

# THE MINES FROM WHICH HE DUG HIS PLOTS



Ada Rehan as Katharine in "The Taming of the Shrew"



Viola Allen as Viola, "I am all the daughters of my father's house, and all the brothers, too, and yet I know not"



The Trial Scene in the "Merchant of Venice" Act IV, Scene I. Thou shalt have justice, more than thou desirest.

## How He Turned Old Stories to Things of Beauty

Written for THE NEW YORK TIMES  
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IN the legal and ethical relations of literature in our day the question of invention plays a highly important part. Most of the cases concerning literary property that come into court, most of the scandals concerning literary honesty that are aired in the newspapers, have to do with the originality or borrowing of plots. Whatever the law as to such disputes may be, it is certain that the usual public discussion of them implies much ignorance of literary history and a complete misunderstanding of the nature of artistic originality. For, to confine ourselves to the drama, no great play can fairly be said to owe its position to sheer novelty of plot; and most great playwrights, taking their plots where they could find them, have depended for their originality upon their imaginative grasp of character and situation, the beauty or brilliance of their dialogue, or the manipulation of the story to produce a convincing and well-proportioned action. Not what story the writer tells is the question, but how he tells it, how he handles it to make it yield the maximum of beauty and significance.

The most obvious instance in proof of this is to be found in the practice of the writers of Greek tragedy. Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides based their plays on the most familiar of myths and legends, and seemed not to care though the same theme had been treated by another only a year or two before. Seneca used, for the most part, the same class of subjects; and, in modern times, Goethe was content to take for the basis of his masterpiece a story which had been well known throughout Western Europe for centuries, had been dramatized by Marlowe, and had been staged, even in the puppet shows of the populace. To this general rule Shakespeare and his fellow playwrights were no exception. There is no evidence that they went out of their way to discover or contrive new stories, though Ben Jonson in this, as in many other matters, is somewhat apart. On the other hand, the very familiarity of a subject seems to have been at times regarded as an asset, as if they could count on the curiosity of their public to see what a new play would make, say, of Julius Caesar, or the story of Troy. As we shall see, the plots of the great majority of Shakespeare's dramas were drawn from the most popular literature of the day, so that we could from their themes and allusions compile a fairly satisfactory account of the stock literature of entertainment among the Elizabethans.

This literature stood, naturally, in close relation to the main currents of thought and feeling of the day. The heightening of national consciousness under Elizabeth was accompanied by the compiling of national annals on a large scale; the revived interest in antiquity was fed by translations from the Greek and Latin classics; and the general quickening of the imagination was fostered by the importation of vast quantities of romantic fiction. The dramatic as well as the non-dramatic literature exhibits this relation, and it would be hard to say how far the theatre reflected popular interests directly, how far indirectly, through the nature of the narrative material which thus lay ready to hand. In any case, the study of the sources of the Shakespearean drama is of historical as well as purely literary interest, on account of the light it throws upon the culture and curiosity of the public, literate and illiterate, for whom it was produced.

The literary and artistic value of the study of sources lies principally in the opportunity it affords us of seeing the dramatist at work. We can lay on the desk side by side the source and the play, and compare the raw material with the finished product, the bricks with the house. Every substitution, every rejection, every addition calls for an explanation; and much valuable elucidation is to be obtained by observing the causes and effects of the changes. These causes and effects range from merely mechanical and economic considerations affecting the conditions of the contemporary stage, through the exigencies of popular actors and the humors of the audiences, to the loftiest demands of tragedy. Their determination is no simple matter, since it calls for a minute knowledge of Elizabethan stage conditions as well as much critical acumen; but no attempt at interpretation which ignores them

can hope to be thorough, and no single line of research affords so much aid to the critic of the art of these dramas as that which has brought to light the materials on which they are based.

The methods employed by Shakespeare in turning narrative into drama vary both from group to group and from play to play. Among the plays dealing with English history four are based mainly on earlier attempts at dramatization, while most of the remaining six come straight from the chronicles. Of the four re-voiced plays, the three parts of "Henry VI." are probably, even in the revised form, the work of several hands, and they are of slight importance from our present point of view. The fourth, "King John," is more interesting.

We still possess the double ten-act play on which Shakespeare wrought, and we can trace point by point how he eliminated and compressed, quickening the action, elaborating the characterization, especially of Constance and Faulconbridge, and changing the theme of the play from an anti-papal tirade to a plea for a united nation. He added to the action scarcely at all, but he rewrote almost every line. The chief source of the other histories was the great compilation of Raphael Holinshed, supplemented by the chronicles of Hall, Fabyan, Grafton, and Stowe, and, in the case of "Henry VIII.," by Foxe's "Book of Martyrs." Events in these books of annals are usually related baldly in chronological order, and what characterization there is done in a few scanty strokes. In each case Shakespeare formed his own conception of the main character, selected subordinate figures, which he grouped around for contrast, for background, or for atmosphere; selected similarly incidents fit to reveal character, as in "Richard II.," or to construct an approximation to a real tragic action, as in "Richard III.," or to construct a comedy in "Henry IV.," and "Henry V.," he caught from an old play; but the wit of the dialogue and the creative power displayed in Falstaff and his set are entirely his own.

