)

Besides the already mentioned character traits, the witches' language is also a source of their ambiguity. According to Diane Purkiss, the witches' lines can be interpreted in multiple ways similarly to their obscure physical appearance (1996, 211). They do not engage in a conversation with the Thane of Glamis, they simply convey a message, a vision of a possible future that is open to a number of interpretations. There is only one-way communication between the sender and the receiver of the encrypted data, where the latter cannot demand any sort of clarification. This idea is further reiterated during Macbeth's second and final encounter with the Weird Sisters, who provide yet another cryptic prophecy with a double meaning, but ultimately refuse to give a proper explanation to the king, who in return curses the three women in his desperate search for answers.

These early modern texts, from Goodcole's pamphlet to Shakespeare's tragedy, not only describe the physical outlook and the peculiar practises of the witch, but they also highlight the character's liminal nature. The collected narratives, which consist of the reports provided by the witnesses and the investigators, are showcased as the main reason for the character's transformation into an outcast of society. The witch's status as a transitional being is emphasized through their visual description as well as their ambiguous use of language. Ultimately, the witch becomes a perfect liminal figure, because she is forced to live on the threshold of two worlds: the human realm and supernatural sphere.

3 Shakespearean Allusions and the “Witchbreed” of *Marvel 1602*

The previously highlighted early modern concepts of witchcraft, stigmatisation and liminality become the main topics of discussion in Neil Gaiman's and Andy Kubert's *Marvel 1602*. However, one might rightfully ask, what exactly makes

this particular narrative so suitable for discussing the aforementioned concepts? The question could be partially answered by observing the comic book medium's very own liminal nature. The comic book is the product of the writer's and artist's partnership. This complex art form is perfectly capable of expressing liminality because it tells its narrative on both a textual and a visual level. The medium is defined by and interpreted through this double nature that allows it to tell more intricate stories as well as to convey human emotions. Mario Saraceni makes a clear-cut distinction between what is specified as the "blending" and the "collaboration" of words and pictures within the framework of comic books. While Saraceni refers to the blending of these two components as the language of the medium, he defines their collaboration as the grammar of graphic narratives (2003, 27). This assumption entails that the graphic narrative is born through this unique language, which is governed by its own special grammar. Thus, the readers of comic books are required to search for a meaning that is inseparable from the textual and the visual components, despite them still being separate parts of the same composition.

Gaiman and Kubert's *Marvel 1602* illustrates the liminal nature of comic books not solely with its use of language and imagery, but also with its clever use of Shakespearean allusions and references. The story of the eight-part series, which is set in the Shakespearean age, presents an alternate version of early modern England that is already on the threshold of a new era, due to the failing health of the English monarch. The writer changes history with the introduction of the modern heroes of Marvel Comics, who are transformed to fit into the narrative landscape of early modern English culture. They are to construct a new world, which is later threatened and deconstructed by the witch-hunting King James I, who becomes one of the main antagonists of the narrative, after seizing the crown of England in the wake of the former monarch's untimely death. However, before this happens, the readers are introduced to the two most important members of Queen Elizabeth I's court. Sir Nicolas Fury and Doctor Stephen Strange serve as substitutes for the characters of Sir Francis Walsingham (1532-1590), principal secretary to Elizabeth I, and John Dee (1527-1608/09), man of science and advisor to the Queen, respectively. The two fictional characters closely mirror the physical attributes and qualities of the above mentioned historical figures. Thus, on the first pages of *Marvel 1602#1* Sir Nicolas Fury receives the title of the "intelligencer," or the "master of spies and cutthroats." Doctor Stephen Strange is transformed into the Queen's loyal master of medicines, the sorcerer, who is tolerated by the English crown up until the point where King James I ascends to the throne, after which he is branded as a heretic and beheaded for his witch-like practices. However, even after his apparent demise, which occurs in the penultimate chapter of the series, the sorcerer still has an important task that is fulfilled when he conveys one final message in a very Shakespearean manner to his

wife. Similarly to the first apparition from Act 4, Scene 1 of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, the bodiless head of Doctor Strange tells a prophecy, which, unlike in the Jacobean tragedy, leads to the resolution of the overall conflict of the comic book. This scene marks one of the many Shakespearean allusions that the writer and the artist employ within their graphic narrative.

