

# The Philosophy of the Plays of Shakespeare Unfolded—and Abridged

Elliott Baker

The complete edition of *The Philosophy of the Plays of Shakespeare Unfolded* was published in London in the spring of 1857.<sup>1</sup> The following November, Delia Bacon, then living in Stratford, suffered a mental breakdown from which she never recovered. She was brought back to her family in the United States and died in Hartford, Connecticut on the 2nd of September, 1859. She was forty-eight.<sup>1</sup>

Much has been made of her mental breakdown by her detractors and her book has invariably been offered as evidence of that instability.<sup>2</sup> There is a connection, but it is causal, for the effort the book required of her and the many tribulations surrounding its publication undoubtedly contributed to her tragic end.

It is not certain that Delia was ever aware of her book's cruel reception. She had good reason to expect otherwise. Her essay, "William Shakespeare and His Plays; an Inquiry Concerning Them," had been a leading article in *Putnam's Magazine*.<sup>3</sup> No less a personage than Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The Sage of Concord," had been impressed by it and encouraged her to expand her theory to book length.<sup>4</sup> Nathaniel Hawthorne, one of the world's most esteemed novelists, had arranged for the book's publication and provided a preface. She undoubtedly knew her views to be contentious, but her many reclusive years during which she claimed, "I am nothing but this work," had left her innocent of the world beyond the windows of her sparse London flat. Steeped as she was in the Tudor era, she lacked familiarity with the England she lived in and the ways of its rigid literary establishment. She was American; she was unfrocked by Oxford or Cambridge or even a university in her own country. Even more damning, in one critic's words, she had "stepped beyond feminine bounds."<sup>5</sup> It was the grossest impertinence for such a one to suggest that the genius who'd given the world its greatest plays had not written them.

Vilification is often moderated by time, while ridicule remains obstinate. The

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misfortune of this book and its author has been to incur the latter. After Delia's death, the ridicule was compounded with pity, forming that particular quagmire from which there is no escape. And so, few self-sacrificial endeavors in the pursuit of truth have suffered so undeserved a fate for so long.

In the few critical notices granted her book, none mentioned what it was about. She had made it abundantly clear that the authorship question, forcibly dealt with in the Putnam article, was incidental to her present inquiry. Her objective was to reveal the existence of a consistent philosophy in the plays, to perceive its intent and establish its origins. But those who passed judgment on *The Philosophy of the Plays of Shakespere Unfolded* turned blind eyes to its very title. It was only the authorship question which was dealt with and on which they vented their mockery and scorn.

Though Nathaniel Hawthorne, in his preface, anticipated "a vast preliminary difficulty" he still underestimated it. He had complained of the book's length and must have known that the financial compensation to reviewers didn't warrant a diligent reading of a hefty volume. But, in a letter to a friend, he expressed his genuine belief that "the book is a good one." Perhaps his own success had left him naive about the lackeys of the literary world. When he did castigate the critics for cowardice, it was too late. Their damage had been done.

There's no denying that *The Philosophy of the Plays of Shakespere Unfolded* was overwritten. It's as if Delia didn't believe the elements of her theory could be absorbed from a single exposure. She resorted to repetition, sometimes seemingly endlessly so, and her presentation suffered accordingly. She overestimated her readers' familiarity with the plays and Bacon's philosophic writings and also granted them a classical knowledge equal to her own. Both miscalculations resulted in obscurities. In another letter, Hawthorne voiced the wish to shovel the excesses out of the book so that its genuine eloquence and ingenuity could shine forth.

*The Philosophy of the Plays of Shakespere Unfolded* is divided into three main sections. The first, a lengthy Introduction, presents the basic concept of the total work, that of an elite coterie of Elizabethan Men of Letters from which the plays emerged. Delia presented Walter Raleigh as the organizer of this group and Francis Bacon as its philosophic mentor. That the two men were not known to have an amiable relationship she attributed to the disguises that courtiers with similar intents had to adopt because of the tyranny of the times.

