

**ANTI-BARDOLATRY THROUGH THE AGES —  
OR, WHY VOLTAIRE, TOLSTOY, SHAW, AND  
WITTGENSTEIN DIDN'T LIKE SHAKESPEARE.**

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By Erin Sullivan  
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Long before today's debates about English literary heritage, compulsory school readings, and whether or not England's national poet, William Shakespeare, should remain safe from the national curriculum's axe, members of the European public passionately debated the value of Shakespeare's plays and their place in an increasingly modern world. Indeed, more than one hundred and fifty years before Harold Bloom declared that Shakespeare invented the human, the poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge similarly promised in him a 'wisdom deeper even than our consciousness' and characterised his talents as god-like. In his public lectures, Coleridge assured his audiences that Shakespeare's art was of such majesty that every line was instantly recognisable – 'not a sentence could be read without its being discovered if it were Shakespeare' – and, furthermore, that it was so noble as to be morally impeccable, 'keeping at all times the high road of life' and making its 'readers better as well as wiser'. Notes from Coleridge's lectures, writings, and conversations reveal his unequivocal devotion to Shakespeare, expressed to its full extent in his discussion of the playwright's rhythm: 'He goes on kindling like a meteor through the dark atmosphere; yet, when the creation in its outline is once perfect, then he seems to rest from his labour, and to smile upon his work, and tell himself that it is very good'.<sup>1</sup> In his version of Genesis, Coleridge envisioned Shakespeare as a divine Creator, shaping form out of chaos as he dashed off a few hundred lines of his sublime iambic pentameter. The effort was minimal, the result 'very good', and the appropriate response on the part of the reader humble veneration.

Though Coleridge is an extreme example of Bard-worship in the history of Shakespearian criticism, the inclination to praise Shakespeare and his works indiscriminately has not vanished from the literary landscape. In popular culture, theatre, and even academia, Shakespeare enjoys a peerless status often beyond the reach of negative criticism. In *'Bad' Shakespeare*, Maurice Charney warns against such 'Shakespeare fundamentalism', writing, '[t]he set of attitudes conveniently classified as Bardolatry prevents

us from understanding Shakespeare as a working dramatist and poet rather than The Bard, before whom all others are as chaff'.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, Graham Holderness argues that in order to overcome bardolatry, our zeal for Shakespeare must 'be subjected to analysis, its ideological content disclosed, and its hegemonic position challenged by the invoking of alternative perspectives'.<sup>3</sup> Critics like Charney and Holderness write against the notion of the canon as a static, stagnant body of literature and for the evaluation of literary works on their own terms. They challenge other critics to take on 'The Bard', for, as Charney writes, '[t]he best criticism has always questioned the assumptions of the established canon'.<sup>4</sup>

A number of writers, both before and after Coleridge, have issued a similar call to arms, taking up their quills, pens, and typewriters against the canonisation of Shakespeare as a literary saint. While many academic and popular writers have supported this cause, this article focuses on the efforts of four of Shakespeare's most famous opponents: Voltaire, Leo Tolstoy, George Bernard Shaw, and Ludwig Wittgenstein. Significant critical attention has been given to each of these writers and their personal distaste for Shakespeare, but none of it has, it seems, considered the central elements of their critiques simultaneously in search of unifying characteristics. By examining their anti-Shakespeare tracts together, this piece seeks to better understand the aspects of Shakespeare's plays and legacy that pose particular problems for some of his readers – and, in this case, some of his most illustrious ones. While the piece in no way aims to defend or refute their arguments, it does consider and even sympathise with their critiques in an attempt to shed light on difficult questions relating to aesthetic taste, literary merit, and the processes of cultural survival. Voltaire, Tolstoy, Shaw, and Wittgenstein lived and worked at different times and in different places over the course of two hundred years, but their writings about Shakespeare evidence similarities that can perhaps help us to contextualise historically continuing debates about Shakespeare's value today.<sup>5</sup> On the most

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<sup>2</sup> Maurice Charney, *'Bad' Shakespeare: Reevaluations of the Shakespeare Canon* (London: Associated UP, 1988), p. 9.

<sup>3</sup> Graham Holderness, 'Bardolatry: or, The Cultural Materialist's Guide to Stratford-upon-Avon', in *The Shakespeare Myth*, ed. by Graham Holderness (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1988), p. 10.

<sup>4</sup> Charney, p. 9.

