

# A Republican Dream? — Americans Question Shakespeare

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## Abstract

In late 2011, *Anonymous*, a large-budget movie from filmmaker Roland Emmerich — the producer of such films as *Independence Day*, *The Day After Tomorrow*, and *The Patriot* — was promoted on posters and in TV commercials by posing the question "Was Shakespeare a Fraud?" While contemporary media executives chose the advertising "tag line" for this film, the roots of their exploitative question go back to 1856 and the lead article, by American Delia Bacon, in *Putnam's Monthly, A Magazine of Literature, Science, and Art*. For the first time in the public press, a scholar argued that William Shakespeare of Stratford-upon-Avon did not write the plays and poems that bore his name. Important to this re-mythologizing was Bacon's thesis that the plays promoted a republican political philosophy that ultimately led to the creation of the United States of America. This article startled some in nineteenth-century society and, via a tangled web, more recently has resulted in the script and publicity campaign for the movie *Anonymous*. The origins of this speculation about Shakespearean authorship, together with related commercial sensationalism, can be linked to the appropriation of Shakespeare's plays to support American republican ideology.

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This essay will demonstrate that the origins of speculation about Shakespearean authorship, together with related commercial sensationalism, can be linked historically to a process of appropriating the plays to support American republican ideology. Society is now used to corporate media companies exploiting the dead and famous to sell cinema tickets and DVDs. No one is safe from hack writers and Hollywood movie producers: from the Christian "messiah" to British Kings, fictions have been produced and sold as fact. In late 2011, the name of Shakespeare was added to this list when a screenplay written by American John Orloff became the large-budget movie entitled *Anonymous*, from Roland Emmerich. This film from the producer of such "blockbusters" as *Independence Day*, *The Day After Tomorrow*, and *The Patriot* was screened in multiplexes around the world. The movie was promoted on posters and in TV commercials by posing the question, "Was Shakespeare a Fraud?" Although this strange question might be well

known to academics in the field of English Literature, it was something quite new for the majority of the Saturday night cinema-going audience.

While contemporary media executives chose the advertising "tag line" for *Anonymous*, the roots of this exploitative question go back to the nineteenth century. Once William Shakespeare was widely accepted as a literary exemplar, a new academic phenomenon was born that appeared to challenge the still-developing bardolatry. While some academics in Britain were beginning to "play with" the simplistic theory that Shakespeare might have possibly been anti-monarchist, more significant questions, first published in America, were raised about the authorship of the plays. However, this was not simply a challenge to the accepted identity of the playwright. The most prominent name behind the authorship controversy attempted to irrevocably link the playwright with the republican ideology that lay behind the foundation of the American nation.

### Joseph C. Hart

The first published challenge to William Shakespeare's authorship was made in an obscure book by Joseph C. Hart, a New York lawyer and journalist and later a Consul for the United States. In 1848, Hart published *The Romance of Yachting*, a book presented to readers as an account of a sailing trip across the Atlantic Ocean to Spain. Despite the title, the book contained a discourse on "several favourite and prevailing historical assumptions, which the author [. . .] made [the] object of [his] dissent" (Hart 1848, 7). Among these "dissents," Hart proposed to rename the city of New York, removing what he argued was the "[English] badge of colonial slavery" (11), and he attacked the tradition of the iconic New England Puritans, preferring to champion the role of the "Knickerbocker race" (42) of Dutch New Amsterdam. Hart then, with more than thirty-five pages of text, presented a well-argued and considered attack on the idea that all thirty-eight plays assigned to Shakespeare had a single author and that this author was William Shakespeare of Stratford-upon-Avon. According to Hart, it was "a fraud upon the world to thrust his surreptitious fame upon us." Significantly, he suggested that in future years, "the enquiry will be, *who were the able literary men who wrote the dramas imputed to him?*" (216; emphasis in original). This question, from the year 1848 onward, appears to be the starting point for much subsequent scholarship. However, Hart did not himself make any claim to identify who the "able literary men" might have been. For the American Hart, the issue was one of English conceit, a fraud originated primarily by Nicolas Rowe in 1709. Hart concluded his expression of dissent by asking his readers, "How much good Christian ink has been spent in writing up a worthless subject, I mean Shakspeare in person" (242).

While Hart may have initiated the process, it is an American woman who should be acknowledged for first publicizing the question of Shakespeare's authorship. In January 1856,

Ohio-born Delia Bacon became the first person to raise the issue in an American journal. Along with challenging Shakespeare's authorship, Bacon offered readers a new and radical approach to the process of appropriating Shakespeare. For this new development, the plays were to be distanced not just from the rural folk background and monarchist traditions of England but also from the Warwickshire yeoman family. The difference between Delia Bacon's approach and that of Joseph Hart was that she sought to link the plays with a group of men whom she believed were prophets of republican America. Her lead article in *Putnam's Monthly, A Magazine of Literature, Science, and Art* startled many in nineteenth-century society and still continues to interest publicity-seeking academics and celebrities.

