“I could a tale unfold…”: Adaptations of Shakespeare's Supernatural for Children, from The lambs to Marcia Williams

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PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE
“I COULD A TALE UNFOLD...”: ADAPTATIONS OF SHAKESPEARE’S SUPERNATURAL FOR CHILDREN, FROM THE LAMBS TO MARCIA WILLIAMS

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I could a tale unfold whose lightest word
Would harrow up thy soul, freeze thy young blood,
Make thy two eyes like stars start from their spheres,
Thy knotted and combined locks to part
And each peculiar hair to stand on end
Like quills upon the fearful porpentine

(Hamlet 1.5.15-20)

The greatest horrors are always unspeakable and can only be imagined. As Hamlet’s ghost cannot reveal the horrors of the underworld, he describes the effect that such a description (“a tale”) would have on the listener. Among the various instances of the supernatural that can be found in Shakespeare’s plays, from more “substantial” ghosts, fairies, and goblins to more subjective apparitions and hallucinations, Hamlet’s meeting with his dead father in Act I, sc. 3 is perhaps one of the scenes that has most captivated and inspired the Western collective imagination. Whether the ghost’s place of origin is Hell or Purgatory (critics are more inclined towards the latter, from Dover Wilson to Stephen Greenblatt), the child reader is confronted with a pedagogically challenging situation to say the least, in which a barbaric request issued by an enraged and vindictive spirit has to be considered by the protagonist. How has this unseemly solicitation to commit murder, contrary to Christian ethics and common morality, been transposed and made sense of, in texts specifically geared to children? Starting with the Lambs’ Tales from Shakespeare (1807) and moving to Mary Cowden Clarke’s The Girlhood of Shakespeare’s Heroines (1850–1851) and to more recent prose adaptations by Bernard Miles, Leon Garfield, Andrew Matthews, and Marcia Williams, this paper will discuss the changing cultural implications and difficulties of handling the narration of the Shakespearean uncanny for...
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children in prose versions of Hamlet for children. I hope to prove that these adaptations are revealing about the way authors from different ages have tried to make sense of the uncanny presence of destructive supernatural forces in Hamlet in order to turn this tragedy into an educationally valuable reading experience for the child. This discussion, which will proceed along chronological lines (starting with the Lambs) will be preceded by a short section in which I will consider briefly the technical as well as ideological issues involved in adapting Shakespeare for children.

Keywords: Shakespeare, adaptation, children’s literature, Victorian literature, Charles Lamb, Tales from Shakespeare, Hamlet

Adapting Shakespeare for Children

The first task, both ideologically and structurally meaningful, of a writer adapting Shakespeare is to choose the plays. He or she must decide which plays are most suitable or appealing to the child. We can rightly guess that plays with fairies and romance, like A Midsummer Night’s Dream and The Tempest, have become great favorites: selections inevitably create a number of alternative Shakespearean canons for children which are often remarkably different from the adult one. In this canon Hamlet has pride of place: it is the most famous and quotable of all the plays, although it is neither the easiest nor the most “childlike.”

Transposing drama into narrative means taking a number of critical decisions about compression and/or expansion1 (Genette 291); the adapter’s job being in a way a “surgical art,” (Porter Abbott as quoted in Hutcheon 19) as Shakespeare must have known very well in his position of adapter of prose novellas into drama (in the opposite position to that of the Lambs). A number of issues must be addressed in the transposition from a dramatic mode into a narrative mode: one of the innovations of the Tales from Shakespeare, which the Lambs bequeathed to adaptations to come, was the voice of the narrator, who, as in fairy tales, describes the characters and the meaning of action so that there are no ambiguities for the reader. Narrators can leap through time and space and rearrange events in their chronological

1In his massive work on the various forms of intertextuality, Gerard Genette cited the Lambs’ tales as an example of digest, “dont l’effet majeur est [. . .] de banalisation”, p. 291.
order,² often simplifying things for the child reader as they intrude with their interpretations and opinions. Edith Nesbit’s narrator, in her prose adaptation of *Hamlet* (1897), for example, wickedly remarks on the prince’s notorious indecisiveness in the following terms: “Hamlet at last got him courage to do the ghost’s bidding and avenge his father’s murder—which, if he had found the heart to do long before, all these lives had been spared” (45).

