

3. Nathaniel Hawthorne, Delia Bacon and Shakespeare

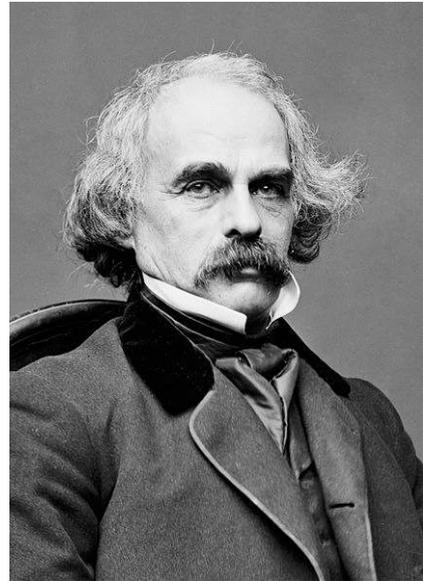
1857

In 1857 Nathaniel Hawthorne, then living in London, provided a Preface to Delia Bacon's *The Philosophy of the Plays of Shakspeare Unfolded* (London: Groombridge Sons Paternoster Row. 1857 Ames Press New York). Disorganized and almost unreadable, *The Philosophy of the Plays of Shakespeare Unfolded* is sustained by its author's intellectual energy and infectious enthusiasm for her topic. Hawthorne's sympathetic account suggests that he was more than half persuaded by Bacon's argument that Shakespeare could not have been the author of the dramas attributed to him, and that they were more likely the work of a distinguished committee headed by Sir Francis Bacon (no relation).

Delia Salter Bacon (1811-1859) was "attractive, vivacious, and intellectual", and Hawthorne initially thought her work "brilliant."¹ It was largely due to his influence that *The Philosophy of Shakespeare's Plays Unfolded* was first published. After Bacon's death he spoke of her more skeptically, especially in "Reflections on a Gifted Woman," *The Atlantic Monthly*, (1883), republished in *Our Old Home* (1888).

The Philosophy of the Plays of Shakspeare Unfolded, long derided by conventional scholars, is now making something of a comeback, albeit unacknowledged: see Bate and Rasmussen: *William Shakespeare and Others / Collaborative Plays* (Palgrave Macmillan 2013).

This Volume contains the argument, drawn from the Plays usually attributed to Shakspeare, in support of a theory which the author of it has demonstrated by historical evidences in another work. Having never read this historical demonstration (which remains still in manuscript, with the exception of a preliminary chapter, published long ago in an American periodical), I deem it necessary to cite the author's own account of it.



Nathaniel Hawthorne 1804-1864

¹ "Delia Bacon: Hawthorne's Last Heroine," *Nathaniel Hawthorne Review* 20.2 (Fall 1994): 1-10.

The Historical Part of this work (which was originally the principal part, and designed to furnish the historical key to the great Elizabethan writings), though now for a long time completed and ready for the press, and though repeated reference is made to it in this volume, is, for the most part, omitted here. It contains a true and before unwritten history, and it will yet, perhaps, be published as it stands; but the vivid and accumulating historic detail, with which more recent research tends to enrich the earlier statement, and disclosures which no invention could anticipate, are waiting now to be subjoined to it.

The INTERNAL EVIDENCE of the assumptions made at the outset is that which is chiefly relied on in the work now first presented on this subject to the public. The demonstration will be found complete on that ground; and on that ground alone the author is willing, and deliberately prefers, for the present, to rest it.

External evidence, of course, will not be wanting; there will be enough and to spare, if the demonstration here be correct. But the author of the discovery was not willing to rob the world of this great question; but wished rather to share with it the benefit which the true solution of the Problem offers—the solution prescribed by those who propounded it to the future. It seemed better to save to the world the power and beauty of this demonstration, its intellectual stimulus, its demand on the judgment. It seemed better, that the world should acquire it also in the form of criticism, instead of being stupified and overpowered with the mere force of an irresistible, external, historical proof. Persons incapable of appreciating any other kind of proof,—those who are capable of nothing that does not ‘directly fall under and strike *the senses*’ as Lord Bacon expresses it,—will have their time also; but it was proposed to present the subject first to minds of another order.

In the present volume, accordingly, the author applies herself to the demonstration and development of a system of philosophy, which has presented itself to her as underlying the superficial and ostensible text of Shakspeare’s plays. Traces of the same philosophy, too, she conceives herself to have found in the acknowledged works of Lord Bacon, and in those of other writers contemporary with him. All agree in one system; all these traces indicate a common understanding and unity of purpose in men among whom no brotherhood has hitherto been suspected, except as representatives of a grand and brilliant age, when the human intellect made a marked step in advance.

The author did not (as her own consciousness assures her) either construct or originally seek this new philosophy. In many respects, if I have rightly understood her, it was at variance with her pre-conceived opinions, whether ethical, religious, or political. She had been for years a student of Shakspeare, looking for nothing in his plays beyond what the world has agreed to find in them, when she began to see, under the surface, the gleam of this hidden treasure.

