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Edited by Paul Edmondson and Stanley Wells

Excerpt

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## PART I

*Sceptics*

This first part of our book offers essays about claims that have been made on behalf of various individuals as alternative authors of the works more generally attributed to Shakespeare. Until the early years of the twenty-first century such claims were thought to have originated around 1785, over 150 years after Shakespeare died, in the work of a Warwickshire clergyman named James Wilmot (1726–1828). This belief originated in an article by Professor Allardyce Nicoll published in 1932 in the *Times Literary Supplement* entitled ‘The First Baconian’ which describes two lectures reportedly given before the Ipswich Philosophical Society by one James Corton Cowell in 1805. They claim that Wilmot amused himself in his retirement by trying to write a life of Shakespeare and tell how, losing faith in Shakespeare, he constructed a theory that the true author of the works was Francis Bacon. But in old age, Cowell reported, Wilmot instructed his housekeeper to burn his papers. His story would have been lost to posterity had he not previously confided it to Cowell, whose lectures were preserved in the University of London Library. But James Shapiro, in his invaluable book *Contested Will*, follows up suspicions about the authenticity of the documents first expressed in the anti-Shakespearian journal *Shakespeare Matters* 2 (Summer 2003) which show that the lectures draw on information, and even vocabulary, which was not available in Cowell’s time. Nor is there any other evidence that Cowell, or the Ipswich Philosophical Society, ever existed. Only one conclusion is possible: the lectures are forgeries, and Nicoll was deceived by them. Even Shapiro doesn’t know who perpetrated the fraud, or why. He guesses that it may have been done for money or have originated in ‘the desire on the part of a Baconian to stave off the challenge posed by

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supporters of the Earl of Oxford'. Furthermore, the deception 'reassigned the discovery of Francis Bacon's authorship from a "mad" American woman to' – and here Shapiro silently quotes *Richard II* 1.3.272 – 'a true-born Englishman'. As a result of these discoveries, the anti-Shakespearian movement must now be pushed forward to the middle of the nineteenth century. As Shapiro intriguingly remarks, 'the authorship question and the "whodunit" emerged at the same historical moment'.<sup>1</sup> In preparing this book Stanley Wells also examined the lectures, which remain unpublished, and was impressed by their plausible appearance of authenticity. There is no wonder that Nicoll was taken in by them. They warrant further investigation.

As we remark in our general introduction, the anti-Shakespearian movement must now be seen as finding its first thorough expression in the work of the American Delia Bacon, and especially in her long book, *The Philosophy of the Plays of Shakspeare Unfolded*, of 1857, often described by those who have not read it as unreadable. One person who has worked his way through the book's intellectually contorted prose is Graham Holderness (Chapter 1), who writes of it and of its author with rare sympathy and understanding, demonstrating that, for all her wrong-headedness, if she were to be 'Delivered from her fruitless crusade to liberate the Shakespearian oeuvre from an allegedly false authorial ascription, Delia Bacon could become a founding mother of political Shakespeare criticism, ideological critique and collaborationist bibliography.'

Delia Bacon believed that the plays were written by a consortium of writers including Francis Bacon. Since her time it has been more common for single authors to be proposed, and one of them is Francis Bacon himself. Alan Stewart, distinguished as a biographer and editor of Bacon, tells the complex and often entertaining story of efforts to establish him as the author of Shakespeare, many of which depend on attempts to identify secret codes and hidden messages in the works such as Delia Bacon hoped to discover by opening Shakespeare's grave (Chapter 2).

One of the more absurd candidates, but one who has attracted and continues to attract many supporters, is Christopher Marlowe, whose death in 1593, early in Shakespeare's career, is one of the best recorded events in English literary history, and

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who is actually quoted and referred to as a 'dead shepherd' in *As You Like It* (3.5.82–3). Charles Nicholl, author of the immensely successful study of Marlowe's last hours, *The Reckoning* (1992), recounts how early attempts to identify him as the author of Shakespeare survived Leslie Hotson's discovery of the documentary evidence establishing conclusively, to anyone with a respect for historical evidence, that Marlowe died before most of Shakespeare's works were written (Chapter 3).

During the later part of the twentieth century Bacon and Marlowe were overtaken in the authorship stakes by Edward de Vere, seventeenth Earl of Oxford, whose candidature had first been propounded in 1920 by Thomas Looney. Oxford died in 1604, so his adherents have to explain away the evidence relating to the dates of composition of Shakespeare's later plays. Oxford's candidature has also become associated with what has become known as the Tudor Prince theory, according to one version of which Oxford was Queen Elizabeth's secret lover, and the Earl of Southampton their son. Alan Nelson, author of a major biography of the Earl, *Monstrous Adversary: The Life of Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford*, examines the numerous fallacies and illogicalities in presentations of the case for his authorship of Shakespeare (Chapter 4).

