
Renaissance and Reformation
Renaissance et Réforme



Artese, Charlotte, ed. Shakespeare and the Folktale: An Anthology of Stories

Mark Albert Johnston

Volume 43, numéro 1, hiver 2020

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1070185ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v43i1.34097>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Iter Press

ISSN

0034-429X (imprimé)

2293-7374 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Johnston, M. (2020). Compte rendu de [Artese, Charlotte, ed. Shakespeare and the Folktale: An Anthology of Stories]. *Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance et Réforme*, 43(1), 205–207. <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v43i1.34097>

originated. There is significant scholarly interest in moving beyond celebratory mythologies and apologetical works defending Servetus and condemning Calvin, and vice versa. Ancín and Towns, thank to their research, move us further in this direction. A very useful and rich appendix (almost two hundred pages) concludes the volume.

MICHAELA VALENTE

Università degli Studi del Molise

Artese, Charlotte, ed.

Shakespeare and the Folktale: An Anthology of Stories.

Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019. Pp. x, 377. ISBN 978-0-691-19086-0 (paperback) US\$19.95.

Mining a rich vein of global folktales that share archetypal elements with eight of Shakespeare's plays, Charlotte Artese's recent anthology builds upon her 2015 book *Shakespeare's Folktale Sources* in order to offer teachers and students new ways to consider firsthand the nature, significances, and full range of Shakespeare's narrative influences. Acknowledging from the outset that generations of scholars (e.g., Geoffrey Bullough's *Narrative and Dramatic Sources*) have already examined and extensively documented Shakespeare's literary sources, Artese intends not to revisit or revise those materials but rather to supplement and augment them by supplying various modern descendants of his folktale influences that—albeit conjecturally—might help modern readers to imagine what expectations original audiences brought with them to early performances of the plays; might illuminate the playwright's creative processes and choices; and (as Catherine Belsey suggests in *Why Shakespeare?*) might explain why the plays have been so successful across time and space. In this light, both Shakespeare's drama and the folktale traditions upon which it builds survive in scores of languages and cultural traditions, serving ever-shifting cultural purposes, but also gesturing back toward their common ancestral roots. As such, the common types and motifs among the stories edited, introduced, and presented here expose not only their shared features and relations to the plays but also the tradition's range of narrative possibilities and the folktale's remarkable ability to transcend cultural, temporal, and linguistic boundaries.

Extant folktales participating in the narrative traditions Shakespeare invokes in his drama thus offer modern readers a sense of the seventeenth-century shapes of those stories prior to their adaptations for the English Renaissance stage.

Organizing the book's chapters around plays that have one or more plots based directly upon a folktale, adapt a legendary history that includes folktales and folk narrative motifs, are based on materials related to folktale, or otherwise rely upon folktale traditions (*The Taming of the Shrew*, *The Comedy of Errors*, *Titus Andronicus*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *All's Well That Ends Well*, *King Lear*, *Cymbeline*, and *The Tempest*), Artese has cannily styled her anthology to lend itself particularly well to adoption for courses aimed at studying Shakespearean drama alongside its folk influences. Despite the neatly chaptered divisions, however, the extent to which the different folktale types tend to share common motifs quickly becomes apparent: how Shakespeare's plays often mix and blur oral and literary sources, resulting in plots that roughly follow one or more folktale trajectories but also incorporate elements from multiple traditions. Artese's project, then, while ably elaborating Shakespeare's indebtedness to folktales generally, can only gesture toward the diversity and complexity of those influences, ultimately exposing the impossibility of identifying the complete range of influences indexed by any given play. One asset gained by surveying the folktale traditions Artese presents here is an expansion of our concept of source narratives to include a vast, illiterate oral tradition, which results in a correlative expansion of the range of conjectural possibilities impacting how we might imagine those narrative parts coming together in the drama. Folktales and their shared motifs further serve as reminders of the traditional aspects of the various plots that Shakespeare appropriates—the exploitations of storytelling conventions and suspensions of disbelief common to both folktales and theatre.

One drawback to the chaptering strategy Artese exercises here is how it tends to foreclose the (frequent) potential for readers to observe how a single version of a folktale might inform more than one Shakespearean plot, or how alternate versions of a folktale plot resemble plays other than the one around which each chapter is organized. Often, the variations on the folktale narratives included here provide the missing links between one of Shakespeare's plots and a familiar (but seemingly distinct) folktale, thereby clarifying (for example) the connections between *King Lear* and the Cinderella folktale tradition, or between *Cymbeline* and that of Snow White. The virtues

of this anthology as a companion text for undergraduate students, who are sure to derive immense pleasure from detecting the resemblances among, and differences between, Shakespeare's plays and these folktale traditions, are well worth exploring for those instructors looking for ways to engage novice students in texts all-too-commonly regarded with fear and dread. Moreover, readers even remotely familiar with Shakespeare's plays are sure to be struck by how fully rounded and realized his characters are by comparison with their folktale iterations, whose actions frequently lack comprehensible motivations. This tendency of Shakespeare's—to borrow well-worn plots and motifs from folktale traditions, but also to round characters that tend in those stories to be rather two-dimensional figures—provides further explanation for the widespread veneration and longevity of his dramatic works. Populating the plots of Shakespeare's dramatic tales as old as time are characters whose faces and functions already seem familiar but whose hearts and minds we yearn to fully know.

MARK ALBERT JOHNSTON
University of Windsor

Baldassarri, Stefano U., and Fabrizio Lelli, eds.

Umanesimo e cultura ebraica nel Rinascimento italiano.

Florence: Angelo Pontecorboli Editore, 2017. Pp. 200. ISBN 978-88-99695-40-8 (paperback) €20.

What is truly lovely about this edited volume is how its wide range of themes and approaches together exemplify the richness and enduring fascination of its field of inquiry: the intersection between the Italian Renaissance and Jewish culture. This book may be of modest dimensions, but it covers a tremendously rich territory: humanism, the history of the book, philosophy, Kabbalah, intellectual biography, belles lettres, and visual culture are all on prominent display, and each contribution opens a small window into a fascinating world worthy of far more extensive exploration. In particular, contributions such as Emma Abate and Maurizio Mottolese's intensely textual and philological exploration of the vernacular kabbalistic manuscripts in the possession of the noted theologian and Christian Kabbalist Egidio da Viterbo, Saverio Campanini's dazzlingly