

Contested Will: Who Wrote Shakespeare

BY JAMES SHAPIRO

The so-called “authorship question” has plagued Shakespeare scholars for generations and been the subject of countless books, articles, and screeds. Now **James Shapiro**, author of 2006’s *A Year in the Life of William Shakespeare: 1599*, takes on the controversy from a different tack. In his new book, *Contested Will: Who Wrote Shakespeare?*, the Columbia University professor zeroes in on “when and why many people began to question whether William Shakespeare wrote the plays long attributed to him, and, if he didn’t write them, who did.” One such skeptic was **Delia Bacon**, whose story has all the elements of a Victorian novel: thwarted ambition, struggles with religious and societal mores, and overtones of madness.

Delia Bacon, 1853. In Theodore Bacon, *Delia Bacon*. London, 1888. Folger Shakespeare Library.

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The story is familiar: a young and ambitious writer with little formal schooling leaves family behind, moves to the metropolis, writes a tragedy, and persuades a star of the London stage to play the lead. But the year is 1837, not 1587, and the writer is not Shakespeare of Stratford but an American named Delia Bacon.

Born in a frontier log cabin in 1811, Delia Bacon was the youngest daughter of a visionary Congregationalist minister who left New Haven, Connecticut, to found a Puritan community in the wilds of Ohio. The venture collapsed, the impoverished family returned to New England, and her father died soon after. While money was found to send her eldest brother, Leonard, to Yale, Delia's formal education ended when she was fourteen, after a year at the Female Seminary in Hartford run by Catherine and Mary Beecher, who were impressed by her "fervid imagination" and "rare gifts of eloquence."

At fifteen, to help support her family, Delia Bacon became a schoolteacher. She continued to read voraciously, added a bit of Greek to her limited Latin, and began writing stories (which she justified to her brother Leonard, now a leading Congregationalist minister in New Haven, as "fiction only as the drapery to something better—truth"). At twenty she published, anonymously, *Tales of the Puritans*—three longish stories of colonial life. The following year she won a story-writing contest sponsored by the Philadelphia *Saturday Courier*, beating out rivals including Edgar Allan Poe for the hundred-dollar prize. Her entry, "Love's Martyr," retells a tragic incident of the Revolutionary War in which a colonist

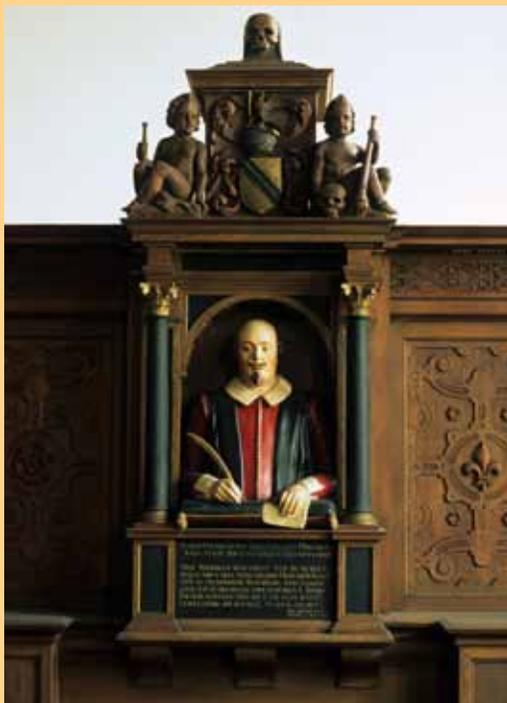
named Jane McCrea was murdered by Indians (in the service of the British general Burgoyne) on the way to meet her royalist lover at Fort Edward; McCrea's death became a rallying cry for the colonial forces and, as tradition had it, helped turn the tide of the war.

"THE VERY MUSE OF HISTORY"

Delia Bacon cut an increasingly impressive figure; one awestruck onlooker described her as "graceful and intellectual in appearance, eloquent in speech, marvelously wise, and full of inspiration, she looked and spoke the very muse of history." As her reputation as a teacher grew, she progressed from instructing schoolgirls to teaching adult women, and eventually—something almost without precedent for a woman at the time—to lecturing publicly on world history to audiences of both men and women. Her delivery was especially impressive: an admirer recalled that "she wrote out nothing—not even notes." Bacon was a gifted synthesizer. She drew comfortably on literature, art, archeology, linguistics, science, theology, and anything else that helped illustrate her account of how mankind, under Providence's guiding hand,

had developed spiritually and intellectually "from the dawn of history, through the shadowy glimmerings of faith and tradition in successive ages, to the broad daylight of the present era."

