Shakespeare for Children:
A Comparative Study of Selected Tales
by Charles and Mary Lamb, and Kamil Kilani

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**Table of contents:**

- **Introduction** ......................................................... 4
- **Chapter One:** Dwelling on the “What” .......................... 26
- **Chapter Two:** Who? Why? And how? .......................... 73
- **Chapter Three:** Contexts of Creation and Reception
  “When and Where?” ..................................................... 110
- **Conclusion** .................................................................. 146
- **Selected Bibliography** ................................................. 153
Introduction

A child leans forward, head cupped in hands, eyes wide with anticipation, raptly concentrating on hearing a story: This is an image for all time. Whether the child is seated beside an open fire in the Stone Ages, on a rough bench in a medieval fairground, or in a modern classroom, the message of the image is the same: Children love a good story.

(Carol Lynch-Brown)
Charles and Mary Lamb, and Kamil Kilani are distinguished authors in the field of children’s literature. They are pioneers as they heralded the task of introducing Shakespeare’s plays to young readers, each in his/her cultural horizon. This research is concerned with conducting a comparative study between both attempts in Britain (1807) and Egypt (1930s) searching for similarities as well as differences between the various versions of the same source texts rather than following older approaches like the fidelity approach (which confines itself to deviations from the original text) or the study of influence (concerned with literary relationships between the adapter and the author).

When dealing with adapting literature for children, two main issues are at hand; adaptations and children’s literature as a genre. In spite of their popularity and appeal, both fields have gone through a long period of marginalization and subordination to superior and more sublime entities. Adaptations have long been attacked as being fake copies and slavish imitations. That is why they have often been associated with negative connotations like: “interference”, “violation”, “deformation”, “perversion”, “infidelity” and the list goes on (McFarlane and Stam; qtd. in Hutcheon, 3).

Commenting on adaptation, Riitta Oittinen (2000) argues that the process has its deep roots; it is not something novel or far-fetched. She contends that: “As long as there has been literature, there have been adaptations” (Oittinen 76).
The same idea is echoed in Linda Hutcheon’s seminal work *A Theory of Adaptation* (2006) where she argues that throughout the course of history “art is derived from other art; stories are born of other stories” (Hutcheon 2). The constant attack against adaptation is actually confusing and inexplicable especially when recalling the “western’s culture long and happy history of ... sharing stories” (Hutcheon 4). No wonder then that these two scholars challenge these negative notions and reject them as mere prejudice, even cultural constructs, against such a significant and prolific process.

Children’s literature has often been met with denigration and even contempt because children themselves were not considered as proper audience in the first place. Some critics go as far as denying its nature as literature at all. On the other hand, there are many strong advocates of the genre like Riitta Oittinen, Peter Hunt, Matthew Grenby, and Fiona McCulloch who contributed greatly to the field.

In her book *Translating for Children* (2000), Oittinen laments the fact that children’s literature has received scant appreciation—which is the case with anything that has to do with children worldwide. Books written for children are underestimated simply because the target audiences are supposed to be “naïve” and “illogical” beings. Not far from now, children were not considered as “a proper, demanding audience, able to criticize” (Oittinen 68). Thus, their literature has been conceived of as mere abridged versions or simplified adult books to suit the young readers’ “limited” abilities. Nevertheless, Oittinen
forcefully asserts that children’s literature has its inherent value, and she expresses her great faith in the child’s potentials to comprehend and fantasize even more than adults.

Peter Hunt vehemently opposes assigning children’s literature to an inferior position. He states that children’s books have been “largely beneath the notice of intellectual and cultural gurus” (1). In his book *Understanding Children’s Literature* (2005) he introduces “the study of children’s literature, addressing theoretical questions as well as the most relevant critical approaches to the field” (1). Further, M.O. Grenby wrote a critical guide: *Children’s Literature* (2008) to “deepen understanding of ... children’s literature as a whole, by examining the history of the form and, especially, the generic traditions that have emerged over the course of the last three hundred years” (1).

McCulloch reflects on the issue of underestimating children’s literature in her *Children’s Literature in Context* (2011). She states that “the academic study of children’s literature was woefully neglected, with it being regarded as a somewhat Cinderella subject unworthy of serious highbrow academic critique” (140). Children’s literature and children’s authors have long been suffering from being ostracized from the official canon, and have been regarded as childish and unworthy of attention. McCulloch argues that “children’s fiction has been decentred and recentred in order to consider its critical and cultural
merits” (McCulloch 140). It is only with the rise of literary theory that children’s literature started to gain importance among other marginalized disciplines.