Adapters of Shakespeare are always very sensitive to the problem of language. How much of Shakespeare’s authentic language should be allowed in the stories and to what degree of linguistic simplification should the plays be subjected? (See Bottoms 73–86) Should Shakespeare be “translated” into an easier, contemporary idiom or should one attempt to maintain a recognizably Shakespearean language? Leon Garfield, who has discussed his choices in an article entitled “The Penny Whistle: the Problem of Writing Stories from Shakespeare” (1990), for example, believes in using direct speech wherever possible and surrounding it with prose that should approximate to it: “I have found it perfectly possible to write within Shakespeare’s vocabulary without being in the least archaic” (96), which echoes similar concerns on the part of the Lambs who wrote in the Preface: “words introduced into our own language since his time have been as far as possible avoided (Lamb and Lamb, 3”).

Charles and Mary Lamb

Charles and Mary Lamb, in 1807, were the first English authors (there had been a previous French adaptation for children in 1783 by Jean Baptiste Perrin) to address the problems, questions, and choices of narrativizing Shakespeare for children. It was Charles who undertook the task of turning *Hamlet* (and another five tragedies) into prose, while his sister Mary adapted fourteen comedies. Since then, *Hamlet* has invariably been de rigueur in every selection of plays for a young audience.

Charles Lamb had to perform the extraordinary feat of turning the real, as well as metaphysical, horror of having a warlike

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²For some plays in the canon there is the additional issue of which printed text to privilege – *Hamlet*’s first scene is remarkably “different” in the second Quarto (174 lines), in the first Quarto (131) and in the Folio (156). However, because of the massive cuts that are generally made in adaptations, this is not a crucial problem.
father come back from the grave to ask for revenge into a narrative that had to entertain and instruct his young readers, so as to encourage future appreciation of the Bard.

The ghost, once again, poses a problem. Supernatural beings, including fairies, were not great favorites among educationalists of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. On October 23, 1802 Charles sent Coleridge a famous letter in which he complained about the moralistic and heavily didactic tales written by a number of women writers who had flooded the book market with their works (“Damn them! [. . .] I mean the cursed Barbauld crew...” [81]). Charles Lamb believed that these educational tales were depriving children of imaginative material for their emotional growth:

Instead of that beautiful interest in wild tales, which made the child a man [. . .] Science has succeeded to Poetry no less in the little walks of Children than with Men. Is there no possibility of averting this sore evil? Think what you would have been now, if instead of being fed with tales and old wives' fables in childhood, you had been crammed with Geography and Natural History (81-82).

Lamb’s passionate appeal, which includes a question which foreshadows his and his sister’s future attempts to envisage “the possibility of averting the sore evil” (81–82) of heavy didacticism, must be understood in the context of the Romantic debate on the supremacy of amusement and the imagination over instruction and “realism” in children’s literature (Barnett 1–18; Norma Clarke 91–103). For contemporary readers who entertain more sophisticated notions of children’s psychology and their own individual responses to the experience of reading, it is quite simple to side with the Romantics and Wordsworth’s plea in the Prelude (“Give us once again the wishing cap / Of Fortunatus, and the invisibile coat / Of Jack the Giant-killer” [188]) rather than with Sarah Trimmer’s declaration of 1802 that fairy tales “are only fit to fill the heads of children with confused notions of wonderful and supernatural events, brought about by the agency of imaginary beings.” (Quoted in Watson 19) However, in defence of Mrs. Trimmer, Anna Barbauld, Maria Edgeworth, and other late eighteenth-century educationalists, one could object that their
direct involvement in literacy and providing teaching materials (more textbooks than literature), their interest in “real” children rather than a poetic “child father of the man” (Wordsworth 106), would have made them more sensitive to what kind of text a child should have access to (see Tucker 104–116). The impact of Locke’s ideas on these lady writers should not be underestimated. In *Thoughts Concerning Education* (1693) he wrote:

I would not have children troubled whilst young with Notions of Spirits [. . .] I think it inconvenient, that their yet tender Minds should receive early impressions of Goblins, Spectres, and Apparitions, wherewith their Maids, and those about them, are apt to fright them into compliance with their orders (245–246).