Delia's vision of Raleigh is idealized and romantic, still rankled by the injustices he endured. But the additional accomplishments she heaps on him remain within the bounds of credibility. Whether he actually presided over "A School of Night" or was merely the social apex of like-minded men is still debated. Whichever, Delia was the first to link this grouping with the

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“Academe” in *Love’s Labor’s Lost*, preceding other Shakespearean scholars by half a century.<sup>6</sup>

Book One, which follows the Introduction, is devoted to Montaigne and Bacon, with an emphasis on their similarities of method as well as philosophy. While never deigning to lock horns with acknowledged authorities, she inadvertently exposes the glibness of their pronouncements. Whereas Hazlitt found Montaigne “inexpressively frank” with “no juggling tricks,”<sup>7</sup> Delia saw his work threaded with metonymy and lurking meanings and her quoted extracts show the Gascon’s postures and utterances often as assumed as his name.

The new enlightenment had blossomed first in France, pioneered by men like Ronsard and Jodelle, but it was Montaigne’s *Essais* which first sparked it in England. Florio’s translation of 1603 achieved Biblical status in Jacobean literary circles and Ben Jonson enshrined it in *Volpone*. “All our English writers... will deigne to steale out of another well-known author almost as much as from Montaigne.” A relevant estimate is that more than seven hundred words in the *Essais* made their first appearance in Shakespeare’s plays after the translation was published.

That Bacon had a similar outlook to the Gascon philosopher is obvious. In fact, he paid tribute to the man he never met by Anglicizing Montaigne’s title for his own first collection of writings. Both men wrote for the few of the present and, hopefully, the many of the future. Both cleverly dissembled their views to avoid the comprehension of the oppressive powers of their times and regarded the solicitude of reputation and glory as follies. Both employed a new kind of Socratic dialogue advancing identical truths. Delia’s perception of this is implicitly acknowledged in Hawthorne’s first letter to her: “You seem to me to have read Bacon and Montaigne more profoundly than anybody else has read them.”

While giving the Frenchman full due, Delia never treated his English counterpart as a mutation. Both pointed with a finger to what they could not say, but Montaigne made no contribution to Bacon’s Scientific Philosophy. Delia’s extensive treatment of this only occasionally alludes to him. In these chapters, Bacon completely takes over the limelight of genius, his logic and rhetoric undergoing an analysis thoroughly at odds with those offered in Spedding’s sixteen-volume lifelong study<sup>8</sup> and Lord Macaulay’s famous essay.<sup>9</sup> She places equal emphasis on thought and word, finding “truth in beauty dyed” in the frequent use of parable and fable. She fathoms his Tables of Review of Instances and accepts his original portraits of virtue, duty, and felicity in the dissection of character. Bacon’s Method of Progression required artistic exhibitions to illustrate the diseases and artificial growths of human nature. He

believed in a discriminating perceptual dominance over popular ignorance and sentimentality. Delia found these concepts to be his paving stone to the stage of The Globe.

It is in the final section, Book Two, of *The Philosophy of the Plays of Shakespere Unfolded* that the leap is made from Bacon the philosopher to Bacon as playwright. Three of the plays, *King Lear*, *Julius Caesar*, and *Coriolanus*, are presented as evidence that the Shakespeare canon contains the missing Fourth Part of Bacon's *The Great Instauration*.<sup>10</sup>

Delia chose her examples well. Since her writing, *Lear* has critically unseated Hamlet as the most complex of Shakespeare's characters. Though the scope of interpretations has broadened, their differences mostly remain minor fissures within the same veins of filial ingratitude and parental anguish. Delia's interpretations still stand apart. To her, it is not only Regan's heart but all the characters that bear anatomizing. The tempest in the mind of the aged king is a microcosm of the chaos of human life, his distress no different from Tom O'Bedlam's gibberish in establishing the limits of fate and fortune. To Delia, the play is a philosophic inquiry into the secrets of majesty, its theme—that ultimate sovereignty belongs to universal nature—stated in *Lear*'s vain attempts to outscorn the elements. To her, this is the tragedy of the many, not only of a monarch. Madness has replaced the conventional Christianity of *The Chronicle History of King Leir* and Sidney's *Arcadia*. The new *Lear*'s frantic appeals reflect the Pyrrhonist sentiment of the period, but she finds these too far removed from existing moral concepts to be pertinent.<sup>11</sup> They are matters best left to academic minds.