By her mid-twenties Bacon was on her way to cementing a career as a professional lecturer in New Haven, but she was restless, and in 1836, with Leonard's reluctant blessing, she moved to New York City. But even lecturing there failed to hold her interest. She sought out leading cultural figures, including James Gates Percival, Richard Henry Dana, and Samuel Morse, and started going to the the-



Replica of the monument to Shakespeare in Holy Trinity Church, Stratford-upon-Avon. Old Reading Room, Folger Shakespeare Library.

Delia Bacon, more than anyone before or after, was responsible for triggering what would come to be known as the Shakespeare authorship controversy.



Francis Bacon. *Of the advancement and proficiencie of learning*. Oxford and London, 1640. Folger Shakespeare Library

Why Francis Bacon?

Francis Bacon was widely celebrated as one of the great men of the Renaissance, the father of modern scientific method, a worldly courtier, a talented writer, a learned jurist, and a brilliant philosopher. Born in 1561, he studied at Cambridge and at the Inns of Court, and traveled on the Continent. His long career as a writer and public servant began in the 1580s, and in 1594 Queen Elizabeth appointed Bacon as one of her learned counsel. His literary range was exceptional and included parliamentary speeches, letters of advice, political tracts, a *History of the Reign of King Henry the Seventh*, as well as his famous *Essays* and his great philosophical works: *The Advancement of Learning*, the utopian *New Atlantis*, *Instauratio Magna*, and *Novum Organum*. About the only thing Bacon didn't try his hand at were plays or narrative poems. He remained deeply involved in politics throughout his life and, after much jockeying, finally attained the positions of attorney general and lord chancellor under King James, before falling out of favor in 1621 on dubious charges of corruption. He was briefly committed to the Tower of London. After his release, Bacon chose, as he put it, "to retire from the stage of civil action and betake myself to letters." He died in 1626. Bacon was unquestionably one of the great minds of his age. For the next two centuries his reputation was secure and the French philosophers did much to promote Bacon as a philosopher dedicated to social reform, his works implicitly an "attack on the systems and dogmas of traditional institutions." It is this legacy that most powerfully informs Delia Bacon's conception of him.

from *Contested Will: Who Wrote Shakespeare?* by James Shapiro

ater. Her timing was fortunate, for one of the leading Shakespeare actors of the day, Ellen Tree, had recently begun performing in New York. Fresh from her successes as Beatrice, Rosalind, and Romeo (to Fanny Kemble's Juliet) on the London stage, Tree was appearing at the Park Theatre in lower Manhattan. Bacon met Tree in the winter of 1838 and convinced her to play the leading role in a tragedy she was writing—a theatrical remake of her prizewinning story "Love's Martyr," renamed *The Bride of Fort Edward*. It promised to be a pathbreaking collaboration; like Bacon, Ellen Tree was unmarried and not dependent on any man for support, and, like Bacon, she managed to maintain a reputation as one who was "impeccably pure and decorous," not all that easy at the time for women connected with the

theater. When Tree left New York for a three-month southern tour to which she had committed, Bacon settled down to finish her play.

THE PURITAN TRIES PLAYWRITING

Bacon was convinced that there was money to be made as a playwright; she had heard that another aspiring dramatist had recently won a thousand-dollar prize for a new play, and Ellen Tree was already amassing a small fortune from her three-year American tour. Yet the possibility of wealth and fame as a playwright was not easily reconciled with Bacon's Puritanism and her uneasiness about working in the theater. "I should be sorry," she wrote Leonard at the time, "to do anything unbecoming a lady or a Christian, even for the sake

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of a thousand pounds.” Bacon also felt compelled to rationalize her work-in-progress to her brother, if not to herself, on moral grounds: “If the play has any effect at all, it will be an elevating one,” since theater was “a form better fitted to strike the common mind” than other kinds of writing. She adds, a little desperately, “If I can get it introduced into so bad a place as the [Park] Theatre I should count it as great a triumph as if they should tear down the greenroom and the stage and put up a pulpit and send for you to preach to them.”

