Tales for Shakespeare

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Stories That Inspired the Plays

Edited by

Thomas G. Olsen

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Tales for Shakespeare: Stories That Inspired the Plays

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For Marinella, again and always

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INTRODUCTION

All the world's a stage,
And all the men and women merely players.
They have their exits and their entrances,
And one man in his time plays many parts,
His acts being seven ages. At first the infant,
Mewling and puking in the nurse's arms;
And then the whining schoolboy with his satchel
And shining morning face, creeping like snail
Unwillingly to school. And then the lover,
Sighing like furnace, with a woeful ballad
Made to his mistress' eyebrow. Then a soldier,
Full of strange oaths and bearded like the pard,
Jealous in honor, sudden and quick in quarrel,
Seeking the bubble reputation
Even in the cannon's mouth. And then the justice,
In fair round belly with good capon lined,
With eyes severe and beard of formal cut,
Full of wise saws and modern instances,
And so he plays his part. The sixth age shifts
Into the lean and slippered pantaloon,
With spectacles on nose and pouch on side,
His youthful hose, well saved, a world too wide
For his shrunk shank; and his big manly voice,
Turning again toward childish treble, pipes
And whistles in his sound. Last scene of all,
That ends this strange eventful history,
Is second childishness and mere oblivion,
Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything.

Let's begin with one of the most frequently quoted and beloved of Shakespeare's speeches, from *As You Like It*: a humane, comprehensive, and eminently memorable pronouncement on the human life cycle. It's Shakespeare at his best, as he develops an exquisite metaphor of actors playing roles to a seemingly basic truth about the "stages" of our finite time on earth. No wonder Shakespeare is almost universally considered great.[1]

The only problem is, this great speech did not originate with Shakespeare. Not even the basic idea. Neither the actors-as-people metaphor, nor the idea of life-as-a role we play, nor the division of our lives into seven ages or acts, nor even the specifics of each of those stages is his original creation. He borrowed it all, tapping into a vast storehouse of ancient, medieval, and contemporary sources that had already expressed these ideas. They were entirely commonplace by the late 1590s, when he composed *As You Like It*.

William Shakespeare, Plagiarist?

What are we to make of this phenomenon of outright borrowing, maybe stealing, which occurs over and over in the Shakespeare canon? By modern standards William Shakespeare was a plagiarist. As a matter of fact, he would certainly qualify as one of the most notoriously successful ones in the history of the English language. On the strength of his dramatic writings, and especially on the public performances of them, he became famous in his own lifetime and eventually wealthy, too. And in countless editions, performances, and adaptations of his plays and poems he achieved a posthumous fame that no other English writer enjoys. And he's been good to others as well: as one scholar notes, his writings have provided the publishing industry with its most profitable, enduring, royalty-free "cash cow" ever.[2]

But the plays that made him rich and famous were, in almost every instance, significantly based upon other authors' works that he mined for their story lines, for their characters, and in some cases even for their verbal expression. As the playwright and critic (and cranky admirer of Shakespeare) George Bernard Shaw once quipped, Shakespeare had a tremendous "gift of telling a story (provided some one else told it to him first)."[3] This is hardly the image most readers want in their minds when thinking about a poet and playwright who has brought great pleasure and challenges to more than twenty generations of admiring readers, scholars, thespians, and theatre patrons across the world.

Before rushing to apply modern ideas about plagiarism and artistic originality to the case of Shakespeare, modern readers need to understand much more about what people in his age understood the creative process to be, what they considered legitimate and illegitimate literary borrowing, and what ethical standards and legal structures were in place in their time. In other words, we actually cannot be so sure that Shakespeare was a plagiarist even if everything we *think* we know about plagiarism would seem to apply to his artistic processes and to the literary works that remain as his legacy.

Contemporary readers also need to consider the general human desire to retell and adapt stories, for that is what Shakespeare did in nearly everything he wrote. In this regard, he ends up looking like almost any other storyteller who relies on the stories of the past, rather than a singular case of either a creative genius or a literary thief. As Linda Hutcheon writes—herself adapting an idea expressed in Walter Benjamin's seminal 1923 essay "The Translator's Task"—storytelling is always and has always been the art of repeating the stories told to us: "art is derived from other art; stories are born of other stories."[4] We need to keep in mind this basic human impulse to retell and to make new as we approach the question of Shakespeare's "plagiarism."

What is a Plagiarist?

First, some definitions. The English word *plagiarism* is derived from a classical Latin root, *plagium*, literally meaning kidnapping. In Shakespeare's youth and for about the first half of his literary career, which as far as scholars can reconstruct began sometime about 1590 and ended sometime about 1612, the term was used in its restricted, literal sense, as in this excerpt from a sermon published in 1577: "and yet man-stealing is most sharply forbidden. Now they commit the offence called Plagium, that is to say, man-stealing."[5] What's evident in this brief example is how anxious the author seems to be to define a Latin term in words more familiar to English speakers: "the offence *called* Plagium"—a phrase that suggests that the author anticipates a certain cognitive gap between his readers' prior experience and the new word. And so he is quick to define the term using the more tangible, usual Anglo-Saxon synonym "man-stealing."[6]

