General introduction

Paul Edmondson and Stanley Wells

In August 1856, a 45-year-old American lady by the name of Delia Bacon paid a visit to Stratford-upon-Avon, where she lodged initially at 15 College Street, not far from Holy Trinity Church. She met with the vicar, George Granville, who allowed her access outside normal visiting hours to Shakespeare's grave, which she wished to investigate in the hope that it concealed solutions to an imagined code which would demonstrate that there were reasons to question received ideas about the authorship of Shakespeare's works. '"If I only had the proper tools", she complained to herself, "I could lift the stone myself, weak as I am, with no one to help" . . . A strange weariness overcame her. She left, her mission unaccomplished.'[1]

We can relate these events around Shakespeare's grave to numerous aspects of the intellectual and cultural climate of the time which occupied the popular imagination: Gothic fiction and drama with their tales of subterranean passages and arcane messages; the questioning of religious orthodoxy; geological discoveries; the authorship of the Homeric poems; archaeological investigations; and the search for the origins of life. Charles Darwin's *The Origin of Species* was to be published three years later, in 1859. Detective fiction with its emphases on the solving of mysteries and the imposing of an all-controlling pattern on a world uncertain of itself was beginning to appear. One of its earliest exponents was Edgar Allan Poe, whom Bacon herself had beaten to the prize in a short story competition.

Delia Bacon published her disintegrationist work *The Philosophy of the Plays of Shakspere Unfolded* in 1857. Her doubts about Shakespeare's authorship had been anticipated by an eccentric New York lawyer, Colonel Joseph C. Hart in a curious and highly derivative book called *The Romance of Yachting* published in 1848.[2] Credulous of John Payne Collier's Henslowe forgeries, Hart was influenced also by a denigratory 'Life of Shakespeare' in Dionysus Lardner's *Cabinet Cyclopaedia*, which found that the plays 'absolutely teem with the grossest impurities, – more gross by far than can be found in any contemporary dramatist'.[3] Hart ramblingly and rantingly fantasized that Shakespeare, who 'grew up in ignorance and viciousness, and became a common poacher . . . purchased or obtained surreptitiously' other men's plays which he then 'spiced with obscenity, blackguardism, and impurities'. He did not identify the original author or authors. We cannot tell whether Bacon knew Hart's book. It is her work that has proved to be seminal, and her name will recur frequently throughout the rest of this volume. Doubting that someone with Shakespeare's educational background could have written the works, she proposed that they were produced by a committee led by the philosopher, scientist and statesman, Sir Francis Bacon. A significant cultural foothold had become established. In early years, interest centred on Francis Bacon. An American Bacon Society, dedicated to propagating the theory that he wrote Shakespeare's works, was founded in 1885 and an English one in the following year. Since that time the proposition that the works were written by anyone else apart from Shakespeare has found expression in many forms.

Throughout this book we use the term 'anti-Shakespearian' to describe those who propagate any theory which disputes Shakespeare's authorship and co-authorship of the works attributed to him. In the past the term has been 'anti-Stratfordian', which allows the work attributed to Shakespeare to be separated from the social and cultural context of its author. But to deny Shakespeare of Stratford's connection to the work attributed to him is to deny the essence of, in part, what made that work possible. Michelangelo cannot be separated from Florence and Rome; Charles Dickens would not be Charles Dickens without London. Shakespeare was formed by both Stratford-upon-Avon and London. The phrases 'the Stratford man', 'actor from Stratford' and even 'anti-Stratfordian' perpetuate this kind of divide. These terms concede that it is possible to separate an artist from his or her background and cultural context. 'Anti-Shakespearian' seems to us to be a more accurate and honest term to use, even when we are referring to great Shakespeare writers and actors of the past and present.

Since Delia Bacon's time, thousands of books and articles have been published questioning Shakespeare's authorship and putting forward an extraordinary range of alternative nominees. An online search for 'Shakespeare's authorship' will reveal an abundance of proponents of anti-Shakespearian theories, and they are by no means confined to Britain and America. Some emanate, for example, from France, Germany, Italy, Norway, Russia and Sweden. And though some of them are amateurs, others are persons of high intellectual ability fully conversant with the techniques of academic scholarship.

