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?Pick up these great little versions of the world?s greatest books, and you?ll discover that Real Reads are a Real Treat.? Real Reads have already, it seems, had a bash at the likes of **Great Expectations**, **Sense and Sensibility**, **The Ramayana** and **The New Testament**. Now it?s WS?s turn.

The publishers are disarmingly honest. Losing many of the original words, they tell their young readers, ?is a sad but necessary part of the shortening process?. Sub-plots and details, ?some important, some less so, but all interesting?, have had to go. Events are combined, words given to different characters, but ?nothing can beat the original?. There?s a potted plot, a note about Shakespeare?s times and stage, books, websites and films to check out, and a ?Food for Thought? section with questions such as ?Can you find examples of poetic imagery?? or an invitation to create an iambic pentameter or an oxymoron (duly explained) which makes you wonder just what age group they have in mind. The accompanying blurb suggests 8+. Colour illustrations decorate rather than extend the text.

Why bother? Perhaps Real Reads believe that just the taste of the storylines is somehow transformational. But there is a wealth of literature for children which needs no tinkering mediation to make it ?more accessible?; and in drama for this age group, for a host of reasons, this is a time for improvisation, for invention, for full involvement of all your class. A Shakespeare text inevitably divides into major and minor roles; or, for some of your 30 children, no role at all. And with Shakespeare, it?s about the way he tells ?em through language and space, at least as much as his borrowed plots.

Consider one speech. ?She should have died hereafter? becomes ?If she had died some other time but now.? We lose ?Tomorrow and tomorrow?? altogether, though we keep ?Out, out, brief candle?? ? and you?ll have to stop to tease that

one out with 8-year-olds. We retain 'Life's but a walking shadow' but lose 'It is a tale told by an idiot'.? These skeletons of the four plays are exactly that ? no matter how skilled the effort to preserve the sense and the rhythm of the lines. What is the point of using these diminished versions at 8+ in the classroom or even, as the publishers suggest, for 'school plays and young people's drama societies'? Ripeness is all. Leave Shakespeare until they're ready for him, whether on page or stage. For me, the project is misconceived.

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