It was carefully hidden, indeed, yet not less carefully indicated, as with a pointed finger, by such marks and references as could not ultimately escape the notice of a subsequent age, which should be capable of profiting by the rich inheritance. So, too, in regard to Lord Bacon. The author of this volume had not sought to put any but the ordinary and obvious interpretation upon his works, nor to take any other view of his character than what accorded with the unanimous judgment upon it of all the generations since his epoch. But, as she penetrated more and more deeply into the plays, and became aware of those inner readings, she found herself compelled to turn back to the *Advancement of Learning* for information as to their plan and purport; and Lord Bacon’s Treatise failed not to give her what she sought; thus adding to the immortal dramas, in her idea, a far higher value than their warmest admirers had heretofore claimed for them. They filled out the scientific scheme which Bacon had planned, and which needed only these profound and vivid illustrations of human life and character to make it perfect. Finally, the author’s researches led her to a point where she found the plays claimed for Lord Bacon and his associates,—not in a way

that was meant to be intelligible in their own perilous times,—but in characters that only became legible, and illuminated, as it were, in the light of a subsequent period.

The reader will soon perceive that the new philosophy, as here demonstrated, was of a kind that no professor could have ventured openly to teach in the days of Elizabeth and James. The concluding chapter of the present work makes a powerful statement of the position which a man, conscious of great and noble aims, would then have occupied; and shows, too, how familiar the age was with all methods of secret communication, and of hiding thought beneath a masque of conceit or folly. Applicably to this subject, I quote a paragraph from a manuscript of the author's, not intended for present publication:

It was a time when authors, who treated of a scientific politics and of a scientific ethics internally connected with it, naturally preferred this more philosophic, symbolic method of indicating their connection with their writings, which would limit the indication to those who could pierce within the veil of a philosophic symbolism. It was the time when the cipher, in which one could write '*omnia per omnia*,' was in such request, and when 'wheel ciphers' and 'doubles' were thought not unworthy of philosophic notice. It was a time, too, when the phonographic art was cultivated, and put to other uses than at present, and when a *nom de plume* was required for other purposes than to serve as the refuge of an author's modesty, or vanity, or caprice. It was a time when puns, and charades, and enigmas, and anagrams, and monograms, and ciphers, and puzzles, were not good for sport and child's play merely; when they had need to be close; when they had need to be solvable, at least, only to those who *should* solve them. It was a time when all the latent capacities of the English language were put in requisition, and it was flashing and crackling, through all its lengths and breadths, with puns and quips, and conceits, and jokes, and satires, and inlined with philosophic secrets that opened down "into the bottom of a tomb"—that opened into the Tower—that opened on the scaffold and the block.'

I quote, likewise, another passage, because I think the reader will see in it the noble earnestness of the author's character, and may partly imagine the sacrifices which this research has cost her:-

The great secret of the Elizabethan age did not lie where any superficial research could ever have discovered it. It was not left within the range of any accidental disclosure. It did not lie on the surface of any Elizabethan document. The most diligent explorers of these documents, in two centuries and a quarter, had not found it. No faintest suspicion of it had ever crossed the mind of the most recent, and clear-sighted, and able investigator of the Baconian remains. It was buried in the lowest depths of the lowest deeps of the deep Elizabethan Art; that Art which no plummet, till now, has ever sounded. It was locked with its utmost reach of traditionary cunning. It was buried in the inmost recesses of the esoteric Elizabethan learning. It was tied with a knot that had passed the scrutiny and baffled the sword of an old, suspicious, dying, military government—a knot that none could cut—a knot that must be untied.

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, for a research that should test the mind of the discoverer, and frame and subordinate it to that so sleepless and indomitable purpose of the prophetic aspiration. It was "the device" by which they undertook to live again in the ages in which their achievements and triumphs were forecast, and to come forth and rule again, not in one mind, not in the few, not in the many, but in all. "For there is no throne like that throne in the thoughts of men," which the ambition of these men climbed and compassed.

The principal works of the Elizabethan Philosophy, those in which the new method of learning was practically applied to the noblest subjects, were presented to the world in the form of AN ENIGMA. It was a form well fitted to divert inquiry, and baffle even the research of the scholar for a time; but one calculated to provoke the philosophic curiosity, and one which would inevitably command a research that could end only with the true solution. That solution was reserved for one who would recognise, at last, in the disguise of the great impersonal teacher, the disguise of a new learning. It waited for the reader who

would observe, at last, those thick-strewn scientific clues, those thick-crowding enigmas, those perpetual beckonings from the “theatre” into the judicial palace of the mind. It was reserved for the student who would recognise, at last, the mind that was seeking so perseveringly to whisper its tale of outrage, and “the secrets it was forbid.” It waited for one who would answer, at last, that philosophic challenge, and say, “Go on, I’ll follow thee!” It was reserved for one who would count years as days, for the love of the truth it hid; who would never turn back on the long road of initiation, though all “THE IDOLS” must be left behind in its stages; who would never stop until it stopped in that new cave of Apollo, where the handwriting on the wall spells anew the old Delphic motto, and publishes the word that “unties the spell.”

