

Erin Pearson

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North Dakota State University

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Shakespeare for the Masses

Following these ladies' brilliant discussions of film adaptations of Hamlet, and using them as grounding in the tradition, I am going in a slightly different direction, outward into the more general, and maybe toward the future? This is a presentation of my study of Shakespeare's texts in recent popular culture. As a graduate student in literature and casual observer of modern pop culture, I consider it an occupational hazard to note references to Shakespeare and his body of work, even in obscure and highly unlikely places. Indeed, it is nearly impossible to live in today's society without at least a superficial knowledge of William Shakespeare's lasting influence. Attitudes toward this impact and whether it is well-deserved vary, but his words and works are irrevocably embedded in our consciousness.

These references are as vastly varied and sometimes surprising as the reactions they cause. The sheer quantity of adaptations, allusions, and other more oblique nods to Shakespeare is both striking and fascinating. Whether they are labeled plagiaries, interpretations, or innovations, the countless ways in which Shakespeare's work has so entirely permeated American culture are awe-inspiring. These observations imply a question: what does it mean? What is to be made of the tension between textual accuracy and the "anxiety of influence"? Between traditionalists and media producers who take liberty with Shakespeare's texts for their own purposes? Are authors and directors including more Shakespeare in their work because his

texts are more readily available with the advent of the internet? Are young people sick of having it shoved down their throat, and showing their dissent by including the high culture champion in their arguably objectionable material? Will the ‘dumbing down’ of Shakespeare’s work ensure that his legacy continues, however altered or abbreviated? Maybe more importantly, is this desirable?

I will begin with a brief examination of three films which are based on Shakespeare’s plays. In descending order of textual and thematic accuracy, I will discuss *O, Ten Things I Hate About You*, and *Strange Brew*. Tim Blake Nelson’s *O* is a modern reimagining of *Othello* aimed at young audiences. In *O*, the screenplay does not coincide with Shakespeare’s text, but basic storyline and character names maintain intact. The action of the film has been moved to a private school and its basketball team. Anachronisms abound, of course. Franco Zeffirelli, a Shakespeare film director in his own right, comments on the tastes of a generation: “Apparently the pseudo-culture of young people today wouldn’t have digested the play unless you dressed it up that way, with all those fun and games” (Brook et al 54). While these updates, or non-updates according to Zeffirelli, may offend some scholars, they preserve the suspense and angst of the originals. In addition, modernizing the setting may disrupt the purity, by which I mean textual accuracy, but it enables the story to be told to a much wider audience. These themes can be taken in by a younger, more contemporary audience, whose culture differs greatly from that of the Shakespearean era.

Next, I will examine *Ten Things I Hate About You*, Gil Junger’s modern adaptation of *Taming of the Shrew*. Kat is the horrifying and undateable older sister, while her younger sister Bianca just wants to go to her prom. The film too, is a rendition meant mostly for teenagers. One refreshing aspect is that Kat, even while falling in love, maintains her personality. She is

able to be romantically happy in her relationship even while she continues to be an intellectual, authority-questioning feminist. In Shakespeare's version, Katherina's happiness necessitates absolute obedience. Another major departure *Ten Things I Hate About You* takes from Shakespeare's text, as noted by Deborah Cartmell, is that "[The film] makes no attempt to recreate Kate's final speech. [This fact] suggests that the play's sexual politics are far too complex and problematic for a cinema audience at the end of the twentieth century" (214).

Strange Brew is indeed a strange brew of a film, produced by and starring Rick Moranis and Dave Thomas. Moranis and Thomas play Doug and Bob MacKenzie, Canadian brothers who have a public access sketch series on SCTV (Clamen). They work at Elsinore Brewing Company, and are roughly equivalent to the characters of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in *Hamlet*. However, their primary interests are drinking beer and having unlikely, silly adventures, so it seems a very curious choice to borrow from the plot of perhaps the most tragic and profound of Shakespeare's plays. Are Moranis and Thomas attempting rebellion, inclusion, or merely irreverence by this choice?

As a kind of transition between these full length feature film adaptations, however loose, and the next set of cultural icons, I have a movie trailer to show. Another treatment of Hamlet's two friends came out last year. Jordan Galland has created a hybrid tale of zombies on Shakespeare's stage in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Undead*.

I would like to shift now from film to the adult cartoon. This has been a curious development in the genre in recent decades. Animation is no longer a clear signal for a family friendly program, just as a Shakespeare reference does not necessarily mean high culture. *The Simpsons* and *South Park* are two exceedingly popular examples of the adult cartoon. Both combine intelligent political and social commentary with less sophisticated and more potentially

offensive humor. Both would also, on the surface, be unlikely candidates for Shakespeare's iambic pentameter.

