More Tales from Shakespeare

Charles and Mary Lamb

About the authors
Charles Lamb (1775–1834) was an essayist who also wrote plays. At the suggestion of their friend, the novelist and philosopher William Godwin, Lamb and his sister Mary, who was several years older, collaborated to write Tales from Shakespeare, with the aim of making the plays familiar to young readers.

William Shakespeare
Although we know little for certain about the life of William Shakespeare (1564–1616), modern scholarship enables us to reconstruct his career with some accuracy. Born in Stratford-on-Avon in Warwickshire, he was educated at the local grammar school. At 18, he married Anne Hathaway, eight years older than himself, and they had three children. Some time later he joined a company of actors and by 1589 was probably in London, acting and writing plays. In 1594, he joined forces with the brilliant young actor Richard Burbage, and became one of the shareholders in what later became the King's Men, the foremost acting company of the time. For over 20 years, Shakespeare wrote two plays a year on average, experimenting with and creating new dramatic forms, excelling in tragedy, comedy, history and romance. He became rich and successful, and retired to Stratford in about 1610, while still maintaining his interest in the London theatre. His plays were first collected together by his company as a tribute after his death and published in 1623.

Summary
This volume contains the stories of Shakespeare's first comedy, The Taming of the Shrew, his first tragedy, Romeo and Juliet, three of the great tragedies of his maturity, Hamlet, Othello and King Lear, and the romance, The Winter's Tale, written towards the end of his career.

Charles and Mary Lamb rewrote the stories of Shakespeare's most famous plays for children. Shakespeare himself had usually adapted narratives of different kinds for the theatre, in many cases employing or linking together concepts from a number of sources. The Lambs' versions were intended to point to a moral that children would be capable of understanding, whereas Shakespeare is rarely so explicit. Consequently, especially in the case of the great tragedies, they are essentially a simplification, not only in terms of language, but also of the themes and characters.

Shakespeare usually based his plays on written sources, giving them dramatic form, much as a film director adapts novels today. We can therefore best understand his intentions and recognise the themes by comparing the plays to the sources and analysing the changes he made. These notes draw attention to the themes Shakespeare imposed on his source material and the extent to which they are modified in the Lambs' retelling.

The Winter's Tale
Shakespeare transformed a story by Robert Greene – Pandosto (1588) – into a play that reconciles the older generation through the love of their children. This play was originally classed as a comedy, although in fact it is a very dark story featuring violence, cruelty and death as much as the healing power of love.

Leontes becomes jealous for no reason convincing himself that his wife, Hermione, has been unfaithful with his friend and guest, Polixenes, and that his new-born daughter, Perdita, is theirs. Ignoring all advice, he seems to have destroyed wife, son and daughter. A generation later, his lost daughter, Perdita, is found. Her marriage to Polixenes' son and Hermione's miraculous survival sets things right between Leontes and Hermione, despite the tragic death of their young son.

King Lear
Shakespeare based his play on various accounts of a mythical English king who had three daughters, two evil and one good. He linked this plot to a parallel story by Sir Philip Sidney, which Charles Lamb left out, of a man with a good and an evil son. In each case, the fathers are blind to their children's natures and entrust their lives to the evil ones.

The old king, Lear, decides to abdicate and divide his kingdom between his three daughters. He asks each daughter in turn how much they love him. The first two
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sisters, Goneril and Regan, reply with fine words and are rewarded with generous amounts of land and property. The youngest, Cordelia, refuses to flatter her father. Instead, she says she loves him as much as she should. Her father is furious and disinherits her. Later, when he is dependent on Goneril and Regan, he realises that their words had been meaningless. They treat him increasingly badly until finally he is abandoned altogether and forced to live outdoors.

Lear goes through the torment of madness before he is reunited with Cordelia, which is how the old play had ended.

Lamb draws the moral that the justice of heaven destroyed Lear’s evil daughters. However, this does not explain why, in Shakespeare’s version, both Lear and Cordelia die as well. In the play, Shakespeare balances poetic justice, where the good triumph and the evil are destroyed (the sub-plot), against the much harsher reality of the story of Lear and his daughters.

The Taming of the Shrew

Petruchio, an adventurer, marries Baptista’s elder daughter, Katharine, even though she has a violent temper, and by his extraordinary behaviour transforms her into a submissive wife. Mary Lamb draws the moral that wives should obey their husbands, which has made this play offensive to feminists. An alternative interpretation is that Shakespeare was satirising this official view of marriage in his time and suggesting that husband and wife should be a team who support each other. Certainly, Katharine and Petruchio have similar, fiery personalities and are well matched. They are often portrayed as a couple who genuinely fall in love.

Note: a ‘shrew’ is really a small mammal which looks like a mouse, but that the word can be used to describe a woman who argues angrily with her husband.

