She-Hulk: Attorney at Law

Jeremy Brett


Here’s the thing, Bruce. I’m great at controlling my anger. I do it all the time. When I’m catcalled in the street. When incompetent men explain my own area of expertise to me. I do it pretty much every day because if I don’t I will get called emotional or difficult or might just literally get murdered. So I’m an expert at controlling my anger because I do it infinitely more than you.

Soon into the opening episode of She-Hulk: Attorney at Law, Los Angeles lawyer Jennifer Walters (Tatiana Maslany) begins coming to grips with her transformed life as a superhuman—specifically, a Hulk, a green-skinned giant fueled by rage like her Avenger cousin Bruce Banner (Mark Ruffalo). In Bruce’s kindly sensei-esque attempts to guide Jen into her new existence, he warns her repeatedly about the costs of giving into powerful triggers such as anger or fear (to which Jen replies dryly, “Those are, like, the baseline of any woman’s just existing.”); their exchanges are some of only the most visible representations of the series’ concern with women and the societally-imposed necessity of female self-control. The issue of control and its overlapping layers lies at the heart of the MCU’s surprisingly deep, complex, and intensely meta superhero-cum-legal workplace comedy. Beneath layers of winking insouciance, the series exercises a number of important thematic impulses that range from female autonomy, to the culturally acceptable role of women both as figures of authority and as superheroes, to the struggle of ownership and input between creators and fans that plagues not only the MCU but fan culture and genre media more broadly.

One particularly interesting strand involves how the presence of superhumans in the world impacts the law. In both comic book and show, Jen is a lawyer who deals expressly with superhuman clients or defendants—throughout the series, we note how current law is ill-equipped to deal readily with the increasing numbers of superpowered beings. How does the legal system apply to (or punish) a shapeshifting Asgardian Light Elf—pretending to be Megan Thee Stallion—who is accused of fraud by a former lover? If Sorcerer Supreme Wong (Benedict Wong) uses a mystical portal to free a man from a high-security prison, how can the law legislate that from happening? If a man with the power of immortality commits serial marriage by legally being “dead” for seconds, how can his misdeeds be quantified or brought to justice? Attempts by the regular world to instill legal control over the supranormal are many in the show, and provide
numerous moments of *Ally McBeal*-style levity. They also reflect an ongoing evolution in the MCU, from a setting in which superheroes are a small corps of godlike other-beings, making brief and frequently destructive impacts on nonpowered populations, into one where supranormal people are not only more frequent, but engage in more street-level, intimate, even everyday situations with people.

But as the quote above from the show’s debut episode notes, the control of women, whether by themselves or by societal pressures and assumptions, is a paramount subject of inquiry. Most visibly and repeatedly we watch as Jen attempts to maintain control throughout the series of her own life and career in the face of obstacles both standard and superheroic. From the show’s opening scene, in which Jen is rehearsing for her colleagues a speech for an upcoming trial and facing down patronizing criticism from a male colleague (and, notably, unwavering support from paralegal and close friend Nikki Ramos [Ginger Gonzaga], whose relentlessly upbeat nature adds to the show’s sense of female solidarity and unity), Jen’s journey involves overcoming wrongful, even hostile, perceptions of her abilities and power. Her familiarity with maintaining heroic levels of self-control is signified in her new identity as She-Hulk—from the character’s comic debut in 1979, Jen has always been distinct from Bruce in the retention of her intelligence and emotional control following a transformation, in contrast to the rage-driven monster that Bruce usually becomes when Hulking out.

Jen from the outset is much more like the “Smart Hulk” that Bruce took years and multiple films to evolve into through careful practice and design. What we see in this series is that Jen needs to exercise that control in every part of her life or face the inevitable rhetorical backlash of being termed “difficult” or a “typical” woman. Becoming She-Hulk does not change this; it only extends it into this new part of her life, with the public amplification and enhanced visibility that a superheroic career brings. Jen’s colleague Mallory Book (Renee Elise Goldsberry) at several points in the series warns Jen that she cannot afford to be angry, or be seen as rageful, because Mallory, an African-American woman in a highly white male world, knows all too well what such an episode would mean for people’s perceptions to change.

