Simply Shakespeare

By Rachel Ann Rogish

Work a little bit of drama into your days, explore the classic works of William Shakespeare, and enjoy some theatre you can do in your own home with Simply Shakespeare!, which can be found at SchoolhouseTeachers.com. We chose a unit that’s a natural for Valentine’s Day: *Romeo and Juliet*.

“What these Tales shall have been to the young readers, that and much more it is the writer’s wish that the true Plays of Shakespeare may prove to them in older years – enrichers of fancy, strengtheners of virtue, a withdrawing from all selfish and mercenary thoughts, a lesson of all sweet and honorable thoughts and actions to teach courtesy, benignity, generosity, humanity: for of examples, teaching these virtues, his pages are full.”

— Charles Lamb, *Tales of Shakespeare*
Resources for Simply Shakespeare:


❤️ Lamb, Charles and Mary. Tales from Shakespeare. New York: Penguin Group, Puffin Classics, 1994 *Having this exact copy allows for use of page numbers referenced in the material.


Note to small families and only children:

As an only child and homeschooled student, I am keenly aware that the idea of performing selections from a Shakespearean play can seem daunting and intimidating. However, no matter the size or age of your family, you can fully enjoy and fully participate in Simply Shakespeare! Invite fellow homeschoolers in your area, cousins, or friends (whether far away or in your church) to come and help you; family and friends visiting in the summer months will also be able to reap the benefits of a time well-spent in this exciting, kid-friendly project.

If you cannot find other people to help, Barbie Dolls are an excellent resource! Seriously! Dress them in whatever costumes you chose, construct backdrops and scenery pieces from cardboard and construction paper, and experiment with using different voices for your characters in the play. Lego people can also be recruited as additional support! Your imagination is the limit.

Simply Shakespeare is designed for any family anywhere and uniquely formatted for your busy schedule; the activities can be completed in a week or comfortably spaced
through several weeks’ time. Opportunities for improving communication skills, vocabulary, and knowledge of geography abound as well as utilizing digital photography, sewing (costume design), music, and basic construction skills for stage designs.

Reading various narration parts from Lamb’s *Tales from Shakespeare* provides excellent public speaking experience, work on diction, pronunciation, clarity, voice projection, and eye contact and animation. Discussions prompted by reading the play are wonderful forums for family time! By reading, acting, and enjoying one another in your family, your entire family will benefit both artistically, educationally, and spiritually.

**Daily Devotions**

❤️ Read one chapter of Proverbs daily; many of the principles in Shakespeare’s plays are found in Proverbs.

❤️ Make a list of specific verses that apply to each play.
Romeo and Juliet
by William Shakespeare

Script Reading—Read Romeo and Juliet in story form from Tales from Shakespeare, by Charles and Mary Lamb (pages 267-288)

Overall Theme—Impetuous behavior combined with immaturity leads to disaster.

Discussion Prompters

1. Were Juliet’s nurse and Friar helpful or harmful?

2. According to the prologue, where did all the trouble begin? What can you learn from this?
3. Romeo goes somewhere he was not supposed to be, the Capulets’ feast, and Juliet did not talk with her parents after meeting Romeo; she never told her parents about him. How did Romeo and Juliet’s choices affect the outcome of the play?

4. Apply Proverbs 11:14 and 15:22 to *Romeo and Juliet* and to your life today.

**The Vocabulary of Shakespeare**—Many of the phrases we use in everyday speech today come from Shakespeare’s plays; he often invented his own words and used common figures of speech from his day. Explore the words below and see if you can find them in a copy of this play. Hints are provided for you below and definitions of the words.

**Shakespearean words:**

❤️ “. . .'tis an ill cook’s fingers. . .” (Act IV, Scene II) Sometimes in Renaissance kitchens, cooks would cut their fingers while slicing meat or chopping vegetables with large, sharp knives. Also, cooks are not supposed to lick their fingers and then put them in the dishes they are preparing.

❤️ “. . .man of wax. . .” (Act I, Scene III) As well made, or as handsome, as if he had been sculpted in wax.
Cultural references:

1. “. . . tithe pigs. . . .” (Act I, Scene IV) Pigs were offered as part of someone’s tithe and offering if they had little money to give to the Church.

2. “. . . turn the tables up. . . .” (Act I, Scene V) Tables during Shakespeare’s time were flat boards joined by metal hinges, and when a table was put away after a feast, it was folded or “turned” up.

3. “. . . by the book. . . .” (Act I, Scene V) This phrase implies that some action is done properly and according to a rule.