<sup>5</sup> When these writers invoke 'Shakespeare' they do so broadly, implying his entire corpus as well as his cultural legacy. When they do direct their comments to specific works, however, they invariably refer to the author's plays and not his poems. Furthermore, they all respond

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<sup>1</sup> Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *The Romantics on Shakespeare*, ed. by Jonathon Bate (London: Penguin, 1992), pp. 128, 130-132, 162.

fundamental level, each writer challenged Shakespeare's artistry, pointing out both the aesthetic and the moral failings of his works. At other times, less offended by the construction or content of the plays, they criticised what they saw as an overemphasis on Shakespeare in schools, universities, theatres, and culture in general, arguing that this lasting popularity was more a testament to intellectual conformity than to the value of his works. More menacingly, a few saw Shakespeare's hegemonic influence as a threat to new literature, arguing that the perpetual deification of an old genius can be stifling to the development of new ones. In every case, these men saw the glorification of Shakespeare as boring and predictable, and accordingly they called for a regime change in literary might.

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Into the eighteenth century it was not only permissible, but even commonplace to discuss Shakespeare's artistic failings. Alexander Pope, in the preface to his 1725 edition of Shakespeare's plays, pointed out the writer's numerous and even surmounting faults: 'It must be own'd', he wrote, 'that with all these great excellencies, he has almost as great defects; and that as he has certainly written better, so he has perhaps written worse, than any other'.<sup>6</sup> In France, Voltaire similarly voiced his objections to Shakespeare's artistry, writing in 1768 letter, '[h]is is a fine but untutored nature: he has neither regularity, nor propriety, nor art: in the midst of his sublimity he sometimes descends to grossness, and in the most impressive scenes to buffoonery: his tragedy is chaos, illuminated by a hundred shafts of light'.<sup>7</sup> Like Pope, his contemporary and friend, Voltaire judged Shakespeare by Augustan aesthetic standards, which valued classical form, decorum, and learned wit; while he allowed that the plays were works of genius, he lamented their lack of style and taste. Though in his early career Voltaire had been a great advocate of Shakespeare, introducing the playwright to the French public and translating portions of his work into French,<sup>8</sup> in his later life he

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to the experience of *reading* Shakespeare's plays, as opposed to seeing them in performance. Such a distinction is potentially very significant; Peter B. Lewis has documented Wittgenstein's positive encounters with Shakespeare in performance and has suggested that, had the philosopher attended the theatre more often, he might have changed his opinion about the Bard. See Lewis, 'Wittgenstein, Tolstoy, and Shakespeare', *Philosophy and Literature* 29 (2005), p. 253.

<sup>6</sup> Alexander Pope, *The Works of Shakespear*, vol. 1 (London, 1725), p. iv.

<sup>7</sup> Voltaire, 'On Shakespeare', in *Voltaire in His Letters*, ed. and trans. by S. G. Tallentyre (New York: Putnam, 1919), pp. 217-8.

<sup>8</sup> T. R. Lounsbury, *Shakespeare and Voltaire* (New York: Benjamin Blom, 1968), pp. 41, 47.

spoke with increasing vehemence about Shakespeare's 'unbridled' style and disregard for aesthetic harmony and the classical unities. In one evaluation of *Hamlet*, he declared it a 'vulgar and barbarous play which would not be supported by the lowest public of France and Italy [...]'. One would take this work to be a fruit of the inspiration of a drunken savage'.<sup>9</sup> Such flagrant language, from a Frenchman, no less, disconcerted proponents of Shakespeare in a way that Pope had not. Though several eighteenth-century Englishmen similarly critiqued Shakespeare's poetry as irregular and indecorous, Voltaire's belligerent manner coupled with his nationalistic overtones particularly offended Shakespeare's supporters, galvanising the debate between Bard-lovers and Bard-loathers.

When Tolstoy published 'Shakespeare and the Drama' in 1906, Coleridge, the Romantics, and bardolatry had long been a part of the critical landscape. By this time, speaking out against Shakespeare in any manner had become increasingly taboo, accounting at least in part for Tolstoy's fierce iconoclasm. During the course of his life Tolstoy read Shakespeare in Russian, German, and English, but he never found a translation or an edition that convinced him that the Bard was anything more than a bombastic hack.<sup>10</sup> Focusing his attention on *King Lear*, Tolstoy attacked the play's 'unnatural events, and yet more unnatural speeches', declaring the work 'a very bad, carelessly composed production, which, if it could have been of interest to a certain public at a certain time, cannot evoke amongst us anything but aversion and weariness'. In Shakespeare, Tolstoy found overblown rhetoric, tedious banter, and unbelievable events; in particular, he challenged the playwright's ability to compose unique and living characters, noting that '[a]ll his characters speak, not their own, but always one and the same Shakesperian pretentious and unnatural language, in which not only they could not speak, but in which no living man ever has spoken or does speak'. Using *King Lear* as a case study for his complaints, Tolstoy declared the characters' struggles artificial, the events wholly unbelievable, and the play's death-ridden conclusion absurd'.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Qtd. by Theodore Besterman in his introduction to *Voltaire on Shakespeare* (Genève: Institut et Musée Voltaire, 1967), p. 16, 19.

