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A brief history of Shakespeare as children's literature

Charles H. Frey

a Professor of English, University of Washington, Box 354330, Seattle, WA, 98195-4330, U.S.A. E-mail:
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Beginning by asking in what sense his works may be considered literature for children, as well as for adults, this article traces a historical line of engagement between adults and youth over Shakespeare; from seventeenth-century performances attended by London apprentices and British students' early response to the text of *Romeo and Juliet*, through eighteenth-century inclusions of Shakespeare's songs and stories in Mother Goose volumes and moralistic summaries, to the past two centuries' plot adaptations for children, school readers, and novelistic off-shoots. Varying standards and tastes for adapting Shakespeare to children's readiness are shown through compared retellings of the love scene in *Romeo and Juliet*, and the gradual expansion of Shakespeare's presence in the literary heritage of youth in England and America is explored through attention to a variety of school rhetorics and editions, retellings for children, biographies, play adaptations, and reworkings in short and longer fiction. An outline gradually appears of sustained cultural investment in the introduction of Shakespeare to children.

**INTRODUCTION**

Because Shakespeare comes from an era different from ours, terms and categories familiar to us may become strange when applied to him. Shakespeare certainly wrote creative, imaginative writing generally deemed to have high artistic value, a common definition of literature (1). The term 'literature' goes back to Latin words for book learning and written letters (1), yet we think of Shakespeare's plays written for speech also as 'literature'. No doubt, young people, apprentices and others, were among the first persons to view and hear Shakespeare's plays in production, and, indeed, teenagers acted roles of children and women in Shakespeare's plays as originally produced. So, then, shall we say that Shakespeare has always been, in a limited sense, 'children's literature'? Even if we think of 'children's literature' as books read first to children and then by them, we may well suspect that the eighteen plays by Shakespeare published during his lifetime, about half his work, were read aloud in households by parents when children could listen and sometimes read by youths. As early as 1623, for example, when the famous first collected edition of Shakespeare's plays was printed, a copy was placed in the Bodleian library at Oxford and became well-thumbed by teenage undergraduates; the famous parting of Romeo and Juliet after their
marriage is nearly crumpled it has been read so often (2). From the beginning, then, Shakespeare has been literature read not just by adults but also by young people.

EARLY ADAPTATIONS FOR CHILDREN

We tend to think of most ‘children’s literature,’ in our day, however, as works either written for children, adapted for children, or taken over by child readers as a primary audience. The flowering of children’s literature in that sense only began well after Shakespeare wrote his works. With the rise of an urban middle class accompanied by many more nonworking children and adolescents came new appreciations of childhood such as John Locke’s (in Concerning Education for Children, 1690) arguing that children should read partly for sheer amusement and Rousseau’s (Emile, 1762) arguing that children, naturally innocent and free, should learn according to their spontaneous interests. In England, John Newbery was one of a number of persons who, in the mid-1700s published books specifically for children. In an edition of his Mother Goose’s Melody, he included some songs from Shakespeare’s plays (3). Around the same time, a Frenchman in London, Jean Baptiste Perrin, printed in French a group of ‘Amusing and Instructive Moral Stories’ adapting such Shakespeare plays as Romeo and Juliet, Julius Caesar, Henry V, Hamlet, Macbeth, Timon of Athens, and Cymbeline. This was apparently a kind of textbook for English students of French (4). Toward the end of the eighteenth century, an anonymous adaptation of The Merchant of Venice (5), for children, appeared in London. It was thought that children might usefully get a taste of Shakespeare without confronting his texts directly.

