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# A Discussion of Dramatic Form through 20th and 21st Century Illustrated Prose Adaptations for Children of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

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In 1807, Charles and Mary Lamb published the first prose adaptation of Shakespeare for an audience of children and young women. David Skinner explains that “by approximately 1660” Shakespeare’s “plays had gained notoriety in England through adaptation performances” (9). In addition, while literacy rates in Britain improved, private, or household readings of Shakespeare gained in popularity (Skinner 9-10). Skinner’s research further reveals that Shakespeare’s popularity in the home was due to a combination of prestige through performances, as well as associations “with intellectualism” and “national pride” (10). Skinner notes that John Locke, in 1693, “recognized the benefits of creating a literary genre specifically for children (Skinner 23). Accordingly, these attitudes about Shakespeare helped to pave the way for the Lamb’s prose adaptation. *Tales from Shakespeare* set a precedent for Shakespearean adaptations for children that is still prominent today. Indeed, the majority of present published criticism concerning children’s adaptations of Shakespeare’s plays includes at least the mention of the Lambs’ publication.

In their Preface, the Lambs argued that Shakespeare’s “themes, characters, and conflicts [were] too complex for young women and children to understand” and consequently needed to be adapted for such an audience (Skinner 14). According to Jean I. Marsden, “the *Tales* would thus fill a gap in the education of young ladies whose access to challenging imaginative fiction was limited” (Marsden 48). As Skinner concludes, “*Tales from Shakespeare* was designed to be a transitional text that prepared children for reading other Shakespeare editions and viewing performances of his plays” (Skinner 6). Thus, the Lambs’ wrote *Tales* with clear intentions and purposes for their intended audiences.

Since the Lambs’ version, adaptations advertised for children often follow the precedent of including a Preface. Ninety years after the Lamb’s publication, E. Nesbit, famous as an author of children’s literature and poetry, included a Preface in her original work, *The Children’s*

*Shakespeare* (1897), which explained that her intentions in adapting Shakespeare came after her children requested that she rewrite the stories so that they could understand them better (Marchitello 180). Nesbit's work has been widely reprinted and adapted. Nesbit's adaptations, along with other contemporary adaptations, do not claim to be intended for a gender specific audience, nor are they particularly interested in filling a gap in education specific to young ladies. The intention of the adaptations is to introduce children to Shakespeare by simplifying the language and plots.

Critics of adaptations of Shakespeare for children argue whether or not the adaptations can be attributed to "Shakespeare" as the prose stories often convey merely the plot, and not the form or poetic verse. Additionally, critics such as Stephanie S. Gearhart argue that Shakespeare should be presented to children through direct textual contact and not through adaptations. In fact, The Ohio State University Nisonger Center is currently part of a collaborative study that is examining how Shakespeare can affect children on the autism spectrum by engaging them in dramatic exercises and utilizing the rhythms of iambic pentameter (The Ohio State University – Nisonger Center). Studies such as this clearly show the value of dramatic form and of Shakespeare's writing for contemporary child audiences. Almost in response to the debate regarding the value of prose adaptations, *The Random House Book of Shakespeare Stories* (2001), contains a Foreword which addresses Shakespeare's understanding of "the magic of theater" and claims that the prose adaptations contain "all the magic of the original plays, and more" even though the prose (Matthews, Foreword). However, authors and editors sometimes choose to leave out characters or portions of the plot. While referencing E. Nesbit's adaptation of Shakespeare for children, Howard Marchitello argues that what Nesbit refers to in her Preface as the "least of Shakespeare," or the basest conception for the plot, opens a dialogue regarding whether merely the plot, and not the form or poetics define what can be labeled "Shakespeare" (Marchitello 181). Contrary, Janet Bottoms argues that the adaptations "should be read in their own right, as legitimate reworkings" (85). Bottoms values the works as individual interpretations of Shakespeare rather than as wholly representative of Shakespeare's plot and form. The difficulty in the original text is often argued to be the language and mature content. As Bottoms notes, "Narrational decisions about focalization, omission, and lexis exert a powerful influence on the

reader” (Bottoms, “to read aright” 2). Therefore, the adaptations have the ability to influence the reader’s interpretation of both the idea of Shakespeare and also the idea of drama.

