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Is Shakespeare the Coca-Cola of Literature?

UNH Professor explores the popularity of the Bard in new book

By Erika L. Mantz
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DURHAM, N.H. - A University of New Hampshire English professor explores how modern popular culture has appropriated and refashioned Shakespeare as a cultural icon in his new book, "Shakespeare and Modern Popular Culture."

"Popular culture is often described as all the things other than high art," says Douglas Lanier, associate professor of English at UNH and a Shakespeare scholar. "Things like movies, TV, radio, comic books, children's books, detective and romance novels. Typically these things have been thought of as a world apart from Shakespeare, but the line has blurred.

"In the book I argue that the intersection between Shakespeare and popular culture is an important subject to study," Lanier says, "and the popular appropriation of Shakespeare's works doesn't necessarily mean that Shakespeare has been dumbed down in the process. Because of popular culture, Shakespeare is the one author students consistently know something about before they walk into a literature classroom. Popular culture is one means by which Shakespeare remains in wide cultural circulation, read and performed in our own day, though not in traditional formats or with conventional meanings."

Lanier worked on the project for close to eight years, and says it wouldn't have been possible without the Internet. The Internet allowed him to tap the collective wisdom of fan communities outside the academic establishment, and more easily create a database of examples of Shakespeare in popular culture.

It is particularly interesting to note, Lanier says, that in the late 16th and early 17th centuries, when Shakespeare was writing, his work
would have been considered popular culture. Many people were not literate and theater was accessible to everyone.

Shakespeare remained a popular author until the 19th century, Lanier says, when theaters were no longer mass-market entertainment and professional Shakespearean scholarship established itself. In the last 100 years, Shakespeare has become 'high art,' the stuff of classroom assignments and highbrow reverence. What Lanier calls 'Shakespop' continues the 19th century tradition of popular Shakespeare into the 20th century. There is genuine information and pleasure to be found in such popular adaptations, he says.

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