Mary and Charles Lamb published their soon-to-be-famous Tales from Shakespear in 1807. These twenty prose narratives, each quite substantial and incorporating Shakespearean language, drew from Shakespeare’s comedies (Mary’s contribution) and tragedies, but not from the histories or romances. The Lambs’ Preface stresses the beauty of Shakespeare’s language. They also wanted ‘to make these Tales easy reading for very young children’ (6), and they wrote primarily for female readers ‘because boys being generally permitted the use of their fathers’ libraries at a much earlier age than girls are, they frequently have the best scenes of Shakespeare by heart, before their sisters are permitted to look into this manly book’ (6). The Lambs suggested that such boys read aloud to their sisters ‘(carefully selecting what is proper for a young sister’s ear) some passage which has pleased them in one of these stories, in the very words of the scene from which it is taken’ (6). Shakespeare is recommended to
young readers in the Preface for his infinite variety of surprising events and turns of fortune and for ‘a world of sprightly and cheerful characters’ (6).

The Lambs’ characteristic combination of delicacy and enthusiasm may be illustrated by their description of Romeo and Juliet’s one married night together:

That night Romeo passed with his dear wife, gaining secret admission to her chamber, from the orchard in which he had heard her confession of love the night before. That had been a night of unmixed joy and rapture; but the pleasures of this night, and the delight which these lovers took in each other’s society, were sadly allayed with the prospect of parting, and the fatal adventures of the past day (6).

Fusing the balcony scene and the marriage night tends to equate the kinds of pleasure in each night, so that sexuality is gently elided, as it is further by the phrase ‘delight which these lovers took in each other’s society’. This was, of course the same era in which Harriett and Thomas Bowdler created their Family Shakespeare (1807, 1814) omitting words that could not, in their opinion, be read aloud in a family of propriety (7).

One may respect the Lambs for their delicacy of wording. Despite their assumption that boys might properly read coarser fare than girls and despite their sexual sanitizing of Shakespeare, their prose narratives often capture the curve of action in a scene or play and retell the story without undue sentiment or judgment. Here is their skillfully Shakespearean rendition of Juliet’s death, written as a single flowing paragraph with only semicolons for sentence breaks:

Before [the friar] could entertain a conjecture, to imagine how these fatal accidents had fallen out, Juliet awoke out of her trance, and seeing the friar near her, she remembered the place where she was, and the occasion of her being there, and asked for Romeo, but the friar, hearing a noise, bade her come out of that place of death, and of unnatural sleep, for a greater power than they could contradict had thwarted their intents; and being frightened by the noise of people coming, he fled: but when Juliet saw the cup closed in her true love’s hands, she guessed that poison had been the cause of his end, and she would have swallowed the dregs if any had been left, and she kissed his still warm lips to try if any poison yet did hang upon them; then hearing a nearer noise of people coming, she quickly unsheathed a dagger which she wore, and stabbing herself, died by her true Romeo’s side (6).

This passage has a nicely focused simplicity, quite typical of the Lambs’ treatments of Shakespeare.

It may help us to recall that the Lambs wished to include the very young (6) in the circle of their listeners and readers, just as the Bowdlers wished to render Shakespeare available to families reading aloud without respect to age of listener. This points to a true difficulty in considering Shakespeare as children’s literature. If, by children, we mean not just those who are barely pre-adolescent but also those who are, say, seven, eight, and nine...
years of age, then we need to consider carefully our purposes in sharing Shakespeare with such youth. I doubt a major purpose lies in explaining to them the meanings of Shakespeare’s sexual language. It will be difficult enough to teach an unexpurgated text of *Romeo and Juliet* to eleven year olds who may well report to irate parents their reading in the play of maids thrust to the wall, of cutting off maidenheads, the bawdy prick of noon, and so on. Do we really resent the attempts by the Lambs and by modern retellers and adapters of Shakespeare for younger children to soften or even eliminate such phrasings? (This is not to deny, of course, the opposite problem of retaining expurgated versions of Shakespeare even as high school texts.)