Aside from little critical material on contemporary adaptations of Shakespeare for children, there is also little treatment of the illustrations that appear alongside the prose. However, contemporary illustrated prose adaptations do have the potential to introduce young readers to Shakespeare, much as the Lambs and other authors have intended. For example, contemporary illustrated prose adaptations of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* have the potential to expose children to the plot of Shakespeare’s work, as well as to dramatic form through the illustrations, Puck’s address of the audience, and through the inclusion of the *Pyramus and Thisbe* subplot that early adaptations removed entirely. In addition, comparison of the prose versions can introduce children to the idea of story adaptation and staging, as well as the role of costuming, through the depictions of the characters in the illustrations.

Like her predecessors the Lambs, E. Nesbit did not include the *Pyramus and Thisbe* subplot. In the Lambs’ version, Oberon happens upon a clown and he gives him the donkey head. This differs from Shakespeare in that Bottom is not known simply as “clown,” although he does represent a lower comedic figure. Additionally, it is Puck who gives Bottom the ass’s head in Shakespeare. Nesbit’s version of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* shows a similar treatment of the play-within-a-play. The play is only mentioned one time to explain the appearance of the clown, but it is not part of the plot. Nesbit chooses to omit the scene of the players rehearsing and the play of *Pyramus and Thisbe* at the Duke’s wedding, which both have the potential to introduce her young audience to the idea of a dramatic play and to the concept of audience. Other texts which include the play sometimes depict the characters being assigned parts or discuss staging, or the audience’s reactions. Nesbit, by choosing to omit the subplot in favor of the main plot, misses an opportunity to represent part of the text as a play.

An audience in a theatre has the ability to interact with the actors. While the actors may or may not address the audience directly, much like Puck does at the end of *Midsummer*, there is an awareness that the actors are performing for an audience and that the audience reacts to the actors, by laughing or clapping. In text, this interaction does not occur. Keir Elam

argues that illustrations “can be regarded as an integral part of the textual and paratextual apparatus of a Shakespeare edition alongside, or sometimes in place of, scholarly notes and critical commentary” (Elam 249). Although Elam is writing about illustrated editions that are not aimed at children, the same theory can be applied to children’s adaptations. Elam disputes scholars Bates and Sillars who argue that illustrations represent a finite depiction which contradicts the “very essence of drama,” which is meant to be a moving form. Keir Elam argues that “the pictorial representation of a play is altogether congruous to a mode of performativity that unfolds in space as well as time. The spectator perceives the theatrical performance not as a staged text but as a complex continuum of images and sounds” (Elam 250.) In such a way, it can be argued that illustrations contain the potential to expose children to dramatic form in conjunction with the prose adaptations..

As E. Nesbit’s stories have been reprinted multiple times, different illustrations have accompanied the works and can convey different significances to their intended young audience. Velma Bourgeois Richmond observes that “The original illustrations” in Nesbit’s text “signal a child audience even more aggressively; notoriously, all characters are small children (Richmond 156-157). In a later reprinting, *Green Tiger’s Illustrated Stories from Shakespeare*, Nesbit’s stories appear alongside Arthur Rackham’s illustrations. Rackham, a famous illustrator, is well known for many of his works including subjects in popular fairy tales and children’s works, such as *The Wind in the Willows*, or *Alice in Wonderland*. In his illustration of Oberon meeting Titania in the woods, Rackham shows them regally clothed, with crowns and long scepters or wands. His illustrations are full of detail and are comprised of muted colors and ink, giving them an elaborate appearance. Oberon appears angry and the lesser fairies cower behind him. Likewise Titania is portrayed with lesser, smaller fairies appearing to take shelter under her long, flowing gown. The scene around them shows the forces of nature, alluding to the reference in Shakespeare that their quarrel upsets nature.