4. “. . . by and by. . . .” (Act II, Scene II) An old way of saying that you are eventually coming.

5. “. . . a wild goose chase. . . .” (Act II, Scene IV) A Medieval horse race where the horses could run wherever they wanted, resembling a flock of geese. Now we use the phrase when we think something is a waste of time.

The Geography of Shakespeare—The town where the Montagues and Capulets live is a real place in northern Italy, located northwest of Venice. Look up Verona in a travel guide or online and find out how old the city is, what geographical features it has, and what the town is known for (other than this play!).
Play lingo:

1. *Props*: props are any objects that are not physically connected to the stage and are mobile. Example: *John helps Peter set up a table and chairs on stage. During intermission, John carries the chairs off stage.*

2. *Background*: a background generally includes anything physically connected to the stage such as a painted backdrop, the outline of a building, doors, and windows. Example: *Peter built Juliet’s balcony out of two-by-fours with his dad’s help.*

3. *Backdrop*: a painted image of valleys, mountains, towns, and more. Example: *John’s sister, Rachel, helped paint a picture of a marketplace for the play.*

4. *Blocking*: blocking is the process a director or performer goes through when they are figuring out where they will move on stage, or where the action in a particular scene will take place. Example: *John and Rachel’s mom, Mrs. Smith, is helping them block for Romeo and Juliet.*

Scenes to Spotlight:

**Narration:** The Prologue, lines 1-10.

**Narration:** Lambs’ page 267, beginning with “Old lord Capulet made a great supper. . . .” and ending with the following sentence. Resume narration on page 268, beginning with “To this feast of Capulet’s then young Romeo with Benvolio and their friend Mercutio went masked. . . .” and ending before “While he uttered these praises. . . .” Resume narration on page 270 with the first sentence of the first paragraph and end with the same sentence.


**Narration:** Lambs’ page 274, the third paragraph. Resume narration on page 274 with “That same day, about noon, Romeo’s friends, Benvolio and Mercutio. . . .” and end with the following sentence.

**Perform: Act III, Scene I, lines 54-105.

*Since Romeo and Juliet has more gentlemen’s parts than ladies’, this scene is a wonderful opportunity for the girls to be extras!

**Narration:** (*In your own words, make mention of the fact that Romeo had been banished because he killed Tybalt after Mercutio died.*) Lambs’ page 279, the last paragraph at the bottom of the page, going onto the top of page 280. Resume narration with the last paragraph of page and read to the end of the same paragraph. Lambs’ page 282, the last paragraph onto page 283, and ending before “Just before, Romeo had been unusually joyful. . . .”

The Production:

Props: for this play you will need swords; you can make them from cardboard and decorate them yourself, purchase them at the dollar store, or find sticks in your backyard. For safety purposes, find basic fencing rules online or in a book and go over the rules with your young fencers. It’s a great way to get PE into your schedule with this classic sport!

Costumes: In the spirit of Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet* is best understood in a Renaissance setting. If time and budget allow, sew your own capes for the young men and period-style dresses for the young ladies; or plan a budget and visit local thrift stores in your area and see what kind of old clothes you can find, or raid your closets and attic at home! Long skirts work well for ladies’ parts and velvet-looking tablecloths work for men’s capes. In the famous duel scene, you can have lots of extras to help create an authentic Italian marketplace atmosphere!

Advertisement: Invitations, posters, and playbills should carry the theme of a quaint Italian city. Find pictures of Italian architecture from the Renaissance or take digital pictures of your cast members posing!

Music: *O Mio Bambino Caro*, by opera composer Gaicomo Puccini, is a great opening piece, especially Joshua Bell's arrangement from his cd *Romance of the Violin*, but any orchestral version will do. *Greensleeves*, a period piece, sets the mood for the balcony scene perfectly, and *Gabriel's Oboe*, played by renowned cellist Yo-Yo Ma, complements the ending with a sound of hope. If you play an instrument or sing, perform a piece that you enjoy!
Staging: your stage can be either indoors or outdoors. A shower rod and long pieces of fabric can be used for a curtain, if desired. For Juliet’s balcony, a tree house is ideal, but anything you could build or have her stand on would suffice admirably.

Banquet: Host your own Renaissance banquet! Keep it a fun, “hands-on” experience by not setting any silverware on the table and by serving what your family can eat with their fingers. Chicken, hash-browns, corn on the cob, fruit, bread, and cheese creates a feast fit for anyone! Invite friends and ask them to dress up, if they wish, and perform your scenes before dinner. Light candles and play classical music to complete the effect! If at all possible, have your feast outside just as the sun is going down.

*Optional.

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