<sup>10</sup> Leo Tolstoy, 'Shakespeare and the Drama', in *Tolstoy on Shakespeare*, ed. and trans. by V. Tchertkoff (London: Free Age, 1907), p. 8. Tolstoy specifies that he read August Wilhelm Schlegel's German translation of Shakespeare, known for its poetic and Romantic rendering.

<sup>11</sup> Tolstoy, pp. 20, 34, 37-8.

Like Voltaire, who in the eighteenth century judged Shakespeare by his neo-classical standards of drama, Tolstoy condemned Shakespeare at least in part for failing to conform to his nineteenth-century notions of art and literature. His demands for naturalism in character and plot were characteristic of the tastes and values of his time and were, consequently, realised in his own novels. G. Wilson Knight, a famous Shakespearian scholar of the early twentieth century, came to a similar, though slightly more indignant, conclusion, implying that Tolstoy hated Shakespeare because Shakespeare did not write like him. Speaking of Tolstoy's call for a 'new form' of drama, Knight wrote:

What 'new form' did Tolstoy expect? Probably a strictly ethical drama, concerned, not with theology, poetic symbolism, death and resurrection, that world of high and creative imagination proper to great art, but rather with the fine simplicities of goodness, human sacrifice, human labour, human love.<sup>12</sup>

While Knight acknowledged the dangers of bardolatrous praise, he also saw Tolstoy's critique of Shakespeare as small-minded and egocentric. For like Voltaire before him, Tolstoy placed Shakespeare within his own aesthetic frame and, not surprisingly, did not like what he saw.

Decades after Coleridge's lectures, George Bernard Shaw also attacked Shakespeare for his deficiencies, a fact that outraged many readers during his time. In a 1896 theatre review, Shaw described *Cymbeline* as 'stagey trash of the lowest melodramatic order, in parts abominably written, throughout intellectually vulgar, and judged in point of thought by modern intellectual standards, vulgar, foolish, offensive, indecent, and exasperating beyond all tolerance'. For Shaw, the incredible and extraordinary aspects of Shakespeare's plays were out of place in the modern theatre, 'where a direct illusion of reality is aimed at'. On the brink of a new century and a new modernism, Shaw looked for stirring, direct, and even blunt realism in theatre, and accordingly he found Shakespeare's free use of intervening gods, wandering ghosts, and miraculous reunions difficult to palate. To emphasise his distaste for Shakespeare's stylistics, he often resorted to violent exaggeration:

With the single exception of Homer, there is no eminent writer, not even Sir Walter Scott, whom I can despise so entirely as I despise Shakespear [...]. The intensity of my impatience with him occasionally reaches such

a pitch, that it would positively be a relief to me to dig him up and throw stones at him.<sup>13</sup>

While Shaw acknowledged Shakespeare's poetic mastery, he found the plays too fantastic for the realism and seriousness of the modern stage. Such spectacle may have suited Elizabethan theatre-goers, but Shaw, like Tolstoy, demanded something new for his era.

Though not a dramatist or novelist, the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein also grappled with the aesthetic problems he saw in Shakespeare's plays. In his notebooks of 1945-50, he accepted the fact that Shakespeare must be good, given that Milton, an author he deemed 'incorruptible', admired him, but he also expressed personal ambivalence towards the plays: 'I could only stare in wonder at Shakespeare; never do anything with him'. On various occasions, Wittgenstein described Shakespeare's plays as 'completely unrealistic' and full of 'asymmetry', presenting themselves as phenomena to be nodded at and admired, rather than processed and understood.<sup>14</sup> Another time he remarked on the difficulty of reading Shakespeare – 'I cannot read him *with ease*' (his italics) – but Peter B. Lewis has refuted the possibility that Wittgenstein had difficulties understanding Shakespeare's Elizabethan English. Rather, he suggests that the note reflects Wittgenstein's struggle to experience the plays as holistic and ultimately harmonious works of art. In this sense, the 'asymmetry' previously noted seems to refer to Shakespeare's tangled plotlines, mingled genres, and general privileging of open-ended complexity rather than unity and concord. Indeed, Lewis proposes 'some basic preference on Wittgenstein's part for an art that is more classically perspicuous, coherent and rigorous than is Shakespeare's' – in other words, a taste for a particular aesthetic order not unlike that of Voltaire, Tolstoy, and Shaw.<sup>15</sup> Wittgenstein's tone throughout remains exploratory and tentative, but many of his concessionary statements belie an underlying scepticism; though he wrote that he understood how 'someone may admire this [a Shakespeare play] & call it *supreme art*' (his italics), other notes suggest that he regarded Shakespeare as something cold and stately and, in truth, found the plays supremely artificial.<sup>16</sup> Too spectacular to reflect the real plight of human life,