On both macro- and microlevels, Jen seeks to control the narrative of her own life and wrest it away from outside forces who imprint their own wants, hates, and inadequacies onto her. In this, she perfectly mimics the very show itself, which brilliantly takes the step of preempting its own inevitable trollish criticisms by weaving them into the story as adversaries. The ultimate enemy in the series is not, as first glance would have it, former adversary-turned-sensitive New Age motivational coach Emil Blonsky/Abomination (Tim Roth), who like Bruce has conquered his baser destructive impulses, but a shadowy Internet collection of toxic masculinity calling itself Intelligencia. Through the course of the show, Intelligencia and its leader, billionaire tech genius/douchebro Todd Phelps (Jon Bass), seek to undermine Jen for what they perceive as her undeserved power, her usurping of the Hulk title from Bruce, and her assumption of a place they feel rightfully belongs to male heroes. Through barrages of Internet comments, death threats, and attempts to publicly humiliate Jen, the men of the wrongfully named Intelligencia echo trollish
criticism from the real world about Marvel’s “wokeism” and its supposed focus on identity politics and diversity rather than on “real” heroes, who are almost universally male and white. *She-Hulk* brilliantly steals the empty thunder from the dull misogynistic posters that the writers and actors know from sad experience will inevitably appear to attack it, and instead proactively fires the first narrative shot against them.

The show’s final episode (whose title, “Whose Show Is This?”, reflects the struggle over cultural ownership and both creator and fannish entitlement to an intellectual property) takes this metaness even further by having Jen literally step out of the narrative to confront Marvel Studios on its own ground and force them to change the story. Instead of the predictable mishmash of a final fight (a common criticism of the MCU and superhero movies in general), Jen insists from her creators a new ending that takes into account her own personal stakes, and that reflects her own life and the changes made to it. It is a breathtakingly hilarious-yet-poignant moment, in which Jen demands, and receives, a conclusion where no male hero (like Bruce) arrives to save her, where Todd is not punched into submission but punished with a lawsuit and Jen’s use of her hard-won legal expertise, and where she may reunite romantically with her very satisfying one-night stand and fellow lawyer/hero Matt Murdock/Daredevil (Charlie Cox).

As Jen notes in an exchange with the all-powerful AI K.E.V.I.N. (a wink at MCU mastermind Kevin Feige) currently in control of her story,

> The Marvel Cinematic Universe is known for its big spectacles and high-stakes plotlines, but it’s often said that Marvel movies all end the same way...

K.E.V.I.N.: Wait, who’s saying that?

Jen: Perhaps this is a result of following some unwritten rule that you have to throw a bunch of plot, and flash, and a whole blood thing that seems super suspiciously close to Super Soldier Serum at the audience in the climax. I propose we don’t have to do that… It distracts from the story, which is that my life fell apart right while I was learning to be both Jen and She-Hulk. Those are my stakes, K.E.V.I.N.

Jen is conscious of her role as a character (which carries over from her comic incarnation and tendency to break the fourth wall), and in a winking nod to the Marvel fanbase acts as a conduit for fan concerns, noting aloud how often MCU heroes seem to have “daddy issues” and asking when the X-Men will be appearing in the MCU. In this episode, and in the series as a whole, we see that Jennifer is the hero that meets our current superhero media moment. One who is acutely conscious of the nonsensical swirl of misogyny and bad takes that surrounds every female hero nowadays, from Wonder Woman to Carol Danvers to Barbie. One who understands and grapples with fannish feelings of ownership and the ways in which the immediacy of the online environment promotes increased producer-consumer interactions. One who understands that, although the stakes in She-Hulk may be small on the cosmic scale (no Thanos-level enemies...
to fight, no mention of the coming Multiverse War), to a single individual the stakes are high indeed. Jen fights for the autonomy and freedom to express herself and make her own way in the world. It is a fight equally as heroic as any the Avengers have fought over the years, and for female MCU fans in particular, I imagine, even more personally relatable. Scholars of media studies and reception, and of women in genre media, will find a rich mine of insight in studying *She-Hulk* on multiple levels.

**Jeremy Brett** is an Associate Librarian at Cushing Memorial Library & Archives, where he is both Processing Archivist and the Curator of the Science Fiction & Fantasy Research Collection. He has also worked at the University of Iowa, the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, the National Archives and Records Administration-Pacific Region, and the Wisconsin Historical Society. He received his MLS and his MA in History from the University of Maryland – College Park in 1999. His professional interests include science fiction, fan studies, and the intersection of libraries and social justice.