

(editor's note: This paper was transcribed from a handwritten cursive copy with various difficulties. For a perfect rendition, the reader might wish to consult the original, itself a copy, in the volume entitled *Literary Club Papers* 2, 1886 – 1887 June 5, '86 to May 21, '87)

The Shakespeare Myth

Since the demented Delia Bacon wrote a magazine article thirty years ago, to prove that Bacon wrote Shakespeare's plays, and published a book a year later to show why he did it, and what they were all about, a host of followers has rushed into print, with the avowed purpose of driving Shakespeare out of the sacred circle of British Poets, and Dramatists. Most of them have been more anxious to drive Shakespeare out than to admit any one to his place: but Judge Nathaniel Holmes, formerly of St. Louis and now of Cambridge, in by far the ablest, most dignified, most complete, and most weighty argument that has appeared on the subject, not only shows Shakespeare the door, but installs Bacon in the vacant chair. His work has passed through several editions, and has recently been published in two, large-sized volumes.

The great difficulty with his work, as with most that have appeared on the subject, is that it is too verbose, abounds in vain repetitions, and its size deters intelligent people from undertaking to read it. They would rather cherish a blind belief in Shakespeare than have their eyes opened by so tedious and painful an operation. The argument, as it seems to me, can be compressed into much smaller compass, and its force and consistency will be more apparent.

1. "This is the age and generation for the explosion of myths." ([]) A myth is anything which seems probable, and has in reality been believed for upwards of ten generations. The longer a thing has been believed, the more difficult it becomes. Nothing can be more repulsive to the philosophical mind of this enlightened nineteenth century than an indulgence in an antiquated belief. The fact that the belief in Shakespeare's authorship of his own plays as old as the plays themselves, is all the proof needed to show that it is false, – a relic of superstition and a foul blot on the intelligence of mankind.

2. If we assume that Shakespeare did not write the plays ascribed to him, there is nothing in his history and antecedents to show that he could do so. This is the most powerful weapon in the modern philosopher's armory. With it, in time, we can overthrow every existing belief, and rid the world of superstition. If we assume that Frederick the Great and Napoleon did not win the victories commonly ascribed to them, we can easily prove that they were incapable of doing so.

3. Shakespeare's father was, by turns a farmer, glover, wool-stapler, butcher, constable, aldermen, and finally, high bailiff of Stratford. He afterwards met with reverses, and had to hide himself to avoid his creditors. The son of such a man could not write poetry or do any other great thing. This must be plain to an American citizen, if to no one else. What would become of Franklin, Lincoln, Grant, – not to mention other illustrious examples, if it had not been for the high lineage, affluent circumstances, liberal education, and lofty station of their respective fathers?

4. Shakespeare's father and his daughter Judith signed their names to important

documents with a mark (X). No manuscript of any of the plays or poems in Shakespeare's handwriting has come down to us. Therefore it is proper to infer that Shakespeare himself could not write, and did not write the plays attributed to him. It is quite certain that Bacon wrote the plays because none have appeared in his handwriting, and he had an object in concealing his authorship.

5. "I remember" says Ben Johnson "the players have often mentioned it as an honor to Shakespeare that his writing (whenever he pen'd) hee never blotted out a line." and Ben adds "Would to God he had blotted a thousand." This is conclusive evidence that he was not the author of the plays he wrote, for he must have copied in order to get along without blotting; and no man copies his own work. He turns it over to an amanuensis or type-writer.

6. At most, Shakespeare did not get more than six or seven years schooling, and this was at the Latin Grammar School of his native village. He never so much as saw Oxford or Cambridge. Now, we know perfectly well that no one in this country except a graduate of Harvard College can write a book or poem worthy to be written by a man of culture. If we didn't know it before, we learned it while Harvard was celebrating its 250th anniversary. Just so: it was impossible for any man in England who was not of gentle birth, and who had not taken a degree at Oxford or Cambridge to compose the poems or plays of Shakespeare. They must have been written by Bacon or Florio or some other learned man, just as Goldsmith's works were probably written by Sam Johnson, and Burns's poems by Wm Wordsworth.

8. Shakespeare went to London somewhere between the spring of 1585 and the fall of 1587. For the next five years we know absolutely nothing of what he was doing. It is fair to conclude that he was doing nothing. All London was astir, at this time, with the new learning, and Athens, in its palmiest days was not more given over to hearing and telling some new thing. Her commerce extended to every known port; the world was being explored by British navigators; and expeditions for colonizing North and South America were being fitted out from time to time; old parchments and manuscripts were being brought to light; great discoveries were being made in the arts and sciences; the press was teeming with new books, and translations and republications of old ones; the impulse of a new civilization was quickening national life, and bringing new thoughts and ideas to every mind. The theater had just become thoroughly established as a national institution, and a score of brilliant writers, among whom were Kyd, Lyly, Greene, Lodge, Nash, Peele, and Marlowe, had elevated and refined the drama, giving to it its stately rhythm, its lofty themes, and its rather magnilquent speech: but of course Shakespeare profited nothing by all this. He was not a University man, and was therefore incapable of learning any thing even out of school. My Lord Bacon was the only one affected by it, and it was all gotten up for his exclusive benefit.