From about the middle of Shakespeare's career the literal concept of "man-stealing" and the variety of Latinate *plagia-* words used to express it slowly became naturalised in the language. But these terms also began to change meanings, gradually taking on the figurative sense with which we are now most familiar. In 1598, as Shakespeare was enjoying success with his cycle of English history plays and several now-perennial favourites such as *Romeo and Juliet*, *The Merchant of Venice*, and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Bishop Joseph Hall turned the word from the legal to the literary sphere by referring to the theft of "old Petrarch's spright [spirit] unto a plagiary sonnet-wright."[7] Although Hall's figurative application of the crime of man-stealing to that of literary theft was not altogether new in Western letters—the Roman poet Martial had used the same image in accusing his fellow poet Fidentius of stealing his verses—it was by no means a common figure of speech. It still had the power of a fresh metaphor.

This is so because literary imitation was not routinely considered criminal. In fact, for most of Western literary history an author's ability to absorb and rework the stories of the past constituted not only a good practice but a necessary one. In the much-followed advice of the Roman poet

Horace, younger poets were encouraged to mine the *publica materies*, a concept that equates roughly to our modern notion of public domain or creative commons, for their ideas. Literary creation was not understood to be the development from scratch of new stories, but rather the creative re-working of old and familiar ones.[8] In 1601 Shakespeare's friend and rival poet-playwright Ben Jonson used Martial's image on three occasions in his play *The Poetaster*. During a heated exchange between rival poets, the following accusation flies: "Why, the ditty's all borrowed; 'tis Horace's: hang him, plagiary!" The image is repeated twice more in the play in two parallel constructions: "poetaster and plagiary" and "play-dresser and plagiary."[9] These were terms of disparagement: a poetaster is an inferior, second-rate poet, the thing that every aspiring poet dreads becoming; a play-dresser was a contemporary term used to describe someone who helped produce plays, not write them, and so in this context, an inferior artist. Jonson was a very self-consciously learned poet and playwright, a classicist vitally interested in his own status as an author and in the relationship of authors to each other and to their literary forebears. Unlike Shakespeare, he was highly protective of his own literary reputation and worried about a range of intellectual property issues with which most of his fellow playwrights rarely bothered. And so it seems fitting for him to be the only English playwright of the period to apply Martial's fifteen-hundred year-old metaphor to English letters, and to do so in a play largely taken from Horace, whose plot revolves around the reputations and careers of rival poets.

What goes around comes around. Within seventy years Jonson was in turn called out by poet and critic John Dryden, who wrote in his *An Essay of Dramatick Poesie* (1668) that Jonson "was not onely a professed Imitator of *Horace*, but a learned Plagiary of all the others; you can track him every where in their Snow." But Dryden hardly faulted Jonson for his habit of borrowing. Indeed, he singled him out among the poets as the "greatest man of the last age" even while he noted the many ways that Jonson borrowed from other writers.[10]

Another twenty years would pass before the adjective would actually be used, again by Bishop Hall in reference to a minister caught cribbing from another theologian: "the plagiary priest having stolen this whole passage . . . verbatim out of Bellarmine."[11] A generation later, in 1646, the idiosyncratic polymath Sir Thomas Browne used the same word, but this time as a noun: "plagiary had not its nativity with printing, but began in times when thefts were difficult."[12] Browne's assertion here is revealing, as it points specifically to the relationship between ideas and published writings. He offers a long list of classical authors who pillaged their forebears, arguing that plagiarism predates the enormous power of the printing press to disseminate ideas, whether they are original or borrowed. The very fact that Browne senses the need to advance this argument reveals that something was changing in English literary thought in the seventeenth century: a belief that "plagiary" and publishing somehow belong together. And indeed, the printing press, able to produce editions in hundreds and eventually thousands of essentially identical copies, greatly increased the potential for a writer's literary theft to make itself known as wider and wider circles of readers had opportunities to identify borrowed words and ideas.[13] But even more significant is that Browne is not arguing that the press gave birth to plagiarism, which he calls "translation" or "transcription," but rather that the practice predated the invention of a technology that exposed borrowing much more easily and widely. And he is at pains not to characterise what we would call plagiarism as criminal: "the Ancients were but men, even like our selves. The practice of transcription in our days, was no Monster in theirs...."[14]

Indeed, an assertion of criminality within the sphere of literary production is not something a writer of Shakespeare's age would have easily understood. It took more than sixty years after the end of his literary career and fifty after his death before English authors began routinely to apply the term *plagiary* to literary theft in the sense that we see in Dryden's comment on Jonson. During a period that also saw a massive increase in the power and reach of the periodical press—which offered even more frequent opportunities for authors to borrow from others, and to be discovered by a larger and larger reading public doing so—the now-familiar definition of plagiarism began to take hold in the language.