### Delia Bacon

Delia Bacon's assertion that Shakespeare was not responsible for the plays credited to his name was recognized by the editor of the respected magazine as controversial, if not mildly heretical. The editor of *Putnam's*, while recognizing a journalistic "scoop," felt the need to distance his magazine from any possible criticism provoked by the article. A footnote to "William Shakespeare and His Plays; An Inquiry Concerning Them" stated that

In commencing the publication of these bold, original, and most ingenious and interesting speculations upon the real authorship of Shakespeare's plays, it is proper for the Editor of *Putnam's Monthly*, in disclaiming all responsibility for their startling view of the questions, to say that they are the result of long and conscientious investigation on the part of the learned and eloquent scholar, their author; and that the Editor has reason to hope that they will be continued through some future numbers of the Magazine. (Bacon 1856, 1)

The editor at *Putnam's* thus indicated his support for the credentials of Bacon but distanced the magazine from the consequence of her thesis.

With this first article, Bacon set out to create, or in her view, to discover the real author or authors of the plays. Her new view of Shakespeare rejected the idea of a mere rural poetic genius in favour of a reformist political writer and democratic republican philosopher. This "new" Shakespeare was to be liberated from any moral taint, or "player's mercenary motive" (Bacon 1856, 15) associated with the theater of Elizabethan Southwark, in order to fulfil a greater destiny as a proto-American and as a type of "founding father." Bacon, connecting Shakespeare with contemporary nineteenth-century scholarship on the Greek poet Homer, pointedly chose to employ emotive and nationalistic language, referring to Shakespeare as, "*our* poet — our Homer" (2). With this reference, Bacon appeared to claim Shakespeare on behalf of the American people, fully

conscious of the heady political atmosphere of mid-nineteenth-century America. For Bacon and her audience, Americans were the inheritors of the mantle of a western civilization that had begun with the Greeks, been passed via the Romans to the English, and now found its true home with Anglo-Americans. The new Shakespeare that Bacon sought to liberate from what she regarded as Tudor oppression, was now part of American tradition and she argued that it was his "works [. . .] that have given our English life and language their imperishable claim in the earth" (2). While Homer may have provided the "song of the nation" (1) for the Greeks, Bacon now sought to credit Shakespeare with having performed a similar service for America.

For Bacon, the Homeric "Shakespeare," while a repository of the tales of Anglo-centric history and civilization, was too much a passive person of mystery to be worthy of veneration in republican America. While Shakespeare was considered culturally Anglo-Saxon and therefore a member of the "race" then considered by some Americans predestined to advance mankind, Bacon argued that his background and lowly business interests prevented him from creating pre-eminent philosophical texts. The *Putnam's* article makes it quite clear that for Bacon, Shakespeare of Stratford-upon-Avon was merely a vulgar actor. Indeed, she compared him to her American contemporary, Barnum, "the prince showman [. . .] in that stately oriental retreat of his, in Connecticut" (Bacon 1856, 12). Shakespeare, the financially motivated actor-manager without university education or formal credentials, did not reflect the image of a bold leader of democratic and republican revolution, as idealized by nineteenth-century American intellectuals and politicians.

Bacon set out to prove that the plays were in fact written by a revolutionary and social visionary who, despite state oppression, strove to inspire a new world. For Bacon, this "New World" was founded in what had become the United States of America, and if the link to the works of Shakespeare could be legitimized through scholarly endeavor, then an inheritance that would inspire, unite, and elevate Americans would be revealed and serve as her personal patriotic contribution. Bacon chose to refer to the author of the plays alternatively as "the scholar" or "philosopher." Her interest in rejecting the authorship of William Shakespeare appears not to have been an attempt to unmask a case of Elizabethan fraud but rather to reveal the link between the plays and an "immortal group of heroes" (Bacon 1856, 4) that, in her later work, were to be called "the Elizabethan men of letters." She believed that this group of anonymous men, perhaps akin to the influential American writers known as "Publius" responsible for the famous *Federalist* papers, were behind the enlightened train of thought that resulted in the foundation of the colony of Virginia and subsequently, the United States of America. Throughout the article, Bacon makes it clear that she does not seek to remove the name of Shakespeare from the plays and poems. Her more weighty

argument was that the name "Shakespeare" was the collective noun that described a moment in history when a group of men, all "subject to an oppressive and despotic censorship [and threatened with] cruel maimings and tortures old and new," sought to promote "the freedom of the new ages that were then beginning" (17). With this assertion, Bacon sought not a new personal name for Shakespeare but a new ownership of the name and the "moment." If Shakespeare could be identified as the collective voice of a struggle for republican freedom, then the owners of this important heritage were now the American Nation. Bacon passionately informed her readership "that [the] moment was there; it is chronicled; we have one word for it; we call it — Shakespeare!" (17).

