

A Borrower Who Lives Forever: An Enquiry into the Sources of Shakespearean Plays

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Abstract

Shiv Kera in his book *You Can Win: A Step by Step Tool for Top Achievers* says, "Winners do not do different things, they do things differently". This paper is an attempt to prove that Shakespeare is a winner in the empire of literature not by writing different plays but by presenting the existing plays differently. When Shakespeare was charged with debts to his authors, Landor replied, "yet he was more original than his originals. He breathed upon the dead bodies and brought them into life". To prove this point, we turn the annals of history and find out the sources or dead bodies of his plays upon which he breathed and brought into life. As he presented the borrowed plots differently, he lives forever in the minds and hearts of the people.

Keywords

Craft of Borrowing, Creative Presentation, the black cats, imperceptible circumstances, etc.

Introduction

Usually, a borrower will live only for an hour in the empire of literature for the black cats, known as critics, in the kingdom of literature, will kill him. But how does Shakespeare live forever even when the plot of his each play was borrowed from other sources? Answer lies in the book of Shiv Kera's "*You Can Win: A Step by Step Tool for Top Achievers*" in which he says "Winners do not do different things, they do things differently". Shakespeare is a winner in the empire of literature not by writing different plays but by presenting the existing plays differently. In V. Lakshmanan's view "Ben Johnson's remark that Shakespeare is 'not of an age, but for all time' sums up the universality and timelessness of Shakespeare (1). According to Holderness, "For Shakespeare, The world is a stage, History a plot, Kings dramatists, Courtiers actors, Commoners audiences and speech itself the dialogue and script that gives breath to all the rest" (121). Brain Vickers opines, "It is by selecting imperceptible circumstances that Shakespeare painted the passions than any other writer" (67).

The Craft of Borrowing and the Art of Creative Presentation

Shakespeare was born in 1564 at Stratford-on-Avon in England. It is appropriate at the beginning to say something of Shakespeare's knowledge of foreign

language. Shakespeare is defined for us by his plays, says Hyland Peter (3). He acquired a reasonable knowledge of Latin and perhaps a smattering of Greek. Shakespeare made use of translations. But he did not accept them slavishly and there is plenty of evidences that he read Latin works of which there was no translation- two plays by Plautus, Buchanan's and Leslie's works on Scottish history and a Latin version of poems in the Greek anthology. There are evidences to tell that Shakespeare had read some of Seneca's plays in the original as well as the Tudor translation of the Ten Tragedies. The absence of Latin quotations in the later plays may simply indicate that Shakespeare came to know the inability of the audience to grasp them.

The influence of certain books on Shakespeare's works has been proved. The Bible left its mark on every play in the cannon- the Bishop's Bible and the Geneva version. The first scene of *Measure for Measure* is taken from St. Mark's Gospel. It is certain that as an actor Shakespeare was acquainted with a large number of plays in which he took part. Although he did not act in Marlow's plays, he echoed Tamberline, Dido and Edward II; he quoted from Doctor Faustus in *Troilus and Cressida*; he quoted a line from *Hero and Leander* in *As You Like It*.

Shakespeare learnt a good deal from other University wits, and their pioneering works reduced the period of his apprenticeship. He had read several of Greene's works, including his two novels, *Menaphone* and *Pandosto*, and two of the coney-catching pamphlets. Greene's heroines served as models for Shakespeare's *Cymbeline* and *The Winter's Tale*. The wronged wives, Imogen and Hermione forgive their husbands, as Greene's heroines in novels and plays do. There is some evidence that Shakespeare had read some of the Nazhe-Harvey controversy, as it left its traces on *Love's Labour's Lost*. He was clearly influenced by Thomas Kyd's most famous play *The Spanish Tragedy*, the revenge play that provided a model for the original *Hamlet*. In the opinion of Kenneth Muir "Thomas Lodge gave him the plot of *As You Like It* and a few phrases in *Richard II*" (8).

Shakespeare knew most of Sydney's work, including *Astrophel and Stella*, *The Defence of Poesy*, and *Arcadia* and most of Daniel's *Delia*, *Rosamond*, *A Letter from Octavia*, *Cleopatra*, *The Civil Wars* and *The Queens Arcadia*. Shakespeare combined a variety of different sources in the texture of his verse, and the process in most cases, was apparently unconscious. Shakespeare's method of composition differed from play to play. For some of his plots he seems to have used only one source, but generally speaking, he combined two or more.