<sup>12</sup> G. Wilson Knight, 'Shakespeare and Tolstoy', *The English Association Pamphlets: Writers, Poets and Playwrights*, 88 (1934), p. 27.

<sup>13</sup> George Bernard Shaw, *Shaw on Shakespeare*, ed. by Edwin Wilson (New York: Arno, 1980), pp. 54, 56.

<sup>14</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, ed. by G. H. von Wright (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), pp. 55e, 89e, 95-98e.

<sup>15</sup> Lewis, p. 249.

<sup>16</sup> Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, p. 98e.

Shakespeare's plays troubled Wittgenstein, compelling him to question their pre-eminent status in the literary canon.

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In addition to the aesthetic concerns these critics raised, they also cast doubt on the moral or philosophical relevance of Shakespeare's plays. Though Voltaire's arguments often focused on Shakespeare's artistic failings, his insistence on classical conventions was related to a sense that drama must demonstrate a dignity and greatness that will affect and even transform audiences. As Theodore Besterman explains, '[w]hen Voltaire insisted that everything on stage must be noble, what he really meant was something like this: it is the duty of a king and his court to give to the nation an example of noble behaviour, and it is the function of the stage to reflect this ideal'.<sup>17</sup> In this sense, Voltaire advocated a form of drama that was idealistic and even didactic, rather than representative of people as they truly are. It was important to him for drama to make its audiences *better*, and in his view Shakespeare's mix of high and low language, virtuous princesses and crude buffoonery, and tragic events with comic asides did not set the proper example for the greater public.

Similarly, Tolstoy, so vexed by Shakespeare's artistic failings, found fault in his lack of a moral purpose. According to him, great art must include three essential elements: a significant subject, technical mastery, and, above all, sincerity. In his estimation, Shakespeare was wanting in all three of these elements, but most urgently he lacked the third. 'Sincerity', Tolstoy wrote, 'is completely absent in all Shakespeare's works. In all of them one sees intentional artifice, one sees that he is not *in earnest*, but that he is playing with words'. For Tolstoy, Shakespeare's constant punning and his ability to make light of all subject matter confirmed his vulgarity and inadequacy as a dramatist. 'He alone can write a drama who has got something to say to men', Tolstoy wrote, and as he saw it, Shakespeare had nothing to offer beyond posturing and foolery.<sup>18</sup>

Several critics have pointed out that Tolstoy's attack on Shakespeare's morality was at least in part due to his religious conversion in his later life, though they are divided as to whether or not this was the prime factor motivating his antagonism.<sup>19</sup> In his

writings, Tolstoy asserted that 'human life is perfected solely through the development of the religious consciousness', and he critiqued Shakespeare's drama for being 'not only without any religious, but even without any moral intention'. He was careful, however, to indicate that by insisting on a 'religious consciousness' in art he was not demanding 'the direct inculcation of any religious truths in artistic guise', but rather 'the expression of a definite view of life [...] [that] penetrates, unknown to the author, through the whole of his work'. In this sense, it is perhaps more accurate to say that Tolstoy demanded an ethical rather than religious perspective from an author; the specific brand of religion was far less important than the clear presence of an organising principle of human morality. The fact that Shakespeare rarely, if ever, demonstrates a systematic ethical code infuriated Tolstoy and led him to extend his damning critique to the society in which Shakespeare found his success: the only reason he rose to fame in the first place, Tolstoy suggested, was that his 'irreligious and immoral frame of mind' suited the debauched tastes of the Elizabethan age.<sup>20</sup>

Shaw also struggled with the morality of Shakespeare's plays, and like Tolstoy he frequently attacked his lack of a significant philosophical purpose. Though he at times acknowledged the dramatist's artistic prowess, praising his facility with language and rhythm, he was less gracious when it came to the ethical content (or lack thereof) espoused in the plays. Shaw believed that 'in drama, as in all art, form is one thing and content another', and so while he could admire Shakespeare's aesthetic skill, he felt free to condemn his shallow content.<sup>21</sup> 'Shakespeare's weakness', he wrote, 'lies in his complete deficiency in that highest sphere of thought, in which poetry embraces religion, philosophy, morality [...] . [H]is characters have no religion, no politics, no conscience, no hope, no convictions of any sort'. Shaw accused Shakespeare, alongside Dickens, of concerning himself too much with the infinite variety of human life and too little with philosophical messages. The result, Shaw alleged, was often entertaining but ultimately trivial: 'in all their fictions there is no leading thought or inspiration for which any man could conceivably risk the spoiling of his hat in a shower, much less his life.'<sup>22</sup> Drama needed to be relevant, topical, and even didactic, showing 'a concern for contemporary

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<sup>17</sup> Besterman, p. 38.