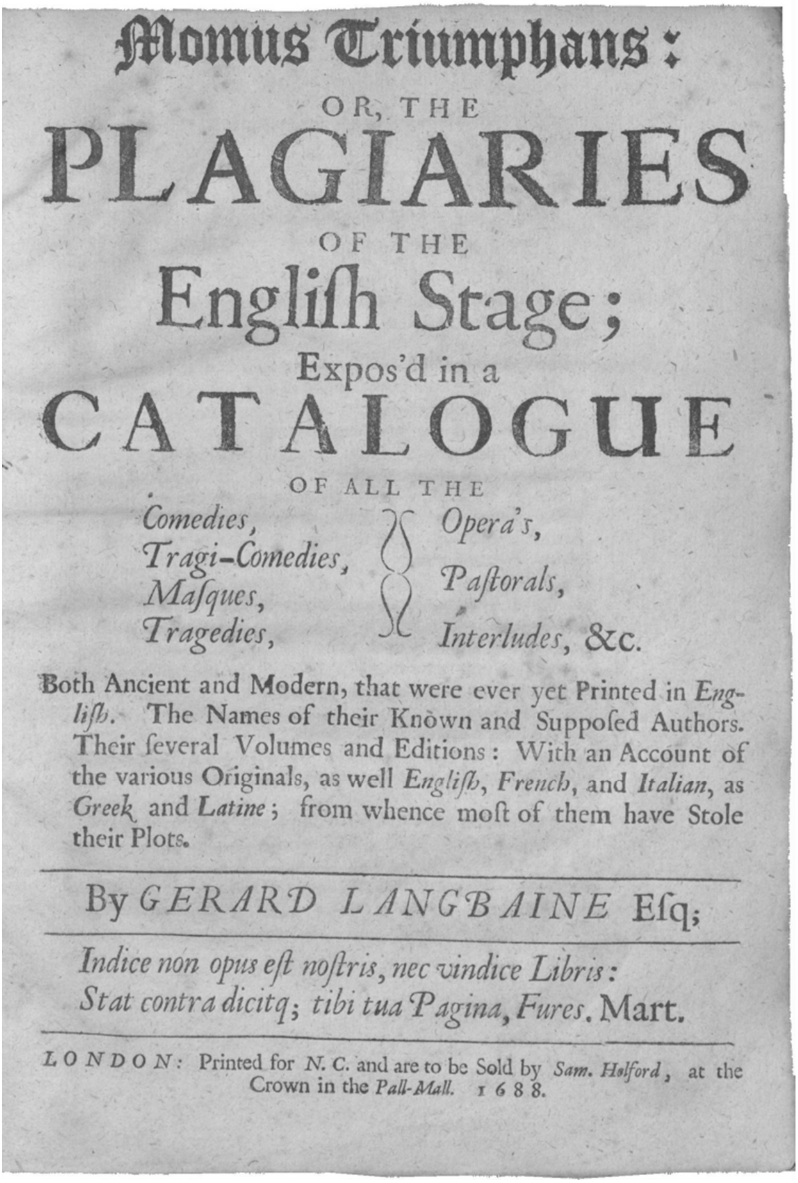
Plagiarist and *plagiarism*, the terms best known to us now, have an even more interesting history. The noun *plagiarist*, meaning specifically a writer who steals another's literary works, appears for the first time in 1674. And although a religious controversialist used the word in 1621, writing "Were you afraid to be challenged for plagiarism," nearly one hundred years elapse before we find another recorded use of the now-familiar noun form *plagiarism*.[15] For many years thereafter *plagiary* remained the preferred term of English writers, rather than *plagiarism*, and by the mid-seventeenth century its literal sense of man-stealing was in clear competition with the emergent figurative sense of word-stealing.

What is interesting about this history is how far into the future this modern sense of literary plagiarism was with respect to Shakespeare's career. Beginning in the 1670s and 1680s we begin to find clearer and more frequent complaints about literary thefts—as in phrases such as "Plagiaries and depredations" and even in book titles such as Gerald Langbaine's 1688 *Momus Triumphans: Or, The Plagiaries of the English Stage* (see Figure 1-

1). His monumental title, typical of the period and ending with idea of *stolen* plots, tells us a great deal about the shifting definition of this evolving word.[16]

Essential to these linguistic changes is an important underlying cultural principle. To be the victim of theft an author had first to *own* something. This basic assumption about the nature and definition of literary "property" has to be accepted and shared by a culture before the slow process of creating legal protections for this kind of ownership can follow. All parties have to concur that an author originates and produces something so distinctively his or her own (by the late seventeenth century we can confidently speak of some notable women writing for a public) as to constitute something that can be possessed or owned. Once a culture accepts that an intangible "product" such as words strung together can constitute a form of property, it is on its way to imagining a way to protect that product's maker and "owner" through legal structures. This is what was occurring in the last decades of the seventeenth and first years of the eighteenth centuries.

In the decades before the all-important Statute of Anne of 1710, prominent writers such as Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, Joseph Addison, and Daniel Defoe began to make increasingly sophisticated legal and moral arguments in favour of copyright protections.[17] In bringing his *Paradise Lost* to press, John Milton left us our oldest surviving contract between an author and publisher—for the now quaint-sounding sum of £5 and promise of more if the book were to sell well.[18] This gradual movement toward distinguishing legitimate from illegitimate borrowing and toward establishing an author as a category of property-owner was much more than just a few key authors rallying to protect themselves and their fellow writers, however. It signals the start of a profound transformation in the dominant ideas of originality and creativity in English letters, in the basic assumptions governing literary writing, and in the principles upon which that society and its legal system operated.



