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Christine Sustek Williams  
*Lee University*

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**A Tale of Two Shakespeares:  
Staging Shakespeare at Conservative Christian Colleges**

*Christine Sustek Williams*

*Lee University*

*American Theatre* publishes an annual list of the top ten plays in production in regional theatres each year and simply removes all Shakespeares from consideration. Otherwise the top ten list would simply be the top ten Bard List. However, when it comes to attempting Shakespeare on the college stage, I argue that many theatre teachers in higher education think twice, or even thrice, before brushing off the old complete works. Most students are quite intimidated when they reach for Shakespeare, having been told for many years that his work is hard to read and harder to understand. Add to that sentiment a common belief that Shakespeare is boring and old, and visions of theatrical dud are born. Ten years ago, those visions certainly appeared to me when setting out to direct Shakespeare at a small Baptist university of about 3200 students.

Because I had written my dissertation on the theatre of the Tudor period, and most of my scholarly papers dealt with that era, everyone assumed that I must be an expert on Shakespeare and desired to direct nothing but plays by The Bard. However, my research centered neither on Shakespeare, nor the London stage, but on local, provincial theatrical performance activity in Tudor England. Truth be told, I was terrified of coming near Shakespeare as a director. I felt wholly inadequate in my abilities to take this great literary giant and put him on my little stage at a small Baptist university in South Carolina. What if I directed it poorly? What if I did not catch something I should have caught? And even more difficult, how do I approach characters that do and say things that seemed to clash with my school's strict moral code. For instance,

an administrator suggested that I should produce a Shakespearian play that included drunken characters by portraying them as “silly and stupid” instead. However, despite my trepidations, I decided to tackle Shakespeare for the first time several years ago. I then had the confidence to do so again just last year. These two productions were quite challenging for reasons that had nothing to do with my fears about perceived inadequacies to produce the Bard. Instead they stemmed from far different issues.

In 2004, when a new assistant professor of theatre, I decided to dip my toe into the water with *The Taming of the Shrew* at my small Baptist university in South Carolina. The university's theatre program was growing, and the students were yearning for a challenge. I decided it was time to challenge them, and at the same time challenge my fears about directing Shakespeare. I chose *Shrew* simply because I believed it was one of the most popular Shakespearean plays, and easier for students and audiences to access. However, it also meant, as I discovered, I had chosen a play with quite a few “problems.”

First and foremost, how to deal with Kate? At the end of the play she is quite sadly, almost the epitome of the woman the Southern Baptist Convention would have been quite happy to support: broken, subdued, and submissive. The conservative Baptist perspective on my campus was that women could not be preachers, i.e. God did not use women to preach His Gospel and lead His people toward Christ. On a campus where a conservative Baptist mission was of paramount importance, women were reminded consistently that they were not equal to men. As a Christian, but not conservative Baptist, female, this (in my opinion) antiquated philosophy did not sit well.

The last thing I wanted to do was, however subtly, support the opinion that wives should be mild and meek. So, as I worked with the actress playing Kate, we talked a lot about who Kate was, and why, or why not, and how, or how not, she would make that

last speech. Ultimately, we decided that we did not believe Kate would let herself be broken. Instead, we believed that she was savvy enough to know that she needed to change tactics with Petruchio, but that she could still be a strong woman. We chose to make use of the idea presented in feminist performances of *Shrew* that the actress could display Kate's dissatisfaction with the turn of events through the way she delivered her lines, making it clear that she did not truly believe her words, but instead had learned how to play the game.

Lauren Love in "Resisting the Organic" talks about this method referring to her performance as Gwendelyon from *The Importance of Being Earnest*. In that performance she chose to address several lines directly to the audience to show that Gwendelyon did not really believe everything she said. Love writes, "when an actor manipulates subtext she gives the audience clues about the character's intentions which are not completely revealed on the surfaces of the words of the text."<sup>1</sup> We chose to utilize Love's theory for portraying Kate in our production of *The Taming of the Shrew*.

Other challenges born of the university's stated, Christian mission reared their heads during the production process. As a Baptist institution, the university resolutely disapproved of any form of drinking alcohol. I did not foresee any problem there—there are no immoral situations nor drunken scenes or characters in *Shrew*. However, a college administrator objected to a part in the final scene of the play, where Petruchio lifts his glass to offer a toast. When I stated that we would use water and glasses that did not give any hint of alcohol, I was told that the very word "toast" implied alcoholic beverages, so I must cut out that reference in performance.

I believe my then college administrators (like many other people) assumed that Shakespeare, an icon of "high culture," is quite clean in terms of language, and therefore relatively "safe" for a production at conservative, Christian university on a stage housed in a building with a steeple. Anyone who has studied Shakespeare

1 Lauren Love, "Resisting the Organic." *Acting (Re)Considered*. ed. Phillip Zarilli (New York: Routledge, 1995), 285.

closely knows that assumption is dead wrong. His plays are full of words, phrases, and *double-entendres* that would raise the eyebrows of many if their meanings were made plain in 21<sup>st</sup>-century English.