<sup>18</sup> Tolstoy, pp. 61-3, 74.

<sup>19</sup> See, for example, Uri D. Levin, 'Shakespeare and Russian Literature: Nineteenth-Century Attitudes', in *Russian Essays on Shakespeare and His Contemporaries*, ed. by Alexandr Parfenov and Joseph G. Price (London: Associated UP, 1998), p. 94-5; Lewis, p. 242; George Orwell, 'Lear, Tolstoy

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and the Fool', in *Collected Essays* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1961), p. 423.

<sup>20</sup> Tolstoy, pp. 74-8.

<sup>21</sup> Edwin Wilson, Introduction, in *Shaw on Shakespeare* (New York: Arno, 1980), p. xviii.

<sup>22</sup> Shaw, pp. 5, 223-4.

social, political, and moral problems.<sup>23</sup> As with Tolstoy, Shaw found Shakespeare too easily disposed to clowning and light entertainment, contrasting greatly with the philosophical weightiness of Shaw's preferred playwright, Henrik Ibsen.

Though Wittgenstein did not in his notebooks explicitly challenge Shakespeare on moral or philosophical grounds, critic G. Steiner has suggested that the reason he continued to return to Shakespeare in his writing was that he was troubled by Shakespeare's lack of '*Dichtung*', or a knowledge 'made organic, by ethical perception'.<sup>24</sup> On more than one occasion, Wittgenstein questioned the relationship between artistry and truth in Shakespeare's plays, proposing that Shakespeare was 'perhaps a *creator of language* rather than a poet', who, when he 'displays the dance of human passions', does so 'in a dance, not naturalistically' (his italics).<sup>25</sup> Recognising the similarities between these critiques and those of Tolstoy, Lewis has proposed that Wittgenstein's difficulty with Shakespeare's lack of naturalism may in fact have stemmed from his reading of Tolstoy, but he is also at pains to point out Wittgenstein's more open-ended, 'interrogative' reaction to his indifference to Shakespeare's plays. While 'for Tolstoy there is no more to be said and damnation follows', Wittgenstein managed to find 'his way into the minds of those who are impressed by Shakespeare'.<sup>26</sup> Such a conclusion accords with Wittgenstein's own self-professed theories of art; concerning issues of taste, he was willing to accept differences as one of the phenomena of life, rather than challenge them in the manner of Tolstoy. In one of his lectures on aesthetics, he demonstrated little anxiety concerning the potentially vexing problem of personal preference: 'Suppose the landlady says: "This is hideous", and you say: "This is lovely" –all right, that's that'.<sup>27</sup>

In this way, Wittgenstein seems to consider taste a function of human life essentially devoid of logic, but such a conclusion did not preclude him from returning repeatedly to the question of Shakespeare and his high valuation in Europe and beyond. In his lecture, Steiner elaborates on the division between artifice and the sublime, questioning whether, for Wittgenstein, Shakespeare offered enough of a moral code or philosophy: '[i]s the 'creation of words' [...] really enough? Are Shakespeare's characters, at the last, more than Magellanic clouds of verbal energy turning around a void, around an absence of truth and moral

substance?'<sup>28</sup> According to Steiner, the answer was no, for while Wittgenstein could accept that Shakespeare was a master of literary craftsmanship, he could not bring himself to believe that Shakespeare's genius was that of a true *Dichter*. Ultimately, Wittgenstein's essential problem with Shakespeare was that he lacked the transcendent, organic knowledge that he thought an artist of his status must possess. In this sense, he allied himself with Voltaire, Tolstoy, and Shaw, who all doubted Shakespeare's moral-philosophical weight and were consequently reluctant to see him as a true artist.