Nor does she follow the well trodden scholarship trail of circumstantial evidence. Phrases from Montaigne's essays appear verbatim in the plays;<sup>12</sup> their borrowings from Erasmus can also be found in Bacon's *Promus*.<sup>13</sup> These duplications could have been used to enforce her theory, but they also remain incidental to her inquiry. The play represents ripe ground for battle and some giants had left themselves open for a kill. Doctor Johnson detected nothing atavistic between the Roman plays and Tudor/Stuart England,<sup>14</sup> and Coleridge saw *Lear* derived from gross improbability, while Delia detected a British lion beneath the ancient costumes. But Johnson gets no mention; nor does Hazlitt, nor Coleridge, nor Pope, nor any of the high priests of scholarship. Equitably, she doesn't exploit the tributes from Dryden and Ben Jonson nor any samples of Montaigne's Lucretian Tomism to bolster her case.

Of the three plays, *Julius Caesar* receives the fewest pages. This most popular and accomplished of the melodramas is treated as the most self-revelatory, the finger unmistakably pointing to Ceasar's laurel wreath on the brows of Elizabeth and James. Brutus and Cassius discuss their views of government out

of earshot of the Tower, but their exchanges warrant T.S. Eliot's verdict that Shakespeare's philosophy was inferior and muddled.<sup>15</sup> "There is a tide in the affairs of men" amounts to little more than a proverb, so Delia looked elsewhere and found the precepts that prodigious persons exist in the blind passions of those absorbed by them and that justice is often nothing but an excuse for the murder of the perfection of power. Tyrants were always waiting in the wings and "another evil may succeed and a worse."

These substantiated some of Bacon's prose. Though he was not averse to having power in his own time, he feared a *Gotterdammerung* which would unleash an unenlightened popular will. The reforms of moral absolutes had to be carried out with a scientific purpose which would improve the gross appetites of man by altering the meaning of popular terms, and all within the existing political framework. "If there be a speck or two in the eye (of England) he were a strange oculist who would pull out the eye."<sup>16</sup> There is a reflection here of Montaigne's caution against decay and corruption carrying them too far from their principles.

As befits one of the longest plays in the Folio, *Coriolanus* is allotted the fullest treatment in her text. If there is a primary concentration in all of Bacon's writings, it is on the double nature of man—the conflict between isolated interest and public sensibilities. Delia finds in Caius Martius Coriolanus the ideal prototype. Through him, true nobility is delved to its roots. The egg of the hero tortures the butterfly and his rise to power is charted from that moment of its inception. The debts to and departures from Plutarch, as in *Julius Caesar*, receive scant attention. Whether or not the dearth of grain in the play had any connection with local Warwickshire riots<sup>17</sup> is left to the nit-picking of professorial combat. The inequality of fortune in nature's book of secrecy is the theme. Lear's realization of it was the basis of his abulia and despair. Brutus and Cassius are but diseased botanical specimens of it. Moreover, Delia maintains that *Coriolanus* includes a definitive scientific classification of the specimens of reverence and submission that men exhibit both singly and in crowds. More essentially, she found in Bacon's "feigned history" the steps in the advancement of learning which could take man from a "nobler kind of vermin" to true sovereignty. She does not neglect the mother/son relationship in this. To her, the image of Volumnia kneeling alone before the City of Rome symbolizes the mistaken duty between child and parent, and her labelling of Volumnia as "the conservator of the harm" is impressively pre-Freudian.

The author would undoubtedly have been incensed by Bernard Shaw's verdict that this play was the greatest of Shakespeare's comedies.<sup>18</sup> She may well have told the flippant Fabian to look beneath the simplistic labor relations of the "comedy," just as she once admonished Carlyle that he did not know what

was in the plays if he believed “that booby wrote them.” She had little patience with those opposing her views, but the brief chapter which concludes her book shows her capable of tolerance.

Obviously smarting from Pope’s summing up of Bacon as “the meanest of mankind” and Macaulay’s devastating comments on his shame, she rises full strength to defend the man she has so profoundly read. The obsequious compliments to King James at the beginning of *The Advancement of Learning* are deformities necessary to justify: “There has not been since Christ’s time any King or Temporal Monarch, which has been so learned in all literature and erudition.” This to the most fatuous of rulers, who regarded riding to hounds as a cultural achievement. Bacon’s own letters appear to support the charges against him, but Delia uses these to substantiate her thesis that all Bacon’s most obvious statements were mere disguises to avoid the Star Chamber. It’s difficult to deny that Bacon’s praise of James’s swiftness of apprehension and penetration of judgment was anything but mockery.