Momus Triumphans:
OR, THE
PLAGIARIES
OF THE
Engliſh Stage;
Expos'd in a
CATALOGUE
OF ALL THE
Comedies, *Opera's*,
Tragi-Comedies, *Paſtorals*,
Maſques, *Interludes*, &c.
Tragedies,

Both Ancient and Modern, that were ever yet Printed in *Engliſh*. The Names of their Known and Suppoſed Authors. Their ſeveral Volumes and Editions: With an Account of the various Originals, as well *Engliſh*, *French*, and *Italian*, as *Greek* and *Latine*; from whence moſt of them have Stole their Plots.

By *GERARD LANGBAINE* Eſq;

Indice non opus eſt noſtris, nec vindice Libris:
Stat contra dicitq; tibi tua Pagina, Fures. Mart.

LONDON: Printed for *N. C.* and are to be Sold by *Sam. Holford*, at the Crown in the *Pall-Mall.* 1688.

Fig. 1-1. The title page of Gerard Langbaine's *Momus Triumphans*

The Statute of Anne, formally titled *An Act for the Encouragement of Learning, by Vesting the Copies of Printed Books in the Author's or Purchasers of Such Copies* is a monumental event in the history of the evolving ideas concerning plagiarism in England and eventually North America. Prior to its passage, legal protections, such as they were, resided with the publisher, not the author. What was protected—quite imperfectly, to be sure—was not the intangible intellectual labour of developing and arguing one's original ideas or telling a good story, but the financial investment of publishers, who, unlike single scribes making individual copies of manuscripts, faced very significant up-front material and labour costs when they produced a printed edition. Since the sixteenth century English publishers had operated under a loose system of royal patents, monopolies, and licences that protected those investments; bibles, prayer books, ABCs, legal statutes, and other highly profitable works proved especially lucrative to publishers lucky enough to enter into such arrangements. In granting such exclusive rights to certain publishers, the Crown also exercised a significant oversight and even censorship power; since monopolies and patents could be withdrawn or left to expire, publishers were cautious not to draw royal ire by publishing the wrong works. It was a system that had something in it for certain publishers and a great advantage for a government that used regulation of the press to manage dissent and to control the diffusion of ideas and art.

Not all protections proceeded from the top downward, however: the London Company of Stationers, a powerful trade guild to which early modern publishers belonged, regulated the printing business in the capital and exercised significant control over its own members by granting to them licences to publish specific works. Although there are some notable cases of rogue publishers pirating works "owned" by others, and many other cases of disputed claims to these rights, the system functioned reasonably well for many decades. Since a licence to publish certain types of works could secure very significant financial rewards for publishers, it probably also contributed to a kind of de facto censorship over what was published. According to historian of copyright law Mark Rose, over the course of the seventeenth century the language used in these licences gradually evolved away from an emphasis upon the *action* of the specific Stationers' grant to an emphasis upon the *rights* of ownership of the publisher—another sign that something was changing in the culture of authorship. He concludes that "a gap was beginning to develop between the institution of the stationers' copyright, which was based upon a traditional conception of society as a community bound by ties of fidelity and service, and the emergent ideology of possessive individualism." The emerging conception of publishers' *proprietary* rights over their products was in the ascendency over a residual idea of a primarily regulatory or supervisory public benefit.[19] As interesting as these changes are, we must remember that by the time they begin to emerge in English institutions like the printing trade and the legal system, Shakespeare's career was long over. None bear directly on how he would have thought about his own creative process.

Before going forward, let us consider an important question. Could it be that just because writers of Shakespeare's era did not routinely use the word *plagiarise* or its related terms to refer to literary theft they had no concept of it? Of course not. Then, as now, authors took due pride in making original work and felt entitled to credit for it. But the meaning of "original work" has changed radically over the last four hundred years, and so this definition needs careful examination. John Kerrigan studied the evolution of early modern ideas of originality, concluding that in the lexicon of Shakespeare's time, an "original work" was one from which copies were made, which is to say, a pattern or prototype for a new but derivative work. This was the sense of originality that had been in use since at least the time of Chaucer, and it was not until well into the middle of the eighteenth century that our modern idea of an original work as origin*ating* with a new author came into use.[20] Shakespeare's generation operated under the cultural assumption that originality was a successful form of copying.

In fact, soon after Shakespeare's early plays achieved popular success and he received some measure of notice, he drew the wrath of a rival playwright on precisely this question. Robert Greene, a university-educated London hack writer and minor playwright some six years older than Shakespeare, complained in a 1592 pamphlet that "there is an upstart Crow, beautified with our feathers, that with his *Tygers hart wrapt in a Players hyde*, supposes he is as well able to bombast out a blank verse as the best of you: and being an absolute *Johannes fac totum*, is in his own conceit the only Shake-scene in a country."[21] The implication behind Greene's snub on young Shakespeare centres on the complaint that he gained his new fame from borrowing from his contemporaries ("beautified with *our* feathers").

