

Cancelling Will S.

by Phyllis Chesler



“Woke” culture is hardly even awake. It is a devouring force that means to eviscerate all excellence that has come before: The Greek classics. Chaucer. Milton. These authors are all white cisgender Western men – enough said.

A friend and I were wondering how long it would be before [School Library Journal](#), librarian Amanda MacGregor conceded that Shakespeare was a “genius wordsmith” but that

his work is full of “problematic, outdated ideas, with plenty of misogyny, racism, homophobia, classism, anti-Semitism, and misogynoir.”

I do not know what “misogynoir” is. Might it refer to *Fifty Shades of Grey* which, as I understand it, does not even reach the shiny silver boot buckle of *The Story of O*.

According to Ben Jonson, Shakespeare “was not of an age but for all time!” “Woke” folk ask: But is he “relevant?” Do we want to keep privileging his stories over and above those written more recently, by women, people of color, queers, trans, and especially non-westerners?

As a founder of Women’s Studies which, at its long-ago best, sought to expand, not retract the Canon, even I think that “relevance” is a bit overrated. Call me crazy, but I like time-traveling, I enjoy being transported to an earlier time, another place, which is why I do not love most modernizations of operas that were set in castles of yore, or on wild heaths and shorelines. We lose something if we wrench them out of their place in time and set them in a more recent time. *Rigoletto* in Frank Sinatra’s Las Vegas, ITAL Gianni Schicchi and *Macbeth* both set in the 1930s.

I stand almost alone. In 1984, the beloved poet, novelist, and essayist, Audre Lorde, wrote that “The Master’s tools will never dismantle the Master’s House,” and yet she used the English language and read widely. Nevertheless, those in favor of “cancelling” writers take Lorde at her word and believe one can create out of the thinnest air, the air that only they themselves can breathe today.

All the teachers and professors quoted in the *School Library Journal*, feel that it’s time for the Bard to retire or be presented in accessible ways. Worse: If one insists on using him, one must use him against himself. A teacher must discuss his biases and failings – which are considerable and possibly

not forgivable.

According to Arizona State University English professor and Shakespeare scholar, Ayanna Thompson: "Shakespeare was a tool used to 'civilize' Black and brown people in England's empire." (She capitalizes Black, but not brown). Shakespeare's plays were "part of the colonizing efforts of the British in imperial India."

I am a woman and yet I never felt myself "colonized" by Shakespeare. His plays have given me great joy. I am thinking of one extraordinary performance at the Globe/Sam Wanamaker Theater in London. The players performed *The Tempest* and the ensemble acting moved me from laughter to awe. Enchanted, I did not want to leave that theater and was one of the last to depart.

Another teacher, in a Michigan high school, Jeffrey Austin, is quoted as saying that teachers need to "challenge the whiteness of the assumption that Shakespeare's works are "universal."

Claire Brunke, a Washington State public school teacher, exiled Shakespeare from her classroom. She wanted to stop "centering the narrative" on works by "white, cisgender, heterosexual men."

Cameron Campos, an English teacher at a high school in Alberta, Canada skipped Shakespeare and chose the works of an Indigenous author instead.

Sarah Mulhern Gross, an English teacher in New Jersey said that when she teaches *Romeo and Juliet*, she analyzes it in terms of its "toxic masculinity."

Silly me. And all this while, I thought *Romeo and Juliet* was a play about young, doomed love, about how two teenagers, a boy and girl, were willing to break with their hot-blooded feuding families for the sake of first love – and to commit suicide

for that love as well. I thought it was a story of love and death, a tragic tale about tribal family quarrels and how two youngsters sought to heal that breach through marriage. My God! The play is *West Side Story* but without music, only with immortal verse.

To be fair, the high school teachers are trying to reach their students but in doing so they are encouraging narcissism and ignorance. Everything has to be about now! Me! My world! Yes, but this also cheats students of their heritage, which they can build on, critique, reject.

This world view is one that leads to statue toppling and erasure of historical figures who, by our lights, are flawed, unacceptably so. Out with Lincoln and Washington.

Lorena German, an Austin educator insists that “your kids will be fine if they don’t read Shakespeare.” Instead, she suggests Amiri Baraka, Zora Neale Hurston, Ntozake Shange, and Athol Fugard as also “deep and powerful.” They are. But they are very recent, written in the 20th century. Does she believe that their focus on Black life in America or Fugard’s white anti-apartheid views are more universal than Shakespeare? Why not teach them all? Why not read them all – in excerpted form if time is the salient issue?

If Shakespeare is taught at the high school level, even in part, I would be open to also teaching the most creative “retellings” of his plays. As long as both are taught, not either/or.

In terms of the colonization critique: Let me note the following. V.S. Naipaul, a Caribbean-based Indian writer and Suzanna Arundhati Roy, also an Indian writer, both won the distinguished British Man Booker Prize. Neither of them refused it. Naipaul was also knighted. Jean Rhys, a Caribbean-born and bred writer (Dominican Creole mother, a Welsh father), wrote a wondrous prequel to *Jane Eyre* titled *The Wide*

Sargasso Sea. I assume that she read Charlotte Bronte in order to do so. Rhys was appointed a Commander of the British Empire for her writing. She did not refuse the honor.

My point: While I may reject [Naipaul's misogyny](#) and cruelty to his wives, I would never dream of refusing to read his work. And while I disagree, most profoundly, with Roy's Marxism and anti-Zionism – that would never compel me to “cancel” her or refuse to read her novels and essays. Although we may be ideologically and geographically apart, we have inherited a literary legacy that spans the continents.

Jean-Paul Sartre, in an Introduction to Paul Nizan's *Aden Arabie*, describes what happened to his friend, the [American Thinker](#).