Romeo and Juliet

The moral of the story is that the death of two young lovers was needed to bring their families to their senses and to end their long feud. Shakespeare based his play on a poem by Arthur Brooke (1562), originally derived from a story by the Italian, Bandello. In all these versions, and in the Lambs’ retelling of the story, the lovers are the victims of bad luck and their fate depends on a series of unfortunate accidents.

The story is set in Verona, Italy. Romeo’s family, the Montagues, are enemies of Juliet’s family, the Capulets. They meet by chance and fall in love instantly. The next day they are married secretly. Romeo is then involved in a fight with Tybalt (a Capulet) and when Tybalt dies, Romeo is forced to run away from the city. Meanwhile, Juliet’s mother is planning a marriage between Juliet and Paris. With the help of the friar (a holy man) Juliet fakes her own death, sending a message to Romeo first. Unfortunately the message does not reach Romeo, and he believes she is really dead. He returns to Verona and takes poison beside Juliet’s still body. Juliet then wakes up, and finding Romeo dead, she too commits suicide.

There have been many film versions of this play; the musical West Side Story, about rival gangs in New York, is based on the same story.

Hamlet

Hamlet is Shakespeare’s most famous play and character and has given rise to many interpretations. He constructed it from a number of sources, including a lost play on the same subject. The Lambs’ version is a simplification of Shakespeare’s play, and it leaves out much of the action.

Hamlet, the young prince of Denmark, is mourning the death of his father and is shocked at the speed with which his mother has married Claudius, the late king’s brother. The ghost of the late king appears to Hamlet and tells him that he had been murdered by Claudius; the ghost orders Hamlet to avenge his death. Hamlet is utterly shocked and paralysed by indecision. His behaviour becomes so strange that his mother thinks he is mad. This theory is strengthened when Hamlet kills Polonius who had been spying on Hamlet.

Meanwhile Hamlet has rejected Polonius’s daughter, Ophelia, whom he had dearly loved. Ophelia is driven truly mad with grief and dies tragically. Her brother, Laertes, sweeps in to avenge the deaths of his father and sister. His decisive action contrasts with Hamlet’s slowness.

Claudius tries to engineer Hamlet’s death. In a dramatic final scene Laertes and Hamlet are reconciled and Gertrude, Claudius, Hamlet and Laertes all die. Of the main characters, only Hamlet’s loyal friend, Horatio, remains.

There are many powerful themes in Hamlet, including revenge, love, friendship, loyalty and betrayal.
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Othello
Shakespeare expanded a short story by the Italian, Cinthio, written to prove that women can be faithful, into the tragedy of the destruction of a marriage. The main character, Othello is black. In the past, white actors used to play the part wearing black make-up, but these days that is never done; black actors take the role.

The skilful villain, Iago, plays on the insecurity of a middle-aged black general in the service of the Venetian state, Othello, who has married a beautiful young wife, Desdemona. He convinces him that she has been unfaithful with his friend and lieutenant, Cassio, so that he murders her before discovering the truth and killing himself. The retelling of the story tends to emphasise Othello’s jealousy, whereas the real theme of the play is the destructive effect of envy and malice.

Background and Themes
Students can best be helped to understand Shakespeare’s achievement by relating it to a modern context.
Shakespeare arrived in London when the professional theatre was scarcely ten years old, but by the time he retired plays were recognised as a form of entertainment that appealed not only to the court and the aristocracy but also to the people. The Elizabethan theatre therefore grew rapidly in much the same way as the film industry in Hollywood in the 20th century. In this context, we should think of Shakespeare as the equivalent in a film company of an actor, the director and the author of the screenplay combined.

Shakespeare and the leading actors in the company became well known to theatre-goers much as film stars did more widely in the 1930s, although there is one important difference – there were no actresses; female roles were taken by young men or boys.

Discussion activities

Before reading
1 Discuss: Ask the class to tell you what they already know about Shakespeare and his plays. Encourage a class discussion.

2 Discuss: Ask the students to look at the cover of the book. Who are the people in the picture? (Actors.) When did people wear clothes like that? (In Shakespeare’s England, see summary above.) Have they ever seen actors wearing costumes like this? Is it better to ‘update’ costumes for modern productions?

3 Explain: Ask them to look at the title of the book and the names under it. Explain that they will not be reading the plays themselves, but summaries of the plays which were originally written by a brother and sister called Charles and Mary Lamb. Explain that ‘tales’ means ‘stories’.

4 Discuss: Ask them to look at the contents page, and read the names of the six plays which are covered in this book. Ask if they have ever seen any of these plays, or film versions, or if know any of the stories.

