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## INTRODUCTION



In 1898, the writer J. M. Synge visited the Aran Islands, seeking to improve his Irish. In a cottage kitchen, an old man seated in the chimney-corner told a story to Synge and the others who crowded around while dinner was cooking. In this tale, a young farmer named O’Conor borrows money from a strange little man who demands five pounds of O’Conor’s flesh should he fail to repay the loan in a year’s time. Later, O’Conor enters into an ill-advised wager with a ship’s captain who claims he can seduce O’Conor’s wife.

Those who know their Shakespeare will find this story familiar, with its clear resemblances to *The Merchant of Venice*, in which a man uses a pound of his flesh as collateral for a loan, and *Cymbeline*, in which a man bets on his wife’s fidelity. Synge relates, “It gave me a strange feeling of wonder to hear this illiterate native of a wet rock in the Atlantic telling a story that is so full of European associations.”<sup>1</sup> I was similarly struck when I first read the Chilean folktale “White Onion,” a story about a young man who faces the prospect of having a kilogram of flesh cut from his rump when he fails to repay a loan on time. The story bears a marked resemblance to *The Merchant of Venice*, and yet the folktale—which features such earthy details as a grubby old man and woman as helpers and the identifying mark of three golden hairs growing from the heroine’s waist—does not seem to be an adaptation of the play. We can recognize a connection between “White Onion” and *Merchant* just as we can recognize both a literary seventeenth-century French tale

1. Synge, *Aran Islands*, 24. For some background on Synge’s travels in the Aran Islands, see Skelton, *Four Plays*, viii–ix.

involving glass slippers and a pumpkin coach and a Chinese story about an abused young girl and her pet fish as “Cinderella.”

Part of the wonder I felt was over how stories separated by differences in time, place, culture, language, and genre can nevertheless resemble each other closely. I feel something of the birdwatcher’s joy when she identifies a bird well-known or rare when I find “The Maiden without Hands,” which I know from the Brothers Grimm, in a collection of Russian or Italian folktales. When I encountered “White Onion,” I saw *The Merchant of Venice*, even though the antagonist is the feckless young man’s godfather, not a Jewish moneylender. The Chilean folktale and the play resemble each other because both descend from earlier “Pound of Flesh” tales. We know such stories predate Shakespeare because medieval versions survive. Generations of Shakespeare scholars have examined his literary sources, but his folktale sources remain largely neglected. Yet just as birds and alligators help us to imagine their ancestors the dinosaurs, so folktales collected in the modern world (the nineteenth century and after) can give us insight into the stories Shakespeare and his audiences might have known. But just as a chicken is not an archaeopteryx, so the folktales in this volume are not Shakespeare’s exact sources, but later members of the genus of his sources. Shakespeare may have known multiple versions of the story he then used as material for his plays, and so each folktale type is here represented by several examples.

In the case of *The Merchant of Venice*, we can be virtually certain that Shakespeare knew a version of the “Pound of Flesh” folktale published in a fourteenth-century Italian collection of stories by Giovanni Fiorentino, *The Duncce (Il Pecorone)*. I have not included this story, although I have included an earlier medieval “Pound of Flesh” tale, because Ser Giovanni’s story is generally accepted as Shakespeare’s source and so is readily available in Geoffrey Bullough’s indispensable eight-volume *Narrative and Dramatic*

*Sources of Shakespeare* and elsewhere.<sup>2</sup> This anthology aims to augment our knowledge of Shakespeare's sources and influences by supplying examples of his folktale sources rather than revisiting his acknowledged literary ones.

The larger question one might ask about *The Merchant of Venice's* sources is, if we are nearly certain that Shakespeare knew the story in *The Dunces*, why should we interest ourselves in other versions of the same story? In what sense is "White Onion," a Chilean folktale collected in 1951, a "source" for a play written and performed in London around 1597? One answer focuses on Shakespeare: he might have known a number of versions of the "Pound of Flesh" folktale, some of them from oral tradition. Attending to the folktale in its many guises can give us a clearer sense of the story tradition available to Shakespeare, although we cannot reconstruct it exactly. Shakespeare's audience, moreover, may have also known the story in many forms, and unlike the playwright, many of them were illiterate, and so the oral tradition may have been all they knew.

Folktales often served as common ground in Shakespeare's theater. The playwright and some members of his audience would have read literary versions of a play's folktale source, and those who could not read might have heard those tales told. In our own culture, when a movie or television show (or short story or novel) adapts a fairy tale, the creator knows the expectations the audience will bring, and the audience knows that the creator knows. The audience waits to see how this version of a well-known story will conform to tradition and how it will vary. Will Red Riding Hood fall in love with the wolf? Will the evil fairy repent and rescue Sleeping Beauty? When we learn the folktale traditions that Shakespeare adapts, we can join this interplay between playwright and audience.