The success of the Lambs’ tales reflects a gradual growth of Shakespeare’s fame through the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, accelerating in the romantic era into genuine bardolatry. Reservations felt by the neoclassical age toward Shakespeare’s alleged disregard of the unities and classical decorum were shrugged off by Coleridge and other romantics who embraced Shakespeare as the poet of nature. Shakespeare began to appear in school texts, first to teach elocution and moral tags, and then as literature. At first, quotations from Shakespeare appeared in isolation (sometimes anonymously) in elocution texts promoted as education for the young nobility and gentry (8). Those same elocutionary readers may nonetheless have encouraged boys and girls lower down in the social scale to advance their literacy and their discursive powers (9). We begin to touch here upon a second major problem in considering Shakespeare as children’s literature; is Shakespeare to be taught as part of highbrow culture and moral advancement? Or is Shakespeare to be taught as available to all, as entertaining, and as a mirror of our own real issues and concerns (10)?

In the 1850s, Henry Norman Hudson edited school texts of Shakespeare that were heavily bowdlerized. Hudson and another school text editor, William Rolfe, stressed character analysis, appreciation of Shakespeare’s moral truths, and also aesthetic appreciation. Hudson pursued the perennially paradoxical goals of many English teachers to teach truth and character but also to teach Shakespeare plays for their own sakes and not as a means of teaching something else (10). My own notion is that Shakespeare becomes problematic in school curricula partly because schools cannot decide for themselves the degree to which they wish to promote elitist or egalitarian ideals, that is, genteel/conservative ideals or democratic/radical ones. And this problem has persisted in schools through the later nineteenth century and the twentieth, even as Shakespeare came to be taught through complete play texts.
Meanwhile, outside the schools, throughout the nineteenth century, publishers brought out for children varied editions of selected songs and sonnets from Shakespeare, compendia of Shakespeare’s knowledge and learning, abridged editions, and analyses tracing Shakespeare’s characters back to their alleged childhoods. An example of this last category is Mary Cowden Clarke’s *The Girlhood of Shakespeare’s heroines* (1851 but reprinted in several popular editions) (11), fifteen stories for adolescents, providing uplifting biographies for such female protagonists as the Venetian Portia and Isabella in *Measure for Measure*. In 1869, Charles Stearns produced for children his *Shakespeare treasury of wisdom and knowledge* (12) in which he commented on selected passages illustrating Shakespeare’s practical, religious, military, geographical, and other knowledge. In the 1880s, publishing houses in England and the U.S. brought out abridged versions, in verse and for children, of plays such as *The Taming of the Shrew, The Winter’s Tale, and The Tempest* (13).

**TWENTIETH CENTURY ADAPTATIONS**

Around the turn of the twentieth century, some famous authors for children began retelling Shakespeare’s storylines. Edith Nesbit, author of such children’s classics as *The Wouldbegoods* and *Five Children and It*, produced *The Children’s Shakespeare* in 1900 (14). Her ‘Introduction’ exposes another point of the thorny difficulties experienced in adjusting Shakespeare’s maturity to childhood interests:

We had been that day to see Shakespeare’s house, and I had told the children all that I could about him and his work. Now they were sitting by the table, poring over a big volume of the Master’s plays . . . . A small sigh roused me –

‘I can’t understand a word of it,’ said Iris.

‘And you said it was so beautiful,’ Rosamund added reproachfully. ‘What does it all mean?’

“Yes,” Iris went on ‘you said it was a fairy tale, and we’ve read three pages, and there’s nothing about fairies, not even a dwarf, or a fairy god-mother.’

‘And what does “misgrafted” mean?’

‘And “vantage,” and “austerity,” and “belike,” and “edict,” and —’

‘Stop, stop,’ I cried; ‘I will tell you the story.’ . . . .

In truth it was not easy to arrange the story simply. Even with the recollection of Lamb’s tales to help me I found it hard to tell the ‘Midsummer Night’s Dream’ in words these little ones could understand. But presently I began the tale, and then the words came fast enough. When the story was ended, Iris drew a long breath.

‘It is a lovely story,’ she said; ‘but it doesn’t look at all like that in the book.’