Introduction, pages v–ix
Before reading
5 On the board, write the following questions, and ask them to look for the answers while they read.

a When did the Lambs write the Tales?
b How many Tales did they write, and what was their purpose?
c How did they share the work?
d What happened in 1796 and how did it change their lives?
e When and where did Shakespeare live?
f When did he write most of his work?
g What were the names of his wife and children?
h Of the six plays in this book, which one did he write first, and which one did he write last?

After reading
6 Discuss: Check their answers to the questions in Activity 5 (see Answer key). Ask the students what other main category of play Shakespeare wrote, apart from comedy and tragedy (he wrote history plays, too). Ask the students to look at page viii again, to find the name of one of the history plays (Julius Caesar).

7 Discuss: Shakespeare wrote his plays to be performed for adult audiences. Most of them were not published for people to read until after his death. The Lambs were retelling the stories for children to read. Ask the students what differences they imagine this involved and what they think they would leave out or could not include. They should think especially about the ‘tragedies’ (plays about tragic situations).

The Winter’s Tale, pages 1–12
Before reading
8 Explain: Ask the students to read the list of characters, but tell them not to worry about remembering it all. Explain that it is there for them to refer back to, whenever they need to. Check that they know where Sicily and Bohemia are.

9 Discuss: On the board, write these words and discuss their meanings:
friendship, loyalty, jealousy, love, guilt, forgiveness
Ask students to consider these themes as they read, and to find examples in the story.
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After reading
10 Discuss: Put the students into pairs or small groups to discuss and note down the outline of the story. Then invite different students to retell it stage by stage, so that the whole class is clear what happens (see summary above).

11 Discuss: Invite the students to suggest and discuss examples of each of the themes, e.g.: friendship: Leontes and Polixenes loyalty: Camillo jealousy: Leontes love: Hermione; Florizel and Perdita guilt: Leontes forgiveness: Hermione

12 Role play: In pairs, students imagine the conversation between Hermione and Leontes when she ‘comes back to life’ (page 11), and act it out.

13 Discuss: Debate this question: Did Leontes deserve forgiveness? Divide the class into two halves. One half of the class discusses, in pairs, reasons why the answer to this question is ‘yes’. The other half of the class discuss, in pairs, reasons why it is ‘no’. When they are ready, have a class debate, with students supporting ‘their’ side – not necessarily their own opinions. Then allow the students to vote to show their real opinions.

14 Write: In pairs or small groups, students choose one part of the story and prepare a ‘newspaper headline’ that summarises it, e.g.: BABY BOY FOR HERMIONE LOST PRINCESS RETURNS Students share their ideas with the class, then write short articles to explain their headlines.

King Lear, pages 13–24

Before reading
15 As before, ask the students to read the list of characters, and to refer back to it when necessary.

While reading
16 Remind students of the themes discussed in Activity 10. Ask them to note down themes in King Lear, as they read.

After reading
17 Discuss: Put the students into pairs or small groups to discuss and note down the outline of the story. Then invite different students to retell it stage by stage, so that the whole class is clear what happens (see summary above).

18 Discuss: Elicit ideas of themes from the class and ask students to explain them, referring back to the text as they wish. Some suggestions: old age, loyalty, honesty, greed, madness, forgiveness, love, loneliness

19 Role play: In groups, students work out a dialogue between King Lear, his three daughters, their husbands and the Earl of Kent. They then act it out, taking several parts if necessary (pages 13–16).

20 Discuss: Ask the students whether they think that this story has any relevance to modern times. Suggest (if necessary) that how to care for old people is still an important question today. Is the extended family always the best solution?

The Taming of the Shrew, pages 25–36

Before reading
21 Guess: In pairs or small groups, students read the list of characters and guess the general story line.

After reading
22 Check: In the same pairs or groups, students discuss how close their ideas were to the real story.

23 Discuss: Elicit the story from the class, stage by stage (see summary, above). Encourage them to refer back to the text whenever they wish to.

24 Discuss: Ask the students if they think this story has any relevance today. Why/Why not?

25 Role play: Students re-read pages 34–35. Then in groups they work out a dialogue in which the three newly married husbands send for their wives, and only Katharine obeys. The number of characters they include in their dialogue can vary – e.g. they may or may not include Baptista.

Romeo and Juliet, pages 37–53

Before reading
26 Discuss: The students will probably have some idea of this story. Elicit as much of the story as possible, or ask them to guess it.

27 Discuss: Ask the students to read the list of characters, and if they have seen a film of the play, ask if they can remember any of the actors.

After reading
28 Discuss: Put the students in small groups and ask them to recall the story, stage by stage. Then go over the plot with the whole class (see summary above).

