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**Diverse
Illustrated
Children's
Shakespeare:**
a guide

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Race and its representation

- Race is a social construct, a way of categorising people that exists in language and culture, not biological fact.
- Race has tangible impacts on people's lived experience.
- Representations of race impact on the lives of all people in societies that consume them.
- Diverse representation benefits all children: from boosting attainment, belonging, and self-esteem to increasing understanding of diverse cultures and empathy.
- For more on these points read the free [PDF by Elliott et al, Lit in Colour](#) .

Race in Illustrated Children's Shakespeare

Shakespeare's plays explicitly feature characters of colour. Examples include Cleopatra, Othello, Aaron (*Titus Andronicus*), and the Prince of Morocco (*Merchant of Venice*). However, film and theatre no longer rely on explicit cues in Shakespeare's texts, speculation about his intentions or original staging to enact racial diversity¹.

Support for diverse Shakespeare is well established in the policies of UK public arts funders and leading organisations such as the Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC), Shakespeare Birthplace Trust (SBT), and Shakespeare's Globe. Casting actors in 'non-traditional' or 'colour-blind' ways and portraying roles as characters of colour are widespread practices in filming and staging Shakespeare.

However, illustrated children's Shakespeare does not reflect the racial diversity of Shakespeare on screen and stage. Nor does it reflect the UK's population, including school populations (36% of pupils identified as BAME in the 2023 school census in England)².

We studied 83 illustrated Shakespeare books for children, stocked in the physical and online shops of the RSC, SBT and Globe. They included fictional and non-fictional picturebooks, graphic novels, manga and illustrated chapter books. We found:

- Only 1 book involved an author of colour: the foreword was attributed to them.
- There were 9 illustrators of colour, out of a total of 52 (17%).
- Less than half of all characters were depicted as people of colour.

This booklet includes a list of texts designed to support diverse illustrated children's Shakespeare – whether you're reading, teaching, selling or making it. Some of these books are models of inclusion. Others offer talking points around problematic representations. Many fall somewhere in-between.

Creators of Colour

The lack of creators of colour is exacerbated by many series having the same illustrator and author (or adaptor of Shakespeare) for each of the volumes in it. More diversity was seen in series with more creators involved.

The small amount of books by creators of colour tended to be aimed at older children. This may suggest that a white default is even stronger in publishing illustrated Shakespeare for young children.

Illustrated Shakespeare compares poorly with children's publishing generally in terms of the diversity of creators. Besides this being inherently problematic, it may perpetuate the over-representation of characters as white people. This study found that creators of colour were associated with texts containing more characters of colour.

Characters of Colour

People of colour still constitute a minority of characters in illustrated children's Shakespeare. However, a figure of around 50% in this study compares favourably with that of 20% in children's publishing generally in the UK (see the free PDF [CLPE Reflecting Realities 2023](#)).

Characters of colour in these books overall occupied a wide range of roles – hero(in)es, villains, lovers, friends, nobles, professionals and labourers. Fact books, however, tended to stereotype people of colour in racist ways, including them only in sections on slavery and criminality.

Characters of colour were rarely well served by the front covers, which were less diverse than the books' contents. Over three-quarters of covers did not depict characters of colour. In several cases, this was despite their contents featuring main characters of colour.

A note on terminology

This leaflet uses 'people of colour' and related terms to refer to the racial diversity of characters, as portrayed in these illustrated books, and their creators, as evidenced by public biographical data. Such terms represent our view of the best available fit for a study based on visual data. The nature of the data meant this study found it difficult to identify white ethnic minority creators and characters, except where the latter involve caricature. Related terms include global majority and BAME people, retained where we cite studies that use them.

Reading List

Bold and Brave Women from Shakespeare

Bold and Brave Women from Shakespeare is a picturebook that stands out as the only book in this study with some text attributed to an author of colour. While overall authorship is attributed to an organisation – the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust – Anja Chouhan, one of its lecturers, is identified as the author of the foreword. The book includes a range of characters drawn as people of colour.