Though Bacon, Marlowe and de Vere have become the most heavily supported claimants, over the years a plethora of other names have been proposed. As Matt Kubus observes in the final chapter of this section of our book, 'Mathematically, each time an additional candidate is suggested, the probability decreases that any given name is the true author.' This fact has not stemmed the flow of pretenders to the throne, which may well have increased even before this book reaches publication.

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## CHAPTER I

*The unreadable Delia Bacon**Graham Holderness*

By common consensus, among both her admirers and her detractors, Delia Bacon's pioneering book on Shakespeare authorship, *The Philosophy of the Plays of Shakspere Unfolded* (1857), is 'unreadable'.<sup>1</sup> The case she presents, for an alternative theory of Shakespeare authorship, remains unproven, since (as she herself came close to admitting) she could adduce no direct evidence whatsoever to support it. Her work cannot truly be described as comprehensively influential, even within 'Shakespeare Authorship studies', as her hypothesis was one of collective and collaborative authorship, whereas virtually all alternative authorship claimants favour a particular individual. Her methodology, which was to elicit from the plays a 'philosophy' that could in her view have been understood and expounded only by writers other than William Shakespeare of Stratford, has in the present been superseded, in alternative candidature polemics, by largely biographical readings of the works.

So why should anyone bother to read the writings of Delia Bacon? Why attempt to read the unreadable?

The outlines of Delia Bacon's life have been thoroughly delineated in some key contemporary studies. I will confine myself to those biographical facts that are relevant to a study of her impact and influence. Born into a cultivated but poor New England background, daughter of a minister, Delia Bacon left school at the age of fourteen and became a schoolteacher. In due course she graduated to teaching adult women, and even lecturing to audiences of women and men in New York. Her initial ventures into writing were of a creative kind: she published some stories, beat Edgar Allan Poe in a newspaper short story competition, and then began writing a play, intended to feature the English star actress Ellen Tree. Bacon clearly felt a strong conflict between her Puritan background and her imaginative bent towards fiction and drama. Eventually the play was published as a work of drama rather than theatre – a 'dialogue', 'not a play', 'not intended

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for the stage'.<sup>2</sup> Around 1845 she began to pursue studies in Shakespeare authorship, driven by a conviction that Shakespeare was not the true author of the works, and that they were in reality written by others.

In America Bacon managed to interest such literary giants as Ralph Waldo Emerson and Nathaniel Hawthorne in her theories. In 1853 she journeyed to England in search of evidence to prove her case, and met with Thomas Carlyle, who dealt generously with her, though he found her ideas unpalatable. In England she pursued her research, and it was from England that she launched her authorship campaign, in an article 'William Shakespeare and his Plays: An Inquiry Concerning Them', published anonymously in *Putnam's Monthly Magazine* in 1856.<sup>3</sup> After the publication of her book the following year, Delia Bacon was afflicted by a psychological breakdown, repatriated to America, and spent her final years in a sanatorium.

In her *Putnam's* essay she systematically laid the foundations of Shakespearean doubt. She claimed, as all alternative authorship proponents claim, that William Shakespeare of Stratford could not possibly have written the plays and poems ascribed to him, for a number of reasons. One was that he apparently did not have the education and experience necessary for their composition, having never attended university, and never travelled abroad. The plays are informed by 'the highest literary culture of the age'<sup>4</sup> and Shakespeare of Stratford could not possibly have possessed it. She also found it impossible to believe that a man as devoted to financial and commercial acquisition as Shakespeare could have produced works of such political and philosophical significance.

How could the player's mercenary motive and the player's range of learning and experiment give us the key to this new application of the human reason to the human life? How could we understand, from such a source, this new, and strange, and persevering application of thought to life. . . .<sup>5</sup>

She found it incredible that the author of those works could have gone largely unrecognized and unacknowledged by the great intellectuals of the age; and that such an author could have shown so little concern to publish and preserve the works for posterity.

Hence it follows, not only that William Shakespeare was manifestly not the author of the works attributed to him, but that whoever was the true author, or authors, must have inhabited the higher echelons of Elizabethan and Jacobean society. In Delia Bacon's work, the aristocratic and courtly characters in Shakespeare's plays are regarded as the appropriate source for this new 'philosophy', which could not conceivably have been within

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the grasp of uneducated and proletarian actors. The ‘courtly Hamlet’ is contrasted with the group of strolling players he instructs in the third act of *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*. Surely, Bacon argues, the author of *Hamlet* was more like the Prince than the players?