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Alongside such aesthetic and moral concerns, these writers also attacked Shakespeare's reputation on the grounds of intellectual conformity. Even before the great rise of bardolatry, Voltaire accused England of loving Shakespeare not for his plays, but for his reputation: 'he has been their taste for two hundred years; and what is the taste of a nation for two hundred years, will be so for two thousand: this taste becomes a religion; and there is in your country a great many fanatics in regard to Shakespeare'.<sup>29</sup> Such blind appreciation first in England and then in France offended Voltaire, who had been, as previously noted, one of Shakespeare's first continental fans. Later in his life he expressed annoyance concerning his by then infamous relationship with England's Bard: 'I was the first writer who made Shakespeare known to the French. I can assure you that before my time no one in France knew anything about English poetry [...] . I have been your apostle and your martyr: truly, it is not fair that the English should complain of me'.<sup>30</sup> Such a statement betrays both Voltaire's enduring affinity for Shakespeare (despite his many qualms), as well as his general indignation at not being recognised for his contribution to the playwright's legacy. Though he was an early herald of English poetry and philosophy in France, his enthusiasm waned when English customs, tastes, and products began to enjoy a vogue in his homeland. Not only did he object to some men's efforts to erect a statue of Shakespeare in France, but he also belittled those 'other imitators [who] have recently erected a Vauxhall in Paris [...] as others still have distinguished themselves by calling their sirloins *rost-beef*'.<sup>31</sup> His distaste for this eruption of Anglomania in his home country motivated him to speak out against the dramatist he once praised, and this tendency for

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<sup>23</sup> Wilson, p. xiii.

<sup>24</sup> G. Steiner, 'A Reading Against Shakespeare', W. P. Ker Lecture, 1986 (Glasgow: Glasgow UP, 1987), p. 11.

<sup>25</sup> Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, pp. 95e, 42e.

<sup>26</sup> Lewis, pp. 247-8.

<sup>27</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief*, ed. by Cyril Barrett (Oxford: Blackwell, 1970), p. 11.

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<sup>28</sup> Steiner, p. 13.

<sup>29</sup> Voltaire, *Voltaire on Shakespeare*, p. 173.

<sup>30</sup> Voltaire, 'On Shakespeare', p. 217.

<sup>31</sup> Qtd. in Besterman, p. 14.

the critic to overcompensate for the public's idolatry carried on into the following centuries.

In 'Shakespeare and the Drama' Tolstoy began by declaring the essay a product of his 'own long established opinion about the works of Shakespeare, in direct opposition as it is to that established in the whole European world'. Such a dramatic opening suggests the degree to which Tolstoy felt he was in the minority concerning the subject at hand. In his condemnation of Shakespeare's aesthetic failings, he lamented society's overwhelming bias in favour of the Bard:

[F]ree-minded individuals, not inoculated with Shakespeare worship, are no longer to be found in our Christian society. In every man of society and time, from the first period of his conscious life, it has been inculcated that Shakespeare is a genius as poet and dramatist, and that all his writings are the height of perfection.

In an effort to undermine Shakespearian inoculation in society, and perhaps also to exorcise any doubts concerning the quality his own taste, Tolstoy attacked Shakespeare's deficiencies openly, declaring himself the only person with the courage to say that the Bard's genius was as illusory as the Emperor's new clothes. As for Shakespeare's popularity nearly three hundred years after the writing of his plays, Tolstoy described the phenomenon as part of a body of 'epidemic "suggestions"', which capture the public imagination for a time before thoroughly fading. Alongside Shakespeare he listed other passing suggestions such as the belief in witches, the search for the philosopher's stone, the Dutch craze for tulips, and popular interest in Darwin, who, in 1903, he alleged was 'beginning to be forgotten'.<sup>32</sup> It is easy to see now how Tolstoy miscalculated – neither Shakespeare nor Darwin has lost any prominence in his field, and while it might be difficult to assess empirically the size and influence of literary fame, it is safe to say that Darwin's theories greatly influenced the development of science in the twentieth century. With such hindsight, Tolstoy's writings can seem foolish, but one can also see how, as he was writing his tract, he felt strongly that the appreciation of Shakespeare had become unthinking and compulsory, a necessary sign of gentility in a bourgeois world, and that aggressive explanations were needed to free readers from the tyranny of Shakespeare-worship. In each line of his vitriol, one can hear his irritation with society at large and sense how much cultural weight he felt he was up against.

