

Classic Readers

TALES FROM SHAKESPEARE



Charles Lamb & Mary Lamb

TALES FROM SHAKESPEARE

Retold by Alfred Lee

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Introduction

In 1807 Charles Lamb and his sister Mary Lamb were asked by their good friend, William Godwin, to write the stories from the best-known of Shakespeare's plays in a form that children could easily understand. The stories were intended as an introduction to Shakespeare for readers who were too young to read the plays themselves, and not as a replacement. It was suggested that girls in particular, who would not in those days be able to use libraries as freely as their brothers, would profit from them. The result was *Tales from Shakespeare*. 'I think it will be popular among the little people' Charles wrote to a friend at the time. And he was right: the stories succeeded beyond expectation, enjoying popularity (with people of all sizes!) until the present day.

At the beginning of the nineteenth century the moral tale was an important form of literature for children; stories were used mainly to teach children the difference between right and wrong. This affected the way the Lambs wrote the stories. The characters are shown as either good or bad in a way that is not so obvious in the plays, and the moral at the end of each story is very clear. *The Tales* attempt, wherever possible, to use Shakespeare's own words to retell the stories, but the language is made easier for the young reader. Some of the stories have also been made less complicated, with fewer characters than the original.

For the Lambs, whose lives until this point had not been at all easy, the *Tales* were their first success in the world of literature. Charles was born in 1775, nine years after Mary Ann. Their father was a poorly paid lawyer's clerk in London. Charles was sent to the well-known Christ's Hospital School, but Mary, as a girl, did not have the opportunity for such a good education as her brother. For most of his life, Charles worked as a clerk at East India House, while writing in his free time. His work was not well paid, and even though Mary earned a little

money from needlework, the family was poor. Mary gradually became mentally unbalanced, and then a terrible event took place that changed the brother's and sister's lives for ever. In 1796 their mother tried to stop a fight between Mary and another girl. The fight ended when Mary killed her mother with a knife. At the court case that followed, Mary was judged to be mentally ill and was sent to a mental home. But Charles managed to persuade the courts to let him take responsibility for looking after her, and she was allowed to return home after three years. Charles spent the rest of his life caring for her, and never married. Because she was known to have murdered her mother and to have been in a mental home, the pair had to move house several times. But on the whole they led a calm and happy life together and brought up a child called Emma Isola, who had no parents, as their daughter. Charles died in 1834 and Mary 13 years later.

Charles was a friend of many famous figures of his time, such as the poets Wordsworth and Coleridge. He was a respected and original judge of literature who also wrote poems, plays and stories. With Mary, he wrote several books for children. They retold the story of the Odyssey in *The Adventures of Ulysses* (1808); *Mrs Leicester's School* (1809) and *Poetry for Children* (1809) followed.

William Shakespeare, whose plays are retold here in story form, is famous around the world for both his poems and his plays, but very few solid facts are known about his life. He was born in 1564 in Stratford-upon-Avon, England, to the trader John Shakespeare and his wife Mary Arden. He probably went to Stratford Grammar School, which offered free education to local boys. In 1582 he married Anne Hathaway, and they had three children, Susanna, Hamnet and Judith. In 1592 Shakespeare was known to be in London acting and writing plays, but he may have worked as a schoolmaster before this. Shakespeare became an important member of a theatre company, which performed at two

London theatres, the Globe and the Blackfriars. His plays were given special performances at the courts of Queen Elizabeth I and King James I and his success made him a wealthy man. We know that he bought New Place, a large and impressive house in Stratford, for his family. He re-built the house, moved his wife and daughters there (his son had died in 1596), and spent his later years there himself when he left London. Shakespeare died in 1616 and was buried in the church in Stratford.

The stories in this collection are taken from plays written at different times in Shakespeare's professional life. *The Taming of the Shrew* is a comedy of character, and one of the first plays that Shakespeare wrote. *The Winter's Tale* was almost his last play. It is called a comedy because the ending is happy, but the characters go through much pain and sorrow before that ending is reached. These two stories were written by Mary Lamb. The other stories were written by Charles, and are examples of Shakespeare's finest tragedies. *Romeo and Juliet* is an early play showing how the joys of young love are destroyed by the hatred of others. *Hamlet*, a terrible tale of revenge, is probably Shakespeare's most famous play. It is jealousy that leads to tragedy in *Othello*, while *King Lear* shows the shocking effects of an old man's bad judgement. This book introduces the reader to some of the most famous characters from Shakespeare's most powerful plays.

The Tempest

Characters

Prospero, the banished duke of Milan.

Antonio, his brother who is the unlawful duke.

The King of Naples.

Ferdinand, his son.

Miranda, daughter of Prospero

Ariel, a spirit serving Prospero

Caliban, a monster

There was a certain island in the sea, on which there lived only an old man, whose name was Prospero, and his daughter Miranda, a very beautiful young lady.

They lived in a cave made out of a rock. It was divided into several parts, one of which Prospero called his study. There he kept his books, which chiefly dealt with magic, and the knowledge of this art he found very useful to him. For being thrown by a strange chance upon this island, which had been enchanted by a witch called Sycorax, Prospero, by the power of his art, set free many good spirits that Sycorax had shut up in the bodies of large trees, because they had refused to do her wicked commands. These gentle spirits were ever after obedient to the will of Prospero. Of these, Ariel was the chief.

