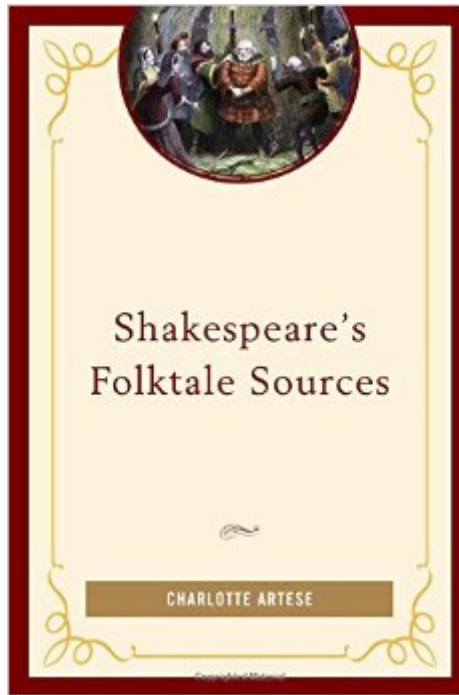


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Shakespeare's Folktale Sources



Synopsis

Shakespeare's Folk Tale Sources argues that 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 Cymbeline"—derive one or more of their plots directly from folktales. In most cases, scholars have accepted one literary version of the folktale as a source. Recognizing that the same story has circulated orally and occurs in other medieval and early modern written versions allows for new readings of the plays. By acknowledging that a play's source story circulated in multiple forms, we can see how the playwright was engaging his audience on common ground, retelling a story that may have been familiar to many of them, even the illiterate. We can also view the folktale play as a Shakespearean genre, defined by source as the chronicle histories are, that spans and traces the course of Shakespeare's career. The fact that Shakespeare reworked folktales so frequently also changes the way we see the history of the literary folk- or fairy-tale, which is usually thought to bypass England and move from Italian novella collections to eighteenth-century French salons. Each chapter concludes with a bibliography listing versions of each folktale source as a resource for further research and teaching.

Book Information

Hardcover: 254 pages

Publisher: University of Delaware Press (June 3, 2015)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 1611495555

ISBN-13: 978-1611495553

Product Dimensions: 6.2 x 0.9 x 9.3 inches

Shipping Weight: 13.6 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 5.0 out of 5 stars— See all reviews— (2 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #916,771 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #62 in Books > Literature & Fiction > History & Criticism > Genres & Styles > Fairy Tales, Folk Tales, Legends & Mythology #586 in Books > Literature & Fiction > British & Irish > Shakespeare > Literary Criticism #1298 in Books > Literature & Fiction > History & Criticism > Movements & Periods > Medieval

Customer Reviews

Much more than we do today, Elizabethans lived with a rich body of oral folklore. They heard stories in taverns, in public squares, at firesides. Blinded by our reading, we tend to miss how important oral storytelling was in Shakespeare's day—and how much he drew on folktales for his

plots. In an important new book, Charlotte Artese helps us take off our readerly blinders and hear the forgotten oral tradition that permeates the playwright's work. Artese focuses on seven plays. For each, she locates the folktale source or sources. She shows how Shakespeare varied the stories to suit his needs. She shows how the playwright played off the audience's familiarity with the stories to strengthen the impact of his own versions. And she shows how the tales clung to a life of their own, importing into Shakespeare's plays vestiges that the plays themselves did not strictly need. The effect is to give the reader a whole new set of ears and eyes for works we thought we already knew. In the interplay between the plays and the tales excavated by Artese, we discern new techniques of the playwright's craft, and we can eavesdrop for the first time on a previously inaudible dialogue between Shakespeare and his audience. Shakespeare's Folktale Sources makes a fresh and, no doubt, lasting contribution to Shakespeare studies. It deserves to be read by scholars and Shakespeare lovers everywhere. The seven plays Artese studies are 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 Cymbeline.

Although shorter than I would have liked, I think readers will find that this is easily the best book of Shakespearean scholarship in a generation. This book illuminates the plays in a way that will transform the study of Shakespeare for decades to come. The arguments made on King Lear are particularly compelling. Harold Bloom must certainly admit, after the release of this groundbreaking work, that he has been replaced.

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