In writing a political play about “a well-known crisis in our national history,” Bacon was breaking new ground as an American woman playwright, for her few antebellum predecessors had devoted themselves to comedy and melodrama. Her debt to Shakespeare’s tragedies and histories is hard to miss: there’s the mix of conversational prose and blank verse as well as the juxtaposition of tragic and comic scenes (including lowlife American troops whose banter recalls that of Falstaff’s companions). Her main character is modeled on Shakespeare’s heroines, which may account for Ellen Tree’s interest in the part: she’s a composite of Juliet (marrying her household’s enemy and dying right after her bridal day), Desdemona (in her intimate scene with a servant before her death as well as in her brief revival before she finally dies), and Ophelia (especially after her death, when her brother and her lover, like Laertes and Hamlet, compete over who can grieve more for her). Politically, the plot reads like an Americanized version of Shakespeare’s *Rape of Lucrece*, in which the death of the heroine leads to the creation of the Republic (just as, in Shakespeare’s poem, the sight of the dead Lucrece leads the Romans to repudiate monarchy). While keenly aware of her English literary roots—not many works about the Revolutionary War mention in passing both Geoffrey Chaucer and Edmund Spenser—Bacon also saw herself as part of a new generation of American writers; even as colonial militia would van-

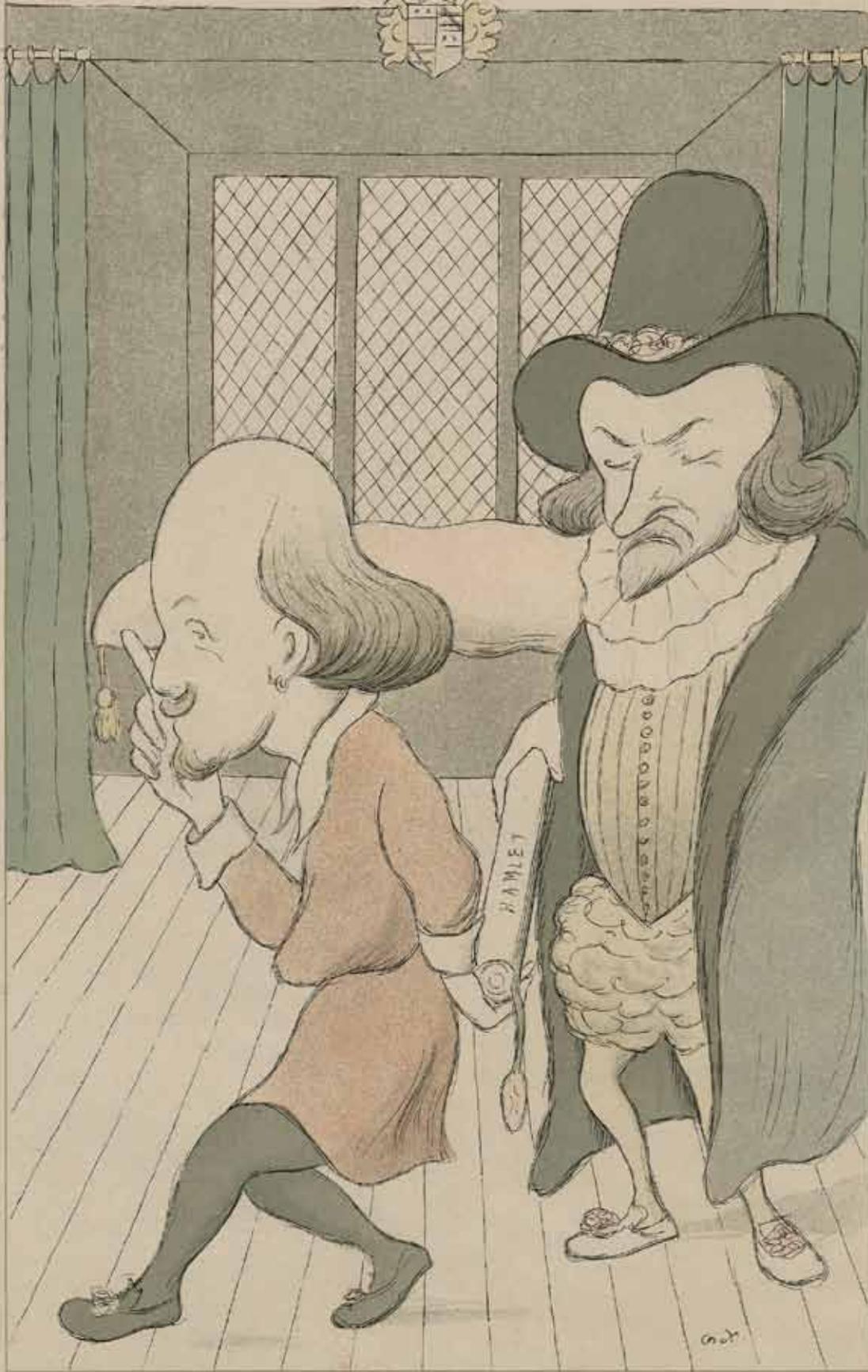
quish the British, so too, one day, would American authors.