Greene's diatribe alludes to a famous fable usually attributed to Aesop (but in fact not original to him—the more one looks for literary appropriation, the more one finds it!) in which a plain bird borrows the feathers of a beautifully plumed one and vainly parades around in them, only to get his comeuppance. Would Greene have charged Shakespeare with literary "man-stealing" if the younger playwright had not, apparently, been so proud of his accomplishments? Was this a matter of class or seniority more than literary borrowing? Perhaps it was a dig at Shakespeare's lack of university education? Greene's metaphor, following the logic of the fable, seems more to complain about Shakespeare's arrogance and presumption, or perhaps irritating sense of singularity (he is an "upstart crow") than any particular act of illicit or unethical literary borrowing. What is interesting about Greene's diatribe is how unclear the metaphor of borrowed feathers is: does he mean Shakespeare's literary borrowing or does he mean his tendency to outshine his fellow writers? And in a delightful irony, Greene even alludes to Shakespeare's image of "a tiger's heart, wrapped in a woman's hide" from *Henry VI, part 3*—in a sense stealing from the very author he intends to insult.

Today most people are acutely aware of the concept of intellectual property in everything from textbooks and bestselling fiction, to pop music, television commercials, and print advertising: who produces it, who markets it, who consumes it, and how it's protected through increasingly complex global legal structures such as brand registration, trademarks, copyright, and digital stamps. Writers of Shakespeare's generation and before enjoyed almost none of the legal protections that modern authors and publishers assume today and that now govern our individual and institutional attitudes toward plagiarism. The principles of copyright as they are now defined did not exist, the court system was not set up to decide cases of intellectual property, and as we have just seen, the very concept of intellectual property claimed on the basis of originality was deeply fraught with subtleties and contradictions that authors and early modern courts would have been equally ill-prepared to deal with.[22]

Modern conceptions of authorship as an existential category are largely a product of Romantic thought that privileged originality in a way that it had never before been defined or privileged in prior ages. Even the protections afforded by the Statute of Anne in 1710 did little to advance the interests of the creators of what we now call intellectual and creative property, as opposed to the publishers who took the financial and administrative risks of bringing their ideas to a public.

Shakespeare's Borrowing

Although very successful, Shakespeare was only one participant in a system of assumptions and practices that stretched back to classical literature, defined literary production in the Middle Ages, and still governed the ways early modern writers thought about their writing processes. Well before the age of Shakespeare and Jonson, Chaucer reworked Boccaccio, and before him Dante took from Virgil, and Virgil took from Homer. Homer, really more a composite than real author, took from oral traditions. In each case, an author's creativity was inherently and primarily a collaboration with the authors of the past, a matter of standing—as the old truism attributed to Sir Isaac Newton (but not original to him) has it—like a dwarf on the shoulders of the giants who came before.[23] Literary originality meant building upon the works of the past rather than breaking from them. As the time-honoured medieval conception of authorship had it, God is the only author and everyone we now call an author merely a scribe.[24] Or in the words of C. S. Lewis, "Touching up something that was already there was almost the characteristically medieval method of composition."[25]

Three aspects of Shakespeare's particular forms of "plagiarism" deserve comment. Perhaps the first and most important is that he was remarkably uninhibited and refreshingly unprejudiced in his choice of source material, unfettered by received ideas concerning the kinds of literary works that could ennoble a serious author. He certainly resorted to the classics, Ovid's *Metamorphoses* above all, and he drew freely from an inheritance of what modern readers now broadly accept as great literary works handed down as part of a cultural heritage from ancient Rome and to a more limited degree from ancient Greece. Works as different from each other as *Titus Andronicus*, *Venus and Adonis*, and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* all have roots in Ovid, while Plutarch and other favourite classical authors provided story lines for the plays set in ancient times: *Antony and Cleopatra*, *Coriolanus*, *Julius Caesar*, and *Timon of Athens*.[26]

But Shakespeare also ranged in and borrowed, apparently without shame, from a wide range of contemporary popular fiction, pamphlets, and sensational news stories. One such example, Robert Greene's *Pandosto: The Triumph of Time*, provided the basis for his *The Winter's Tale*. (This is the same Robert Greene who had called him an upstart crow. Maybe he had a point about Shakespeare's borrowed feathers?) Though his biographers usually conclude that Shakespeare did have a grammar-school education as a boy, he was not a university-trained scholar and sometimes, but not always, took the easy route by reading ancient and modern European source works in translation rather than in the original.[27] Just as important was his listening: he listened to the speech patterns and ideas of common people in London and in the English countryside. As plays such as *Henry IV Part I*, *As You Like It*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream, Measure for Measure*, *Julius Caesar,* and *Coriolanus* vividly demonstrate, he also had a keen and often sympathetic ear for the rich, evocative language of the habitués of drinking establishments and brothels, simple shepherds, and angry mobs. He knew the names of many plants, their properties, and the rude nicknames that country people sometimes gave them. All these voices existed well outside the bounds of what many more conventionally learned or tradition-bound early modern authors considered acceptable source material.