The illustration depicts movement of the wind: trees in the background can be seen bending in the wind; leaves are blowing wildly about; and Titania and Oberon appear to be standing in an open field of long grass, with the grasses also bending in the wind. Titania is barefoot and appears less angry than Oberon, boldly yet beautifully facing him,

perhaps alluding to a submissive nature or to her eventual relenting of her servant to Oberon. The picture is not stylized but aims for realism. The depiction of movement in the illustration serves to suggest that the story is meant to unfold visually for the reader, a concept that mimics staging. In reading about Titania meeting Oberon in the woods, the visual illustration could suggest staging and appearance to a child audience. By comparison of other illustrations in various editions, there is an opportunity to open a dialogue concerning story adaptation, costuming, and staging. Just as directors stage theatrical performances differently, illustrators can portray the characters differently in their art. Side by side comparison of various adaptations and illustrations of the same adapted tale, show varying degrees in choices of plot inclusion, as well as character concept.

In *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1996) retold by Bruce Coville and illustrated by Dennis Nolan, the subject of the play-within-a-play is addressed. Before the cover page, the book contains a list of *dramatis personae* in the forms of illustrations and names of eight of the major characters: Hermia, Lysander, Demetrius, Helena, Titania, Oberon, Puck, and Bottom. While the other characters are not included, there seems to be an intention to mimic a cast list. Each character is represented in non-stylized portrait from the shoulders up. The couples are paired facing their opposite: Titania across from Oberon, Hermia across from Lysander, and Demetrius across from Helena. While Puck and Bottom are situated across from each other, but not facing each other. Puck, appears laughing at Bottom, perhaps indicating that he will be responsible for playing a trick on Bottom, and Bottom appears looking off to the side, perhaps alluding to his obliviousness regarding the trick. This initial drawing sets the stage, so to speak, for the prose adaptation. Unlike Nesbit and the Lambs, Coville chooses to include the *Pyramus and Thisbe* subplot, but severely edits it. Unlike the Lambs and Nesbit, Coville does not include a Preface, but does include "A Note From the Author" at the end of the book which references Nesbit and explains his considerations for his adaptation. Coville specifically remarks about his choice to highly edit the play-within-a-play. He writes, "The major cut I made in the retelling was to trim the relative weight given to the last act, which consists largely of Quince and company's play-within-a-play. While on stage this can give rise to inspired buffoonery, it does not add to the plot so much as comment on it." For Coville, the play-within-a-play does not advance the plot and therefore he

deems it expendable. Yet, in a prose version, the introduction of the concept of a play can act to introduce children to the piece as performance rather than merely story. Unlike earlier versions, Coville includes more of the play-within-a-play than the Lambs or Nesbit. The scene is introduced as such: “Elsewhere in the city a carpenter named Peter Quince had gathered his friends to put on a play in honour of the duke’s wedding. He had chosen a weaver named Nick Bottom to play Pyramus, the hero” (Coville 7). Although highly edited, the adaptation reflects the humor of the players as they assign roles to their play. A combination of dialogue and narration conveys the subplot to the reader. Flute for example, protests just as Shakespeare’s Flute did at being asked to play the woman: “Please, let me not be made to play a woman!’ he cried. ‘I have a beard coming on” (Coville 7). The idea of the play being introduced, the young audience can relate to each man taking a part and also to the humor of the parts being assigned.

Next to the text in Coville’s edition is an illustration by Nolan. Nolan’s illustrations appear frequently throughout the book. They either appear alongside text or above it, showing what Elam might refer to as a “continuum of images and sounds” as it can be inferred that a parent, or other adult, will likely be reading to a child. Children reading the texts for themselves would still perceive sound as represented by the text. For example, when Bottom cries that he “shall roar and roar,” the sound of the roar is perceived through the illustration by his open mouth and by hearing or reading the word. In the illustration, the four players stand together. Bottom is seen roaring while two of the players are seen laughing and the third is seen scratching his head. The third is likely Quince and conveys his frustration assigning the parts with Bottom claiming to want to play them all. Again, the illustration is not stylized but aims for realism. The colors are bold and bright and the players, as well as the other characters outside of the fairy realm, are represented in Athenian clothing depicting the time frame of the story’s setting, rather than Shakespeare’s own time. Adults reading or discussing texts with children can discuss the clothing choices as costuming for the illustrations.