Bacon had now restated the aspect of appropriation that had been visible in so many poems and orations in America throughout the early nineteenth century. Bacon's impassioned argument can be seen as an appeal to American readers to acquire the works of Shakespeare, not just as a collection of entertaining plays, but more importantly, as prophetic text intended for the ethnic group who were destined to civilize the continent of North America. Bacon continued to create the links between the American Nation and Shakespeare with her rhetorical question, "Which of our statesmen, our heroes, our divines, our poets, our philosophers, has not learned of him; and in which of all their divergent and multiplying pursuits and experiences do they fail to find him still with them, still before them?" (Bacon 1856, 10).

While Delia Bacon was later to overtly champion Sir Francis Bacon as the leader of the "men of letters," she resisted the temptation to dwell on the sensational, preferring to argue that the name Shakespeare represented a group of men and a "moment." Bacon followed her *Putnam's Monthly* article with a substantial book of 675 pages. With enthusiastic support and several letters of introduction from none other than Ralph Waldo Emerson, she had, since 1853, been in her temporary base in England preparing the evidence to support her provocative claim. It was Emerson who was to introduce her work to George Putnam and Emerson who had written to Bacon after receiving her article in manuscript, offering his opinion that "The account of Englishmen, and what is servile in them, and the prophetic American relations of the poetry, struck me much" (Emerson 1991, 490). His identification with the idea of the "prophetic" nature of Shakespeare for America, so important to Bacon's thesis, must have been great encouragement. Emerson had the credentials of a respected American intellectual and support from him in nineteenth-century America was, as Walt Whitman demonstrated with early editions of *Leaves of Grass*, very valuable. While Emerson did not necessarily accept Bacon's "proof" for her theory, the idea of a "hero" philosopher with a dream or "chimera" that would result in the foundation of the United States proved to be very attractive. It is easy to speculate that Emerson supported Bacon in her literary endeavors because she personally

represented "The American Scholar" and her thesis, if true, would provide the American Nation with a more secure claim to this "representative man."

When Delia Bacon's *The Philosophy of the Plays of Shakspeare Unfolded* finally appeared in April 1857, it proved to be a development of the earlier narrative of a struggle for freedom and the attempt to establish a new social order in Elizabethan England. However, what had previously been coherently argued in *Putnam's Monthly*, either due to her passionate commitment to her cause, possible deteriorating mental condition, or anguish that another person (in England) was about to usurp her thesis, unfortunately had now become a rambling and difficult text. Once more, as the book title indicates, the key issue for Bacon was not the putative new identity for the previously hidden writer of the plays. Rather than any single author, it was the philosophy that Bacon intended to "unfold."

In her book, Bacon analyzed passages from several plays, including *King Lear*, *Hamlet*, *Julius Caesar*, and *Coriolanus*, offering a general conclusion that the philosopher behind the plays intended to challenge "the expediency and propriety of permitting *any one man* to impose his individual will on the nation" (Bacon 1857, 326; emphases in original). Connecting America with the philosophy of the plays, Bacon suggested that

that great question, which was so soon to become the outspoken question of the nation and the age, could already be discussed in all its vexed and complicated relations, in all its aspects and bearings, as deliberately as it could be today; exactly as it was, in fact, discussed not long afterwards in swarms of English pamphlets, [. . .] exactly as it was discussed when that "lofty Roman Scene" came "to be acted over" here, with the cold-blooded prosaic formalities of an English Judicature. (332)

Bacon demonstrated that she was fully aware and engaged with contemporary political developments in America by referring to her group of Elizabethan reformers as "Know-Nothings" who adopted secrecy to avoid punishment for the "crime" of asking a "forbidden question" (xx). Bacon also appeared to address her various compatriots who, rather like the transcendentalists, attempted to find new philosophies. Her message to these people on philosophy was that "We have had them; we need not look to a foreign and younger race for them; we have them, fruit of our own stock; we have had them not cloaked in falseness, but exposed in the searching noon-day glare of our western science" (566).