As the narrative continues to unfold, we are introduced to the most crucial figures of the comic book series, the transitional beings of this fictional world, who must live on the thresholds of society due to their otherness. These liminal characters, who are collectively referred to as the "witchbreed" throughout the eight-part series, are the early modern equivalents of the X-Men, a group of fictional characters from the lore of Marvel Comics, who were born with special, superhuman abilities and stigmatized because of this by society. Back in 1963 Stan Lee and Jack Kirby created the original company of the X-Men, which consisted of Angel, Beast, Cyclops, Iceman and Jean Grey with their leader Professor X. Gaiman and Kubert transform the original team; however, they still retain crucial aspects of the X-Men mythology. According to Andrew Miller, throughout their entire publication history, the stories of the X-Men and their supporting cast of mutants were seen as an obvious metaphor for liminal groups; these narratives always included themes of racism, extreme prejudice and hate towards otherness, and fear of the unknown (2003, 283). One could argue that they introduced a type of modern 'witchcraze' to the contemporary reader. In the comic books, mutants are feared by the public, because they are perceived as a threat to humankind. This fear is not unlike the early modern English period's mass hysteria regarding witchcraft and its practitioners.

The X-Men, or the "witchbreed" conform to major theories about the 'Other.' Zoltán Imre argues that the presence of the 'Other' is necessary, because it maintains the social hierarchy by highlighting the contrasts between social and asocial, normal and abnormal, culture and subculture. This order, according to his argument, can only be achieved and preserved, if individuals, who are branded as deviants, are marginalized by society and historically stripped of their characteristics of being exotic or primitive (2018, 252). The mere existence of such characters, which could be a result of either ethnic, religious or gender-related differences, challenges and threatens the authority of the governing majority and that of the established order. Whether society refers to these certainly norm-defying characters as witches, witchbreed or mutants, is only a question of labelling. Thus, it is no wonder that the X-Men, including the characters with whom they share their stories, are so easily altered to fit the *Zeitgeist* of an era, in which individuals were branded and marginalized for being different from what society considered as normal.

In the context of *Marvel 1602*, the comic book figures remain the same liminal characters as their modern counterparts; however, they also exhibit some features of

the stereotypical early modern witch. When Carlos Javier, the spiritual leader, or, as Victor Turner would probably categorize him, the instructor of the witchbreed, introduces himself and his school of gifted students, readers start to assume that Gaiman has drawn some inspiration from the North Berwick trials' main suspect, John Fian, when he crafted his own character. Similarly to that historical figure, who also had his own students in the form of his alleged coven of witches, Javier is presented as a type of teacher, who prays with his pupils to God for the well-being of his kind in their own church. The early modern witchcraft pamphlet, *Newes from Scotland*, which chronicles the apprehension and trial of Doctor Fian, Agnes Sampson and the rest of their coven, refers to the notable sorcerer and his apprentices as individuals "who suffering themselves to be allured and inticed by the Diuell whom they serued, and to whome they were pritiatelye sworne: entered into the detestable Art of witch-craft" (Carmichael 1816, 8). After Sampson's apprehension and torture, during which she revealed the names of the group members, the alleged witches were brought before the Court of James VI of Scotland, who hated and relentlessly hunted their kind. They confessed their numerous crimes that they had committed against their fellow Scotsmen as well as against their king. Although the Scottish king is similarly portrayed in *Marvel 1602*, the witchbreed of Carlos Javier evade being captured by his witch-hunting inquisition, as they successfully escape from England to the New World (America), which they later on refer to as their new home.¹ Still, Gaiman's depiction of these fictional characters retains a close resemblance to that of the North Berwick coven. Akin to John Fian, they have their own church, but in addition to that, they also have a personal prayer, which is supposed to save them from their enemies, including the hateful English monarch among others:

Dear God, who made us what we are. Who gave us our talents, making us each different, who gave us our gifts. In your infinite mercy and wisdom, allow us to share our gifts with the world, and not to hide our talents beneath a bushel. Grant us freedom from those who hate us, and would destroy us. And let us, while hated, not in turn give in to hate. Amen. (Gaiman and Kubert 2003b, 13:5)²

Javier's prayer functions as the witchbreed's very own *pater noster* that praises God, instead of the Devil, for receiving such wonderful abilities, which they would like to employ in the service of others, for the benefit of all mankind. Thus, the early modern incarnation of Marvel Comics' X-Men are presented as a type of religious cult that is, in certain aspects, similar to Doctor Fian's coven of witches.