In his “Note,” Coville also discusses his edits in relation to Nesbit’s desire to create a story of Shakespeare that children could understand. Regarding the illustrations, the author writes: “Fortunately, in the same way that actors can make it easier for the audience to keep track of these

ciphers, having an illustrated version helps readers follow their adventures” (Coville). Coville then, seems to understand the function of the illustrations as a medium for dramatic conveyance if only to help the young reader follow the characters. Although Coville may not have valued the subplot to advance the main plot, his inclusion play-within-a-play diverges from previous texts and brings with it a level of depth beyond stage buffoonery. Coville’s rendition of the *Pyramus and Thisbe* play first appears in the text as dialogue between the players choosing their parts. At the end of the book, the play itself is condensed to three short paragraphs and ends with the audience laughing at the players. The illustration accompanying this page shows Bottom on stage acting. In the background, behind Bottom and appearing behind the stage curtain, is Puck. Puck is watching the play and laughing. The appearance of Puck in the illustration conveys the idea that the players are being watched by an audience. Puck, as the audience appears not in front of them, but is silently observing from a space only visible only to the reader. This idea parallels the readers themselves. The readers take the place of the audience looking towards the stage and are also aware of all of the action. Characters like Bottom, remain continually unaware of the tricks that have been played on them in both the play and the text.

In Shakespeare’s play, Puck directly addresses the audience at the conclusion. In this way, Nolan’s illustration retains Puck’s unique role as Puck looks to the audience from behind the curtain. Unlike other illustrations, Nolan’s have received some critical attention. In her book *Shakespeare in Children’s Literature: Gender and Cultural Capital*, Erica Hateley examines Dennis Nolan’s illustrations of Puck. Hateley observes that “Puck is larger than the other fairies but smaller than Oberon and thus functions as a figure of identification for the implied child reader” (Hately 118). Nolan’s portrayal of Puck directly links him to the child audience. Like a child, Puck appears below the adult sized figures but above some of the lesser fairies, which places him in a position between representations of authority and younger children. Hateley further writes, “Socially and physically, Puck at once exemplifies the Shakespearean fairy and functions as an exception to the group: He appears to be more powerful than the other fairies, is central to the plot, and is the speaker of the epilogue” (Hately 118). To the young reader, Puck can function in much the same way socially and physically as Hateley suggests, he occupies the realm

between adults and younger children. Coville's adaptation does not allow Puck the epilogue at the end of the play. As Hateley notes "This speaking position attributes him with a position of theatrical power that negotiates the space between the theatrical and the real, just as Puck travels in the space between the human and the fairy in the play" (Hately 118). However, Nolan's illustration with Puck behind the curtain can be argued to contain what Hateley calls the "space between the theatrical and the real" by depicting Puck not only looking on at the play just as the young reader is also observing the action, but by also facing the reader, alluding to a direct, if yet, silent address.

In their adaptation, *A Midsummer Night's Dream & Other Classic Tales of the Plays*, (2014) author Nicola Baxter and illustrator Jenny Thorne include the play-within-a-play subplot. There is less humor than Coville's version showing the assigning of the parts of the play through dialogue, but Baxter at least attempts an explanation to her young audience with regard to staging. At the end of Baxter's adaptation of *Midsummer*, the players perform the play which she mentions as "the play of *Pyramus and Thisbe*" (18). While there is no summary of the play, Baxter interprets the play as "hilarious" to her young audience (18). Additionally, she includes the following lines from Shakespeare's original *Midsummer*:

*Thus die I, thus, thus, thus*  
*Now am I dead.*  
*Now am I fled:*  
*My soul is in the sky:*  
*Tongue, lose thy light!*  
*Moon, take thy flight!*  
*Now die, die, die, die, die.*  
 (Baxter 18)

The book throughout contains original verses of Shakespeare italicized to set them apart from Baxter's adaptation. The inclusion of these verses, as well as historical notes regarding Shakespeare's time period, accompanying the text serve to introduce the young reader further to Shakespeare's form and historical context. Like the Lambs, Nesbit and Coville, Baxter's adaptation includes a plea in the introduction that readers should look beyond her adaptations to fully engage in Shakespeare. At the

close of the adaptation, Baxter describes Puck's farewell to the audience this way: "At last, only Puck is left. He says goodnight to the audience and reminds them that what they have seen is no more real...than a dream" (18). There is ambiguity in the intended meaning of "the audience," in that it is unclear if Puck is addressing the audience of *Pyramus and Thisbe*, or the audience of the book. Unlike previous adaptations discussed, Puck is described as addressing the audience which is a reminder to the reader that the piece they are reading was originally meant to be performed as a play.