8. During this time, when Shakespeare was doing nothing, unless he was preparing to write these plays, "Francis Bacon was intent upon his legal studies, his parliamentary duties, his scientific inquiries, his civil and moral essays, his "Wisdom of the Ancients" his "Advancement of Learning" and his philosophical speculations" (Holmes) and took great pains to have it known.

In 1592, the three parts of Henry VI were performed, and were said to have been written or largely revised by Shakespeare; and Greene, a University man and himself a writer of plays, cries out bitterly against this upstart crow, beautified with [] feathers that with his tygre's heart wrapped in a player's hide “ – an expression derived from the third part of Henry VI – “supposes he is as well able to bombast out a blank verse as the best of you: and bring an absolute Johannes factotum, is, in hys owne conceyt the only Shake-scene in a cuntry.”

Nash says that the first part of Henry VI was so popular, that 10,000 people went to hear it in a few weeks. Its popularity doubtless stimulated somebody to continue writing historical plays, but of course that somebody was not Shakespeare. The obvious truth could never penetrate his dull brain! Francis Bacon was the only man who had the learning and the leisure and the theatrical manager's sagacity to see and act on this public demand.

9. All writers of plays were poor, dissolute, spendthrift, and ne'er-do-well. Shakespeare prospered, was fifty, and made money enough during his first ten years in London to help his father out of his difficulties, and buy for himself the “New Place at Stratford.” Ergo, Shakespeare was not a writer of plays. He probably made his money by holding horses at the door of the theater, scene-shifting, acting such parts as the Ghost in Hamlet, –the highest he ever aspired to attending to manager's duties and details of business for which his associates by reason of their life-long experience and business habits were much better fitted than himself – or else, –and here my Lord Bacon comes in again, –he was handsomely paid to copy out and father the plays which Bacon wrote and was ashamed to [] as his literary progeny. This view is enforced by the fact that Bacon remained poor as other scribblers did.

10. Shakespeare did not write the plays because they constitute a work of such colossal magnitude that no one man could possibly have performed., Though it was directly in the line of his business, and he gave his whole life to it.

11 Bacon must have written them, because he gave all his time and attention to other works of such might and character as to earn for him the reputation of being the “most prodigious wit” of his own or any other time, and the “wisest, wittiest, meanest of mankind.” It is much easier for one man to accomplish two such tasks than for two to do it; and Shakespeare never pretended to be the author of the “Novum Organum.”

12. Shakespeare never took any pains to publish a correct edition of his plays during his lifetime, though if he had the capacity to write them, he must have known that their greatness was immortal. Bacon must have written them though compelled to conceal their authorship by the consciousness that they would disgrace him. Shakespeare's course, if he was the real author was most unnatural; since they were written primarily to be performed in the theaters belonging to himself and associates; and as there was no law of copyright in those days, the exclusive ownership and right to represent the plays was respected by the public only so long as it could not get hold of a manuscript or printed copy. He should undoubtedly have given his rivals a chance by publishing them in cheap editions as soon as he had copied out the parts for his own players and plays had proved successful.

13. He does not mention the plays in his will, or make any disposition of his interest in them, or appoint a literary executor to collect and publish them. This, too, is most extraordinary in a man of his nice sense of honor who had written the plays for the company of which he was a member, had received his full share of the profits derived from their performance, and had parted long before death with his entire interest in the Company.

14. The first authorized edition was published in 1623, seven years after his death by his surviving fellows Heninge and Condell who certify that the plays were printed "from the true original copies;" and noble tributes were paid to Shakespeare by them, and Johnson, and others. Bacon was then living and made no claim to be their author; and two years later he published his "Metrical Versions of the Psalms" which are so labored and unmusical, and so unlike anything ever attributed to Shakespeare that they afford an indubitable evidence of his authorship of the Venus and Adonis, the Sonnets, and the Plays; for if he had not been there author, and anxious to conceal the fact, he would not have taken so much pains to prove to the world that he was no poet.

A few other arguments have been adduced, but these are the most weighty and convincing; and if, after listening to those, people still maintain their belief in Shakespeare's authorship of his own plays, it is proof that they were born just three centuries behind the times.

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Kemper Editor,

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