*Shrew* is no exception, and given my experience with an administrator over the mere implication of alcoholic beverage in *Shrew*'s script, I realized that my college administrators would object to any hints of sexuality on their stage. What then, for instance, was I to do with the hilarious exchanges in Act IV, scene 3 (lines 155-163)<sup>2</sup> between Petruchio, Grumio, and the Tailor about Kate's new gown—exchanges full of double-entendre?

**Petruchio:** Well, sir, in brief the gown is not for me.

**Grumio:** You are i'th' right, sir. 'Tis for my mistress.

**Petruchio:** (to the tailor) Go, take it up unto thy master's use.

**Grumio:** (to the tailor) Villain, not for they life. Take up my mistress' gown for thy master's use!

**Petruchio:** Why, sir, what's your conceit in that?

**Grumio:** O, sir, the conceit is deeper than you think for. 'Take up my mistress' gown to his master's use'—O fie, fie, fie!

We opted to eliminate the double-entendre by cutting the lines referring to "his masters use," resulting in an exchange among the characters that read:

**Petruchio:** Well, sir, in brief the gown is not for me.

**Grumio:** You are i'th' right, sir. 'Tis for my mistress.

**Petruchio:** (to the tailor) Go, take it up.

Sadly, without the double-entendre in the interplay of words, the truncated exchange lost any comic bite or purpose.

Fortunately, I was saved from further "cleansing" of the script because several of the sexually charged lines in *The Taming of the Shrew* slipped by administrators, actors, and audiences, who simply did not understand the references. A case in point: when rehearsing the wooing scene between Hortensio, Lucentio and Bianca in Act

2 *The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. G. Blakemore Evans (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974), 133.

III, scene 1 (lines 74-78),<sup>3</sup> Hortensio offers Bianca a gamut (diatonic scale) he has written. Bianca reads the “gamut of Hortensio:”

A—re—to plead Hortensio’s passion.  
 B—mi—Bianca, take him for thy lord,  
 C—fa, ut—that loves with all affection.  
 D—sol, re—one clef, two notes have I,  
 E—la, mi—show pity, or I die.

Obviously, as with many other lines in the script, I chose not to explain to my student-actors the sexual double-entendre contained in the phrase “one clef, two notes have I.” However, the actor playing Petruchio was watching the scene and noticed the line. A particularly quick-witted student, he looked at me and said: “does that mean what I think it means?” I nodded yes, but also gestured to him to refrain from sharing his discovery with the rest of the cast. The double-entendre went unnoticed by cast and audience alike.

As is obvious, these modifications and deletions resulted in a much tamer, but less uninhibited and funny, version of *The Taming of the Shrew*. And my efforts to shape the production to suit the play to this production environment meant my student performers were deprived of the opportunity to appreciate the full richness of the language and sophistication of the script. The experience of directing *The Taming of the Shrew* at that conservative, Baptist university opened my eyes to the challenges of producing Shakespeare in a college promoting what I would call a Christian mission. It made it clear to me that many of Shakespeare’s plays could not work well in such an atmosphere. How on earth, for example, would one deal with the scene between Caliban and the drunken butler Stefano in *The Tempest*, or comparable scenes in *Twelfth Night* featuring Sir Toby Belch and Sir Andrew Aguecheek? How much comedic dialogue would one need to cut from *Comedy of Errors*, *Midsummer Night’s Dream*, *As You Like It*—in other words most, if not all, of Shakespeare’s comedies—because of sexual puns and double-

<sup>3</sup> *Riverside*, 125.

entendres? For that matter, how could I stage scenes in *Romeo and Juliet* involving Mercutio, Benvolio, and Romeo, or certain scenes from *Hamlet* (like Ophelia's mad scene), for the same reasons? Because of these issues I did not attempt another Shakespearean production during my tenure there.

In 2007 I moved to Lee University in Cleveland, Tennessee. Lee University, a bit larger than my previous university (about 4300 students), also is also a Christian, liberal arts university, affiliated with the Church of God, a Pentecostal denomination. It too professes a similar moral atmosphere as my previous institution, stressing avoidance of the consumption of alcohol and promiscuous sexuality. Actually, students at Lee University have more rigorous religious obligations than required at my previous university. Students at Lee are required to attend two chapel meetings per week; the Baptist university only required two chapel meetings per month.

The theatre program at Lee University is not much older than that of my previous university, but it is larger and far more developed. For instance, at the Baptist university the only theatre venue was a large, 1500-seat auditorium that also served as a convocation hall and chapel. At Lee there are two venues, a 450-seat auditorium and an 100-seat thrust theatre. Administrators at Lee also are far less suspicious of theatre and more trusting of its theatre faculty.