:: Gap in Literature ::

This research aims at studying Tales from Shakespeare by Charles and Mary Lamb (1807) and Kamil Kilani’s adaptations of three Shakespearean plays which are King Lear, The Tempest and The Merchant of Venice (1930s) using the comparative method. Only three stories from the Tales are studied and analyzed, those which have counterparts in Kilani’s series Shakespeariyāt. Charles Lamb is responsible for adapting King Lear, whereas his sister accomplishes adaptations of The Tempest and The Merchant of Venice. Kilani also worked on Julius Caesar in his collection, yet it does not have a counterpart in the Tales. Thus, it was impossible to incorporate it in this comparative study.

It is obvious that the three adapters share the same objective of delivering Shakespeare to young readers despite their different socio-historical backgrounds. As far as the researcher is informed, there has been no previous research conducted on Kilani’s adaptations of Shakespeare, and no researcher has before attempted a comparative study to compare and contrast the two adapters in question.
Focusing on comparative literature, O’Sullivan pinpoints how it “largely ignores children’s books”, and she remarks that “children’s literature studies too seldom works with comparative methods” (1). That’s why she is highly critical of the discrepancy between children’s literature as “a discipline with an international subject” on the one hand, and yet its “monocultural horizons of research” on the other. In other words, O’Sullivan firmly believes that the absence of dialogue between different cultures is the core of the problem. This could be enhanced through comparative readings and understanding of culture-specific academic traditions and styles (O’Sullivan 42). O’Sullivan’s suggested method is adopted by the researcher in approaching the selected tales to open up new channels of communication between different cultures through children’s literature: specifically the English and Egyptian cultures.

:: Why this topic in particular? ::

a) An interest in children’s literature, a long marginalized area in spite of its indisputable significance. In fact, children’s literature provides researchers and scholars with a repertory of ultimately rich material for their interpretation and analysis.

b) To carry out a comparative study between different Shakespearean adaptations in entirely different contexts and conditions and to be able to investigate peculiarities as well as differences.
c) No previous research has been conducted on Kamil Kilani’s

*Shakespeariyāt* either independently or comparatively (emphasized by Amin Kilani in a personal interview).

d) It is done with the purpose of drawing attention to great writers like Kamil Kilani and his lifetime project of establishing a complete, gradable library for children starting from the age of 5 up to adolescence. It epitomizes the hope laid on children and the dream of raising book-friendly generation(s).

:: **Methodology** ::

The thesis builds on the work and thought of three distinguished figures: the Canadian critic Linda Hutcheon, the Finnish children’s author and critic Riitta Oittinen, and the German scholar Emer O’Sullivan.

Hutcheon’s *Theory of Adaptation* is one main pillar upon which the research is built. Her general and all-encompassing theory is the backbone of the entire thesis. She meticulously breaks down the process of transferring texts through different genres, media and modes of engagement (showing, telling and interactive modes). Much emphasis is laid on context as well. Her proposed technique is employed in this research to study the different attempts of adapting Shakespearean dramas. To sum up, Hutcheon’s scientific methodology of studying adaptations provide the skeleton for the entire thesis.
This is to be complemented by extensive application on the tales in a comparative manner based on the contributions made by Oittinen and O’Sullivan.

Riitta Oittinen’s major contribution is in defying the dominant fidelity approach when studying translations for children. Rather, she proposes a child-centred approach laying much emphasis on the satisfaction of the young recipient through the creation of a child-suitable book. Her purpose is to cast her zoom lens on one central subject: the target readership. She theorizes on the best philosophy when translating/adapting for children; such a special segment of recipients as she ceaselessly confirms.

Last but not least, Emer O’Sullivan’s book *Comparative Children’s Literature* (2005) focuses on contact studies in children’s literature. She gives the discipline a new dimension as she argues that translations for children should not be studied in isolation, but rather concurrently with texts from different geographical spots. This is simply aiming at creating a dialogue between the various traditions of addressing young readers. Hence, it would be fruitful to link the effort of the three figures together in studying the Lambs and Kilani comparatively for it provides the basis to accomplish the task more efficiently.
Hutcheon: An advocate of a study on the verge:

Linda Hutcheon has always been preoccupied with this paradox between the popularity of adaptation and yet its constant deprecation. Moreover, she saw in the limitation of adaptation studies to the cinema industry a huge stimulus to come up with a general comprehensive theory to extend the scope of adaptation studies beyond movies and televisual adaptations. She openly expresses her “desire to challenge the explicitly and implicitly negative cultural evaluation of things like postmodernism, parody, and now, adaptation, which are seen as secondary and inferior” (Hutcheon xii). That is why she seeks to deconstruct the dominant discourse that devalues and underestimates such important cultural practices as adaptation, a discourse that accepts only texts that fit into the category of canons and great literature while rejecting anything else. She strongly affirms that adaptation is “a derivation that is not derivative—a work that is second without being secondary” (Hutcheon 9). Hence, she launched her project *A Theory of Adaptation* (2006) not only to defend adaptation and reveal its merit, but also to lay the foundations for a comprehensive theory that offers a systematic method for approaching adaptations in their different genres and media.