Condemned to refer the origin of these works to the vulgar, illiterate man who kept the theatre where they were first exhibited, a person of the most ordinary character and aims, compelled to regard them as the result merely of an extraordinary talent for pecuniary speculation in this man, how could we, how could any one, dare to see what is really in them?

... Condemned to look for the author of *Hamlet* himself – the subtle Hamlet of the university, the courtly Hamlet, ‘the glass of fashion and the mould of form’ – in that dirty, doggish group of players, who come into the scene summoned like a pack of hounds to his service... how could we understand him – the enigmatical Hamlet, with the thought of ages in his foregone conclusions?<sup>6</sup>

Delia Bacon is commonly associated, perhaps simply because of the coincidence of names, with the claim that Lord Bacon was the true author of the Shakespearian oeuvre. She did *not* however argue, as others later did, that the plays were solely the work of Lord Bacon. Indeed, at exactly the same time a separate, and perhaps independent case was being made for Bacon as the sole author, by William Henry Smith. Smith published his own book, *Bacon and Shakespeare*, the following year, thus coinciding with the publication of Delia Bacon’s. But her argument was quite different from his.<sup>7</sup>

Her case was both more complex and correspondingly more difficult to prove. It was essentially that a ‘school’ of Renaissance intellectuals, including Francis Bacon and led by Sir Walter Raleigh, were responsible for the composition of the plays ascribed to Shakespeare, though their authorship remained cloaked in anonymity. Delia Bacon saw the Elizabethan monarchy, and its Jacobean successor, as a continuum of despotic tyranny, presided over by a paranoid monarch, supported by a repressive civil service and secured by a ruthless secret police. The monarchy and its court were instruments of violent coercion that could tolerate no disloyalty or dissent, and absolutely vetoed freedom of speech. Men such as Raleigh and Bacon, possessed of republican and libertarian ideas that in such conditions were dangerous even to espouse, still more to express, turned to writing plays as a means of covertly disseminating their opinions. Bacon described them as a ‘little clique of disappointed and defeated politicians who undertook to head and organize a popular opposition against the government, and were compelled to retreat from that enterprise’ (p. 15). The one historical

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juncture where this conspiracy found the courage to raise its head into public visibility was when followers of the Earl of Essex commissioned a performance of *Richard II* as a precursor of their attempted rebellion in 1601. Normally understood as an attempt by insurrectionists to use the old play, with its depiction of a monarch's forced abdication, as a rehearsal for the real deposition of Elizabeth I, Delia Bacon saw it rather as the direct programmatic expression of a conspiracy, involving both the aristocratic insurgents, and their intellectual supporters, who were themselves responsible for authorship of the play. But the rebellion was a failure. 'Driven from one field, they showed themselves in another. Driven from the open field, they fought in secret' (p. 37). Through the public medium of the theatre, incendiary political ideas could be promulgated to the people, while their true authors could remain protected by a cloak of anonymity. Had the true authorship of the plays become known to the government, both the plays and their authors would have been violently suppressed.

Delia Bacon found in the 'Shakespeare' plays (particularly in *King Lear*, *Julius Caesar* and *Coriolanus*) and in the minds of their putative authors – who are usually, frustratingly, alluded to, rather than explicitly named, in her writings – a sceptical scientific philosophy, an anti-monarchic republican politics and a proto-democratic vision of human and civil rights. The plays, like the minds and lives of their authors, exude that sceptical and progressive 'new philosophy' that, in John Donne's words, 'call[ed] all in doubt',<sup>8</sup> and that far transcended the limited intellectual horizons of the conservative monarchical culture these men sought to challenge. The plays expose the pretensions of kingly authority to divine prerogative, and demonstrate that the distinctions between monarchs and ordinary people are purely conventional and artificial. The plays offer a penetrating critique of the contradictions on which traditional monarchical authority rests, and for Delia Bacon this critique was indistinguishable from the inductive scientific reasoning pioneered by Francis Bacon. A true and abiding 'sovereignty' requires a different basis, though Delia Bacon stopped short of finding this authority in the 'masses', who in the sixteenth century were still 'ignorant' and unfit for 'rule' (p. 532). The plays ascribed to Shakespeare were circulated by Raleigh, Francis Bacon and others, in order both to educate these masses, and to establish a blueprint for a future society of intellectual freedom and political liberty.