He borrowed ideas for his early plays from the following sources. *The Comedy of Errors* has its basis in the two Plautine comedies - *The Menaechmi* and *The Amphitruo*. The main plot is taken from *The Menaechmi*, in which one of the twins, Menaechmus Surreptus arranges to have dinner with a courtesan named Erotium. Menaechmus Sosicles is taken for his brother and gets a meal instead. Peniculus, a parasite who shared the meal, exposes Menaechmus to his wife. Eventually all is explained. Shakespeare begins his play with a scene from the story of Apollonius of Tyre in which Ageon explains how he lost his wife and

sons. The ultimate source of the play *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* was *Diana* by J. De Montemayor, which Shakespeare could have read in a French Translation or possibly in B. Yonge's English version not published until 1598. The central situation is similar to that of *The Two Gentlemen*: Felismena dresses as a man and finds that her lover Felix is wooing Celia, becomes his page, and is sent with a letter to Celia who falls in love with the messenger. Celia dies and Felix and Felismena eventually marry.

There are three theories about the relationship of Shakespeare's play to *The Taming of a Shrew*. Firstly, *A Shrew* was the main source of Shakespeare's play. Secondly, it was practically derived from *The Shrew*. Lastly, both *A Shrew* and *The Shrew* were derived from a lost play, *The Ur-Shrew*. The second strand in the play was provided by Gascoigne's *Suppose* (1566) a lively version of Ariosto's *I Suppositi*.

Titus Andronicus may not be wholly Shakespeare's. Two recent editors have detected traces of Peele's style in the early part of the play. There are many sources for *Henry VI* and *Parts 1-3*. The strongest argument against Shakespeare's sole authorship of Part I is the inconsistency of characterization, the alternation of competence and incompetence and the weakness of construction. *Part II* is based almost wholly on Hall's *Chronicle*. Shakespeare's conception of his villain-hero, *Richard III* came ultimately from Sir Thomas More's *History of Richard III*, which was afterwards embodied in the *Chronicles* of Hall and Holinshed.

The main source of the play *Romeo and Juliet* was *The Tragicall Historie of Romeus and Juliet* by Arthur Brooke (1562), a poem based on Bandello. Brooke describes the feud between the Montague's and Capulets, and the attempt by Prince Escalus to effect peace. It has been argued that Shakespeare's *Richard II* used in addition to Holinshed's *Chronicles*, Hall, Berner's *Froissart*, *Woodstock*, *A Mirror of Magistrates*, Daniel's *Civile Wars* and three French manuscripts: *Chronicque de la Traison et Mort de Richart Deux Roy Dengleterre*, Le Beau's version of this and Creton's *Chronicle* mostly.

From the Knight's tale of Chaucer, Shakespeare took a number of details like the celebration of the wedding of Theseus and Hyppolyta, the observance of May Day and the name of Philostrate, who is Emily's page to make *A Midsummer-Night Dream*. The main plot of *Love's Labour's Lost*, concerned with the vow of Navarre and his lords to study for three years and to see no woman, may perhaps have been suggested, however faintly by Pierre de la Primaudaye's *L'Academie Francaise* which Bowes translated in 1586. Discussion of the sources of *King John* is complicated by questions of date and of possible revision. If the play was written before 1591, Shakespeare could not have made use of the anonymous play, *The Troublesome Raigne of King John*, published in that year, nor could he have echoed Daniel's *Civil Wars*.

He made his comedies and tragedies by borrowing ideas from the following sources. Two lost plays, *The Venesyon Comodye* (acted 1594) and Dekker's *The Jew of Venice* have been mentioned as possible sources of *The Merchant of Venice*. The sources of *Henry IV: Parts 1-2* are the following. *The Famous Victories of Henry the Fifth* (1598) survives only in debased, piratical and abbreviated version. It may be assumed that the original provided the basic structure for Shakespeare's Trilology on the hero of Agincourt. Shakespeare also made use of Holinshed's *Chronicles* and Hall's *Chronicle*.

There are several tales which have some affinity with the main plot of *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. Sir Giovanni Fiorentino's *Il Pecorone, Riche His Farewell to Militarie Profession* (1581), *Tarltons Newes Out of Purgatorie* and Painter's *Palace of Pleasure*. Shakespeare's main source of *Henry V* was Holinshed's *Chronicles*, but he also used Hall and *The Famous Victories*, probably used *The Annals of Cornelius Tactius* (1598), possibly used Daniel's *Civil Wars*.

A likely source of *Much Ado About Nothing* is a lost play, entitled *Ariodante and Genevra* which was performed at Court in February 1583 by the boys of Merchant Taylors school. Shakespeare's use of North's translation of Plutarch's *Lives* for *Julius Caesar* has been studied by a large number of critics and editors. He might have read some of the *Lives* as early as 1595, for there is a verbal echo of the first of them in his account of The Amours of Theseus.