For the plays dealing with classical antiquity the chief source was Sir Thomas North's translation, through the French, of "Plutarch's Lives." Here he was dealing with material of a very different quality from the English chronicles. Plutarch was profoundly interested in character; his book was a series of portraits of the great men of Greece and Rome, who had fascinated him; and the incidents, great and small, which he selected for his biographies were chosen mainly for their value in delineating the personal traits of his subjects. Thus Shakespeare found a much larger part of his task already performed; and though he had his own idea of Caesar, of Antony, or of Coriolanus, one can easily perceive Plutarch's conception of these characters shining through. Moreover, North wrote a style really superior to that of the contributors to Holinshed, and Shakespeare, with characteristic economy, availed himself of a hundred well-turned phrases, and at times did little more than add the graces of meter to the stately prose of North. But the central conception of each play is Shakespeare's in the main; and in developing it he not only selected and rejected, but rearranged and condensed with great freedom.

One play dealing with a classical theme, "Troilus and Cressida," stands apart as to its source, as it does in many other respects. The plot of the lovers is drawn from Chaucer's poem of the same name; the scenes in the camp come chiefly from a version of the Troy story by Caxton. But versions of this tale abounded, and a complete list of all the accounts from which Shakespeare may have received hints will probably never be made. Yet there is no play in connection with which a knowledge of the previous history of the plot and characters is more important, for the clue to what appears to many modern readers the degrading and degraded treatment of the most famous story of antiquity is to be found in a realization of the attitude of the Middle Ages, and, to a large extent, of the Elizabethans, toward Helen and Cressida, Hector and Ulysses. To as great an extent as in the historical plays, Shakespeare was manipulating material not entirely plastic; and whatever of human or dramatic values he added, he knew he had to reckon with the prepossessions and prejudices of his audience. And it is in his sources that these are to be apprehended.

The terms of his problem were obviously very different in the field of comedy. Here, though many of the stories were accessible to the ordinary reader, no such prestige attached to either characters or incidents as in the case of the histories, English or Roman. Further, the very nature of comedy gave him a freer hand in

subduing his material to the purposes of entertainment or light satire.

There is no evidence compelling us to believe that Shakespeare knew Italian, yet it is to Italian *novelle* that the majority of his comic plots are to be traced. The love story in "Cymbeline" is found in the "Decamerone," though the precise form in which Shakespeare read it is unknown, and Boccaccio, through Painter's English version, supplied him also with the plot of "All's Well That Ends Well." With the tale of Imogen Shakespeare combined a legend of the British King, Cymbeline, which he found in Hollinshed—an interesting example of the freedom he used with history when he got clear of the hindrances of the popular memory.

The story of the caskets in "The Merchant of Venice" is also found in Boccaccio, and that of the pound of flesh in another Italian, Ser Giovanni Fiorentino. But both elements are very widespread, and may probably have been combined in an earlier English play. Similar uncertainties as to precise source exist as to the obligations of "Much Ado About Nothing," "Twelfth Night," and others. As a rule, we know of either an English or a French version, or both, through which the story might have reached Shakespeare; but the freedom of treatment and the multiplicity of versions combine to make the exact determining of sources much more difficult in this class of plays.

What he did not take from these *novelle* is, however, clear enough. He did not take the sparkling dialogue, he did not take the atmosphere, he did not take the long series of delightful girls whose charm and distinction do most to raise these plays to the summit of romantic comedy. It was for little more than incident and situation that he was indebted, and it is again to his characterization that the incidents and situations owe whatever of convincingness they possess.

Three plays are commonly set aside as possessing plots probably contrived by



William Faversham and Maude Adams in "Romeo and Juliet" ~ ~ ~ "I must be gone and live, or stay and die" ~ ~ ~

Shakespeare himself—"Love's Labour's Lost," probably his first attempt in this form; "A Midsummer Night's Dream," and "The Tempest," very possibly his last completed play. Hints for episodes and names in the first have been found in contemporary French history, but the scanty plot is not of such a nature as to overthrow any generalizations one may form as to Shakespeare's strength lying elsewhere than in the invention of new fables. Fragmentary sources for the highly composite fabric of the "Dream" are to be found in Chaucer and Ovid; the love chain, which comes nearer to being a central plot than any other element in the play, he could have found along with the magic juice in the Spanish romance of "Diana," by Montemayor, from which a few years before he had drawn the plot of "The Two Gentlemen of Verona"; and the fairies and artisans are clearly not mainly of literary origin at all. For "The Tempest" many parallels are to be found, no one of which can be positively stated to have

been that used by Shakespeare; but the plot is clearly made up of very familiar story material, and at most could only be said to have been put together by Shakespeare rather than invented. Finally, the reference of "The Comedy of Errors" to the "Menechmi" and the "Amphitruo" of Plautus disposes of the question of the originality of Shakespeare's comic plots.