Shaw also felt the need to call the bluff of Shakespeare's adoring public, focusing his efforts specifically on England. Though he did not believe that

Shakespeare was entirely bad or that his admirers were entirely deceived, he still sympathised with Tolstoy's frustration. In a letter to V. Tchertkoff, Tolstoy's friend and translator, Shaw wrote:

As you know, I have striven hard to open English eyes to the emptiness of Shakespear's philosophy, to the superficiality and second-handedness of his morality, to his weakness and incoherence as a thinker [...] . Unfortunately, the English, being bad analysts, worship their great artists indiscriminately and abjectly, so that it is impossible to make them understand that Shakespeare's prodigious literary power, his fun, his mimicry, and the endearing qualities that earned him the title of 'the gentle Shakespeare' – all of which, whatever Tolstoy may say, are unquestionable facts – do not stand or fall with his absurd reputation as a thinker.<sup>33</sup>

Shaw admired Shakespeare's talents, but he also detested the 'indiscriminate' praise England heaped upon its national dramatist. By praising all of Shakespeare as perfect, Shaw felt that these admirers failed to appreciate the aspects of his writing that truly were superb. In one of his newspaper articles he complained, 'we are making too much of a fetish of our Swan. He was the greatest intellect we have produced, but the tendency to regard him as above criticism is bad [...] . It is false admiration to worship him as an infallible demi-god'.<sup>34</sup> Shaw found such blind admiration of Shakespeare ridiculous and, like Voltaire and Tolstoy, took it upon himself to balance the scales of cultural hegemony. The above excerpt shows, however, that when he lashed out at Shakespeare with his harshest criticism, he directed his venom more at the English populace than at the dramatist himself – indeed, it was Shaw who first coined the word 'bardolatry' to help with such attacks.<sup>35</sup>

Wittgenstein also expressed suspicion concerning Shakespeare's popularity, noting that, 'in western culture at least, he stands alone, & so, one can only place him by placing him wrongly'. Shakespeare's peerless positioning in the literary canon troubled Wittgenstein, prompting him to return repeatedly to the subject: 'I am deeply suspicious of most of Shakespeare's admirers', he remarked in one entry, adding in another, when 'I

<sup>33</sup> George Bernard Shaw, 'To V. Tchertkoff', in *Tolstoy on Shakespeare*, pp. 114, 116.

<sup>34</sup> Qtd. by Wilson, p. xvi.

<sup>35</sup> 'Bardolatry', *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (1989).

<sup>32</sup> Tolstoy, pp. 7, 34, 50, 64-7.

hear expressions of admiration for Shakespeare made by the distinguished men of several centuries, I can never rid myself of a suspicion that praising him has been a matter of convention'.<sup>36</sup> Though Wittgenstein never went so far as to discredit Shakespeare entirely, he always remained highly sceptical of the Bard's popularity, which he believed arose not 'from a genuine appreciation of his works but merely through an unquestioning herd mentality among the would-be literati'.<sup>37</sup> Like Voltaire, Tolstoy, and Shaw, Wittgenstein took a strong dislike to the adoring public that seemed to love Shakespeare more out of social convention than for any merit of his own. Their banal praise made him view Shakespeare's lasting reputation as a monument to intellectual conformity rather than to his great artistry.

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Finally, in addition to all the complaints thus far described, both Tolstoy and Shaw suggested that the size of Shakespeare's reputation actually threatened the production of new art. In both cases, the writers revealed an anxiety concerning their own creative powers and their chance for a lasting reputation, an anxiety that Harold Bloom has argued causes 'strong poets' to misread one another, perhaps wilfully, 'so as to clear imaginative space for themselves'.<sup>38</sup> For Tolstoy, Shakespeare's influence took on a menacing and sinister tone, setting a poor model for aspiring writers and also damaging the ability for drama to persist as a serious art form. Of these dangers, he wrote:

[T]he suggestion that Shakespeare's works are great works of genius, presenting the height of both aesthetic and ethical perfection, has caused and is causing great injury to men [...] . This injury is twofold: first, the fall of the drama, and the replacement of this important weapon of progress by an empty and immoral amusement; and secondly, the direct devaluation of men by presenting to them false models for imitation.

Tolstoy's bleak outlook on literature in the wake of Shakespeare often took on personal overtones, suggesting ulterior motivations for his doomsday predictions. When he noted how, in the shadow of Shakespeare, the young writer 'no longer believes in himself but in what is said by the learned people whom he respects', he added, 'I have experienced all this'.<sup>39</sup>

<sup>36</sup> Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, pp. 95e, 55e.

<sup>37</sup> Martin Wiggins, 'Is Shakespeare Bad?', *Around the Globe*, 12 (1999), p. 34.

<sup>38</sup> Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1975), p. 5.

<sup>39</sup> Tolstoy, pp. 77, 80.