Second, within any particular source text—usefully called *hypotexts* by the French theorist Gérard Genette—Shakespeare was also remarkably unbound by pre-ordained ideas about what was important or valuable; he took only what he wanted from his sources, often leaving aside major plot points and characters, and routinely manipulating major details of approach, tone, action, and meaning to fit artistic designs of his own.[28] He was inherently a *synthesising* artist, again and again employing an eclectic, recombinant style of borrowing in which he fused together elements from multiple sources and never produced straight, slavish, or superficial rewritings of any one source, even in cases where he retained major plot lines and characters from a single story.

In the very useful distinction offered by E. M. Forster in his *Aspects of the Novel* (1927), there is a fundamental difference between a story and a plot, and this distinction is central to understanding how Shakespeare borrowed and what he did with his borrowing. In Forster's words, a story is merely "a narrative of events arranged in their time-sequence," while a plot is "also a narrative of events, the emphasis falling on causality." He illustrates his point with this now-famous juxtaposition: "'The king died and then the queen died' is a story. 'The king died and then the queen died of grief' is a plot." In a plot, the emphasis of what is being told to us shifts from events to causes, and to what may underlie those causes. Linear time is less important than what stimulates the reader's imagination: we begin to ask "why" rather than "and then?"[29] Forster's maxim is a point of particular importance to Shakespeare's methods, for time after time, we see that his engagement with a prior narrative is often at the level of story, for its framework and sequence of events, while the plot comes from his imagination: he supplies motives where motives are unclear or absent in the source, he explores human desires and anxieties at key points where the prior text is silent, and he shows little restraint in changing the details of a story when doing so improves it. Sometimes, as in the case of his King Lear and several other protagonists, he achieves psychological effect by suppressing or denying motives that are explicit in his sources.

At this point I want to make clear a basic principle about Shakespeare's habits of composition: knowing one major source story for a Shakespeare play, even the source that most recognizably served him for his story lines, never fully accounts for his borrowing. Not only did he routinely combine more than one story, but he also drew from the language of the English Bible, made allusions to topical political events, and summoned the spirit of works, like Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta*, without necessarily copying the stories' narrative events. He synthesised and recombined material, even non-literary in nature, to change a received story into a plot. The collection of stories you now have before you does not attempt to present all the sources that went into a single play, but many of those sources can be tracked down and consulted as you understand more about how and where Shakespeare drew inspiration for his works.[30]

To these two observations can be added a third, perhaps better left to be discovered through the reading experiences of individuals than pronounced upon at great length here: Shakespeare consistently showed a remarkable ability to discover within his source stories the psychology lying latent in other writers' characters, as well as opportunities to explore emotional conflict and inner turmoil that his sources often underplayed or simply ignored. This tendency appears not only in his dramatic works, but also in his two narrative poems, *Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece*, published in 1593 and 1594, respectively. In these poems and in his nearly forty plays, what is especially striking is Shakespeare's habit of teasing out and developing human passions and the workings of the human mind, creating out of mere words the impression that a real person is opening up his or her soul. Sometimes, as we will see, he did so on the basis of almost no textual precedent because early modern authors often made little of the psychology of their characters. See, for example, how you respond to the sources stories for *The Merchant of Venice*, *Hamlet*, *Othello*, and *The Winter's Tale* and note what happens in the transition from the prior story to the second telling. Shakespeare had a knack for discovering or inventing the psychology behind the actions narrated in someone else's plot—recall George Bernard Shaw's quip that the playwright could tell a great story so long as someone told it to him first. One of the ways he developed his own stories was by emphasizing the psychological dimensions of characters he found in the pages of others.

In the enthusiastic analysis of one influential contemporary critic, Shakespeare is judged to have "invented" what it is to be human and to have shown audiences for the first time in history what human psychology looked like when dramatised.[31] Although this claim has been the subject of a number of highly sceptical and sometimes hostile responses,[32] most readers of Shakespeare do come to admire his ability to deliver characters of remarkable depth and truthfulness. To give just one notable example: the textual basis for the almost larger-than-life character Lady Macbeth is extremely thin. Despite her enormous presence in Shakespeare's play, she gets nothing more than a parenthetical mention in his main source, Raphael Holinshed's *Chronicle of England, Scotland and Ireland* (1587). In Shakespeare's telling of the story, however, we get fiery speeches and astonishing feats of emotional blackmail as she chides, cajoles, and demands her way into her husband's consciousness. Lady Macbeth's transformation can be very instructive: where Holinshed contents himself with a passing reference that leaves readers with practically no lasting image of her and certainly nothing that would allow them to draw any conclusions about her motivations or passions, Shakespeare spotted an opportunity to explore a very minor character's psychology. In doing so, he deepened the psychology of his protagonist as well. By heightening and intensifying Macbeth's wife's presence in the story, Shakespeare created one of the great husband-wife stories of all time: her overwhelming ambition, followed by her precipitous fall into guilt, madness, and eventual suicide complements Macbeth's own psychological complex of ambition and restraint. In the final acts of the play she offers a sharply defined foil for his descent into paranoia and cruelty, creating and enriching the story as audiences become a party to the couple's shared fantasies, ambitions, hesitations, guilt, and ultimately separation and death.