When, in the Fall of 2010, I decided to try my hand at another Shakespeare, it had been well over six years since the university's last Shakespearean production. An entire "generation" of students had graduated without seeing Shakespeare performed on the Lee University stages, and as when I staged *Shrew* at the Baptist university, I had students begging for the challenge. I decided to tackle a quite different play, the less-than-often-produced *The Winter's Tale*. Many questioned my choice, wondering why I choose such a lesser-known play. My vice president described it

quite aptly as a “schizophrenic” play with one half comedy and one half tragedy. However, I felt the themes in the play of forgiveness, resurrection, and love were suitable themes for a Christian college, and also for today’s world at large, and that our audiences would have no issues about the dramaturgical oddity of the script.

I was not faced with the issue of “cleansing” of the script that I had faced during *The Taming of the Shrew*. At Lee University the content and possibly explicit words were not an issue. For example, the character King Leontes’ twice calls the baby Perdita a “bastard” (Act II, scene 3, lines 74, 76).<sup>4</sup> Administrators deemed that the word was appropriate to the overall message of the play. It is important to note, however, that administrators at Lee would object to the word “bastard” if used in the more colloquial, modern sense the word.

I did have doubts about the appropriateness of what might have been an “eyebrow-raising’ speech for our primarily Pentecostal audience. In Act IV, scene 4, a servant describes a peddler’s wares:

He hath songs for man or woman, of all sizes; no milliner can so fit his customers with gloves: he has the prettiest love-songs for maids: so without bawdry, which is strange; with such delicate burthens of dildos and fadings, ‘jump her and thump her;’ and where some stretch-mouthed rascal would, as it were, mean mischief and break a foul gap into the matter, he makes the maid to answer ‘Whoop, do me no harm, good man;’ puts him off, slights him, with ‘Whoop, do me no harm, good man (lines 191-200)’<sup>5</sup>

The speech is full of sexual innuendos, and though a modern audience might not noticed them, it certain would notice the word “dildos.” (Interestingly, this is the first use in print of the word.) Because of its length, Act IV, scene 4 became dubbed in rehearsals as the Bible” scene,” and therefore I was in the midst of cuts to shorten it. This was a perfect speech to omit. The

4 *Riverside*, 1579.

5 *Riverside*, 1590.

servant had already announced that the peddler was selling numerous items and waiting for admittance, so cutting this speech caused no harm dramaturgically or to the humor of the scene. To my knowledge we received no complaints regarding the language in the play.

I must add that I believe the different venues in which I produced *Shrew* and *Winter's Tale* may have some bearing on the vitality of the two productions, and especially on the differing attitudes of administrators concerning "cleansing" scripts at my previous institution and Lee University. *The Taming of the Shrew* was performed in a large, multi-purpose space that doubled as a chapel. *The Winter's Tale* was produced in a small theatre that holds no connection to a worship space.

*Shrew* was performed in a large, forty-foot proscenium theatre with over 1500 seats. The space is almost cavernous, creating a distance and lack of immediacy between the performers and audiences, which, in my opinion, dampened down much of the comedy and flow of the play. Added to this, the space functioned more often as a church for the campus community than as a theatre. This dynamic complicated performances on this stage. Therefore, consciously or unconsciously, university administrators and audiences had preconceptions about what was appropriate to perform on a stage that twice a month featured sermons, praise and worship.

*The Winter's Tale*, on the other hand, was performed in a small theatre. Audience members were never far from the action, with our aisles leading through the audience to the stage. Characters entered and exited amidst the audience, and on occasion some action occurred in the aisles. This was a venue that lent itself to an intimate experience for the audience. Audience members were never distanced from the action. At the same time, I believe

the fact that *Winter's Tale* was produced on a stage that had no connection to a worship space made a difference in what administrators considered appropriate for performance. I do question whether the multiple uses of the word "bastard" in *Winter's Tale*, even in its most correct context, would have been deemed appropriate by administrators if performed on our main stage—a 450-seat auditorium that twice weekly serves as place of worship, and where some main stage productions are scheduled for Homecoming and Spring Recruitment days.

In *The Republic*, Plato argues that theatre is dangerous because it would expose citizens to impure ideas. This concept seems alive and well on some college campuses. Certainly theatre has the power to ask questions that some would rather they not be asked. Theatre also can expose audiences to ideas, people, and themes that some might deem questionable for young minds. *The Taming of the Shrew* drifted too closely in that direction for administrators' comfort at my previous institution. This may account for much of the intervention that resulted in "sanitizing" the script. Some of administrators' concerns also may have arisen from the newness of the theatre program. Unlike Lee University, with its older and more established theatre program, the program there had not yet established sufficient trust between its theatre program and the administration.

*Christine Sustek Williams is Discipline Coordinator and Assistant Professor of Theatre at Lee University, Cleveland, Tennessee, where she directs, and teaches a variety of theatre courses.*