¹ The potential postcolonial aspects of this geographical transfer from England to America are interesting as well, though in the present essay the focus falls elsewhere.

² The fifth panel on page thirteen depicts a scene in which the witchbreed and their headmaster pray to God in their own church.

Nevertheless, this is not their only feature that aligns with Turner's concept of liminality or early modern culture's idea of witchcraft. Another crucial attribute, the mark of witchcraft is also showcased here, although, unlike in the example of Elizabeth Sawyer, it is not a third breast that appears on the body of the witchbreed, but the letter X, with which these individuals were branded for their otherness. Some members of the group have other, much more visible attributes that reiterate their liminal existence. Henry McCoy, also known as "Beast," is such a transitional being. His in-betweenness manifests in his appearance as a half-human, half-ape-like creature, not unlike *The Tempest's* Caliban, who is described in the play as a monstrosity himself, a hideous mixture between a man and a fish.³ On the pages of the comic book series he is represented as a brutish barefoot man, albeit blessed with an exceptional intelligence, almost like the noble savages that are described in Montaigne's essay (2006). Another such figure with an evident bodily deformity is Werner, nicknamed "Angel," who, as his name suggests, possesses huge, angel-like wings. Both Henry McCoy and Werner are depicted as monstrous creatures, hybrids, who appear as cross-overs between a human being and some sort of animal. They defy the laws of nature and the laws of the social system by simply existing. According to Cohen, the monster is terrifying, because it lives on the threshold of multiple worlds and therefore, it resists being categorized in the natural "order of things" (1996, 6). Essentially, the monster, which appears to be another product of culture, much like the witch, is marginalized and transformed into a scapegoat by society, due to its state of being different from the established social norms culturally, politically, sexually or otherwise. However, being a product of culture also signals that the meaning behind the phenomenon, just as culture itself, can change with the passing of time.

While Angel and Beast are both trapped in their half-human and half-animal forms, the character of Jean Grey is mistaken throughout the narrative for being John Grey, a man instead of a woman, warranting some comparison with the Weird Sisters from Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, who also appear as gender-fluid entities. Similarly to Banquo, who is unable to determine the true sex of the Weird Sisters when he first encounters them alongside Macbeth, Werner is also confused by Master Grey's initial physical appearance, due to her clothing and seemingly masculine features, and he believes her to be another male apprentice. The secret of Jean Grey being a woman is eventually revealed to the characters of the graphic

³ "TRINCULO: What have we here, a man or a fish? Dead or alive? A fish, he smells like a fish – a very ancient and fishlike smell, a kind of not-of-the-newest poor-John. A strange fish." (Shakespeare 2011, 2.2, 25–28)

narrative and to the reader, but only after her sacrifice and tragic passing. Pikli describes this gender-related confusion regarding the witches of the Shakespearean tragedy as another attempt at blurring or completely dissolving boundaries (2018, 25–26). Thus, Jean Grey, akin to Angel and Beast, is also a liminal character, although, from a different perspective: her liminal existence is defined by her gender fluidity, rather than any bodily mutation. The remaining two pupils, Roberto and Scotius, nicknamed “Iceman” and “Cyclops” respectively, are depicted as liminal characters almost solely through their status of being witchbreed. However, the former student’s abilities allow him to shift his corporeal form, changing from his ice state to his normal, human appearance, which is not unlike the transformation of the Shakespearean Weird Sisters. In spite of the outcome of their respective fates, it can be confirmed through the observations mentioned above that Gaiman and Kubert’s iteration of the X-Men in *Marvel 1602* not only draws inspiration from the historical events involving the alleged criminals of the North Berwick witch trials, but also expands upon their tales, while simultaneously incorporating some elements from Shakespearean plays, such as *Macbeth* and *The Tempest*.