The Preface to Bacon's book was written by novelist Nathaniel Hawthorne, who at that time was United States Consul in Liverpool. Bacon had requested his assistance in May 1856, when her

financial difficulties had worsened. Again, the issue of American "national interest" is evident in the manner of Bacon's appeal to Hawthorne. Her letter to Hawthorne closes with,

This is not *Consular* business exactly, I suppose . . . But I think when President Pierce appointed one so eminent as yourself in the world of letters, to represent him in this country, he deserved the return which he will have if through your aid this discovery should be secured to the country to which it properly belongs [i.e., America] instead of being appropriated here — or instead of being lost rather as it is more likely to be. (Hawthorne 1987, 200)

Naturally, he responded to this appeal to his personal and official patriotism. In his Preface to Bacon's book, Hawthorne revealed that he had written his contribution largely on the strength of his reaction to the *Putnam's Monthly* article, as he had not been able to read the complete book prior to its publication. It is perhaps significant that Hawthorne felt prepared to endorse this large work on the strength of so short an article and a single meeting of "above an hour" (Hawthorne 1863, 53). Hawthorne acknowledged the possible reaction of some contemporary Shakespeare "idolaters":

The first feeling of every reader must be one of absolute repugnance towards a person who seeks to tear out of the Anglo-Saxon heart the name which for ages it has held dearest, and to substitute another name, or names, to which the settled belief of the world has consigned a very different position. (Hawthorne 1857, xv)

But any "repugnance" felt by Hawthorne himself was put aside as he adopted Bacon's main thesis, that there was a single unifying "new philosophy" contained within the plays that "no professor could have ventured openly to teach in the days of Elizabeth and James" (ix). An allusion to the struggle for freedom and the association with America is again made clear in the Preface as Hawthorne suggests that "the great secret of the Elizabethan age was inextricably reserved by the founders of a new learning, the prophetic and more nobly gifted minds of a new and nobler race of men" (xi). As Hawthorne wrote this sentence, the "nobler race" he appeared to have in mind and would benefit from this "reserved great secret" was his own Anglo-American "race."

In his Preface, Hawthorne provided a partial explanation to a question that might have been posed by readers of *Putnam's Monthly*, writing that "unexpected obstacles prevented further publication" of Bacon's thesis in the serialized form of journal articles (Hawthorne 1857, xii). These "obstacles" appear to have been an editorial decision to reject the next three articles due to a perceived lack of "proof" for Bacon's claims. Additionally, the three magazine article manuscripts were inexplicably "lost" by William Emerson and Sophia Ripley while in transit to the home of

Ralph Waldo Emerson (Emerson 1991, 490). Hawthorne, in the Preface, also hints that "another evil followed" this misfortune (Hawthorne 1857, xii). The particular new "evil" was that Bacon and Hawthorne were both aware that William Henry Smith, a non-American, was about to publish a book suggesting the name of an alternative author for the works of Shakespeare (see Smith 1856 and Smith 1857). The implied sensitivity to, and awareness of, the issue of nationality was emphasized further by Hawthorne, who stated that "it had been the author's original purpose to publish [the book] in America; for she wished her own country to have the glory of solving the enigma of those mighty dramas" (Hawthorne 1857, xiii). Hawthorne again stressed the importance of American "ownership" by informing the readers that "it was [however] written [. . .] in the land of *our own* PHILOSOPHERS and POETS" (xiv; capitals and emphasis in original).

Delia Bacon's article in *Putnam's Monthly* and her subsequent book, while perhaps not finding a large readership in the United States, did provoke both widespread comment and review in the "popular press." Newspaper and magazine editors, hungry for copy, selectively quoted passages that allowed them to communicate the main points of interest to their readers: namely, that Sir Francis Bacon or Sir Walter Raleigh wrote Shakespeare and that both men shared a proto-American ideology. One such periodical was *The Daily Picayune* from New Orleans. The editor, after satirizing the question of "Who wrote Shickspur?," referred to both a *Boston Post* review and Bacon's earlier article in *Putnam's Monthly*. The main comment about Bacon's 675-page text was that

Miss Bacon makes a careful and close examination into the life and writings of the great men of that time — Lord Bacon, Sir Walter Raleigh, and others. She appears to consider them as a band of reformers, for whom the world was not prepared, and who were compelled to conceal their plans of reform; and that they were the real authors of the plays which were brought out in the name of Shakespeare. ("Who wrote Shickspur?" 1857, 4)

This concise summary encapsulated Delia Bacon's self-declared life's work in a manner that allowed the American reader simultaneously to ridicule the English and celebrate American progress.