In this hypothesis, those radical and liberating writings clearly did not have their desired effect. Had the enterprise succeeded, then England would presumably have become a republic, or a constitutional monarchy, decades before the Commonwealth and the 'Glorious Revolution'. The 'despotism'



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of Elizabeth, continued by her successor, James I, would have been overthrown and replaced by political liberty and representative institutions. By a historical short-cut, England would have become something very much like America.

Just as Delia Bacon needed to exaggerate the educational poverty and cultural deficiency of Shakespeare the provincial player, in order to render it unthinkable that he could have been the true author, so she needed to caricature Elizabethan government as a violently coercive and despotic tyranny so as to make it plausible that some of the age's leading intellectuals should have resorted to a covert conspiracy to challenge the hegemonic culture via stage plays whose authorship they were obliged to disclaim. She comments on *Julius Caesar*:

Does not all the world know that scholars, men of reverence, men of world-wide renown, men of every accomplishment, were tortured, and mutilated, and hung, and beheaded, in both these two reigns, for writings wherein Caesar's ambition was infinitely more obscurely hinted at – writings unspeakably less offensive to majesty than this? (p. 360)

It is of course true that the leading exponents of her 'school', Raleigh and Bacon, were both imprisoned by James I, though for conspiracy and corruption respectively. Raleigh was executed, and Bacon pardoned. Other presumed members of the 'school' were not so treated: Edmund Spenser was honoured, and the Earl of Oxford alternately favoured and tolerated. But Bacon's hypothesis needed to establish a scenario, again redolent of the American Revolution, in which all good men were for liberty, and against the crown. She needed to portray them as so committed to their cause – 'determined to make their influence felt in that age, in spite of the want of encouragement which the conditions of that time offered to such an enterprise' (p. 30) – that they were prepared to participate in a dangerous conspiracy. At the same time she had to depict them as so fearful of the potential consequences that they cloaked their ambitions in secrecy, sought to conceal 'their lives as well as their works', and resolved to 'play this great game in secret' (p. 19).

Why should such men, who all wrote and published copiously in the literary fields of poetry, history, philosophy, find in the drama a congenial instrument for the transmission of those opinions they wished to avoid expressing in their own writings? The key to this problem lies in the fact that the Elizabethan drama was both a courtly and a popular cultural form. The same acting companies performed the same plays in the public theatres and in the milieu of the court. A successful Elizabethan or Jacobean

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dramatist was able to deploy a medium that could speak identically to courtier and apprentice, to monarch and citizen, to the patrician elite and to the plebeian masses. What this school of radical intellectuals needed was what Delia Bacon calls, in a prescient phrase, an ‘organ of communication’ that would address both the ‘potent and resistless rulers’ (p. 31) and their enslaved subjects; that would convert the court to the love of liberty, and enthuse the people with a dream of freedom.

It is clear from this proposition that Delia Bacon saw the Shakespeare plays not primarily as art, or entertainment, but more as a huge project of public education in political ethics and civic values. The hospitality afforded to this project by the theatre consisted, not in its capacity for stirring action and thrilling language, for complexity of characterization and poetic depth, but rather in the fact that, as an inclusive cultural form, the drama facilitated the transmission of ideas from the progressive elite to the uneducated masses. As James Shapiro points out, Delia Bacon’s notion of a Tudor and Jacobean ‘school’ sometimes sounds less like an intellectual academy than a pedagogical fraternity offering courses in ‘civics’ in some anachronistic programme of adult education.<sup>9</sup>

Delia Bacon did not write to please, or to charm, or to entertain, but to prove a number of propositions. These are: that Shakespeare’s works contain a prescient, progressive, libertarian philosophy, a republican politics and an emancipatory vision of the rights of man; that they could not have been written by William Shakespeare of Stratford; and that they were in fact written by several others, including Lord Bacon and Sir Walter Raleigh, as elaborated above.

Although Delia Bacon clearly managed to interest some of the truly great writers of her time – Emerson, Hawthorne, Carlyle – in her ideas, she did not persuade any of them to the truth of her convictions. Her work was instantly targeted as false prophecy by Shakespeare experts. The American Shakespearian Richard Grant White accomplished the suppression of further articles in *Putnam’s Monthly Magazine*, and later stigmatized Bacon as a lunatic, implying that the mental collapse of her last years was already implicit in her campaign against Shakespeare as author.

To dismiss Delia Bacon as simply wrong, as White did, would seem today a less than satisfactory conclusion. But wrong she certainly was. Her argument that the Stratford Shakespeare was, through lack of education and cultural deficiency, in no way up to the job of writing the plays has been comprehensively refuted by generations of scholars, biographers and critics,