‘It is only put differently,’ I answered. ‘You will understand when you grow up that the stories are the least part of Shakespeare.’ (14)

Nesbit proceeded to recount Shakespeare’s plots, somewhat in the style of the Lambs. If I use as my test case, the account of Romeo and Juliet’s one night of love, already quoted from the Lambs’ version, you may compare Nesbit’s even more simplified and sanitized version:
So, on the very day of his wedding, Romeo killed his dear Juliet's cousin, and was sentenced to be banished. Poor Juliet and her young husband met that night indeed; he climbed the rope-ladder among the flowers, and found her window, but their meeting was a sad one, and they parted with bitter tears and hearts heavy, because they could not know when they should meet again. (14)

The frontispiece illustration shows a chubby Romeo, about three years old, standing on a ladder outside Juliet's balcony and giving an equally chubby and cherubic Juliet a dainty kiss on the cheek.

At about the same time, Kate Douglas Wiggin, well known for her *Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm* (1902), produced a book of verse for youth titled *Golden Numbers* (15), including poetry by Shakespeare and many others. In 1906, Rudyard Kipling published *Puck of Pook's Hill* (16) in which Dan and Una conjure up Shakespeare's Puck, from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and adventure with him in merry old England. I have tracked down from this turn-of-the-century era several other books such as an anonymous *Children's Shakespeare* (17) from 1900, published in New York, *The Shakespeare Story-Book* (18) by Mary Banks, 1902, Alphonso Smith's *Why Young Men Should Study Shakespeare* (19), also 1902, an anonymous *Sports and Pastimes for Boys and Girls* (20), including selections from Shakespeare for young readers, 1902, Alice Hoffmann's *The Children's Shakespeare* (21), 1911, and Jeanie Lang's *More Stories from Shakespeare* (22), 1919.

It is important to realize that the introduction of Shakespeare to children was a massive project in the twentieth century and one not at all limited to schools. It may be difficult to over emphasize the extent to which many writers earlier in the century really believed that Shakespeare could be a primary gentling and civilizing influence for children. In 1920, Mrs Andrew Lang, wife of the famous compiler of fairy tales, contributed a brief biography of the Bard to *The Gateway to Shakespeare for Children* (23). In 1922, Gertrude Taylor Slaughter argued in her Prologue to *Shakespeare and the Heart of a Child* (24) that 'many a child has entered into Shakespeare's Temple of the human spirit and come forth charged with a knowledge far beyond his present or his future experience', a rather remarkable claim.

1934 saw a collection of *Six Stories from Shakespeare* (25) that included contributions from John Buchan and Winston Churchill. The long tradition of adapting Shakespeare continued on the children's stage, in 1933, with Grace Barnett's *Shocking Shakespeare: A One-Act Comedy for 8 Boys* (26) and, in 1935, the anonymously written *Lad of Stratford: A One-Act Play with Music Based on the Boyhood of Shakespeare* (27). The trend continued, perhaps with some slackening in the War years and shortly thereafter.
More recent contributions to the history of Shakespeare in children's literature include Marchette Chute's 1949 biography for children, titled *Shakespeare of London* (28) which draws on contemporary sources and her equally well-considered *Introduction to Shakespeare* (29) and *Stories from Shakespeare* (30), all of which are classics in the field. In 1969, John Updike gave us *Bottom's Dream* (31), a brief story for juveniles adapting material from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. One of the more outstanding retellings of Shakespeare for children was Bernard Miles's *Favorite Tales from Shakespeare* (32), in 1976, including *Macbeth, A Midsummer Night's Dream, Romeo and Juliet, Twelfth Night, and Hamlet*, with illustrations by Victor Ambrus. Focusing again on the marriage night scene of *Romeo and Juliet*, you can appreciate Miles's attempt to vivify and not just sanitize the action:

Swiftly Romeo climbed to the balcony, pulling the rope up behind him and coiling it beside the rails. Then the window opened and Juliet flew into his arms and they were both laughing and crying at the same time and running their hands through each other's hair and kissing each other wildly, knowing that this might well be the only night they would spend together for a long, long time, perhaps for ever.