While Hawthorne's preface to Bacon's book could be considered a public endorsement, several years after her death, in "Recollections of a Gifted Woman," a form of sketch and partial eulogy, he broadly condemned her authorship theory as a "despotic idea" (Hawthorne 1863, 44), suggesting that it ultimately caused her decline. However, while now publically he rejected her thesis, he described Bacon as a "gifted woman." He omitted any mention of his original Preface to her book.



Following the publication of Delia Bacon's book, writers on the subject of Shakespeare have often appeared to be solely preoccupied with the identity of the playwright. Bacon's academic argument that the author of Shakespeare was proto-American in character and that he or they shared American republican ideals has largely been ignored in favor of the sensationalism that surrounds the names of the various candidates proposed as author for the plays. However, while the quest for a secret identity of the playwright has included persons from various countries, Americans particularly seem to have been motivated to pursue this line of enquiry. Between 1857 and 1884, more than two hundred and fifty-five books, pamphlets, essays and articles were published in America on the subject of Shakespearean authorship. While for Peter Rawlings, "the widespread appetite for the Baconian hypothesis in America is easier to dismiss than to take into account" (1999, 14), the desire to associate the plays known as Shakespeare with a republican revolutionary playwright provides one possible answer.

### Walt Whitman, Ignatius Donnelly, Mark Twain

Perhaps influenced by this tide of nineteenth-century publications, even Walt Whitman felt the need to comment on the subject. In "What Lurks Behind Shakspeare's Historical Plays" (1884), an article first published in 1884 but later to be included in his *Democratic Vistas*, Whitman suggested that "it is possible a future age of criticism, diving deeper, mapping the land and lines freer, completer than hitherto, may discover in the plays named the scientific (Baconian?) inauguration of modern Democracy" (Whitman 1964). While Whitman's piece did not mention Delia Bacon or other theorists, it can be supposed that he intended the article to be his comment on the authorship debate. The acceptance by Whitman of the idea that Shakespeare could have been a proto-American may explain why, now in his "dotage," here and elsewhere he appears to have softened his previously expressed hostile opinion on the possible "undemocratic" nature of Shakespeare's plays. The fact that Whitman was in some small way engaged with this authorship issue can be again seen from the 1891 "death-bed" edition of *Leaves of Grass*, where he included a short poem entitled "Shakspere-Bacon's Cipher," a reference to a book by Philadelphia-born Ignatius Donnelly.

Donnelly, to exploit further American public interest in the authorship story, published evidence suggesting that within Shakespeare's plays lay "*The Great Cryptogram*" (Donnelly 1888) its existence providing proof that Sir Francis Bacon was the secret author of the plays. Donnelly's thesis was later recycled substantially in a book by Sir George Greenwood; it was this book that reportedly inspired Mark Twain's subsequent enthusiastic mock autobiography, provocatively entitled *Is Shakespeare Dead?* (1996). Twain, writing about his own early apprenticeship as a

Mississippi riverboat pilot in 1857, described how he took part in heated debates with his instructor about the Shakespeare-Bacon controversy. The fact that two professional sailors (one a high-school "drop-out"), both working in the harsh environment of the Midwest, more than 1,100 miles from any East Coast metropolitan city, felt motivated to debate the authorship of Elizabethan drama suggests how widespread the American interest in the Shakespeare "authorship" controversy had become.

## Conclusion

The "academic" debate first publicized in nineteenth-century America continues to this day with a recent book from Columbia University's James S. Shapiro (2010). The authorship "issue" was given an even more sensationalist spin in 2011 with the script from Orloff and the movie *Anonymous*. This big screen Hollywood appropriation of Shakespeare promoted the bizarre and "wild" theory that Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford was both the illegitimate son of Queen Elizabeth and her lover, father of her subsequent illegitimate child, and the secret author of "Shakespeare." Conspiracy theories and secrets sell books, and from its gestation with Joseph C. Hart and later development by Delia Bacon, to the intervention of Twain, the consummate "hack writer," to today's celebrity actors and the present day movie producers, significant numbers of American writers have amused themselves speculating about the theory of a mystery playwright waiting to be discovered. However, behind what could be described as a political and perhaps "patriotic" desire to unmask an anonymous, "secret" republican person behind the plays of Shakespeare lies a more fundamental, mercenary need. That "need" manifests itself in a desire to profit financially by associating their fictional output with the most renowned and read literary work in the English language — work known throughout the world as Shakespeare.

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Title Page of Ignatius Donnelly, *The Great Cryptogram: Francis Bacon's Cipher in the So-called Shakespeare Plays*. Internet Archive. <https://archive.org/stream/greatcryptogramf00donnrich#page/n3/mode/2up>.

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