The lively little spirit, Ariel had no evil in his nature, except that he took rather too much pleasure in troubling an ugly monster called Caliban whom he hated because he was the son of his old enemy Sycorax. Prospero had found this Caliban in the woods, a strange twisted thing, far less like a man than an ape. He took him home to his cave, and taught

him to speak. And Prospero would have been very kind to him but the bad nature which Caliban had from his mother Sycorax would not let him learn anything good or useful. Therefore he was employed like a slave, to fetch wood, and do the most laborious tasks, and Ariel had the duty of forcing him to these services

When Caliban was lazy and did not do his work, Ariel (who could be seen by no eyes but Prospero's) would come quietly up and pinch him, and sometimes throw him down in the mud, and then Ariel, in the likeness of an ape would make mouths at him. Then swiftly changing his shape, in the likeness of a hedge-hog he would lie rolling in Caliban's way, who feared the hedgehog's sharp points would prick his bare feet. With many such-like cruel tricks Ariel would often trouble him, whenever Caliban failed to do the work which Prospero commanded him to do.

Having these powerful spirits obedient to his will, Prospero could by their means command the winds, and the waves of the sea. By his orders they raised a great storm. In the midst of it he showed his daughter a fine large ship struggling with the wild sea-waves that every moment seemed about to swallow it up. The ship, he told her, was full of living beings like themselves.

'O my dear father,' said she, 'if by your art you have raised this dreadful storm, have pity on their sad trouble. See! The vessel will be dashed to pieces. Poor souls they will all be drowned. If I had power, I would sink the sea beneath the earth, rather than that the good ship should be destroyed, with all the precious souls within her.'

'Be not so wild, daughter Miranda,' said Prospero, 'there is no harm done. I have so ordered it, that no person in the ship shall receive any hurt. What I have done has been in care of you, my dear child. You do not know who you are, or where you came from, and you know no

more of me, but that I am your father, and live in this poor cave. Can you remember a time before you came here? I think you cannot, for you were not then three years of age.'

'Certainly I can, sir,' replied Miranda.

'But what?' asked Prospero, 'by any other house or person? Tell me what you can remember, my child.'

Miranda said, 'It seems to me like the memory of a dream. But had I not once four or five women who served me?'

Prospero answered, 'You had, and more. How is it that this still lives in your mind? Do you remember how you came here?'

'No, sir,' said Miranda, 'I remember nothing more.'

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'Twelve years ago, Miranda,' continued Prospero, 'I was duke of Milan, and you were a princess and my only child. I had a younger brother, whose name was Antonio, to whom I trusted everything, and as I was fond of quiet and deep study, I commonly left the governing of my state affairs to your uncle, my false brother (for so indeed he proved). I, careless of all worldly ends, buried among my books, gave my whole time to the bettering of my mind. My brother Antonio being thus in possession of my power, began to think himself the duke indeed. The chance I gave him of making himself beloved of my subjects awakened in his bad nature a proud desire to rob me of my dukedom. This he soon did with the aid of the king of Naples, a powerful prince, who was my enemy.'

'Why didn't they destroy us then?' asked Miranda.

'My child,' answered her father, 'they dared not, so dear was the love that my people bore me. Antonio carried us on board a ship, and when we were some miles out at sea, he forced us into a small boat, without either oars or sails or ropes. There he left us, as he thought, to die. But a kind lord of my court, Gonzalo, who loved me, had privately placed

in the boat, water, food, clothing and some books which I value above my dukedom.'

'O my father!' said Miranda, 'what a trouble must I have been to you then!'

'No, my love,' said Prospero, 'you were a little angel that preserved me. Your smiles made me to bear bravely my evil fortune. Our food lasted till we landed on this desert island, and since then my chief delight has been in teaching you, Miranda, and from these lessons you have gained much.'

'Heaven thank you, my dear father,' said Miranda.

'Now tell me, sir, your reason for raising this storm?'

'I will,' said her father, 'by means of this storm, my enemies, the king of Naples and my cruel brother, are cast ashore upon this island.'

Having so said, Prospero gently touched his daughter with his magic stick, and she fell fast asleep, for the spirit Ariel just then appeared before his master, to give an account of the tempest, and of what he had done with the ship's company. And though the spirits could never be seen by Miranda, Prospero did not wish her to hear him speaking as would seem to her with the empty air.

'Well, my brave spirit,' said Prospero to Ariel, 'how have you performed your task?'

Ariel gave a lively story of the storm, and of the fears of the seamen, and how the king's son, Ferdinand, was the first who leaped into the sea, and his father thought he saw his dear son swallowed up by the waves, and lost.

'But he is safe,' said Ariel, 'in a corner of the isle, sitting with his arms folded sadly, crying out for the loss of the king, his father, whom he thinks drowned. Not a hair of his head is touched, and his princely garments, though wet in the sea-waves, look fresher than before.'

'That's my good Ariel,' said Prospero, 'Bring him here. My daughter