2. Bullough, *Narrative and Dramatic Sources*, 1.463–76.

Both folktales and Shakespeare's plays are cultural survivors, thriving in scores of languages and cultures through the ages. Just as modern writers, playwrights, and filmmakers endlessly adapt Shakespeare's plays, so Shakespeare drew from the tales in the culture of the time. Macbeth becomes a samurai in Akira Kurosawa's film *Throne of Blood*; Snow White becomes a bullfighter in Pablo Berger's film *Blancanieves*. The title of Catherine Belsey's 2007 book poses an essential question: *Why Shakespeare?* Why have Shakespeare's plays been so durably successful? Belsey concludes that the resemblances between Shakespeare's plays and folk narratives help to explain Shakespeare's place at the center of the Western literary canon. By absorbing the narrative traditions on which Shakespeare drew, we may peer into the heart of what makes him great: a profound connection to his audiences through the centuries and around the world.

This book defines narrative traditions using two concepts from folktale studies, "types" and "motifs." A folktale type is a generalized plot drawn from many different versions of what seems to be the same kind of story; a motif is a small narrative unit, or "those details out of which full-fledged narratives are composed."<sup>3</sup> The standard reference work, Hans-Jörg Uther's *The Types of International Folktales*, provides a title and a plot description for each folktale type, and assigns each type a number with the prefix ATU. "A Pound of Flesh," for example, is ATU 890. The entry in *The Types of International Folktales* for the folktale most of us know as "Bluebeard" is:

[ATU] 312: **Maiden-Killer (Bluebeard)** . . . An odd-looking rich man (e.g. with a blue beard [S62.1]) takes his bride to his splendid castle. She is forbidden to open a certain room, but she disobeys and finds it full of the dead bodies of her predecessors

3. Thompson, *Motif-Index*, 1.10.



[C611]. The husband wants to kill her for her disobedience [C920], but she is able to delay the punishment (three times) [K551]. She (her sister) calls their brother (three brothers) who kills the husband (sometimes with help from a dog or other animal) and rescues his sister(s) [G551.1, G652].

Common variations in the story tradition are noted parenthetically, and motifs are indicated in square brackets. The motifs are listed and defined in another essential reference work for folktale studies, Stith Thompson's *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature*. It catalogues folktale motifs and assigns them a number beginning with a letter. In the description of "Maiden-Killer," Motif C611 is "Forbidden chamber." Tale types and motifs are helpful tools, but studying multiple versions of a folktale type or motif can help readers understand the range of narrative possibilities for a traditional story.

Oral tradition played a greater role in Shakespeare's culture than in our own.<sup>4</sup> His plays themselves refer to storytelling. In *The Winter's Tale*, Queen Hermione calls her young son Mamillius to her to tell her a story. He obliges, saying, "A sad tale's best for winter. I have one / Of sprites and goblins" (2.1.22–26). In *Macbeth*, Lady Macbeth castigates her husband for being afraid of illusions, as if he were frightened by a "woman's story at a winter's fire" (3.4.62). Sometimes characters refer to specific folktales. In *Much Ado about Nothing*, Benedict cites "the old tale" with the lines "It is not so, nor 'twas not so: but indeed, God forbid it should be so!" (1.1.200–201). This chorus appears in an English folktale, "Mr. Fox," included in Joseph Jacobs's great nineteenth-century collection *English Fairy Tales*.<sup>5</sup> Edgar, disguised as a mad beggar in *King Lear*, intones "Childe Rowland to the dark tower came, / His word was still 'Fie,

4. On literacy rates in early modern England, see Fox, *Oral and Literate Culture*, 18–19.

5. Jacobs, *English Fairy Tales*, 151.

foh and fum, / I smell the blood of a British man'” (3.4.178–80), a reference to the folktale “Childe Rowland,” also in Joseph Jacobs’s collection.<sup>6</sup> In *Hamlet*, Ophelia in her madness utters, “They say the owl was a baker’s daughter” (4.5.42–43), which refers to a traditional story in which Jesus and St. Peter, disguised as beggars, ask a baker’s daughter for some bread. When she refuses, Jesus turns her into an owl.<sup>7</sup> Shakespeare seems to have expected his audiences to recognize folktales and other traditional stories from the briefest references to them. We might also recall that the theater itself is in large measure an oral form, with actors delivering lines they have learned in front of an audience, not unlike a storyteller.

I have used this collection as a textbook for my “Shakespeare and the Folktale” course, which I have taught regularly since 2010 at Agnes Scott College. The folktale sources can be an excellent point of entry into Shakespeare. They are less intimidating than the Bard, provide a partial preview of the play’s plot, and allow a course on Shakespeare to include texts from many cultures. I also hope that this book will bring pleasure to those who enjoy Shakespeare, folktales, or both. Each section includes tales related to a specific play, with a brief introduction to point out the connections. Within each chapter, the stories are ordered in a way that follows the introduction’s discussion of these connections. Those who would like more extended analysis can consult my 2015 book, *Shakespeare’s Folktale Sources*.

*Shakespeare’s Folktale Sources* considers seven plays: *The Taming of the Shrew*, *Titus Andronicus*, *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *All’s Well That Ends Well*, *Measure for Measure*, and

6. *Ibid.*, 123.