Throughout her book, Delia refers alternately to the poet and the philosopher, leaving the impression that she considers them one and the same. Only twice does she return to her original assertion that the plays were the products of more than one mind. Had she clung to this theme, her work might not have been greeted so derisively. The type of cunning she approved of in Raleigh and Montaigne and Bacon could have made her theory palatable without totally denying it. Both *Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece* were dedicated by William Shakespeare to the Third Earl of Southampton, who was a sycophant of the Earl of Essex, who in turn was a close friend of Bacon until Essex’s attempted insurrection. Delia had published fiction. She was certainly capable of concocting a scenario in which the actor Shakespeare ingratiated himself to the others enough to be a frequent guest at Gorhambury House so that, having ingested Bacon’s philosophic musings, some later appeared in his plays. The beginner’s crudities in the earlier efforts would thus be excusable and she might even give the player full marks for the birth of Anthony Dull and Holofernes. But any such contrivance would have destroyed her conception at its very source, and her Putnam article had already made this impossible. A single extract should suffice.

Take, one by one, the splendid men of this Elizabethan age, and set them down with a *Hamlet* to write, and you will say beforehand, such a one cannot do it;...—oh no; he with his infinite wit and invention, with his worlds of covert humor, with his driest prose, pressed, bursting with Shakespearean beauty, he could not do it, nor he with his Shakespearean acquaintance with life, with his Shakespearean knowledge of men under all the different

social conditions... with his large, genial, generous, prodigal Shakespearean soul that would comprehend all, he could not do it; neither of these men, nor both of them together, nor all the wits of the age together:—but this Mr. Shakespeare of the Globe, this mild, respectable, obliging man, this “Johannes Factotum” (as a contemporary calls him, laughing at the idea of his undertaking “a blank verse”), is there any difficulty here? Oh no! None in the world.<sup>19</sup>

We should remember that, before this article appeared, many men of independent mind had felt uneasy with the Stratford legend. Pope had bowed before the miracle of the plays’ creation; Coleridge had asked if God chose idiots to convey truths; and men as diverse as Bismark and Emerson had expressed difficulty at relating the man Shakespeare with his work. Delia, though, was the first to offer an alternative. Before crossing the Atlantic on her mission, she had acquired a substantial following as a speaker. The pulpit rhetoric of her prose was similarly bound to attract adherents. After her death some became disciples and, as so often happens, she was further victimized by their good intentions.

Many of those newly convinced were articulate and distinguished. Later, rival candidates to Bacon were nominated, most noticeably Christopher Marlowe; William Herbert, Earl of Derby; and Edward de Vere, Earl of Oxford. But what became known as the “Baconian Movement” long prevailed. Accusations that Bacon wrote like a Lord Chancellor were countered by Dryden’s tribute and Shelley’s declaring him a poet with a language that had “a sweet and majestic rythm.”<sup>20</sup> Sentence lengths were charted, feminine endings counted, and meter measured. Various ploys of cryptology were prompted by Bacon’s mention of ciphers, the first three letters of the alphabet wheel being a partial anagram of his name.<sup>21</sup> The authorship question was no longer incidental, but the purpose of Delia’s work was ignored. *The Dictionary of American Biography* had the final word—“To her remains the credit or discredit, of having inaugurated the most absurd, and in other hands, the most popular of literary heresies.”

The Baconian movement gradually dwindled as the Oxfordian one gained credence, finally ending on a ludicrous note of counterpoint when a book attempting to prove that William Shakespeare wrote Francis Bacon’s works was respectfully reviewed by respected critics.<sup>22</sup> It can now be declared officially dead. Francis Bacon is never mentioned in the realms of poetry or theater. More pertinent is that the name of the man to whom Kant dedicated *The Critique of Pure Reason* is noticeably absent from many indexes of modern philosophy and the new historicism.

