

Children's Shakespeare

For many people in the UK, our first interaction with Shakespeare is a GCSE English lesson where Macbeth is placed on our desk. We react one of two ways, we do not understand it and so we choose not to. Or, with a little bit of patience and work we realise that we can work out what those witches are saying, and we become utterly enthralled and immersed into this fantastical world where we wish someone showed us it sooner. So where does Children's Shakespeare come from? Despite being around as long as storytelling itself, the Romantic era saw a large shift in the priorities for children, with philosophers and artists arguing that all children should not be working in factories and instead deserve the right for education. The figure of the child represented qualities that were under threat in adults like innocence, focusing on the idea of wonder. Children's Shakespeare encapsulates the stories in prose format to make them more accessible. This allows the plots to come through and draw us into the story and clearly dictates who each character is and how we're meant to feel toward them. However, when we look at Children's Shakespeare, we can see that it is characterized by a great irony. Shakespeare is revered for his use of language and yet the first thing that changes is the reduction of complex words and rhythms, its format is more recognisable. This blog will introduce you to why Shakespeare is important, how it can be adapted, some cartoon adaptations, and backstory into the lives of Mary and Charles Lamb.

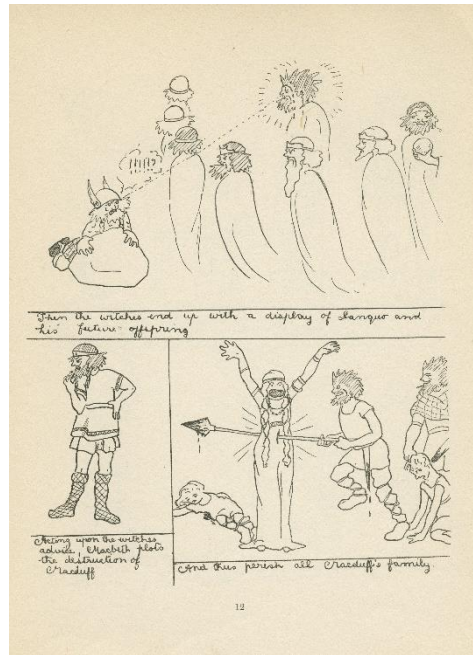
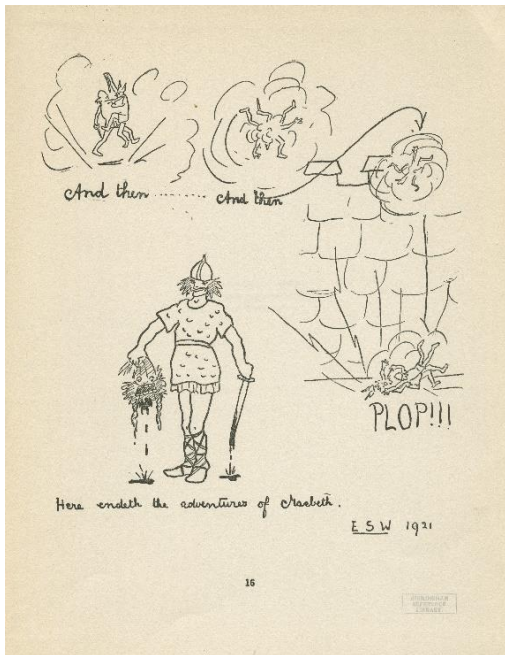
Why is Shakespeare still important?

Ben Jonson described Shakespeare as 'the soul of the age...not of an age, of all time' which elegantly places him as an eternally influential figure. Shakespeare is responsible for shaping the English language with sayings and at times (in the case of Richard III) rewriting our history. By inventing 1,700 new words that we still use today, Shakespeare has demonstrated that creativity comes from playing with language and finding new ways to communicate. Interestingly, his stories lend themselves perfectly to children's literature because at the heart of them both, they entertain as well as educate.

It would be impossible to discuss the importance of Shakespeare by not looking at the heart of his plays, the story. Shakespeare uses timeless and universally understood themes, such as love, hate and betrayal, to tell complex and emotional stories that move people. The themes lend themselves to pretty much any setting and can be made relevant to whichever context you are in. The Shakespeare Collection is in possession of a number of scrapbooks where Shakespeare quotes are pasted below a news story – demonstrating the universality of Shakespeare's work. The plots are so compelling that it is hard to not be invested and find characters you want to cheer on from your place as spectator. Film adaptations make them easier to follow but children's adaptations make them easier still. The main differences from the original text is the switch into prose for extra contextual knowledge, the immense cuts, and the inclusion of illustrations.

