

# From Hornbooks to Comic Books: "Shakespeare for Children"

Meg Pearson, University of West Georgia

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## Abstract

The Folger Shakespeare Library's current exhibition, "Golden Lads and Lasses": Shakespeare for Children, explores the many ways in which Shakespeare's stories have been adapted, modernized, and packaged for children. The array of materials in the show — Victorian story books, paperdolls, comic books, and movies — provides an inspiring illustration of Shakespeare's continuing appeal for younger audiences.

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## "Golden Lads and Lasses": Shakespeare for Children. Exhibition

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Library, 201 East Capitol St. SE, Washington, DC 20003.

The Folger's latest foray into its vast collection of Shakespeariana has resulted in a fascinating look at the many ways Shakespeare's plays and plots have been adapted for children. Arranged chronologically, the exhibition begins with the impossibly small Elizabethan hornbooks used by schoolchildren and ranges up through the past decade's rash of films renovating Shakespeare for teen audiences, including *Ten Things I Hate About You* (1999), a hip rethinking of *Taming of the Shrew*, and *Romeo + Juliet* (1996), the remarkably successful Baz Luhrmann film featuring Claire Danes and Leonardo DiCaprio as the doomed lovers.

Between these two extremes, the Folger presents a dizzying range of materials designed for children, mostly from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Charles and Mary Lamb's famous *Tales from Shakespear* (1807) may be found here in dozens of editions, most featuring dazzling, hand-colored illustrations. The nineteenth century was a ripe time for children's books, and the exhibition includes a wonderful breadth of examples, ranging from Edith Nesbit's *Children's*

*Stories from Shakespeare* (1901) to Fay Adams Britton's blends of fairy tales with Shakespeare (1896), to Skelt's Juvenile Drama adaptations of *Othello* (c. 1840). Each of the beautifully illustrated books appears almost in miniature, the better to fit into tiny hands. The attention to detail and design in these print editions will fascinate readers and scholars of material culture alike.

The inclusion of Henrietta and Thomas Bowdler's heavily edited Shakespeare (1807), the basis for generations of schoolchildren's editions, helps to illustrate how Shakespeare began to be explicitly tailored to serve as a moral compass for the Victorian period. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the editions for children. Moralized retellings of *Hamlet*, *Romeo and Juliet*, and *Merchant of Venice* assure their readers that Shakespeare's plays serve as "instructions for our conduct in life." Modern books are less heavy-handed and generally seek to delight young readers with lively reworkings of the plays rather than to instruct them. Lois Burdett's *Macbeth for Kids* (1996) introduces children to the Scottish play with an abbreviated plot set in rhyming couplets, and Tina Packer's *Tales from Shakespeare* (2004) combines famous lines from the plays ("Is this a dagger I see before me?") with simple storylines.

Of particular interest to the exhibition's curators are the Shakespearean adaptations that focus on women. Beginning with a small book called *Judith Shakespeare*, by William Black (1884), the exhibition illustrates how retellings of Shakespeare's biography and plays were marketed to girls. An article in a magazine for girls from 1887, "Shakespeare as the Girl's Friend," exhorts young women to look for role models in Shakespeare's female characters as it teaches them how to understand the plays. More recent novels use the plays as a place to launch their own independent explorations into the interior lives of Shakespeare's women. Books such as *Dating Hamlet: Ophelia's Story*, by Lisa Fiedler (2002), and *Shylock's Daughter*, by Mirjam Pressler (2002), follow a recent trend in fiction by refocusing stories on the "secondary characters." (Think of Gregory Maguire's *Wicked* (1995) or Sena Jeter Naslund's *Ahab's Wife* (1999), which tell the stories of the Wicked Witch of the West and the lonely wife of the Pequod's captain.) The urge to open these books and see for oneself how these authors have chosen to retell Ophelia's story can be nearly overwhelming. As an advertisement for the bookstore, this exhibition is a victory!

One of the most intriguing recent genres featured in the exhibition is the comic book or graphic novel. With origins in nineteenth-century picture books, the Shakespearean comic book found a niche in the middle of the twentieth century — the exhibition features half a dozen gorgeous editions of *Hamlet* and *Macbeth* from the period — and has since evolved into a postmodern extravaganza in the hands of contemporary artists. Marcia Williams's graphic novel for *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1998), easily the most popular play adapted for children, stands as one of the show's highlights. She employs Elizabethan English for the play's dialogue within the

frames of the comic, but then includes the "responses" of the audience, who are drawn around the margins of the page. The hecklers' places on the page correspond to their status, as either standing penny-payers or moneyed elites. As one wry groundling tells his friend while he gazes up at Helena, "Wish my wife was obedient as a spaniel!" The result of this bold graphic design is a delightful representation of the theatrical experience.

Interspersed between the more formal museum cases are paintings and drawings by local schoolchildren. Portraits of Shakespeare and designs of plays by elementary students hang proudly next to the First Folio that remains on display in the Folger's Great Hall. Hilarious letters written by students "in character" are worth their own visit. (Lady Macbeth assures her husband in one note that she is "icksploding" with ambition.) This attention to the experience of younger visitors is carried through in a case filled with Shakespeare-inspired toys, which includes the Hamlet finger puppets and the Shakespeare dolls that grace many a teacher's desk. The exhibition signage and wall text appears to be similarly aimed at younger visitors, but the result unfortunately serves neither child nor adult. Apart from a few gems that children might find intriguing — the fact that early modern theatergoers ate nuts, not popcorn, intrigued one tourist on my visit — at times the exhibition texts can be opaque, or even condescending to young readers. Creating a show with archival materials that will appeal to young, sophisticated visitors is no easy feat, however, and the show's impressive content makes the signage problem practically unnoticeable.

Wandering through the exhibition led my companions to recall their own first experiences with Shakespeare. While one had been taken to see a play, another had treasured the Lamb stories, and yet another had been read the plays as a very young girl. Discussion turned to the quality of the newest adaptations in the exhibition, particularly films such as Disney's *Baby Einstein: Baby Shakespeare World of Poetry* (2002) or Mike O'Neal's *Green Eggs and Hamlet* (1995), and whether experiencing Shakespeare through these films is the "best way." Given the potential of online editions of Shakespeare, which can feature every performance adaptation on film and dozens of images from manuscript, print, and the fine arts, there are now thousands of ways for a young person to access the Bard. One need only look at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Shakespeare Project, including *Hamlet on the Ramparts*, to see the possibilities for online editions for children. This virtual abundance makes the carefully hand-colored illustrations of the nineteenth century seem quaint by comparison, but one hopes that we can come close to providing something as beautiful for our own children.

## Online Resources

"Golden Lads and Lasses': Shakespeare For Children." Folger Shakespeare Library [cited 26 June, 2006]. <http://www.folger.edu/template.cfm?cid=2007>.

*Hamlet on the Ramparts*. MIT Shakespeare Project and Folger Shakespeare Library [cited 5 May, 2006]. <http://shea.mit.edu/ramparts/welcome.htm>.

Internet Movie Database Entry for *Baby Einstein: Baby Shakespeare World of Poetry*. <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0488491/>.

Internet Movie Database Entry for *Green Eggs and Hamlet*. <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0134697/>.

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