The Simpsons' Sideshow Bob is a genius thespian, and has served as Bart's nemesis on the show. In the episode "Funeral for a Fiend," Bob has rigged a bomb to explode and kill the entire Simpson family. He quotes some relevant dialogue from *Macbeth*, then starts to leave the room triumphantly. Lisa points out an error in his quotation, however, and he uses the laptop which is the functioning trigger for the explosive to check Wikipedia. Despite his training as an actor, Bob is still less capable of memorizing his Shakespearean tragedies than Lisa Simpson. In fact, with his dying breaths Bob says, "Ah, hoisted on his own petard." Lisa corrects him immediately: "Actually, it's hoisted *with* his own petard." Again in the 20th and most recent season, the writers of *The Simpsons* pay their own peculiar version of homage to the bard when [Homer plays Macbeth](#).

Perhaps because of the considerable success and longevity of *The Simpsons*, adult themed cartoons have become more and more popular in the last twenty years. One such success is *South Park*, created by Matt Stone and Trey Parker. In *South Park*, Terrance and Phillip had been the boys' favorite comedians before their not-so-amicable split. Their act had previously consisted primarily of flatulence, but Phillip decides he wants to become a serious actor, and takes up with a [Canadian troupe playing "Hamlet."](#) This is a textually accurate recreation of *Hamlet's* final scene, aside from the supplementary "buddy" and "guy," included to make even clearer the fact that the actors are Canadian. (explain- Canadians can be identified on the show by their speech, saying "buddy," or "guy," as well as their Pacman-looking heads and mouths) The exclamation of "bleh!" as each character dies is another addition. The single abridgment is of the dialogue presumably taking place during Stan's interpolation of "Jesus tap-dancing Christ is this thing

ever gonna end?” Dialogue from *Hamlet* also makes an appearance two seasons later, in the boys’ new Mormon classmate Gary’s “[family home evening](#).” An allusion is fairly useless if the audience fails to realize its origin, and *South Park* and Shakespeare audiences wouldn’t logically overlap, so what is the purpose?

One place where such an overlap would be much more expected is in the audience of the BBC Next, I will examine a source with just that audience. *The Black Adder* is an historical sitcom starring classically trained British stage actors, which eventually aired on BBC. Even these sketches however, show a great deal of irreverence, even contempt for the renowned playwright. The clip from *Blackadder Back and Forth* is a blatant undermining of Shakespeare’s lasting impact, a total rejection that his reputation is deserved, and the unleashing of physical anger as a passerby [punches Shakespeare](#).

Finally, I would like to include examples of Shakespeare being truly absorbed into what some may consider one of the lowest forms of mass media: video sharing websites.

The next two clips come from a video sharing website created by Will Farrell, Adam McKay and Chris Henchy, comedians and members of the George Sanchez Production Company. They allow any video to be posted on the site, until it is deemed un-funny by voters, when it will be sent to “die” (Funny or Die). When faced with the decision about what subject will yield the most positive votes, two men thought of Shakespeare. “[Secret Shakespeare Man](#)” is a Hungarian swordsman on a mission to get the audience to read all the sonnets. The clip includes a secret agent tune, swordplay, and a mask, oh my! The second, posted by a “[Canadian guy in a Toque](#)” claims that it is heavily abridged, but the clip is still relatively long for the site. He is reading *Hamlet*, after all, so it is to be expected. These men could choose anything funny that could get a visceral response from a majority of viewers: slapstick, toilet humor, or anything

vulgar and not so cognitively demanding as a spoof on Shakespeare. What does it indicate that Shakespeare is even present in these, perhaps the lowest of the low media?

What does this mean for Shakespeare scholars? Why include brief, vague allusions such as *Hamlet's* address to Yorick's skull in an obnoxious adult cartoon? Why bash Shakespeare when your audience may be some of the last individuals who truly appreciate his work? Why make plays into flashy, fluffy movies for teenagers? Maybe an answer can be discerned by one last scene, from *Clueless*, itself a recreation of Jane Austen's *Emma*. When the ditzy main character, Cher's step-brother's elitist girlfriend mistakenly identifies Hamlet as the speaker of "to thine own self be true," she is quickly corrected. The girlfriend scoffs, and says she thinks she remembers *Hamlet* accurately. Cher says: "Well I remember Mel Gibson accurately, and he didn't say that. That Polonius guy did."

Is Zeffirelli speaking truth, then? Are these repackagings of Shakespeare the only ones young people can grasp? Or is Shakespeare getting more obscene and insipid because print is unable to keep up with the exponential growth of electronic media? Is he in fact, as Burt projects, yet against all previous indications, mortal? Or "just another dead white male, soon to be obsolete?" (Burt 1). I believe the gift that mass media has given is a greater appreciation for quality entertainment from any genre, and more eclectic tastes. Maybe the "nerdy" English major can laugh at the antics of Kenny and Kyle. Maybe the "stuffy" academic can see the validity of non-canonical literature. Or maybe there will always be tension between the purist Shakespeare scholar and an opportunistic entertainment industry. What can be discerned absolutely, however, is that Shakespeare is everywhere, in some form or another, and he will not be disappearing anytime soon.

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