When studying adaptations, Hutcheon finds the fidelity approach that aims at measuring the extent of “faithfulness” to the “original text” quite provocative, and even futile. She is in conflict with all academic attempts that belittle and devalue this massive and widespread process of “cultural
recycling”. Christa Albrecht-Crane and Dennis Cutchins (2010) also share the same view concerning the negative impact of the fidelity approach on hindering the process of adaptation studies. Both argue that “[the] stubborn insistence on fidelity certainly has kept adaptation theory from maturing” (12) since scholars have been essentially trapped in “uncovering the inevitable lack of fidelity” (15). This surely has put all chances of any major progress in adaptation studies at stake.

Within the framework of telling stories, authenticity is a fallacy and mere illusion, Hutcheon asserts. She contends that there is no such thing as an “original story”. However, this argument is by no means a suggestion that adaptations should be studied as autonomous works; i.e. independently from the adapted (source) text. Rather, adaptations should be dealt with as adaptations because they “are haunted at all times by their adapted texts” (6, her emphasis). This is the recommended methodology of studying both works simultaneously to show how repetition and freshness as well as familiarity and novelty are mingled together to produce such a kind of unique effect.

Interestingly, Hutcheon pinpoints that the term “adaptation” refers both to the product and the process, and she posits that there are three layers inherent within the term. Firstly as a product, it is a “deliberate, announced, and extended revisitation of prior works” (7). Secondly, it is a process of (re-)interpreting and (re-)creating with certain purposes or intentions in mind. In Charlie Kaufman’s words, adaptation is “a process of appropriation, of taking
possession of another’s story, and filtering it, in a sense, through one’s own sensibility, interests, and talents” (qtd. in Hutcheon 18). Thirdly, it is a process of reception involving a series of intertextual relationships established between texts namely: the adapted text, the adaptation and whatever evoked texts in the process of reception.

Hutcheon’s systemic methodology of approaching adaptations depends on analysing the works according to a range of Wh- questions; namely “the what, who, why, how, when, and where of adaptation” (xiv, her italics). This is to make the process of studying and criticising adaptations a well-defined task founded on solid ground; and hence restoring the long ignored adaptations to the arena of cultural and literary studies.

- The ‘What’ focuses on two parts: what gets adapted and in what forms?
- ‘Who is the adapter?’ is the second question.
- ‘Why adapt?’ reflects on intentionality factors and motivations behind the decision to adapt in total subversion of the “intentional fallacy”. It also investigates the ideological background of the adapter.
- The ‘How’ focuses on the target readership or the recipient in mind; and how the adaptation process takes place to fulfil that end?
- The ‘When and Where’ are concerned with the contexts of creation
Oittinen: A Child-centred Approach to Translation and Adaptation:

In her *Translating for Children* (2000), Riitta Oittinen defies all the destructive notions and lame views about children and their books. She sheds light on the merit of children’s literature and highlights the vital role it plays in shaping the young reader’s personality. She even undertakes the task of studying translation for children to reveal its merit and to help restoring it back to the arena of cultural and literary studies on solid ground. Surely she is one of the most prominent figures struggling in this field. According to Oittinen, translating for children is not a futile or “unethical” cultural activity that violates faithfulness. Rather it is a great attempt of introducing the world’s classics and prominent works to the child reader for broader cross-cultural communication. Adaptations are to be appreciated and evaluated not based on such norms as fidelity and invisibility, but on how far they appeal to the target reader.

In response to opinions privileging the “original text” as some superior entity, Oittinen negates the presence of any inherent value in a given text just for being “original”. She even goes as far as questioning the notion of originality. There is no such thing as a 100% authentic text (the same notion is echoed in Hutcheon). She quotes Harold Bloom who postulates that “every story, even the original, could be understood as an adaptation, a version of life—it is based on some other story, which again is based on some previous story” (Oittinen 79). In this way, whether consciously or unconsciously, any