There remain the tragedies. Of these "Titus Andronicus" is a reworking of older plays, somewhat after the fashion of "King John"; the materials of "Romeo and Juliet" and "Othello," like those of the comedies, are drawn from Italian *novelle*, the former through an English narrative poem, the latter from Cinthio through the French. But it is difficult to exaggerate the transformation accomplished by the dramatist here. All the characters taken over from Cinthio are recast, and several are added. Such instances as the separate voyages of Othello and Desdemona, the drunkenness of Cassio, the connection of Emilia and Bianca with the handkerchief, are invented by him. The catastrophe is entirely made over. Instead of the swift and terrible close with which we are familiar, the Italian tale drags on through the torture and banishment of Othello, who finally is assassinated by Desdemona's relatives, while Iago dies from torture inflicted under another accusation. All that is in the higher sense tragic is Shakespeare's, and nowhere is his power of transmuting dross to gold more superbly exhibited.

"Macbeth" again goes back to Holinshed, but shows a freer handling of history than the chronicle plays. "King Lear," like "Cymbeline," belongs to the legendary part of Holinshed; but here Shakespeare had, in addition, an old play, and some other versions of the story. Again all the power of the catastrophe is due to him alone.

## Campbell Found Beatrice Disagreeable

From Thomas Campbell's "Remarks on the Life and Writings of Shakespeare."

AT the same time, if Shakespeare were looking over my shoulder, I could not disguise some objections to this comedy, which involuntarily strike me as debarring it from ranking among our poet's most enchanting dramas. I am, on the whole, I trust, a liberal on the score of dramatic probability. Our fancy and its faith are no niggards in believing whatsoever they may be delighted with; but, if I may use a vulgar saying, "A willing horse should not be ridden too hard." Our fanciful faith is misused when it is spurred and impelled to believe that Don John without one particle of love for Hero, but out of mere personal spite to Claudio, should contrive the infernal treachery which made the latter assuredly jealous.

Moreover, during one half of the play, we have a disagreeable female character in that of Beatrice; Her portrait, I may be told, is deeply drawn and minutely finished. It is; and so is that of Benedick, who is entirely her counterpart, except that he is less disagreeable. But the best drawn portraits by the finest masters may be admirable in execution, though unpleasant to contemplate, and Beatrice's portrait is in this category. She is a Tartar, by Shakespeare's own showing, and if a natural woman, is not a pleasing representative of the sex. In befriending Hero she almost reconciles us to her, but not entirely; for a good heart that shows itself only on extraordinary occasions is not sufficient atonement for a bad temper, which Beatrice evidently shows.

In the old play the French forces under Cordelia are victorious, and Lear is restored to his kingdom. But Shakespeare had made Lear undergo too much to make any such restoration possible. He had invented the madness of the King, as he had the banishment of Kent and the character of the Fool; he had filled the play with pity and terror. From Sidney's "Arcadia" he had drawn the underplot of Gloucester and his sons, and thus doubled the emphasis on the tragedy of filial ingratitude. After all this there was only one ending. When we hear Lear's terrible cry over the body of Cordelia.

Thou'lt come no more,  
Never, never, never, never!  
There can be only assent to Kent's decision:  
Vex not his ghost; O, let him pass! He hates him  
That would upon the rack of this tough world  
Stretch him out longer.

The story of the sources of "Hamlet" has been often told. We have, indeed, various earlier forms of the tale, but the play which immediately preceded Shakespeare's is gone, except as it may glimmer through the corruptions of the first Quarto, or be dimly shadowed in the degraded prose version acted by English players in Germany. No more impressive proof of the value of a knowledge of Shakespeare's sources can be given than the negative evidence derived from the loss of the work of his predecessor on this theme. It is more than probable that some of the most puzzling elements in this greatest and most enigmatic of his works are due to survivals in our text of the older play; but it is all but impossible that we can ever recover this clue to the mystery—a clue which, if found, might prove triumphantly and forever the value of the search for sources.

The marriage of the marriage-hating Benedick and the furiously anti-nuptial Beatrice is brought about by a trick. Their friends contrive to deceive them into a belief that they love each other, and partly by vanity, partly by a mutual affection which had been disguised under the bickerings of their wit, they have their hands joined, and the consolations of religion are administered, by the priest who marries them, to the unhappy sufferers.

Mrs. Jameson, in her characters of Shakespeare's women, concludes with hoping that Beatrice will live happy with Benedick, but I have no such hope, and my final anticipation in reading the play is the certainty that Beatrice will provoke her Benedick to give her much and just conjugal castigation. She is an odious woman. Her own cousin says of her:  
Disdain and scorn ride sparkling in her eyes,  
Misprising what they look on—and her wit  
Values itself so highly, that to her  
All matter else seems weak. She cannot love.  
Nor take no shape nor project of affection,  
She is so self-endear'd.

I once knew such a pair. The lady was a perfect Beatrice; she rallied hypocritically at wedlock before her marriage, and with bitter sincerity after it. She and her Benedick now live apart, but with entire reciprocity of sentiments, each devoutly wishing that the other may soon pass into a better world. Beatrice is not to be compared, but contrasted, with Rosalind, who is equally witty, but the sparkling sayings of Rosalind are like gems upon her head at court, and like dewdrops on her bright hair in the woodland forest.