This would have been the most bitter pill of all for Delia Bacon to swallow. Her entire work is based on the presumption that Bacon wrote for the future benefit of man and the eventual adhesion of his double nature. He'd found no melodies in "the flutes and trumpets of the Greeks" suitable to practical everyday life. He'd censured Aristotle for ignoring the affections while mouthing ancient slogans in a learned tongue. Bacon's inductive process was to be a secular replacement for Aristotelian syllogisms. Delia believed the purpose of the plays was to assist in this transition and that Bacon's scientific philosophy would finally prove dominant. But the trimmings of current morality show them shaped more by Aristotle's *Organum* and *Eudemian Ethics* than by any parts of *The Great Instauration*.

A hundred years ago, it was said that only William Shakespeare was more quoted than Francis Bacon. Today, possibly one of his sentences might be familiar to school boys.

Some books are to be tasted, others to be swallowed, and some few to be chewed and digested.

Another passage, from Bacon's writings, would seem even more applicable to *The Philosophy of the Plays of Shakespeare Unfolded*.

Read not to contradict, nor to believe, but to weigh and consider.

## Notes

1. Delia Bacon, *The Philosophy of the Plays of Shakespeare Unfolded*, with a preface by Nathaniel Hawthorne (London, 1857).
2. Samuel Shoenbaum in his *Shakespeare's Lives* has probably been her main assailant. See also, "Happy Birthday, William Shakespeare, and Keep Those Plays and Sonnets Coming," by Robert Giroux (*The New York Times*, April 28, 1985).
3. *Putnam's Monthly* (January 1856).
4. Ralph Waldo Emerson, after reading the manuscript of her essays, wrote to her on the 12th of June, 1852. His letter included, "There is an immense presumption against us which is to be annihilated by battery as fast as possible. On most accounts, the eligible way is, I think, the *book*, published simultaneously in England and here."
5. *Punch* (May 2, 1857). The review continued, "Women might better unfold tablecloths than the sheets of Shakespeare."
6. In 1592, a book written by the Jesuit Robert Persons under the name of "Andreas Philopater" was surreptitiously circulated in England. Among other slanders, it accused Raleigh of keeping a school of Atheism in which "young men learned to spell the name of God backwards." Whether this was the "School of Night" mentioned in the King of Navarre's speech in *Love's Labor's*



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*Lost* is still debated by scholars. The subject is treated fully by Ernest Strathman in his *Sir Walter Raleigh, A Study in Elizabethan Skepticism*.

7. William Hazlitt, *Selected Writings*, ed. R. Blythe (1970).

8. James Spedding, *The Life and Letters of Francis Bacon* (London, 1861-1874).

9. Thomas Babington Macaulay, "Lord Bacon," *The Edinburgh Review* (July 1837).

10. As conceived by Bacon, *The Great Instauration* was to consist of six parts. The Fourth Part was to offer examples of his inductive methodology. He wrote that Part Six was beyond his remaining strength, thus implying that the fourth and fifth parts had been accomplished. However, no segments of them were found among his writings.

11. William R. Elton, *King Lear and the Gods* (1988).

12. See Peter Sokolowski's review of *The Complete Essays* of Montaigne in the Fall 1993 issue of this journal.

13. Mrs. Henry Pott, *The Promus of Formularies and Elegances* (1883). Mrs. Pott tabulated more than 1,600 quotations from the works of Bacon and Shakespeare which showed similarities. Many of these were from Erasmus.

14. Samuel Johnson, *Preface to the Edition of Shakespeare's Plays* (London, 1765).

15. T.S. Eliot, *Four Elizabethans*.

16. Francis Bacon, *Advancement of Learning*.

17. This theory is advanced by Russell Fraser in *Shakespeare, The Later Years* (1992).

18. Bernard Shaw, *Shaw on Shakespeare*, ed. Edmund Wilson.

19. Putnam's Monthly (January 1856).

20. Percy B. Shelley, *The Symposium or Preface to the Banquet of Plato*.

21. The professional cryptologists, William and Elizabeth Friedman, in their *Shakespearean Ciphers Examined* (1957), presented a full inquiry into the "cypher issue," which resulted in a negative conclusion.

22. Charles Hamilton, *In Search of Shakespeare* (1986).