Courtney Lehmann, an English professor at University of the Pacific, recently published a book, “Screen Adaptations: Shakespeare's 'Romeo and Juliet,' the Relationship Between Text and Film.”

Shakespeare and soccer. Soccer and Shakespeare.

Courtney Lehmann likes the alliterations. The iteration isn't bad, either.

The successive S's fill two big chapters in her life story.

"I learned to approach everybody with acceptance and gratitude," said Lehmann, a University of the Pacific English professor and author. "Until proven otherwise. Then I'd slide-tackl them."

Lehmann, who first "dialed in" to William Shakespeare's lyricism as a child, has crafted a career focused on teaching - and writing about - the British bard's timeless masterworks.

Her life-long passion for soccer - she played on four University of North Carolina national championship teams - underlines the energetic spirit and enthusiasm with which she approaches her literary love and social activism.

Today is Shakespeare's birth date. He would be 447.

"I thought, 'This is pretty cool stuff,' " said Lehmann, who, at 6, watched a New Haven, Conn., production of 'Romeo and Juliet' with her mom. "I started to gravitate toward Shakespeare. It's silly, but I also wanted to be the first woman Major League Baseball player. I had an elaborate scheme."

Lehmann's latest elaboration on the all-time, all-star playwright's schemata is "Screen Adaptations: Shakespeare's 'Romeo and Juliet,' the Relationship Between Text and Film." The 288-page paperback, her fifth book, was released on March 15 by London's A&C Black Publishers Limited.

It traces and analyzes the filmed evolution of Shakespeare's tragedy of "star-crossed lovers" - from 1902 silent, black-and-white shorts through glossy contemporary Hollywood adaptations.
There are detailed - but not overly "academic" - examinations of productions by Baz Luhrmann and Franco Zeffirelli as well as "West Side Story" (1961), originally a Broadway musical based on the "Romeo and Juliet" love story, which dates back to antiquity.

The 1961 Academy Award winner, however, "contains not a single line from Shakespeare," Lehmann points out.

"I've pretty much always been into pop culture," said Lehmann, 41, who's taught at Pacific since 1998 and spent two years researching and writing the book. "As a medium, film is the most obvious place. In theater, there's less way to get the message out to as many people."

"Romeo and Juliet" (1597), with its theme of forbidden love and broken-hearted death played out amid acrid family rivalry, remains universal.

"Everybody's familiar with the story on some level," Lehmann said. "Almost everyone thinks Shakespeare invented it. He really didn't. His is just the most compelling one. He used language to convince the audience that two people can fall in love and, in 48 hours, take their own lives over not being able to be with each other. He telescopes it and puts so much into a play based on a poem and Italian folklore."

"While "Measure for Measure" (1604) remains Lehmann's No. 1 Shakespearean hit, she said, "I absolutely adore" film director Luhrmann's "William Shakespeare's Romeo + Juliet" (1996): "There are so many alienation effects that it shocks viewers. If you get past that, there's real exquisite visual poetry that's equivalent to the spoken poetry of 'Romeo and Juliet.' "

She's also fond of "Water" (2007). The last in a trilogy (after "Fire" and "Earth"), it's an "exquisite, controversial" film by India's Deepa Mehta. She uses Shakespeare's "trope" to illuminate the status of women in Indian culture.

Films by Australia's Luhrmann and Italy's Zeffirelli ("Romeo and Juliet," 1968) are subjects of separate chapters. So is "West Side Story," directed by Robert Wise and Jerome Robbins. Crafted by Leonard Bernstein, Stephen Sondheim, Arthur Laurents and Robbins, it began as a daring artistic Broadway breakthrough (1957). It remains one of the most popular movie musicals ever.

The literal absence of Shakespearian language in the film isn't a disqualifier. Like the stage play, it's set in Manhattan, N.Y., and replaces the Montagues and Capulets of Verona, Italy, with white (Jets) and Puerto Rican (Sharks) street gangs. (Shakespeare first used the word "punk" 407 years ago.)

Nor is the ongoing plaint that Shakespeare is too hard to understand.

"You have to ask them to abandon themselves and be reckless with prose and poetry," said Lehmann of dispelling Shakespeare fear among students. "Speak it out loud, even if they don't know what a word means. Once you get into the zone, it's like a Harlequin romance (novel). It's learning to trust yourself to read.

"The way the beauty of it opens up to interpretation, it's in the eye of the beholder. Once they get into Shakespeare's zone, they really find themselves absorbed by the language and time period. It's as if nothing has changed."
Lehmann, born in Summit, N.J., discovered such magic at 6, charmed and wondering to mom why men were kissing each other in "Romeo and Juliet" (women couldn't participate in the Elizabethan age).

"I saw some things I'd never seen before," Lehmann said with a giggle.

From an early age, she read a lot and was fascinated by Arthurian legends and Camelot - "all that Shakespeare emerged from. I found myself very, very excited by these stories that Shakespeare would transform in his own way."

In junior high, she "fell in love" with Shakespeare's Mercutio ("Romeo and Juliet"). Baseball and soccer contended for her affections.

Lehmann was known in New Hope-Solebury, Pa., and then Newtown, Conn., for playing shortstop successfully on boys Little League teams - "I once stole home with a head-first dive" - and excelling as a soccer goalie.

At Newtown High School, she had to "begrudgingly" switch to softball while continuing her all-star ways in soccer and taking all the advance-placement English classes possible.

Lehmann enrolled at North Carolina, hoping to play softball. That didn't work out. So a friend convinced her to give soccer a shot. Lehmann impressed the women's soccer coach during a practice. At 5-foot-4 and 120 pounds, she became the "shortest (NCAA) Division 1 goalie in the country."

Lehmann was a non-scholarship goalie and "utility" player on four national championships teams, scoring the final goal in the NCAA title game - a 6-0 victory over Connecticut - her senior year. On ESPN.

She stayed close to Shakespeare as an English major, spending one summer at England's Oxford University).

That continued (in the off-season) at Indiana University, where she achieved her masters and doctoral goals in English. She was tutored (in literature and women's issues) by Linda Charnes and Susan Gubar: "Between those two, you couldn't ask for any better role models."

Except, of course, for parents Carol, who taught art in secondary schools and migrant labor camps, and Charles, who worked in public relations for Campbell's Soup Co.

"The dinner-table conversation from when I was very young was two hours talking about issues," she said. "Language and ideas came naturally to me."

Social activism has been a family trait and tradition. Lehmann, whose list of credits is voluminous, has been director of the Pacific Humanities Center since 2002. She and sister Brooke, 40 - a filmmaker and Washington, D.C., child advocate - founded Women Doing It for Themselves. They're making a second trip to Haiti