One final attempt at showcasing liminality, as well as the power of storytelling in the graphic narrative, arrives in the form of another Shakespearean allusion, and an interesting case of meta-narration. In the fifth part of the comic book series, “In Which a Treacherous Course is Plotted,” the writer and the artist appear to intrude the story for a fleeting moment in order to retell what has occurred in it so far. This sequence is arguably inspired by another scene that was taken from Shakespeare’s late romance, *The Winter’s Tale* (1610–11), in which the allegory of Time appears on the stage to propel the events of the drama sixteen years into the future. Gaiman and Kubert play the same role in the fifth issue: they essentially embody the Chorus, which summarizes the various plot threads of the previous issues and then goes on to develop the rest of the narrative, foreshadowing future events that have yet to transpire:

In the past, England has offered a haven to the Witchbreed, and turned a blind eye to the activities of Carlos Javier, their leader. But Elizabeth’s death has propelled James VI of Scotland to the English throne. James has elected to blame the Queen’s death on those he hates and fears. He has sent Fury to capture or kill Javier and his Witchbreed. Fury sent his young assistant, Peter, on ahead, to warn Javier. (Gaiman and Kubert 2004, 2)

The dialogue between the artist and the writer, which also evokes a play-within-the-play situation, frequent in Shakespearean drama, is shown in a contemporary environment with Kubert at the drawing board and Gaiman in front of him with further instructions and remarks on the plot. In this scene a plethora of books, involving various themes, such as the “Middle Ages,” “Castles” or “Knights,”

are showcased in the background, which provide a small glimpse and a vague hint at the sources that were consulted before and during the creation of *Marvel 1602*. The conversation between the two creators implies that they relate to each other like Prospero and Ariel. While the writer assumes the role of the magician, the artist becomes a type of servant, a familiar spirit, who executes the will of the creative leader. Interestingly, the illustrator seems to have doubts regarding the general course of the narrative and he questions whether certain inclusions into the tale, such as tiny dinosaurs, are truly necessary; thereby, he challenges Gaiman's authority. However, those concerns are rapidly laid to rest by the determined writer, who, as the final authority, ultimately decides what direction the comic book series needs to take. The creative leader reassures, not just the artist, but also the reader, that he knows what he is doing and everything will be unveiled at the right time. This comedic example, which provides a rather ironic look behind the scenes of a comic book's production, arguably proves that the writer and the artist need to collaborate with each other in order to successfully complete the graphic narrative. Essentially, they become equal contributors to the same product, despite their distinct roles. Ultimately, this meta-scene aims to exemplify the liminal nature of graphic storytelling, as it implies that the narrative itself is created in an in-between space, which in this instance not only symbolizes the gutter, the blank area between the panels, but also the creative mindscape that is shared by Gaiman and Kubert.

4 Conclusion

In conclusion, while Gaiman and Kubert's eight-part narrative highlights the double nature of the comic book medium and graphic storytelling in general, its primary focus remains on the reintroduction of the concept of liminality to the contemporary reader. With the help of ingeniously crafted Shakespearean allusions and the utilization of some of the most beloved heroes and villains of Marvel Comics, some of which are redrawn to mirror historical figures from England, the writer and the artist of the series bridge history and fiction to create a completely new narrative landscape. By drawing inspiration from a long list of early modern English texts, which includes works such as *Newes From Scotland*, *The Wonderful Discoverie Of Elizabeth Sawyer, A Witch*, *Late Of Edmonton*, *The Witch of Edmonton* and *Macbeth*, *Marvel 1602* designs its very own transitional beings, who replace the stereotypical character of the witch. The careful analysis of concepts such as the 'Other' and that of the outcast also proves to be pivotal in understanding how exactly the phenomena of the early modern 'witchcraze' and Marvel Comics'

X-Men relate to each other and how they are both reimagined, combined and incorporated into the story of the selected graphic narrative. Through the study of the literary references included, both textual and visual, and the meticulous examination of the aforementioned fictional figures, who are collectively referred to as the “witchbreed,” the paper has ultimately explored the characteristics of liminal existence, the ramifications of a life lived on the threshold as well as the transformative power of storytelling in Gaiman and Kubert’s *Marvel 1602* series.

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