Amidst so many fierce denunciations, Tolstoy's essay betrays feelings of insecurity and even inferiority, for it 'made him feel bad about himself that he was blind to the merits which were so obvious to others'.<sup>40</sup> Consequently, he placed a tremendous amount of blame on Shakespeare, and in his conclusion he alleged that the wrongful and blind appreciation of the Bard not only harmed current generations of readers, but most importantly caused aspiring young writers, 'having assimilated Shakespeare's writing', to lose 'the capacity of distinguishing good from evil'.<sup>41</sup>

Shaw also feared the negative influence Shakespeare, or any other monumental reputation, might have on the production of new art. For him, 'Shakespeare was a symbol of old, outworn ideas', and much of his writing against the playwright was part of an effort to make room for new drama.<sup>42</sup> To Ellen Terry, he wrote, '[m]y capers are part of a bigger design than you think: Shakespear, for instance, is to me one of the towers of the Bastille, and down he must come'.<sup>43</sup> In his writing, Shaw treated Shakespeare not as a fellow dramatist, but as an icon that had to be destroyed in order for drama to persist as an art form. He openly admired much of Shakespeare's work, admitting that '[n]o man will ever write a better tragedy than Lear', but he saw the generation of new work as more important than the veneration of old masters.<sup>44</sup>

Among the new works in question were Shaw's own plays. As a working dramatist, he clearly felt intimidated by the theatrical legacy Shakespeare had left in Britain and abroad and often alluded to the difficulty of creating new work in such a historically rich literary arena. Perhaps in an attempt to exorcise personal doubts, Shaw finally staged an outright confrontation between Shakespeare and himself in his short puppet show, *Shakes versus Shaw*. He began the sketch with cantankerous dialogue between the two writers, but by the end his attention turned to the difficulty of being a practising playwright in the wake of Shakespeare's legacy and talent. To the indignant and all-powerful 'Shakes', 'Shaw' pleads,

Peace,  
jealous Bard:  
We both are mortal.  
For a moment suffer  
My glimmering light  
to shine.

<sup>40</sup> Martin Wiggins, 'Repulsion, Weariness and Bewilderment', *Around the Globe*, 14 (2000), p. 38.

<sup>41</sup> Tolstoy, p. 80.

<sup>42</sup> Wilson, p. xii.

<sup>43</sup> Qtd. by Wilson, p. xii.

<sup>44</sup> Shaw, p. 217.

In the stage directions, a light begins to glow between the two puppets, suggesting artistic communion and the possibility of shared inspiration. Any hope for such a union, however, is quickly extinguished: in answer to Shav's plea, Shakes cries, 'Out, out, brief candle!' and the stage goes black. In this way, Shaw showed his deference to Shakespeare, but at the same time suggested the difficulty of producing new drama in the shadow of such an imposing genius. In his essay 'Better Than Shakespear?' he similarly advocated the destruction of all reputations, including his own: '[w]e must hurry on: we must get rid of reputations: they are weeds in the soil of ignorance. Cultivate that soil, and they will flower more beautifully, but only as annuals'.<sup>45</sup> For Shaw, the cultivation of art and literature in a society always had to be ongoing and cyclical; more dangerous than letting a past genius like Shakespeare lie fallow was preventing new creativity from breaking ground.

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Voltaire, Tolstoy, Shaw, and Wittgenstein wrote at various times and in different places over a span of nearly two hundred years, but they all lived in societies that lauded Shakespeare's talent as a playwright and actively sought to maintain his literary legacy. While this article has not sought to justify or rebut their assaults against Shakespeare, the question of personal taste, and whether or not it can be subjected to any kind of systematic analysis, looms large. In search of a reliable barometer of artistic value, George Orwell suggested that 'ultimately, there is no test of literary merit except survival, which is itself an index to majority opinion'.<sup>46</sup> If survival is the only palpable test of literary merit, then two things are true: first, that Shakespeare has passed the test with flying colours and will likely continue to do so, and second, that popular opinion is a more important index than individual analysis, regardless of the aesthetic sensibilities or achievements of the given individual. I would argue, however, that this does not mean that registering dissenting opinions is not useful, even when they are at times misguided. Returning to the four writers that have been the subject of this piece, we can see how, at their worst, these anti-Bard critics rival the most extreme bardolaters in their extravagant use of rhetoric and their ideological bias. At their best, however, they provide a subtle, acute analysis not only of Shakespeare's works, but also of the dangers of accepting the literary canon as a rigid, dusty monument rather than as a dynamic body of ideas. In their writings, we hear arguments concerning literary

heritage, the power of art, and the importance of active, critical thinking – and with such complex cultural issues at stake, it is little wonder that these debates remain strong today.

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<sup>45</sup> Shaw pp. 279, 222.

<sup>46</sup> Orwell, p. 419.



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