

Was Shakespeare Any Good?

EPIC VERSE SMACKDOWN



TEAM NO

LEO TOLSTOY

GEORGE

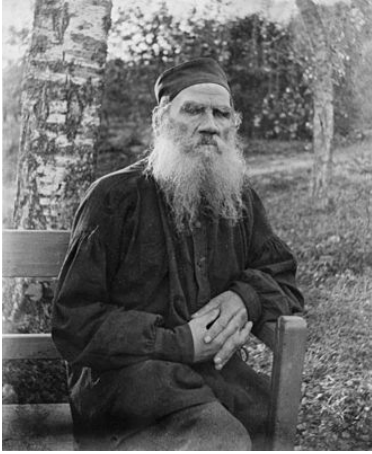
BERNARD SHAW

VS.

TEAM YES

GEORGE ORWELL

MAYA ANGELOU



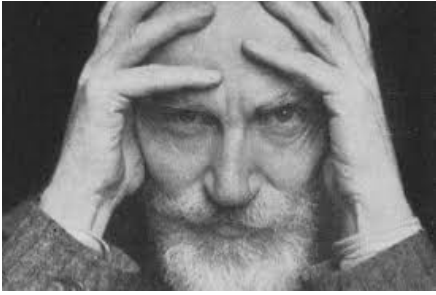
Count Leo Tolstoy (1847-1920) hated Shakespeare. After *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina*, he wrote a savage monograph denouncing Shakespeare as a third-rate hack, exalted by German critics into a cult figure, a 400-year run of *The Producers*. Tolstoy later became a Christian mystic, renouncing his money, title, and wife.

The culture of the West is obsessed with the Bard
But when I open the book, I find it kind of hard
To stay awake through all this overwritten overdone drama
A nasty little prince and his promiscuous mama
Witches and ghosts? You call that Literature?
That's a Halloween gimmick 'cause you're so immature
I have to sit for three hours watching Lear and his daughters
You call it tragedy but it's a pornographic slaughter
All your plots are all the same, a lady dressed as a man, do
You wanna kill the king, is that the best that you can do?
Your language is pretentious, no one talks like that
Except a CHEAP COURT JESTER for aristocrats
So let the world pretend, yeah, let 'em all applaud
But I'm not Canon fodder 'cause I know you're a fraud
You're a practical joke, played by German pedantics
Who had to find an Englishman to please the Romantics
So let me be blunt, I'm sorry if I'm terse,
But the longer this goes on, it goes from Bad to Verse.



George Orwell (1903-1950) fought in the Spanish Civil War against Franco, then wrote *1984* and *Animal Farm*. In *Lear, Tolstoy and the Fool* (1947) he answered Tolstoy's 1906 attack on Shakespeare, pointing out that Tolstoy's renunciation and bitterness exactly reproduced Lear's.

My dear Tolstoy, these are saucy observations
But your tangy Russian dressing needs a little marination
In the humanist tradition that my man really started
When the bloody Dark Ages finally departed
Invention of the Human, a new Protestant Voice,
Freedom of the Will and Individual Choice
You say the plays are boring? How 'bout *War and Peace*
After two thousand pages, I'm begging for release
At least *his* battle scenes are a wicked little thrill
That a morbid little Russian ain't never going to kill
You want your poetry pure, without a lot of context
But gimme violence and drugs and a lot of hot sex
Human beings under pressure and the verse just explodes,
A manic manifesto that the haters can't erode-
(you say) The verse is contrived, yeah, you say he's a cheater
But everything we say now is a reading of his meter
You can't even speak English without quoting the dude
But you say that we're all wrong, you vegetarian prude
So you can say that he's awful, you can say that he stunk
But people like him better than some celibate monk.



George Bernard Shaw (1856-1950) was an Irish playwright turned Fabian socialist in England. He joined Tolstoy to attack the Shakespeare establishment as a fraud created by the British ruling classes.

Comrade, I'm surprised you have this royal lackey's back
'Cause let's face it, he was just a dumb reactionary hack
Man! you're naïve, you're like Ophelia or Miranda
'Cause you're getting all weepy over Tudor propaganda
We Irish know the smell of British domination
So I can't get too excited over this indoctrination
Oh look! We're English! God Save our crown-éd heads!
While the French common people have to bury their dead
What kind of rad-i-cal enjoys this kind of play
When Henry murders prisoners on Crispian's Day
And don't you get me started on the issue of class
'Cause in every single play the workers take it in the ass
Like in *Julius Caesar* or in *Coriolanus*
They're stupid and inferior and utterly heinous
Bottom, Jack Cade, like Caliban
They got animal heads, not the Rights of Man
Oh and speaking of Man, attention feminists!
The cure for independence is Petruchio's fist
Life is bad enough if you're a woman and you're shrewish
But the play gets even worse if you're unlucky to be Jewish
(so don't) Talk about Shakespeare like he's liberal and woke
'Cause he's a right-wing copyrighted cynical joke.



Maya Angelou (1928-2014) was an American poet and civil rights activist. In *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings*, she wrote about Sonnet 29 opening her eyes, because she understood what it was to be “in disgrace with fortune and men’s eyes”

George Bernard Shaw, you better watch your mouth.
(I don't) Remember you marching with us down in the South.
And I don't need a lecture on representation
From some phony Irish poser who fled his own nation
Your little diatribe kinda misses the point
Your history's confused, your time is out of joint
You're blaming the man for living in his time
But you don't understand how the meter and the rhyme
And the freedom that it opens, not for you, for me
And I don't need permission from some petty-bourgeoisie
Who talks a good game, but forgot how to feel
I look at Othello, I see a man who's real
And his pride and his rage, that he takes to his grave
Is a story of a man, not your pity to a slave
(so don't) Trouble deaf heaven with your bootless cries,
Cause Sonnet 29 ain't never gonna die
I'm entitled to the Light shining through this text
'Cause it belongs to me – sorry if you're perplexed
I can handle the truth and anything contrary
'Cause I own this voice --- by any means necessary.