Charles Lamb’s own observations on the impressionable minds of children, in his 1823 essay “Witches and Other Night-Fears,” sound like a response and an implicit challenge to Lockean principles. While relating his own “nervous terrors” as a child, connected to the picture of a witch that had given the young Charles a number of sleepless nights, he admits:

Had I never met with the picture, the fears would have come self-pictured in some shape or other [. . .] but, as it was, my imagination took that form.

– It is not book, or picture, or the stories of foolish servants, which create these terrors in children. They can at most but give them a direction. (79)

It is, therefore, against this background of competing interests, those of teachers providing educational texts and exercising strict control over their suitability on one side, and the romantic idealization of childhood on the other, that Lamb’s adaptations should be examined.

Charles was dissatisfied with the styles of performance of his time and firmly believed that Shakespeare’s plays were incompatible with stage representation. This could have had something to do with an idea of narrative which would encourage private interaction with the Shakespearean text and active use of the imagination. As he put it in a famous essay in 1811, “upon the stage when the imagination is no longer the ruling faculty, [. . .] we are left with our poor unassisted senses” (33–34). He was not the only

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3For Lamb’s dissatisfaction with contemporary acting standards, see Park 164–177.
Romantic critic to hold this view; William Hazlitt, as regular a theatregoer as Lamb, wrote in 1817: “We do not like to see our author’s plays acted, and least of all, ‘Hamlet’” (80–81). In his essay “Tragedies of Shakespeare, Considered with Reference to Their Fitness for Stage Representation,” Lamb compares the effect of the theatrical representation of the supernatural horrors in *Macbeth* to a silent reading of the same scene:

When we read the incantations of those terrible beings the Witches in *Macbeth* [. . .] is the effect upon us other than the most serious and appalling that can be imagined? Do we not feel spell-bound as Macbeth was? [. . .] But attempt to bring these things onto a stage, and you turn them instantly into so many old women, that men and children are to laugh at. Contrary to the old saying, that “seeing, is believing”, the sight actually destroys the faith. [. . .] children who thought they saw something in the dark, triumph when the bringing in of a candle discovers the vanity of their fears. For this exposure of supernatural agents upon a stage is truly bringing in a candle to expose their own delusiveness. It is the solitary taper and the book that generates a faith in these terrors: a ghost by chandelier light, and in good company, deceives no spectators (35).

Much depends, of course, on styles of performance: Partridge’s terrified reaction at the appearance of the ghost in Garrick’s production of *Hamlet* in Fielding’s *Tom Jones* (1749), when he “fell into so violent a trembling, that his knees knocked against each other” (757), contrasts with reports of more reserved or less demonstrative Hamlets, like Kean’s, which apparently was not frightened of the ghost (Hapgood 22). As interpretations of the ghost along the centuries have offered various degrees of horror in the prince’s response to the old king’s apparition, changing conventions in the ghost’s representation and clothing should be taken into account. A suit of armour on stage could suggest a materiality that contemporaries can hardly associate with an ethereal spirit. As Jones and Stallybrass have observed, “the drapery of ghosts must now, indeed, be as spiritual as the ghosts themselves” (248) (however, one should beware of generalizations: Branagh’s approach to the ghost in his cinematic *Hamlet*, with Brian Blessed’s imposing armoured figure and very light blue eyes, who moves and looks more like a statue than an immaterial spirit, is nothing less than scary).
If, as Lamb maintains, terror is more deeply felt in solitary reading than in the public space of performance, then the narrativization of *Hamlet*, the operation of *telling* horrors may indeed be more appropriate than *showing* them. The Lambs were the first of many generations of adapters to cut substantial portions of the plot, especially subplots (the gravediggers’ scene in *Hamlet*), single characters (Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and Osric), as well as bawdy talk and double-entendres. In a play of comparatively limited action and many soliloquies, not only does the narrator enter the minds of the characters to tell the reader what they think, he/she actively appropriates the dialogue and incorporates it in his descriptions. What is characteristic in Lamb’s version of *Hamlet* is the strategy of justification of the protagonist, which runs parallel to the general disparagement of Claudius (described as “base and unworthy in disposition” (227), “wicked” (240), “false” (241)). Hamlet’s madness is not exclusively an “antic disposition” that he “puts on,” but a result of the ghost’s visitation: “the terror which the sight of the ghost had left upon the sense of Hamlet, he being weak and dispirited before, almost unhinged his mind, and drove him beside his reason” (231). His loving nature is constantly affirmed: “The mere act of putting a fellow-creature to death was in itself odious and terrible to a disposition naturally so gentle as Hamlet’s was” (233). The ghost’s second apparition in Gertrude’s closet is even more terrifying than the first as it comes as a powerful reminder of the terrible deed that has to be done: “And just as he spoke, the ghost of his father, [. . .] entered the room and Hamlet, in great terror, asked what it would have; and the ghost said that it came to remind him of the revenge he had promised” (237). His cruelty to Ophelia is underplayed and his mistreatment of Gertrude in her closet (a scene often cut in adaptations for children) is considerably softened and put to didactic use:

And though the faults of parents are to be tenderly treated by their children, yet in the case of great crimes the son may have leave to speak even to his own mother with some harshness, so as that harshness is meant for her good, and to turn her from wicked ways, and not done for the purpose of upbraiding (236)
The narrator’s last words, after the final carnage, describe Hamlet turning to Horatio as “spectator to this fatal tragedy” and, once again, by appropriating Fortinbras’s words (“For he was likely, had he been put on, to have proved most royal” 5.2.381–382), he insists on Hamlet’s good qualities: “For Hamlet was a loving and gentle prince, and greatly beloved for his many noble and princelike qualities; and if he had lived, would no doubt have proved a most royal and complete king of Denmark” (241). That the narrator should appropriate the character’s report by turning it into a form of indirect speech (Mullini 99–116) is not surprising: it has been noted that Hamlet is a play built on narrative, which starts with the ghost’s “master” narrative (“in many ways the most powerful of all the play’s story-tellers” [Neill 23]) which triggers the action of the play, replicated by the story of “The Murder of Gonzago,” to which one could add Ophelia’s story of Hamlet’s love for her, Hamlet’s own story of how he escaped from the pirates, and later, the story of his childhood friend Yorick, and so forth. Arthur F. Kinney has wondered over the question left unanswered by the play: “what story about Hamlet will Horatio tell?” (93) Perhaps, given the sympathetic account of the prince’s story that we find in the Tales, it was Charles Lamb who responded to Hamlet’s appeal to Horatio: “If thou didst ever hold me in thy heart [. . .] in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain/ To tell my story” (5.2.330,332) (or, in Lamb’s rephrasing, “he would make a true report, as one that was privy to all the circumstances”).

Mary Cowden Clarke

To the eighteenth-century rise of children’s literature in the expanding book market, the nineteenth added the increased importance of Shakespeare as required reading for children. As Gary Taylor has put it succinctly,

By the nineteenth century a familiarity with Shakespeare was expected of every educated person: the sooner aspirant middle-class children could acquire such knowledge, the better. Shakespeare was thus forcibly transformed into a children’s author (207).

4Roberta Mullini has perceptively analyzed this feature (99–116).
Young ladies, like children, were to be preserved from the harshness of some of the Bard’s language and incidents. Access to Shakespeare, the Lambs suggested in the Preface to *The Tales*, had to be provided with a brother acting as an intermediary: “Instead of recommending these Tales to the perusal of young gentlemen who can read them so much better in the originals, I must rather beg their kind assistance in explaining to their sisters such parts as are hardest for them to understand” (4).