29 Discuss: On the board, write the following prompts: Romeo / go to the party The friar / help Romeo Romeo / kill Tybalt Juliet / drink the medicine Romeo / get the message Romeo / kill himself In pairs, students discuss the role of chance in this story. Ask them to prepare sentences beginning with If, using the prompts and their own ideas too. e.g.: If Romeo hadn’t gone to the party, he wouldn’t have seen Juliet. When they are ready, students share their ideas with the class.

30 Discuss: In pairs or small groups, students plan an alternative ending for the story. They then compare ideas and vote for the best one.
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31 **Discuss:** Invite the class to suggest the main themes in this story. Some suggestions: love; hatred; revenge; forgiveness; death

32 **Role play:** In pairs, students act out the dialogue between Romeo and Juliet when they speak after the party (pages 39–42).

33 **Discuss:** Talk about what happened after Romeo and Juliet died (the families were reunited). Do they think this is realistic?

34 **Write:** In pairs, students prepare a short ‘newspaper article’ with this headline: YOUNG LOVERS FOUND DEAD.

### Hamlet, pages 54–67

**Before reading**

35 **Discuss:** Ask the students what they know about this play. Elicit or teach the most famous lines in the play – and probably in the whole of Shakespeare: To be or not to be? That is the question … and discuss what Hamlet means by this (he is considering suicide).

36 **Discuss:** Tell them to look at the list of characters. Do they see anything unusual? (One of the characters is a ghost.)

37 **Discuss:** On the board, write these words and discuss their meanings: ambition; love; revenge; jealousy; madness; friendship. Ask students to consider these themes as they read, and to find examples in the story. Encourage them to suggest other themes, too.

**After reading**

38 **Discuss:** In pairs or small groups, students go through the story stage by stage. Then check with the whole class (see summary above).

39 **Discuss:** Invite the students to suggest and discuss examples of each of the themes listed in Activity 37. Encourage discussion and different points of view. e.g. ambition: Claudius and possibly Hamlet; love: Hamlet and Ophelia, Polonius and his children, Gertrude and Hamlet; revenge: Hamlet, Laertes; madness: Ophelia, possibly Hamlet; friendship: Horatio.

40 **Role play:** In pairs or small groups, students choose a part of the story to act out. If necessary, make some suggestions, e.g. one of the ghost scenes; Hamlet when he shouts at his mother and then kills Polonius; Hamlet talking to Ophelia; Ophelia’s funeral.

41 **Game:** In pairs, students choose one of the characters (but not Hamlet himself) and write down what he or she thinks about Hamlet and his strange behaviour, e.g.: Gertrude: My poor son. I think he’s gone mad. I’m so worried about him. Claudius: What’s the matter with him? Does he suspect me? I must stop him. They then read out what they have written, and the rest of the class guess who the character is.

### Othello, pages 68–80

**Before reading**

42 Ask the students to read the list of characters, and to refer back to it if necessary.

**While you read**

43 Tell the students that some people consider this play ‘politically incorrect’ because of its racial theme – ask the students to consider this while they read, and make up their own minds.

**After reading**

44 **Discuss:** In pairs or small groups, students go through the story stage by stage. Then check with the whole class (see summary above).

45 **Discuss:** In pairs, students discuss these questions: Who is the villain in Othello? Is there a hero? Students then share their ideas with the class.

46 **Discuss:** Ask the students what they think of the plot – does it offend anyone, or do they think it’s a good story?

47 **Discuss:** Elicit ideas of themes from the class and ask students to explain them, referring back to the text as they wish. Some suggestions: love; jealousy; honesty; trust.

48 **Role play:** In pairs, students act out the dialogue between Othello and Iago when Othello first becomes jealous (pages 74–76).

### Extra activities

49 **Discuss:** Ask the class to suggest the names of some popular modern plays or films. Do any of the story lines have similarities with Shakespeare’s stories? Are any of the themes the same?

50 **Discuss:** Remind the class that although Shakespeare’s plays are traditionally performed in the costumes of Shakespeare’s England, they are often produced in different settings and with different costumes. Remind them of how the story of Romeo and Juliet was used for West Side Story. Ask the class to choose one of the plays, and choose a different setting for it. Then in pairs students take two or three of the main characters and decide what costumes they would give them (e.g. Hamlet in student’s jeans and trainers). Students then share their ideas with the rest of the class and vote for the best ideas.

51 **Discuss:** In pairs, students decide which of the plays were classed by the Lambbs as ‘tragedies’ and which are ‘comedies’. (tragedies: Hamlet, King Lear, Othello, Romeo and Juliet comedies: The Taming of the Shrew, The Winter’s Tale).

52 **Discuss:** Have a class vote for the play they would most like to see. Encourage them to give reasons. Which one is their least favourite? Why?

53 **Discuss:** In pairs, students choose one of the stories, and plan a different ending. Then tell the class.