Some of the candidates proposed over the decades were more or less contemporary with Shakespeare (most of them university educated or aristocratic, such as Sir Walter Ralegh and the Earls of Southampton, Rutland and Derby, and even including both Queen Elizabeth I and King James I. Others (such as Sir Philip Sidney) were dead by the time some of Shakespeare's plays and poems were written, and at least one (Daniel Defoe, born around 1659) lived long after Shakespeare's time. Fashions in candidature constantly fluctuate; beyond Francis Bacon, the most popular have been Christopher Marlowe and, currently, Edward de Vere, the seventeenth Earl of Oxford. Over the years, authorship has figured in innumerable newspaper reports, prominent public discussions, debates, radio and television broadcasts and in several mock trials, most notably in Washington, DC, in 1987 (with three Supreme Court justices) and in London in 1988 at the Inner Temple (with three Lord Justices) – the Shakespearian cause prevailed on both occasions. Many works of fiction have taken the topic as a point of departure. During the first decade of the twenty-first century the doubters began to achieve a higher profile through, especially, the proponents of the online 'Declaration of Reasonable Doubt' (see Chapter 17) which is proud to put to the fore various famous people who have signed it, including leading actors such as Sir Derek Jacobi, Jeremy Irons, Mark Rylance and Michael York. At least two universities actively encourage doubts about Shakespeare's authorship (see Chapters 17 and 19). The discussion achieved a high public profile in consequence of the prominent Hollywood film *Anonymous* (Sony Pictures, 2011, directed by Roland Emmerich) in which Shakespeare is portrayed as a drunken, inarticulate buffoon, acting as a front-man for the Earl of Oxford whom the film depicts as the covert author of Shakespeare's plays (as well as the illegitimate son of Queen Elizabeth I and illegitimate father, with Queen Elizabeth, of the Earl of Southampton, Shakespeare's patron). The poster advertising the film portrays a figure representing Shakespeare with his back to the viewer accompanied by the question 'Was Shakespeare a Fraud?' The film's distributors circulated educational materials designed to encourage teachers to doubt Shakespeare's authorship and to spread that doubt among their pupils.

At least until the end of the twentieth century the subject was the province of amateurs (that is, people with no professional commitment to literary or historical studies). What became known as 'the Shakespeare Authorship Debate' was largely ignored by many Shakespeare scholars who stood aloof from it, regarding it as a topic unworthy of their attention, even as a supreme expression of human folly. Shakespeare organizations and scholars are accustomed to being slandered with the accusation that they are defending Shakespeare's authorship, and what is often slightingly referred to as 'the Shakespeare industry', for selfish, commercial reasons.

Nevertheless the authorship discussion is a complex intellectual phenomenon well worthy of objective consideration. It raises questions about the nature of historical evidence, the moral responsibility of academic enquiry, the place of artists' works in relation to their lives, the cultural and intellectual formation of Shakespeare and his contemporaries, the status of scholarly and expert authority, the relationship between the professional scholar and the general public, the psychology of conspiracy theories and the practice of collaborative playwriting in Shakespeare's time.

It is partly in response to these developments that The Shakespeare Birthplace Trust felt the time had come to take a more active part in discussion of a topic which is of central importance not only to its activities but to those of innumerable other organizations world-wide and indeed to anyone interested in the works of the world's best-known and most influential writer (see Chapter 19).

This collection of essays is divided into three parts. Part I is concerned with some of the most conspicuous alternative nominees for Shakespeare's authorship and with the history of the claims that have been made for them. Part II examines various aspects of Shakespeare's authorship including his collaboration with other professional writers. Part III engages with ways in which the Shakespeare Authorship Discussion has found expression in the popular imagination. It is our hope that the collection will both illuminate the phenomenon and shine a Shakespearian light on a too-long-established heresy.