Regarding the illustrations, Thorne clothes her characters in Renaissance period attire. The illustrations show staged moments, or tableaux, rather than implied action within the environment and are stylized, or non-realistic. Although they do not depict as much movement as Rackham's illustrations, they still serve to allow the young reader to visually experience the story as a set of visual moments. In addition, the clothing could serve to introduce readers to the ideas of costuming. These costumes reflect Shakespeare's time period; whereas, other costumes have reflected the perceived time period of the play itself, Ancient Greece [or Athens].

In *Illustrated Stories from Shakespeare* by the publisher Usborne, Lesley Sims adapts *Midsummer* while Serena Riglietti illustrates the narration. The entire volume by Usborne appears beautifully illustrated, with each page containing artist renderings of the adapted works. Usborne also makes the choice to include an illustrated list of the characters in each play explaining their part. Unlike other children's adaptations, the publisher also chooses to divide the play into chapters, representing acts. Although the chapters do not mirror Shakespeare's acts directly, they still make an attempt to divide the action. Sims' adaptation also includes the *Pyramus and Thisbe* subplot. Sims' titles her chapter two as "Putting on a play." Sims' rendering of the assignment of the play's roles mirrors Coville's version. A mixture of both narration and dialogue serve to convey the humor of the scene. Some of Shakespeare's verse appears alongside highly stylized illustrations depicting the characters, but overall the text is greatly adapted. Still, the humor of the scene can be found in Bottom's dialogue, "'Oh! I could be Thisbe too,' Bottom offered. 'I'll speak low for the man,' he growled, 'and high for the girl,' he finished with a squeak" (Sims 215). Like Coville, there are implied sounds with the author's word choice. In Sims' adaptation, the play-within-a-play subplot sees its most thorough

treatment. Sims describes the staging of the play within her narration. By doing so, a young reader can envision the action of the play. Additionally, Riglietti's illustrations depict the staging and humor elements. Sims writes that "Snout stood in the middle as the wall, and the play began" (258). This text is accompanied by an illustration of Bottom and Flute as Pyramus and Thisbe, respectively, trying to kiss through the figure of Snout who stands between them as a wall. Additionally, Shakespeare's verse appears above them, further depicting the act as staged. As in previous adaptations, Puck is not given his address to the audience at the end of the play.

Even as they adapted Shakespeare's plays, the authors of the children's adaptations were aware that they would be criticized for rendering the plays into plot based prose. Clearly, they valued Shakespeare's original work and wanted to preserve as much as possible, while adapting the plays into versions more appealing and suited to introducing children to Shakespeare. While much of the dramatic form was compromised, the versions do retain aspects which, in conjunction, and with guidance contain the potential to expose children to the dramatic form which preserve the form of the original pieces. The inclusion of the play-within-a-play, for example, in contemporary children's adaptations of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* has the potential to expose children to dramatic form, even if edited or limited. Comparison of the texts in a home or classroom setting can bring forth discussions of story adaptation, author choices, and inclusions or exclusions. In addition, the adaptation of the text to prose loses dramatic form that is recaptured by including, even in part, the play-within-a-play. Additionally, as suggested of Shakespeare illustrations by Elam, contemporary illustrated adaptations of Shakespeare for children can reflect dramatic form through the illustrations themselves, which appeal visually to the reader, similarly to a staged performance. The illustrations can also serve as a catalyst to discussions of staging and costuming. By allowing young readers to experience various adaptation of a single play, there is further potential to engage in ideas regarding drama, staging, adaptation and costuming. Just as variously staged versions of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* can vary in interpretation, so can the illustrations and the prose adaptations. The authors adapting the works often called for their versions to act as a first step towards introducing Shakespeare. Therefore, increasing a child's access to various versions of adaptations, whether at home or in a

classroom, can also act to stimulate discussions and interest in Shakespeare.

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