Cowden Clarke had been a family friend of the Lambs and a regular visitor to the Lambs’ household. In an article entitled “Shakespeare as the Girl’s Friend” (1887), Cowdon Clarke writes:

> Happy is she who at eight or nine years old has a copy of Lamb’s Tales from *Shakespeare* given to her, opening a vista of even then understandable interest and enjoyment! Happy she who at twelve or thirteen has Shakespeare’s works themselves read to her by her mother, with loving selection of fittest plays and passages! (369)

Female introduction to the Bard was, thus, ideally placed in an affectionate family setting, but the change from the Lambs’ male mediator to Mary Clarke’s mother should not pass unnoticed. The protofeminist agenda that was at work in many Victorian fairy-tale writers can also be perceived, although in a more subtle way, in Mary Cowden Clarke’s *The Girlhood of Shakespeare’s Heroines* (1850–1852). Mothers and daughters are the protagonists of these 15 novellas dedicated to the description of the childhood and teenage years of Shakespeare’s heroines, which are meant to explain how female characters have grown and developed into what we read on the page and watch on stage (as shown in Figure 1).

> “Imagined biographies, which fall somewhere between the spiritual history of the bildungsroman and the pre-Freudian history,” as a critic has defined them (Auerbach 212), the tales are rich in detail, new and familiar characters and episodes, incidents, and explanations. They can be considered as part of the tradition of character criticism of Shakespeare’s heroines that had become prominent in the nineteenth century, possibly best exemplified by such works as Anna Jameson’s *Characteristics of Women, Moral, Poetical and Historical* (1832). As Julie Hankey notes, “After Jameson it became commonplace to describe Shakespeare as the ‘champion’ of women” (427). Cowdon
Clarke, who wrote her novellas after her own “career” as a Shakespeare’s editor and philologist had been established, believed that her task in *The Girlhood* was “to conjecture what might have been the first imperfect dawning of that which he [Shakespeare] has shown us in the meridian blaze of perfection” (vii). We find the heroines coming to terms with serious childhood traumas caused by bereavement; parental neglect; dysfunctional families; and, even as in the case of Ophelia, the threat of a child molester. These are double-edged cautionary tales: if on the one hand they praise and reinforce traditional notions of femininity, on the other, they point out, through the use of doubles (generally invented female characters that interact closely with heroines and often mirror their destiny), the dangers girls must identify and from which they must escape. What is most noticeable about Clarke’s endeavor is the attempt to provide motivation, which is also the most subversive of all integrations and alterations that can be found in *The Girlhood* (Brown 95)\(^5\).

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\(^5\)“This curious exercise—an excavation of a text’s hypothetical history—might be compared to a Freudian case study: the present can only fully be understood with reference to a reconstituted past. The successful prequel, I would argue, is an essentially subversive form” (Brown 95).
Ophelia’s novella starts with abandonment. Her mother leaves her in the care of her old nurse’s family, in order to further Polonius’s political ambitions in Paris. The mother-figure for young Ophelia is therefore Jutha, the adolescent daughter of the peasant couple, who takes good care of her (and protects her from the unwanted albeit insistent attentions of an idiot brother) at least until she falls in love with Lord Eric. During the lovers’ encounters, the girl Ophelia is left to her own devices: “her walks in the forest were all solitary now”\(^6\) (209). Abandoned by her noble lover, Jutha is found dead by Ophelia with her still-born child.

Years later, at court and re-united with her family, Ophelia relives this experience when she finds the lifeless body of her friend Thyra, who has hanged herself after being seduced and deserted by the same evil Lord Eric. On both occasions, Ophelia hardly recovers from these traumatic incidents (this could be indeed the origin of her future madness in the play), which foreshadows her own story of yielding to passion and rejection by a socially superior lover. What is particularly interesting is the way prophetic dreams and actions enter the narration. As if set free in a séance, revenants (which in Victorian England, as has been observed, “had the disruptive dynamism of stars” [Auerbach 192]) haunt Ophelia’s dreams, like the dream of “digging down into Jutha’s grave, with a mad desire to look upon her face once more” (Cowden Clarke 217), which anticipates Laertes’s throwing himself into Ophelia’s own grave at her funeral. While the reader is alerted to the dangers the Victorian female might have to face in her teenage years, Ophelia does not seem to have learned from her “doubles” (who have clearly disregarded the value of prudence in their relationships with men). Neither a loving mother’s advice nor a prophetic dream with the two girls’ spirits and the armoured ghost of the king pointing ominously at a third mysterious girl (obviously Ophelia herself) are warning enough:

“Is the king dead?”

[... ] said Ophelia. “I have been dreaming strangely.”