PART I

Sceptics

This first part of our book offers essays about claims that have been made on behalf of various individuals as alternative authors of the works more generally attributed to Shakespeare. Until the early years of the twenty-first century such claims were thought to have originated around 1785, over 150 years after Shakespeare died, in the work of a Warwickshire clergyman named James Wilmot (1726–1828). This belief originated in an article by Professor Allardyce Nicoll published in 1932 in the *Times Literary Supplement* entitled 'The First Baconian' which describes two lectures reportedly given before the Ipswich Philosophical Society by one James Corton Cowell in 1805. They claim that Wilmot amused himself in his retirement by trying to write a life of Shakespeare and tell how, losing faith in Shakespeare, he constructed a theory that the true author of the works was Francis Bacon. But in old age, Cowell reported, Wilmot instructed his housekeeper to burn his papers. His story would have been lost to posterity had he not previously confided it to Cowell, whose lectures were preserved in the University of London Library. But James Shapiro, in his invaluable book *Contested Will*, follows up suspicions about the authenticity of the documents first expressed in the anti-Shakespearian journal *Shakespeare Matters* 2 (Summer 2003) which show that the lectures draw on information, and even vocabulary, which was not available in Cowell's time. Nor is there any other evidence that Cowell, or the Ipswich Philosophical Society, ever existed. Only one conclusion is possible: the lectures are forgeries, and Nicoll was deceived by them. Even Shapiro doesn't know who perpetrated the fraud, or why. He guesses that it may have been done for money or have originated in 'the desire on the part of a Baconian to stave off the challenge posed by supporters of the Earl of Oxford'. Furthermore, the deception 'reassigned the discovery of Francis Bacon's authorship from a "mad" American woman to' – and here Shapiro silently quotes *Richard II* 1.3.272 – 'a true-born Englishman'. As a result of these discoveries, the anti-Shakespearian movement must now be pushed forward to the middle of the nineteenth century. As Shapiro intriguingly remarks, 'the authorship question and the "whodunit" emerged at the same historical moment'.[1] In preparing this book Stanley Wells also examined the lectures, which remain unpublished, and was impressed by their plausible appearance of authenticity. There is no wonder that Nicoll was taken in by them. They warrant further investigation.

As we remark in our general introduction, the anti-Shakespearian movement must now be seen as finding its first thorough expression in the work of the American Delia Bacon, and especially in her long book, *The Philosophy of the Plays of Shakspere Unfolded*, of 1857, often described by those who have not read it as unreadable. One person who has worked his way through the book's intellectually contorted prose is Graham Holderness (Chapter 1), who writes of it and of its author with rare sympathy and understanding, demonstrating that, for all her wrong-headedness, if she were to be 'Delivered from her fruitless crusade to liberate the Shakespearian oeuvre from an allegedly false authorial ascription, Delia Bacon could become a founding mother of political Shakespeare criticism, ideological critique and collaborationist bibliography.'

Delia Bacon believed that the plays were written by a consortium of writers including Francis Bacon. Since her time it has been more common for single authors to be proposed, and one of them is Francis Bacon himself. Alan Stewart, distinguished as a biographer and editor of Bacon, tells the complex and often entertaining story of efforts to establish him as the author of Shakespeare, many of which depend on attempts to identify secret codes and hidden messages in the works such as Delia Bacon hoped to discover by opening Shakespeare's grave (Chapter 2).

One of the more absurd candidates, but one who has attracted and continues to attract many supporters, is Christopher Marlowe, whose death in 1593, early in Shakespeare's career, is one of the best recorded events in English literary history, and who is actually quoted and referred to as a 'dead shepherd' in *As You Like It* (3.5.82–3). Charles Nicholl, author of the immensely successful study of Marlowe's last hours, *The Reckoning* (1992), recounts how early attempts to identify him as the author of Shakespeare survived Leslie Hotson's discovery of the documentary evidence establishing conclusively, to anyone with a respect for historical evidence, that Marlowe died before most of Shakespeare's works were written (Chapter 3).

During the later part of the twentieth century Bacon and Marlowe were overtaken in the authorship stakes by Edward de Vere, seventeenth Earl of Oxford, whose candidature had first been propounded in 1920 by Thomas Looney. Oxford died in 1604, so his adherents have to explain away the evidence relating to the dates of composition of Shakespeare's later plays. Oxford's candidature has also become associated with what has become known as the Tudor Prince theory, according to one version of which Oxford was Queen Elizabeth's secret lover, and the Earl of Southampton their son. Alan Nelson, author of a major biography of the Earl, *Monstrous Adversary: The Life of Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford*, examines the numerous fallacies and illogicalities in presentations of the case for his authorship of Shakespeare (Chapter 4).

Though Bacon, Marlowe and de Vere have become the most heavily supported claimants, over the years a plethora of other names have been proposed. As Matt Kubus observes in the final chapter of this section of our book, 'Mathematically, each time an additional candidate is suggested, the probability decreases that any given name is the true author.' This fact has not stemmed the flow of pretenders to the throne, which may well have increased even before this book reaches publication.