Graphic Novel series

The Graphic Novel series published by Franklin Watts features illustrators and characters of colour, drawn in a range of roles, in Shakespearean settings. Noteworthy volumes in the series include:

- *Much Ado About Nothing* – Wendy Tan Shian Wei (illustrator), Steve Barlow and Steve Skidmore (adaptors).
- *Romeo and Juliet* – Wendy Tan Shian Wei (illustrator), Steve Barlow and Steve Skidmore (adaptors).
- *A Midsummer Night's Dream* – Edu Coll (illustrator), Steve Barlow and Steve Skidmore (adaptors).

Shakespeare Shake-ups series

Books in the Shakespeare Shake-Ups series of chapter books by Mark Beech (illustrator) and Ross Montgomery (author) adapt the plots to a British school setting. The pupils are drawn to suggest the school's multicultural make-up. Volumes in the series include:

- *Fortune's Fool* –
based on *Romeo and Juliet*
- *Hurly Burly* –
based on *Macbeth*
- *Rock Bottom* –
based on *A Midsummer Night's Dream*
- *Tripwrecked* –
based on *The Tempest*

Tragic *No Holds Bard*

For older students, *Tragic*, the two-part graphic novel rewriting of Hamlet along the lines of a whodunnit, features characters with diverse racial and sexual identities. Dana Mele is the author, with Valentina Pinti (illustrator) and Chiara Di Francia (colourist). Similarly, *No Holds Bard* is a fast-paced graphic novel written by Eric Gladstone. It reimagines several plays with LGBTQ+ storylines, including racially diverse characters and creators: Gabrielle Kari (line artist), Ines Bravo (colourist), Aditya Bidikar (letter artist).

Manga Shakespeare series

The noughties' Manga Shakespeare series is published by Self Made Hero, with Richard Appignanesi adapting the text in each volume. It features illustrators and characters of colour, many East Asian, reflecting the medium's Japanese origins. Sci-fi, fantasy and shōjo³ genres frequently inform the artwork. See, for example:

- *Twelfth Night* –
Nana Li (illustrator)
- *As You Like It* –
Chie Kutsuwada (illustrator)
- *Romeo and Juliet* –
Sonia Leong (illustrator)
- *Julius Caesar* –
Mustashrik (illustrator)
- *A Midsummer Night's Dream* –
Kate Brown (illustrator)

Manga Shakespeare (continued)

Adherence to manga conventions often creates ambiguously racialised characters – although manga publisher Saturday AM has outlined best practice on *How to Draw Diverse Manga*. Obviously racialised characters in the extensive series demonstrate variable takes on diversity. Contrast the *Macbeth* (Robert Deas - illustrator) featuring an entirely Japanese post-apocalyptic samurai 'cast' with:

- *The Merchant of Venice* – Faye Yong (illustrator), which distinguishes Jewish characters with heavy, kohl eyeliner.
- *King Lear* – Ilya (illustrator), which is set among First Nation and settler Americans, with a 'Red Indian chief' cover.
- *Othello* – Ryuta Osada (illustrator), which features a shining white title character on its cover, although inside he appears a darker shade of greyscale than other characters.

Manga Classics series

More recently published, the Manga Classics Shakespeare volumes frequently feature East Asian heritage creators as both adaptors and illustrators, again using a manga style that ambiguously racialises characters. They write engaging final sections on the 'making of' each book. Creators of the volumes read for this study include Julien Choy (illustrator), Crystal S. Chan (story adaptor), and Michael Barltrop (modern English adaptor).

Shakespeare for Everyone

History and fact books dealing with the life and times of Shakespeare often fail to depict historic and current social diversity. The people drawn in *Shakespeare for Everyone* by Sarah Tanat Jones (illustrator) and *Emma Roberts* (author) help this picturebook towards fulfilling its title.

Orchard Shakespeare series

The Orchard Shakespeare series (Andrew Matthews – adaptor, Tony Ross – illustrator) contains some similar discussion points around representing diversity to the above volumes in Manga Shakespeare. Drawings of Othello, Shylock and Cleopatra contain elements of caricature in the depiction of Black, Jewish, and Egyptian characters. It limits racial diversity to the few characters of colour identified in the plays. It remains widely stocked.



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¹ The type of diversity referred to throughout this booklet.

² Other countries in the UK are often just in double figures.

³ Manga aimed at girls and younger women.