[... ]

\(^6\)All quotations from “Ophelia, the Rose of Elsinore” are from Mary Cowden Clarke, *The Girlhood of Shakespeare’s Heroines, A Series of Fifteen Tales*. 
“He seemed dead, as I saw him—though he moved before me, waving his arm toward them. He pointed to them, as each appeared."

“Of whom do you speak, dear child?”

“Of those figures—those women”. [. . .]

“It was there she sat, - the first figure I saw. The night was obscure; [. . .] but I saw her plainly [. . .] I knew her, before she [. . .] moaned over the little white face that lay upon her bosom. It was Jutha, mother!” [. . .]

“Close beside me, there gradually shaped itself into substance a form that seemed to grow out of the shadowy night air. It became the distinct semblance of the king, as I saw him ride to the Norwegian wars, in coat of armour, and with truncheon in hand, not long since; save, that in his face, in lieu of being lighted with hope of conquest, life-like, and animated, was pale and all amort—ghastly, and set in death. He turned this wan visage full upon me, as he pointed to the figure of her who sat lamenting; and then she vanished. [. . .]

But there were two others, I saw. One was poor Thyra.

[. . .] Then I saw one approach, whose face I could not see, and whose figure I knew not. She was clothed in white, all hung about with weeds and wild flowers; [. . .] The armed royalty waved sternly, but as if involuntarily, commanded by yet a higher power than his own will; and then the white figure moved on, impelled towards the water. I saw her glide on, floating upon the surface” (248–249)

Ophelia’s heightened sensibility and childhood experiences make her the ideal receptacle of words like those of Laertes, “be wary then, best safety lies in fear” (1.3.43). Fear indeed is her hallmark, the way she responds to a threatening and violent male world in “The Rose of Elsinore,” a world which speaks to her in hallucinations and nightmares, where the old king, armoured and corpse-like, does not reveal the circumstances of his death but like many Elizabethan and Jacobean ghosts, points to Ophelia’s own death by water, after showing us a procession of unfortunate suicides. This is the terrible tale that old Hamlet unfolds before the eyes of Ophelia and her readers.

In Cowden Clarke’s novellas, the idealization of heroines is compatible with realistic and insightful portrayals, set in specific
and not improbable places and periods. Moving the characters from the margins to the center, and validating their perceptions and experiences, inevitably changes our perception of their contributions to the original plays. Clarke’s novellas, addressed primarily to a sisterhood of girl readers, grant marginalized or even victimized female characters the possibility of an extra-textual “past” which explains their choices and makes them fuller and more valuable characters.

Prose Adaptations by Miles, Garfield, and Matthews

In contrast to Cowden Clarke’s prequels, Bernard Miles 1976 version of Hamlet provides an interesting sequel to the story of the sweet prince. What is remarkable about this prose version of the play, which takes on the impossible task of condemning revenge without blaming either old or young Hamlet, is the attempt to paste a reassuring conclusion, a sort of sequel in a Christian afterlife, onto the rather grim carnage of the original ending:

Claudius went deep into the fire and torment which Hamlet’s father had endured for so long. Indeed his spirit is still there, and it will be many hundreds of years before his sins are burned away and he can ask God to set him free. And that will be long after you and I are dead and gone. But Hamlet’s life had been so brave and good, [. . .] that his life had been a living prayer. So his spirit went at once to the place of light and peace where Ophelia’s spirit was waiting to receive him. And through his suffering he was allowed to rescue his father’s spirit from his prison-house and unite it with his mother’s. [. . .] So the four of them were joined together and are still joined and will never be separated (Miles 125).

So, in a way, Hamlet’s ghost does return in the end, but not in order to gloat over revenge, as in Kyd’s Spanish Tragedy or Marston’s Antonio’s Revenge, but as a penitential spirit rescued by the son to whom he had entrusted a potentially damning mission. By reinforcing the pattern of retribution and combining it with a form of poetical justice in the afterlife, Miles effectively neutralizes the effects of Hamlet’s choice to follow his father’s “unchristian” command.