When Ellen Tree left New York to tour in February 1837, most of *The Bride of Fort Edward* was already drafted, and Bacon planned to submit the finished script to Edward Simpson (the formidable manager of the Park Theatre) in April. Then things unraveled. Bacon started getting headaches. She then decided that she’d need the summer to finish the play. After that, she became discouraged when a friend who read the script didn’t think it would succeed onstage. In the end, it seems pretty clear, she couldn’t reconcile her Puritanism with her literary ambitions—so she put what she had written in a drawer. A year later, she retrieved it and sent a finished draft to Leonard. By then, Ellen Tree had moved on. Leonard sat on the script for six months, then criticized it harshly.

Hoping to salvage what she could, determined not to seek Leonard’s advice again, and resolved that plays were meant to be read and not seen, she touched up the script and published it anonymously in 1839. Bacon added a defensive preface to make clear that what she had written was “a dialogue . . . not a play”—and “not intended for the stage.” This wasn’t entirely accurate, nor was the distinction Bacon drew between Drama (which captured the “repose, the thought, and sentiment of actual life”) and Theater (whose capacity to instruct was undermined by “hurried action, the crowded plot, the theatrical elevation which the Stage necessarily demands”). Bacon turned her back on the stage—including Shakespeare’s plays in performance. One of her students later recalled that “Miss Bacon not unfrequently spoke of having seen Shakespeare in theatrical representation,” but she “always spoke of her experience in theatre-going as a disappointment, and said that she did not care to go again.”

Despite her misgivings, Delia Bacon’s first and only play had stage potential; with Ellen Tree in the lead and some skilled pruning it would have commanded attention. The published version was positively reviewed in the *Saturday Courier*, and, as

Bacon saw herself living in an age of discoveries, and not just scientific ones.



WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE, HIS METHOD OF WORK

Max Beerbohm. *William Shakespeare, His Method of Work*. Print, 1904. Folger Shakespeare Library.

it happened, Edgar Allan Poe wrote about it as well, noting that the anonymous author's "imagination [is] of no common order" and calling the play's "design... excellent." The published "volume" was a commercial failure—only 692 of 1500 copies were sold.

A REVELATION ABOUT AUTHORSHIP

Defeated, Bacon returned to New Haven and resumed teaching and lecturing, knowing that she wasn't cut out to be a novelist or a playwright and that she would have to find a different outlet for her intellectual gifts and driving ambition. In the spring of 1845, her winter classes over, Bacon withdrew from society, moved into New Haven's Tontine Hotel, and buried herself in her books, on the verge, she was sure, of a revelation about the authorship of Shakespeare's works. Six months later Bacon had at last mapped out her findings, though more likely in her mind than on paper. She shared the news with Leonard, who recorded in October 1845 that Delia "has about concluded to publish her new theory of Shakespeare in one or more volumes, to find a place in Wiley and Putnam's *Library of American Authors*." In fact, over a decade would pass before she published a word of her theory—first in an anonymous article in *Putnam's Monthly Magazine* in 1856, and then, a year later, in a strange and rambling book, published simultaneously in England and America, which told a somewhat different story, or at least a different part of the story. Bacon died two years later, following a descent into insanity.

Since Delia Bacon, more than anyone before or after, was responsible for triggering what would come to be known as the Shakespeare authorship controversy, it's helpful to know what drew her to it, how her views changed over time, and what was ultimately at stake for her. Unfortunately, little evidence that might illuminate any of this survives—no manuscript drafts, no diary or journal, not even a record of what books or editions she consulted. Her family disapproved of this project (and blamed her drift into insanity on it), and may have destroyed what evidence once existed. It's no small irony that anyone investigating the development of Delia Bacon's ideas confronts much the same problems as Shakespeare's biographers. In her case too critics have been quick to reach conclusions about the work based on anecdotal evidence drawn from the life.



James Shapiro

Philippe Cheng

Delia Bacon saw herself living in an age of discoveries, and not just scientific ones. She could see in Biblical and Homeric textual scholarship the extent to which questions of authorship were overturning centuries of conventional wisdom. Perhaps Shakespeare's works deserved a closer look too. Yet at the time there were no departments of English literature, let alone Shakespeare professors to do so, at either American or British universities. This was her opening, for few Americans could rival her knowledge of Shakespeare's works. She was familiar with the major criticism, had spent years reading and teaching the plays, and had the kind of intimate knowledge of them that could only be acquired from emulating Shakespeare in one's own plays and stories.