Juliet led him into her room and as they embraced they lost all thought of being two separate people. Their bodies grew into one another and they became a single being, worshipping each other as the marriage words had commanded that they should, then sinking to sleep, cradled in each other's arms.

At last it was morning and time for Romeo to be up and away. . . . (32)

In the past two decades, versions for children of Shakespeare's plays have almost poured from the presses. Of note, are Diane Davidson's series 'Shakespeare for Young People' (33), Cass Foster's *Shakespeare for Children* and her series of sixty-minute Shakespeare plays (34), Leon Garfield's *Shakespeare Stories* (35), Geraldine McCaughrean's *Stories from Shakespeare* (36), Bruce Coville's illustrated retellings (37), and Bruce Koscielniak's *Hear, Hear, Mr. Shakespeare* (38), and of course there are many comic and semi-comic illustrated versions of Shakespeare plays.

To the many distinguished sound recordings by familiar acting companies and actors, we may add recordings by Bruce Coville and by Jim Weiss whose 1998 cassette, 'Shakespeare for Children' is widely sold (39).

Recent editions of *Books in Print* have mentioned over seventy books connecting Shakespeare and juvenile literature. I would single out such authors as Lois Burdett, Diane Davidson, Roma Gill, Diane Stanley, and Joanne Suter.

Then there are a variety of ways that Shakespeare may figure in contemporary children's and young adult fiction. The earlier mentioned 'Prologue' to the book by Gertrude Taylor Slaughter, *Shakespeare and the
*Heart of a Child* (24), is a fictional account of travels taken by sisters and other family members all against the backdrop of Shakespearean scenes and plots. Elizabeth Gray (Vining) brought out, in 1962, *I Will Adventure* (40), an illustrated story for children involving Shakespeare as a character. Marilyn Singer has a young adult novel, *The Course of True Love Never Did Run Smooth* (41), from 1983, about a high-school girl who plays Helena and gets her feelings tangled with actors and their roles. And Dennis Covington, in *Lizard* (42), 1991, tells of a deformed boy who plays the part of Caliban in a Louisiana school for retarded boys. A prolific young adult author, Caroline Cooney, in her novel *Forbidden* (43) refashions the story of Romeo and Juliet, and Julius Lester has similarly adapted *Othello* (44) for young adults. A recent novel written for 9 to 12 year olds is *The Shakespeare Stealer* by Gary Blackwood (45) in which an orphan boy living in Shakespeare’s day is forced to attend performances of *Hamlet* to surreptitiously write down and steal the dialogue for his master.

Finally, in view of the immense popularity of the film ‘Shakespeare in Love’, I may be forgiven, I hope, for mentioning that Rosemary Sisson’s 1977 biographical fantasy treating Shakespeare’s family life in Stratford-upon-Avon is titled *Will in Love* (46). And a book for juveniles in French, entitled *Qui est? . . . Shakespeare* (47) was written (in 1969) by Monique de Lesseps (the same last name as that of Viola, female protagonist in the film).

**CONCLUSION**

This history of Shakespeare as children’s literature has indeed been brief. A longer history would look more closely at (among other topics) Shakespeare in schools, at evolving methods for first presenting Shakespeare’s own words, images, and rhythms, and for teaching Shakespeare in performance to varied ages and capacities of children. Because the full texts of Shakespeare include complex and controversial thought, we need to discover more about which aspects of Shakespeare have best appealed to the learning levels and styles of heterogeneous populations of schoolchildren. Such expanding histories of Shakespeare as children’s literature will no doubt include historians’ own views on Shakespeare’s meaning and significance in relation to varied schemes of child development. In this approach to the subject, I have tried merely to survey some peaks in the vast range of Shakespearean offerings made over the past four centuries by adults to youths. Even this limited sampling may suffice, however, to suggest the intense interest and respect that have long been accorded to Shakespeare on both sides of the generational divide.
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