Leon Garfield’s 1985 adaptation of Shakespeare’s plays is characterized by what Stanley Wells has called “a crisp, metaphorical
style” (148). Garfield also tends, like the Lambs, to omit subplots and minor characters and often his descriptions of characters and settings appear to be influenced by theatrical productions. Apart from the illustrations by Michael Foreman, the text invites the reader to stage the play in his/her mind. Hamlet’s world is in degrees of black and white, where the prince’s “dark looks and dark attire” (172) contrast with the faces of the night watches “white as bone” (169), like his own “pale face” (176) and his expelled breath at the sight of the ghost, which “made a thread of grey amazement in the air.” When referring to the apparition, the narrator rarely uses the word “ghost”; he prefers to introduce him as the dead king or Hamlet’s dead father, “cold and lifeless” so the meeting appears like a confrontation between a son and the walking corpse of his father: “father and son stood close together in the secret fold of the night,” with the son “aching with pity, for he saw that his father’s spirit was tormented by love no less than by hate” (177). In the first part we follow the way a domestic tragedy, a father and a son coming to terms with unhappiness (“Hamlet stared into his father’s [. . .] unhappy eyes and longed, with all his heart, to kiss his freezing hand” [176]), turns into something horrible that will undermine political and heavenly order, something bigger than Hamlet himself: “What was he [. . .] doing in this dark world of murder and revenge, of treacherous kings and faithless queens, of creeping courtiers and poison?” (179). The idea of fate dragging Hamlet away from his studies towards this primitive world of revenge is reiterated in the play. The narrator gives us Horatio’s perception of Hamlet’s dilemma: “Sadly Horatio gazed at the brilliant, lively and noble young Prince who had been dragged back into an ancient, corrupt world of poison, murder and revenge” (200).

A way to enter the character’s mind and his dilemmas is having the protagonist re-tell his story in a very long soliloquy. This is the case of Andrew Matthews’s Hamlet: A Shakespeare Story (illustrated by Tony Ross), 2000, where Hamlet is the intrafictional narrator of his own story, so that we have a first-hand report of the ghost’s apparition:

The ghost was dressed in armour [. . .] Its face was my father’s face, but twisted in agony, its eyes burning like cold, blue flames. Its voice was a groan of despair that sent shudders down my backbone (11).
The tone is of an intimate confession: “There were times when I thought I truly had gone mad, when I felt I could no longer carry the burden of what the ghost had told me” (17). Events and states of mind are narrated in the past until the last “scene,” set in the Great Hall at Elsinore, where Hamlet switches to the present to describe, in present tense, the duel with Laertes and the deaths that follow. The ending is narrated through a stream of consciousness, which ends with the vision of old Hamlet and Horatio’s words:

Voices shout.. people are running. I fall back, and someone catches me. I think it is Horatio, but I cannot see him clearly, for a darkness is falling before my eyes. . . coming down like the snow falling, that night on the battlements. . .

Through the darkness, I seem to see a light. . . and my father’s face. . . and everything drops away behind me. . .

Horatio’s voice whispers, “Farewell, sweet prince!”

And the rest is silence. (57–58)

The authorial choice of having the reader rely uniquely on Hamlet’s narration prevents the story from reaching proper closure beyond the prince’s death. In other words, even though young readers can have direct access to Hamlet’s thoughts and can try to find their way in his tormented and meandering mind, they are also deprived of reassuring words or kind epitaphs by other characters or a third-person narrator.