The Exploits of Macbeth

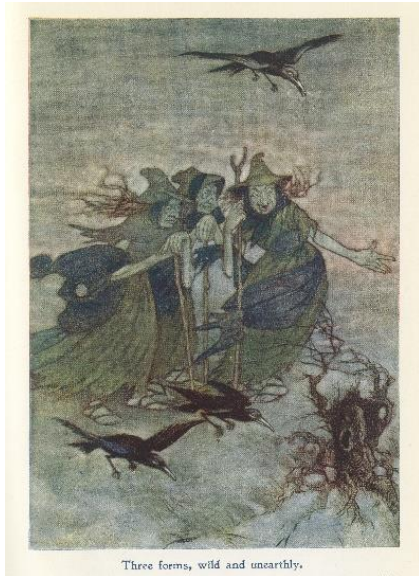
The Exploits of Macbeth was written in 1921 by Eileen Watson (a 13-year-old), who wanted to create a humorous version for her and her friends to enjoy. Even from the title, we can see that this adaptation takes a tragedy and adds an element of adventure and excitement that you do not get from the original text. This immediately makes it more accessible to children because it stops being an intense and serious text and transforms itself into an exciting, adventurous tale to be enjoyed.



We can see from these images that Watson has simplified the text of *Macbeth* and edited a 2,162-line play into just 16 pages (with 46 images)! Throughout this text, we can see that the pictures are clearer than the handwriting, which demonstrates that one of the easiest ways to encourage and interest younger readers is the inclusion of images. Bearing in mind that Watson wrote this for her friends, we could assume that they had a stronger interest in art than they did reading, art can feel more imaginative, but Watson has seamlessly blended the two. She comments that it has been written with 'unrestricted fancy' and this artistic license has allowed her to envision a new perception of the play. The images draw you in and provide you with a visual aid that may only otherwise be achieved through plays. Watson's images are also comic-like in style – which is a common association to young people and here is demonstrating the adaptability of Shakespeare's plays. The words Watson uses are colloquial but also quite dramatic. By cutting out the complicated language and moments of context, *Macbeth* can be quite punchy and more compelling. The pictures and captions work in tandem to cut down the reading time of *Macbeth* by over a couple of hours, which overall makes for a more enjoyable experience of the play.

Mary and Charles Lamb's *Macbeth*

Mary and Charles Lamb also reduce the play significantly by only focusing on key events (they tell it in only 10 pages!) but take a different approach to how they retell *Macbeth*. Their version is completely in prose and uses very little speech. The idea of not flipping from voice to voice is beneficial in children's literature because it reduces confusion around who is speaking. It also provides context. Shakespeare can often be confusing because it can be difficult to keep track of different characters, but through prose you can learn their attributes and visually recognise the name. Prose also means that the reader can learn about the characters through an unbiased narrator rather than through other people's opinions – allowing children the opportunity to form their own ideas about the characters.



Similarly to the comic, there is a picture in this adaptation – this time it’s just of the witches.

This picture is much darker than Watson’s book. The intricate detail and cold earthy colours make the image rather scary and quite intense. This is interesting for two reasons. The first is that it was written much earlier than Watson’s book (1807) and one of the main motivations for writing it was to avoid ‘vulgar commercialised performances’. They believed in the power of self-imagination and so the choice to only include one image demonstrates how effective they believe the work of Shakespeare to be.

The darkness of their pictures draws us to the scandal of the Lamb family and the potential roots of their retelling of Shakespeare. Mary Lamb was severely mentally ill and suffered fits of aggression and breakdowns. During a more extreme mental breakdown, Mary fatally stabbed her own mother and was committed to a mental facility in Islington. Charles Lamb took it upon himself to look after Mary himself but when it became too much she would return to a mental facility. It was not long into this arrangement that the toll was taken on Charles, who became an alcoholic. Despite both siblings facing their own struggles, they stuck together, looking after the other in what has been described as a ‘double-singleness’. They found that writing helped them both, like their own form of creative therapy. Through this they made many notable connections with the poets William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge and they fell into a literature derived social circle. This society is credited with the origin of *The Tales* because they were a request from William Godwin’s second wife Mary Jane Godwin – she wanted something for their Juvenile Library.

There are many more children’s adaptations in The Shakespeare Collection, and I hope this blog has introduced you to the exciting world that lies beneath the original plays!

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