7. See Uther, *Types of International Folktales*, ATU 751A, “The Farmwife Is Changed into a Woodpecker,” which notes variants in which the woman is a baker’s daughter and the transformation is into an owl; and Thompson, *Motif-Index*, A1958.0.1, “The Owl Is a Baker’s Daughter.”

*Cymbeline*, which have one or more plots based directly on a folktale. This anthology also includes *King Lear*, which adapts a legendary history that includes folktales and folk narrative motifs; *The Comedy of Errors*, which is based on a classical Roman play that is in turn related to the “Twins or Blood-Brothers” folktale; and *The Tempest*, whose dependence on the “Magic Flight” folktale is partial and incomplete, but fascinating nonetheless. I did not include *The Merry Wives of Windsor* or *Measure for Measure* here because of a dearth of relevant folktales available in English.

While other Shakespeare plays, such as *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* and *Macbeth*, include supernatural elements, and others, such as *The Winter’s Tale* and *Pericles*, include folktale motifs, they do not follow the plot of any one folktale type. The plays that Shakespeare bases on specific folktales tend to focus on marriage and family instead of magical elements, and transform such elements in traditional tales into a more recognizable reality. *Titus Andronicus* adapts the “Maiden without Hands” folktale, in which the maimed heroine’s hands always grow back; not so for *Titus’s* heroine Lavinia. In the “Snow White” plot of *Cymbeline*, there is nothing magical about how Imogen falls into a death-sleep and then awakens: she simply takes a drug that later wears off, much like the one Juliet takes in *Romeo and Juliet*. *The Tempest* is the exception to this trend, but even in this play the magic in the folktale source, “The Magic Flight,” is curtailed, ending not with a sorcerers’ showdown but with Prospero’s renunciation of magic. For this reason, I prefer to use the term “folktale” rather than “fairy tale” when speaking of Shakespeare’s traditional sources, since “fairy tale” suggests magical elements, and in contemporary culture can suggest the whimsical, inconsequential, and naïve.

In deciding which versions of the folktales to include in each chapter, I considered first how close the connections were between the play in question and the versions of the folktale. I also selected

stories for how well they were told, and my final consideration was diversity of the cultures represented. Since I teach in the United States, I am always especially pleased to come upon New World folktales that speak to Shakespeare's plays. I have not restricted my selections to English or even European folktales, because folktales show a remarkable ability to transcend cultural and linguistic boundaries. Many literary stories that scholars accept as Shakespeare's sources are Italian and French. Orally transmitted tales recorded in very different places can be quite similar. A folktale told in Iraq in the twentieth century participates in the same tradition Shakespeare drew on for his plays, and so might provide evidence about how the folktale appeared in seventeenth-century London. I am convinced that what we gain by examining these folktale traditions justifies this inevitably speculative enterprise. We cannot know exactly how these stories were told in Shakespeare's day, but we can learn about the story traditions themselves.

The folktales herein primarily come from the geographical expanse from India to Ireland that folktale scholars consider to be a "traditional area"—that is, a region in which very similar versions of a given tale can be found.<sup>8</sup> Thus, with a few exceptions, most of the stories in this collection come from Europe, the Middle East, and India. Morocco, situated close to Europe on the Mediterranean, supplies a Jewish folktale related to *The Merchant of Venice*, and I also include two stories from African diasporic cultures, "Black Jack and White Jack" and "Jack Beats the Devil." These last two stories come from the New World, as do three Chilean stories I have included. These stories seem to descend, at least partially, from European traditions conveyed by colonization, slavery, and other forms of cultural contact.

What can folktales teach us about Shakespeare? They might illuminate his creative processes. They might help us understand

8. Thompson, *Folktale*, 14.

why Shakespeare's plays have been so successful across time and space. They also may help us imagine what Shakespeare's audience might have brought with them into the theater, whether they were standing on the ground or seated in a privileged position on the stage, since folktales could have been available to those at a range of literacy levels. Shakespeare's folktale sources can reveal to us how he met his audience on common ground, and how he kept them there.

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### Notes

- \* Folktale types are double-posted in the index. They are listed in the entry “Types” by their designation in Uther’s *The Types of International Folktales*—which consists of the prefix “ATU” followed by a number (cf. p. 4)—and title of the folktale type (e.g., ATU 890 “A Pound of Flesh”). They are also listed in the index by title, followed by their Uther designation (e.g., “A Pound of Flesh” [ATU 890]).
- \* Motif types are double-posted in the index. They are listed in the entry “Motifs” by their designation in Thompson’s *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature*—which consists of a letter prefix followed by a number (cf. p. 5)—and title of the motif (e.g., J1161.2 “Pound of flesh”). They are also listed in the index by title, followed by their Thompson designation (e.g., “Pound of Flesh” motif [J1161.2]).
- \* Folktales are double-posted in the index. They are listed by title, followed by a parenthetical indication of culture of origin (e.g., “White Onion” (Chilean story)). They are also listed by the name of the collector of the tale, followed by title (e.g., Pino-Saavedra, Yolando, “White Onion”).
- \* Page numbers in italic type indicate the text of the folktale.

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