Hamlet in Strips: Marcia Williams

Despite the numerous illustrations, Matthews’s text could work on its own while the last text I am about to examine relies on the interaction between (short) texts and words, and between the play and the audience. Marcia Williams, who declared that she was inspired by a visit to the Globe when it was still under construction to write her own rendition of the plays, adopts the comic-book form, in which the characters in the strips use
Shakespeare’s dialogue while a summary of the plot is provided underneath. What is unique is the recreation of an original performance at the Globe, as the margins of the page become the space of the theater where groundlings or higher-class patrons, including Queen Elizabeth I, keep a running commentary on what they are watching. The audience of Hamlet, for example, have their say on a number of matters. On the subject of the ghost, comments range from a Queen Elizabeth lookalike commenting, “typical Danish ghost” and then wondering “did we behead that person?,” to the groundlings’ complaining “what a gloomy start,” “well, Denmark is gloomy, stupid,” or “that ghost is asking too much.” Spectators offer several remarks on the gloom and gravity of the play. At the end of the performance a lady laments: “Bleak bleak bleak” while a young man asks, “Where’s the happy ending?” Part of the audience tries to spurn Hamlet to take revenge. After the Mousetrap scene, a lady exclaims “you’ve no excuse now Hamlet” and a couple of groundling children shout, “Come on Hamlet,” silenced by Shakespeare himself: “You children are distracting my audience.” In this adaptation, humour is used to (partially) “tame” the disturbing potential of the play: the murders and tragic deaths are effectively “framed,” visually as well as verbally, by the audience’s deflating comments. The voices in the frame, which produce a distancing and metatheatrical effect, also challenge the monologic voice of the narrator, thus establishing a multiplicity of viewpoints and interpretations. Even if the author modestly declared her intention was to provide “nothing more than a stepping stone to the Bard himself,” (37) this is certainly a humorous and innovative adaptation, which tries to recapture the atmosphere of a live production in a light-hearted way.

The last fifty years have produced full-length novels in which famous Elizabethans come back to the present as ghosts (from Penelope Lively’s The Ghost of Thomas Kempe, 1973, to Michael Morpurgo’s My Friend Walter of 1988; moreover, in 1977 Puffin reprinted Alison Uttley’s 1939 A Traveller in Time where a girl is transported to Mary Stuart’s household and involved in the Babington plot). Some contemporary juvenile novels are also set in the Elizabethan age with witches and spirits (like Paul Stewart’s The Weather Witch, 1989 and Maggie Pearson’s The Eyes of Doctor Dee, 2002) while in very recent years no less than three
novels (Lisa Fiedler’s *Dating Hamlet*, 2002; Lisa Klein’s *Ophelia*, 2006 and Matt Haig’s *The Dead Fathers Club*, 2006) have reformulated and expanded *Hamlet* as a teenage story—an indication of a steady interest in presenting *Hamlet* to a younger reading public.

It is certainly true that these adaptations, in their own peculiar ways, celebrate the fact that Shakespeare, and *Hamlet* in particular, should be part of children’s literature, but they also suggest that this should be done in a mediated form, a form that teachers, parents and critics find acceptable. Adaptations can also be perceived (by parents, librarians, and teachers) as a way to initiate children to their cultural heritage and the “universal values” that the Bard is believed to embody (Stephens and McCallum 256), not to mention the fact that since the first half of the nineteenth century, Shakespeare has appeared in the lives of many children simply in form of a textbook (and a topic for examinations). This may well have motivated parents, publishers, and educators to devise entertaining ways to ensure that the approach to Shakespeare’s drama happens in a simplified, non-threatening (and even humorous or irreverent) manner, in an attempt to accumulate “cultural capital” (in the sense suggested by Bourdieu [Johnson, 7]) for their children’s future education and professional life.

Transposing Hamlet’s dilemmas and inner conflicts—issues that have kept Shakespeare’s scholars engaged for centuries—for a young readership without oversimplifying or neutralizing the disturbing implications of this play, especially if the adaptor tries to retain a Shakespearean flavor in style and language, is a formidable task. As Charles Lamb, the first of a series of adaptors who have risen to the challenge of “messing about” with the Bard’s tragedies, honestly and humbly recognized in the Preface to the *Tales*, he was only trying to give “a few hints of the great pleasure which awaits them [children] in their elder years,” producing “faint and imperfect stamps of Shakespeare’s matchless image.” When he writes that “it was not easy matter to give the histories of

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7“The possession of [. . .] cultural capital is accumulated through a long process of acquisition or inculcation which includes the pedagogical action of the family or group members (family education), educated members of the social formation (diffuse education) and social institutions (institutionalized education),” (Johnson 7).
men and women in terms familiar to the apprehension of a very young mind” (3–4), it would be indeed hard to disagree.

References


Cowden Clarke, Mary. “Shakespeare as the Girl’s Friend,” Shakspeariana 4 (1887): 355-369, Print.


Hamlet, directed by Kenneth Branagh, 1996.