Rather than ransack the archives for proof, Delia Bacon sought it in the plays themselves, and concluded that the evidence had been there all along.

A DEEPER TRUTH UNDER FICTIONAL DRAPERY

The young women under her tutelage in New Haven received a rich grounding in Shakespeare denied their brothers enrolled across town at Yale. Bacon led her charges through repeated close readings of such plays as *Hamlet* and *Julius Caesar*, devoting a good deal of attention to questions of character and searching relentlessly for each play's deeper philosophical meaning—a by-product, no doubt, of her long-standing view that writers hid a deeper “truth” under fictional “drapery.” One of her students recalled how Bacon “seemed to saturate herself with the play, as it were; to live in it, to call into imaginative consciousness the loves, hopes, fears, ambition, disappointment, and despair of the characters, and under this intense realization to divine, as it were, the meaning of the play—‘its unity’ as she said—its motif.” Bacon showed them how to discover “intimations in obscure passages, in unimportant utterances, apparently void of significance,” and taught them that there “is nothing superfluous...in any of these plays, the greatest product of the human mind; nothing which could have been dispensed with. Every character is necessary; every word is full of meaning.”

While her search for the plays' hidden meaning was unusual for the time, Bacon's approach to Shakespearean drama was otherwise typical of the age. She had a hard time believing that these nobly philosophical works were written with popular performance and commercial potential in mind. And thanks to the influence of contemporary biographies of Shakespeare, she found the gap between the facts of his life and his remarkable literary output inexplicable.

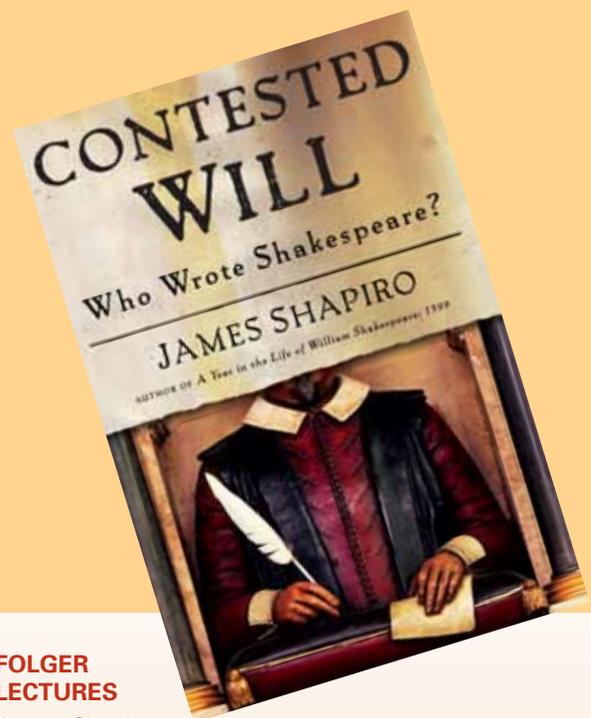
The framework within which she imagined the world of the English Renaissance, also typical of her day, was limited to monarchs, courtiers, and writers. The rest were written off as ignorant masses (“Masses...still unlettered, callous with wrongs, manacled with blind traditions, or swaying hither and thither, with the breath of a common prejudice”). It was history from the top down and limited geographically to London and the court. Her Shakespeare canon was no less restricted and also typical of nineteenth-century readers: at the center of it were *Hamlet* and *The Tempest*, and it extended to the plays meatiest in philosophical and political content—*Othello*, *Julius Caesar*, *Lear*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Richard the Second*, and, unusually, *Coriolanus*—but not much further. While she had surely read the other thirty or so plays, as well as the poetry, they didn't serve her purpose, and for the most part she passed over them in silence.

Nobody before Delia Bacon who had doubts about Shakespeare's authorship had been willing to take the crucial next step and explain, in print, the reasons that the plays should be reattributed to an alternative candidate. Rather than ransack the archives for proof, she sought it in the plays themselves, and concluded that the evidence had been there all along. Others had just not read the plays with sufficient attention to obscure and seemingly irrelevant passages. It was no great leap for her to assume that Francis Bacon was somehow behind the plays (and it was not, as many have assumed, because she believed herself to be distantly related).

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James Shapiro is Larry Miller Professor of English at Columbia University. He is the author of four books, most recently *A Year in the Life of William Shakespeare: 1599*.

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