On this object, which she conceives so loftily, the author has bestowed the solitary and self-sustained toil of many years. The volume now before the reader, together with the historical demonstration which it pre-supposes, is the product of a most faithful and conscientious labour, and a truly heroic devotion of intellect and heart. No man or woman has ever thought or written more sincerely than the author of this book. She has given nothing less than her life to the work. And, as if for the greater trial of her constancy, her theory was divulged, some time ago, in so partial and unsatisfactory a manner—with so exceedingly imperfect a statement of its claims—as to put her at great disadvantage before the world. A single article from her pen, purporting to be the first of a series, appeared in an American Magazine; but unexpected obstacles prevented the further publication in that form, after enough had been done to assail the prejudices of the public, but far too little to gain its sympathy. Another evil followed. An English writer (in a ‘Letter to the Earl of Ellesmere,’ published within a few months past) has thought it not inconsistent with the fair-play, on which his country prides itself, to take to himself this lady’s theory, and favour the public with it as his own original conception, without allusion to the author’s prior claim. In reference to this pamphlet, she generously says:

This has not been a selfish enterprise. It is not a personal concern. It is a discovery which belongs not to an individual, and not to a people. Its fields are wide enough and rich enough for us all; and he that has no work, and whoso will, let him come and labour in them. The field is the world’s; and the world’s work henceforth is in it. So that it be known in its real comprehension, in its true relations to the weal of the world, what matters it? So that the truth, which is dearer than all the rest—which abides with us when all others leave us, dearest then—so that the truth, which is neither yours nor mine, but yours *and* mine, be known, loved, honoured, emancipated, mitred, crowned, adored--_who_ loses anything, that does not find it.’ ‘And what matters it,’ says the philosophic wisdom, speaking in the abstract, ‘what name it is proclaimed in, and what letters of the alphabet we know it by?--what matter is it, so that they *spell* the name that is *good* for ALL, and *good* for *each*,’—for that is the REAL name here?

Speaking on the author’s behalf, however, I am not entitled to imitate her magnanimity; and, therefore, hope that the writer of the pamphlet will disclaim any purpose of assuming to himself, on the ground of a slight and superficial performance, the result which she has attained at the cost of many toils and sacrifices.

And now, at length, after many delays and discouragements, the work comes forth. It had been the author’s original purpose to publish it in America; for she wished her own country to have the glory of solving the enigma of those mighty dramas, and thus adding a new and higher value to the loftiest productions of the English mind. It seemed to her most fit and desirable, that America—having received so much from England, and returned so little—should do what remained to be done towards rendering this great legacy available, as its authors meant it to be, to all future time. This purpose was frustrated; and it will be seen in what spirit she acquiesces.

The author was forced to bring it back, and contribute it to the literature of the country from which it was derived, and to which it essentially and inseparably belongs. It was written, every word of it, on English ground, in the midst of the old familiar scenes and household names, that even in our nursery songs revive

the dear ancestral memories; those “royal pursuivants” with which our mother-land still follows and retakes her own. It was written in the land of our old kings and queens, and in the land of *our own* PHILOSOPHERS and POETS also. It was written on the spot where the works it unlocks were written, and in the perpetual presence of the English mind; the mind that spoke before in the cultured few, and that speaks to-day in the cultured many. And it is now at last, after so long a time—after all, as it should be—the English press that prints it. It is the scientific English press, with those old gags (wherewith our kings and queens sought to stop it, ere they knew what it was) champed asunder, ground to powder, and with its last Elizabethan shackle shaken off, that restores, “in a better hour,” the torn and garbled science committed to it, and gives back “the bread cast on its sure waters.”



Delia Bacon 1811-1859

There remains little more for me to say. I am not the editor of this work; nor can I consider myself fairly entitled to the honor (which, if I deserved it, I should feel to be a very high as well as a perilous one) of seeing my name associated with the author's on the title-page. My object has been merely to speak a few words, which might, perhaps, serve the purpose of placing my countrywoman upon a ground of amicable understanding with the public. She has a vast preliminary difficulty to encounter. 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 long assigned a very different position. What I claim for this work is, that the ability employed in its composition has been worthy of its great subject, and well employed for our intellectual interests, whatever judgment the public may pass upon the questions discussed.

And, after listening to the author's interpretation of the Plays, and seeing how wide a scope she assigns to them, how high a purpose, and what richness of inner meaning, the thoughtful reader will hardly return again—not wholly, at all events—to the common view of them and of their author. It is for the public to say whether my countrywoman has proved her theory. In the worst event, if she has failed, her failure will be more honorable than most people's triumphs; since it must fling upon the old tombstone, at Stratford-on-Avon, the noblest tributary wreath that has ever lain there.