Where did Shakespeare find or discover the material to do so? Geoffrey Bullough's discussion of his creative process in writing *Macbeth* is helpful: "Lady Macbeth's character is almost entirely created by Shakespeare both in its internal convolutions and in its outward manifestations. The ambitious wives in Holinshed and other possible chronicle sources provided merely a sketchy outline which he filled in."[33] Specifically, Shakespeare may also have remembered Queen Medea, who murdered her own children, from Thomas Newton's 1581 *Seneca His Tenne Tragedies*. He may have drawn some details from Hector Boece's *The Description of Scotland*, a source used by Holinshed, in which Scottish wives are vividly described as breastfeeding their young children for fear that they would degenerate if left to wet-nurses, but at the same time given to the custom of dipping their swords in and drinking the blood of their freshly slain enemies. Details such as these may have combined into the details of Lady Macbeth's bloodlust and the image of her dashing out the brains of her own toothless child while it was nursing. Shakespeare may also have transferred some of the qualities of King Duff's ambitious wife, using details given in Holinshed's *Chronicle*, to his newly developed character.[34] The conclusion we should arrive at through this example is that although Shakespeare took the *Macbeth* story from Holinshed, he radically transformed almost every important aspect of it to create, in effect, an original work.

Women and the marginalised—wives, daughters, gardeners and other manual labourers, prostitutes and pimps, thieves, foreigners, and servants—all come in for special attention in the works of Shakespeare. This is one of his particular features as an author: a knack for discovering in these usually minor characters psychological and emotional depths that his historical and literary sources almost always deny them or never report. One contemporary critic calls this quality a “compulsive habit of creative interiorization”—the ability to imagine and creatively render as believable the inner lives of even his minor characters, while another argues that Shakespeare “is able to embody different perspectives” to produce authentic representations of human experience, converting “‘selves’ or possible selves . . . into ways of being and living.”[35] The development of Lady Macbeth from almost no textual antecedents serves as a prime example of this aspect of Shakespeare’s technique as a playwright.

Adaptation and Appropriation: A Human Constant

According to Richard Dawkins, our human capacity to pass on elements of culture from one generation to another is almost as constitutive of our nature as is our biology.[36] In a study first published in 1976 he offered a brief overview of his theory of cultural “memes”: units of culture analogous to genetic data, but in fact even more enduring across human evolution than our genetic distinctiveness. He argues that memes are the basic elements of human culture—tunes, ideas, catch-phrases, clothes, fashions, ways of making pots or building arches—that propagate themselves, much like genetic traits across generations, by an ongoing and almost inexorable process of imitation and repetition.[37] To the Internet generation, of course, memes are most commonly thought of as the web-based jokes and parodies that circulate and change with amazing speed and variety over social media networks.[38] This modern sense builds upon the root definition offered by Dawkins: in broad cultural terms, all forms of memes function and have meaning because one generation or group passes its cultural distinctiveness to another by transmitting its thought, its techniques, and its material and cultural products, and even its jokes, via previously circulated forms. Like genetic code, memes can combine, associate and adapt; and thus they evolve, producing a cultural heritage that is both distinctive and open to variation. And that is the principal strength of memes according to Dawkins: a combination of durability and adaptability.

His theory takes us to the very heart of an important aspect of Shakespeare’s “plagiarism,” for what he routinely did as an author was to engage with a literary tradition comprised of many interwoven memes that he replicated in modified and fresh forms. Shakespeare’s originality consisted not in inventing new stories but in discovering in his hypotexts something latent or unspoken.[39] Examples include basic plot details such as the struggle of young love against familial pressures in *Romeo and Juliet*, Hamlet’s inner quest to avenge his murdered father, or the ill-fated love-test that King Lear puts to his three daughters. All these individual units of human narrative tradition—these memes—resonate with timeless, folkloristic, or fairy-tale qualities that are immediately recognizable as belonging to some deep human reservoir of stories much larger and older even than the various Western literary repositories from which Shakespeare borrowed.

Central to the theory of memes is the principle that cultural transmission benefits, somewhat paradoxically, from variation. In other words, a unit of culture that holds to a straight, unchanging line of transmission, just like a genetic trait that never mutates, is likely to die out within a few generations. An unchanging unit of cultural meaning eventually becomes irrelevant or obscure to later audiences, but a cultural trait that absorbs and accommodates new stimuli has much greater chances of surviving. In the case of human stories, this means that old stories must be made new so as to be relevant to generations that have different interests, concerns, or challenges; they must both retain something of their essence and renew themselves. The stories most open to imitation are the ones that stand the best chance of surviving into the future.[40]

All of this sounds a lot like what occurs in contemporary fan fiction circles, where amateur authors, usually with the help of social media outlets and the wide reach of the Internet, give new life to familiar stories, whether those of Homer, Jane Austen, or J. K. Rowling. In a literary category called by one critic "a genre fundamentally based on appropriation . . . . a form of cultural production that is essentially derivative," fan fiction authors set well-known characters or plot lines in new time frames, sometimes imagining scenes, characters, or plot events not in the original work, often mashing together characters or episodes from two or more source stories.[41] At times their efforts also cross platforms, drawing from television, video games, or cinema to fiction, or vice-versa.[42] Indeed, the explosion of fan fiction in the last generation or so is merely an accelerated, obvious, and cross-media version of what has occurred over the whole course of Western literature, where prior stories functioned as prompts and invitations for generations of subsequent authors to create their own literary and cultural productions in a more gradual but equally interactive and participatory way.