As You Like It has Thomas Lodge's *Rosalynde* as its source, published in 1590. Lodge's own source was *The Tale of Gamelyn*. *Twelfth Night* is a masterpiece of recapitulation. Shakespeare had already used the device of the mistaken identity of twins in *The Comedy of Errors*; in *Twelfth Night*, as in many Italian plays, the twins are of different sexes. The main source of *Troilus and Cressida* was Chaucer's great poem *Troilus and Criseyde*. Shakespeare was also acquainted with Henryson's bitter sequel *The Testament of Cresseid* in which the heroine suffers as a leper for her unfaithfulness.

The following are the sources from where he borrowed ideas for his tragedies. *Hamlet* was based on a lost play of the same title. But since *The Spanish Tragedy* resembles *Hamlet* closely, it would be considered that the source play the *Ur-Hamlet* as it has been called was written by Kyd or by a close imitator of his. The source, of *All's Well That Ends Well*, was either Boccaccio's "late tale" in *The Decameron* or William Painter's version of the same tale in *The Palace of Pleasure*.

The first literary treatment of the plot of *Measure for Measure* was Claude Rouillet's *Philanira* (1556), a Latin play which was translated into French seven years later. The source of *Othello* is Giraldi Cinthio's *Hecatommithi*. In Cinthio's tale Othello is called the Moor, Iago the Ensign and Cassio the Captain: only Disdemona is given a name. It is possible that the original inspiration of *King Lear* came not from the Lear story at all but from Sidney's story of the

Paphlagonian King and his two sons in *Arcadia*. He would have come across Lear story both in Holinshed's *Chronicles* and in *A Mirror for Magistrates*.

It is reasonable to assume that Shakespeare chose the subject of *Macbeth* because James I was reputed to be descended from Banquo. On 27 August 1605, the king witnessed at Oxford Matthew Gwinn's *Playlet* in which three sibyls prophesied to Banquo's descendants imperium sine fine. The source of *Timon of Athens* may be the following. Berowne in *Love's Labour's Lost* refers to 'Critic Timon'. When Shakespeare was writing *Julius Caesar*, he would have read the account of Timon in Plutarch's *Life of Antonius*. At some time, he had read Painter's account which mentions Timon's wish to be buried on the shore that the waves and surges might beate and vex his dead carcas. These words are echoed by Shakespeare. The source of *Antony and Cleopatra* was Plutarch's *Life of Antonius*. Shakespeare's portrait of his hero is very close to Plutarch's. His knowledge of *Coriolanus* story dated from his schooldays. The story is told by Livy and Shakespeare could have had refreshed his memory of it when Philemon Holland's translation of it was published in 1601. But the fable of the Belly and the Body's members is to be found not only in Livy but also in Erasmus' *Copia*, in Aesop's *Fables* and in a collection by Caxton as well as in Plutarch's *Lives*.

Shakespeare borrowed the ideas for his last plays from the following sources. *Pericles* was based on an earlier play and that Wilkins's novel *The Painful Adventures Pericles* was also based on the same play rather than Shakespeare's rewriting of it. The source of *Cymbeline* can be the following. The popularity of *Mucedorus* a feeble old play revived in 1607 led Shakespeare to search for similar old romantic plays worth revival or adaptation or for similar Mouldy plots which could be dramatised.

Shakespeare relied largely on Greene's romance *Pandosto* published in 1588 for his *The Winter's Tale*. He picked up hints from a number of different places to make *The Tempest*. Friar Bacon in Greene's play is one of many magicians who renounce their magic art. Shrimp in *John A Kent and John A Cumber* by Munday has resemblances to both Puck and Ariel: he misleads lovers by playing a tune or speaking in the voice of one of the lovers. In *The Rare Triumphs of Love and Fortune*, Bomelio's magic books are stolen by his son. There is a wild man in *Mucedorus*. There were several plays on the reign of *Henry VIII*. In 1604, Samuel Roweley's play, *When You See Me, You Know Me*, was performed at the fortune theatre, published in 1605, and reprinted in 1613, the year when Shakespeare's play was first performed.

Conclusion

Shakespeare lives in the minds and hearts of lovers of Literature even after 400 years of his death. Because he was successful in presenting the existing plots differently. When Shakespeare was charged with debts to his authors, Landor replied, "yet he was more original than his originals. He breathed upon the dead bodies and brought them into life". To prove this point, we turned the annals of

history and found out the sources or dead bodies of his plays upon which he breathed and brought into life. As he presented the borrowed plots differently, he lives forever in the minds and hearts of the people. What John Keats writes in his poem “Ode to a Nightingale,” is true in the case of Shakespeare Keats writes of his nightingale, “Thou was not born for death, immortal Bird! / No hungry generations tread thee down”. Shakespeare, thou was not born for death, immortal playwright/ No hungry generations tread thee down.

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