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# Authorizing Shakespeare

## What the Bard Has to Say to Modern Culture

Even in his time, Shakespeare's plays were progressive: female main characters, soliloquies that question the meaning of life or subvert the tradition of primogeniture. His plays relate universal truths about who we are as humans and how we relate to each other. In their time, they called attention to social oppressions and lauded noble values. Four hundred years later, his authority remains as various directors, actors and producers reinterpret his plays for modern contexts. More than just retelling "Taming of the Shrew" with newer clothes, however, these modern adaptations reveal our society's sometimes-unconscious value sets, and quite often how



we perceive the "figure of otherness"—someone of different race, gender or social class.

**Monique Pittman's** first monograph, *Authorizing Shakespeare on Film and Television*

(Peter Lang, 2010), examines film and television adaptations of Shakespearean drama within the last 20 years as a window into Western culture's perception and treatment of the figures of otherness. Her research indicates a surprising paradox: although the past 20 years have seemed more tolerant, socially progressive and liberal, the corresponding adaptations of Shakespeare still retain conservative and often repressive portrayals of non-white, lower-class and female roles.

Pittman's book is the culmination of nearly eight years of conference presentations, peer-reviewed articles, and research on Shakespeare in film. Sometime in between publishing four peer-reviewed articles and a myriad of conference presentations, Pittman began to notice relationships between how directors and producers viewed both Shakespeare's authority as creator and their own authority as adapters and how their productions portrayed women, people of non-white ethnicity and lower economic status. Despite the advent of "colorblind

casting," many adaptations still diminish these "other" roles, which Pittman sees as a disturbing justification of continued oppression. "Shakespeare's plays are the product of an incredibly hierarchical, rigid, even brutal at times, culture. However, they are magnificent for their moment in time in how they deal with subjectivities that are not white, not English. What I found shocking about the more modern interpretations is that in some cases they are more socially repressive than the text might warrant."

Kenneth Branagh's 1989 film *Henry V* ushered in an era of renewed interest in Shakespeare in film. Pittman chose to study the Branagh era because of its excellent concentration of a range of approaches and restored attention to Shakespeare. Accompanying the Shakespearean Renaissance of the "Branagh Era" is an effort to make Shakespeare more accessible to younger audiences—resulting in films loosely based on his plays. Because film adaptations of

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Shakespeare range from period-correct depictions on PBS to teen films "inspired by" Shakespeare, Pittman chose her material across a fidelity spectrum. "My working hypothesis was that the adaptations more faithful to Shakespeare's text would have more potential to be quite conservative in their social constructs, and vice versa." She divided her book into a film section followed by an examination of television shows, which she argues draw from *Antony and Cleopatra* and *Julius Caesar*.

Of course, studying film adaptations of Shakespeare doesn't mean just sitting in front of a movie all day. Pittman began her research by transcribing all the director/producer commentaries on each DVD, examining



paratextual information including interviews from the creators and producers of each project, and for many of the television shows, the actors' previous theatre backgrounds. Her data collection involves copious frame-by-frame notes on every aspect of the film, from lighting to placement—when Shylock is consistently placed in the outskirts of a frame, for example, it signals how the director understands him. Costumes, lighting and tone of voice are all indicators of how the director wants his audience to view a subject.

"You would think that less faithful adaptations would portray conceptions of otherness more widely," she says. However, analysis shows that isn't the case: "Across the board, the conservative understanding of gender, class and ethnic identity still dominates." This she ascribes in part to post-colonial studies that point to Shakespeare as a mechanism used to justify colonial rule. Ownership and authority to interpret his plays have resided with white males for so long that directors, in claiming themselves authoritative interpreters of the text, revert to these conservative interpretations.

She cites two examples: Michael Radford's faithful rendering *Merchant of Venice* starring Al Pacino and the less faithful *She's the Man* starring Amanda Bynes. Radford, of Jewish descent himself, insists in his commentaries and interviews that he does not see the play as anti-Semitic but as a criticism of fundamentalism and racism. But the film contradicts his stated viewpoint by continually forcing Shylock to the minimizing outer edges of the frame and placing the racist Portia in the dominant center. Additionally, portrayals of Portia's non-white suitors, the African Morocco and Spanish Aragon, are highly stereotypical, depicting the suitors simply as comic figures.

Teen films such as *She's the Man* pres-

ent another paradox: although seemingly about rebellion and discovering identity, the supposed freedoms are often “suddenly and violently quenched by the introduction of romance.” At the end of *She’s the Man*, the heroine appears to achieve everything—social status, acceptance and, of course, a boyfriend. “It’s total fantasy and completely implausible; and a pretty conservative depiction of female identity,” says Pittman. She adds that the teen movies “accustom people to ideas about women and men that we should perhaps question.”

This project was “integral to my beliefs as a Christian and how Christians should relate to those around them, regardless of gender, ethnicity or class,” says Pittman. To her, several of the adaptations were concerning “in light of the fact that as Christians, we are supposed to have compassion for everyone.”

Nonetheless, the way forward may be in the hands of younger directors and less faithful adaptations of Shakespeare’s plays, such as the Chicago Shakespeare Theater’s 2010 production of *Taming of the Shrew*. A frequent visitor of CST, Pittman has seen almost all of the productions in the past 10 years and is considering an analysis of their productions as a future project. “I’m not exactly sure what shape it will take,” she says, “but I can guarantee it will still be about gender, class and ethnicity because those are huge concerns of mine and endlessly fascinating.”

Single-authored publications are the research standard in the field of English. The students involved in Pittman’s project gained experience through bibliographic searches and copying editing assignments as well as through first-hand observation of the book publication process, experience that has sparked their own independent work. Two Andrews students involved in early stages of the project are pursuing graduate degrees in film studies, one a doctoral candidate at the University of Florida and the other an MFA student at the University of Southern California School of Cinematic Arts, and another student, a doctoral candidate at Northwestern University, has presented a conference paper on gender and race in Shakespearean film adaptation that grew out of foundational conversations with Pittman.

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## Inaugural Year for the Siegfried H. Horn Excellence in Research and Creative Scholarship Award

The annual Siegfried H. Horn Excellence in Research and Creative Scholarship Award has been established to recognize lifetime scholarship achievement of Andrews University faculty members. The associate dean for research identifies names of eligible faculty members who have produced substantial scholarly contributions over the previous five years at Andrews University, and the members of the Scholarly Research Council vote on final recipients. One recipient is selected from each of four faculty categories:

1. Sciences and Mathematics
2. Arts and Humanities
3. Professions
4. Religion and Theology

The inaugural recipients received their awards during the annual faculty/staff awards ceremony, February 28, 2011, and are listed below.

This award has been established to honor Siegfried H. Horn’s legacy of scholarship and contribution to the field of Biblical archaeology at Andrews University, and his impact upon the world church and the wider community of scholars.

Siegfried H. Horn was the premier biblical archaeology professor, with many of the projects begun under his leadership still continuing to produce fruitful results today. Horn was the embodiment of a life dedicated to



scholarship, and he influenced every major contemporary Seventh-day Adventist theologian and biblical scholar in addition to significantly impacting the larger world of Old Testament scholarship and Biblical Archaeology.

Horn was the child of a Bible teacher and one of Germany’s earliest aviators. From his mother, he learned a love of the bible, history, and archaeology; his father imparted to him a love of travel and adventure. After beginning his theological studies in Germany and England, Horn went to the Dutch East Indies as a missionary. During World War II, he was imprisoned with other Germans first in Java and then India. In his seven years in internment camps, he followed a rigorous schedule of study, as well as teaching Greek, Hebrew and Bible classes to his fellow detainees.