What this line of thinking suggests is that modern readers and audiences need to look at Shakespeare's habits of borrowing as just one instance in a broad, on-going human process of cultural replication and renewal, and not as simple or single acts of source-stealing. Like contemporary fan fiction authors, Shakespeare took old stories and gave them new life, often changing the method of presentation from prose or verse narrative, which are *telling modes*, to that of drama, which is primarily a presentational or *showing* mode.[43] Some examples of this process contained in the following pages of this collection include his reworking of the legendary Romeo and

Juliet story, taken from Arthur Brooke (who took it from other sources in a long line of borrowing), the Othello story of Cinthio, and others. In some of these cases, as in his use of François Belleforest's version of the Hamlet story or Ser Giovanni Fiorentino's *Il Pecorone* for *The Merchant of Venice*, one source text was combined wholesale with other major sources in a process of co-adaptation that demonstrates the basic principle espoused by Dawkins, that memes replicate themselves in human culture by being fundamentally open to variation and adaptation.[44]

In other cases, he reworked a previously staged dramatic work of his fellow London playwrights. *The True Chronicle History of King Leir and His Three Daughters, Gonorill, Ragan, and Cordella*, published in 1605 but first performed about a decade earlier, became the blueprint for his own *King Lear*. In *The Merchant of Venice*, published twice in 1600 but probably first acted a few years before that, he cribbed only a few specific lines from Christopher Marlowe's hugely successful play *The Jew of Malta* (and also grabbed some from Marlowe's *Tamburlaine the Great*). But he also responded on a very deep level, a level irrespective of exact verbal borrowings and plot details, to key elements of that play's spirit.[45] In still other cases, he mined historical narratives in search of glimpses into the minds and spirits of characters from the ancient world such as Julius Caesar and Coriolanus, and of kings and queens of his native England such as King John, Richard II, Prince Hal, Henry IV, and Richard III. His principal sources for his English history plays were Raphael Holinshed's massive prose *Chronicles of England, Scotland, and Ireland* (1587 edition) and Edward Hall's *Union of the Two Noble and Illustre Families* (1548). For his plays based on classical history he resorted principally to Sir Thomas North's *The Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romanes* (1579), an ambitious tome (itself a translation from the French) which contained a wealth of stories that inspired Shakespeare's imagination.

We can better understand Shakespeare's particular case by considering what some of the best minds interested in the human impulse to adapt stories have said about the process and the effects of adaptation in general. Among the most important points argued by Linda Hutcheon, one of the leading contemporary theorists in this field, is that audiences and readers derive—and seem always to have derived—great satisfaction from the combination of familiar and new elements that adaptations provide. An adaptation appeals to audiences and readers precisely because it is both familiar—it's a story that they already know—and fresh—it's not *exactly* the story they remember. Something new piques their interest, while at the same time something already comfortable grounds them and makes them feel at home.[46]

Underlying and supporting these theories of the familiar and the new is the time-honoured Aristotelian principle of imitation, or as he called it, *mimesis*. Aristotle's theory posits that part of the pleasure of engaging with dramatic stories about others is that we, as spectators, find pleasure in seeing actions and characters that in some way resemble aspects of our own lives. Aristotle was not making the claim that audiences experience anything like a perfect one-to-one correspondence between what they see and what they live—he was, after all, using Sophocles' tragedy *Oedipus Rex* as his primary text and that play does not offer up a life story to be desired by anyone. Rather, he suggested that aspects of what theatrical audiences witness stimulate the basic human emotions of fear and pity and bring about "the proper purgation of these emotions" that encourages some form of self-awareness.[47]

Modern genres such as the novel or the personal memoir, to say nothing of film or televised mass-audience sporting events, which Aristotle did not know anything about and could not even anticipate, have the same potential as drama to excite in readers and viewers the human emotions he describes. Fiction and creative non-fiction have an enormous capacity to present an imitation of life to readers as they become engaged with stories they read rather than see performed. Cinema presents another narrative genre that Aristotle could never have imagined, but which works very effectively on our emotions: because of the particular characteristics of its medium (the darkened room, the potential for highly realistic camera-work, the layering of music over images and voices, and so on), film has a special power to focus viewers' attention, in much the way that concentrated reading can, both forms creating a diegesis (the fictional "reality" that setting, characters, and actions present to us) so compelling that the world around us can slip away and time can seem suspended.

Even though Aristotle's *Poetics*, the source of this theory of mimesis, was imperfectly known in Shakespeare's time, the principle of literature's capacity to represent real life and show it to readers in a recognizable form had a defining effect on the way that literary works were created in Shakespeare's time. The concept of mimesis promoted imitation as a foundational principle of artistic creation during the early modern period and even before. Imitation of prior works actually *constituted* creativity; it was expected that writers would engage with the stories of the past, modifying or amplifying those narratives, all the while imitating them and thus creating for readers something that—following Hutcheon's principle—was both familiar and new. Not only was imitation expected by audiences, it was regarded as a sign of virtuosity for literary authors to insert themselves into this tradition (in this period, "herself" only occasionally