

The Cure for Bacon-Shakespeare Skepticism: Read This Book!

Review of Brian McClinton, *The Shakespeare Conspiracies: Untangling a 400-Year Web of Myth and Conceit*, 2d ed. (Belfast: Shanway Press, 2008. First published Aubane, IRE: Aubane Historical Society, 2007). 470 pages.

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In the several years since *The Shakespeare Conspiracies* was first published, the world of academic Shakespeare scholarship has come around to the idea that the Shakespeare plays were not written by a single author, but by a group of collaborating writers.¹ This begs the question: who was the leader of this group? For good reason, Baconians have long asserted it was the peerless Renaissance humanist and humanitarian, poet-philosopher-statesman Francis Bacon (ch 5). Contrary to what one may hear, there has never been a fact-based reason for conclusively ruling out Bacon's authorship, only opinions which bear closer scrutiny.

It should be noted that Bacon need not have been the sole "author" to have been the "author" of the Shakespeare works. One might legitimately call a person the "author" of a large-scale literary project, such as a multi-volume treatise or encyclopedia, if that person has the ultimate "authority" over its final form. Such an author might contribute original works while also selecting, editing, and arranging the contributions of others.

Also contrary to popular opinion, the problem in demonstrating Francis Bacon's authorship has not been a dearth of evidence but an abundance. After four hundred years, the plays of Shakespeare are still revealing their treasures to intrepid investigators. The challenge is: how to present all this information comprehensively and succinctly, yet engagingly, in one—albeit densely packed—volume? Ask Brian McClinton, for he has done it, arguing persuasively with reason, eloquence, and wit.

McClinton is a retired teacher, a graduate of Trinity College, Dublin, and a humanist. He tells us he has been studying Bacon-Shakespeare issues for over four decades. His book is one of the few definitive recent books presenting the evidence for the Bacon-Shakespeare case, although ongoing scholarship continues to turn up new treasures. I wish I had found this book sooner. McClinton continues the work of the (late) British

¹ Barry R. Clarke, *Francis Bacon's Contribution to Shakespeare: A New Attribution Method* (New York: Routledge, 2019), xii–xix.

barrister N. B. Cockburn, author of *The Bacon Shakespeare Question: The Baconian Theory Made Sane* (Limpsfield, 1998) who also devoted much of his adult life to Bacon-Shakespeare research. Unfortunately, finding a copy of Cockburn's book can be difficult. Peter Dawkins' 2004 book, *The Shakespeare Enigma: Unravelling the Story of the Two Poets* (London: Polair Publishing) is also scholarly and excellently researched.

In twenty chapters, McClinton presents the major arguments in favor of Bacon's authorship, including those related to the *Promus* and Northumberland Manuscript (ch 9), literary parallels (citations at p. 244), the writings of contemporaries (ch 8), and evidence from the plays themselves (chs 13, 18, 19). There are 24 illustrations; appendices, including a useful Bacon-Shakespeare timeline (pp. 434–435); chapter endnotes (kept to the essential); an extensive bibliography, and an index.

The Shakespeare Conspiracies has the distinction of being one of just two modern "Baconian" resources James Shapiro lists in the bibliography of his 2010 book, *Contested Will: Who Wrote Shakespeare?* (New York: Simon & Schuster, at p. 282)—a book which, incidentally, McClinton has reviewed.² The other is Lawrence Gerald's website, Francis Bacon's New Advancement of Learning, <https://www.sirbacon.org>. It is puzzling why, in *Contested Will*, Shapiro makes no attempt to counter the 470 pages of good Baconian evidence which McClinton presents in *The Shakespeare Conspiracies*—or, for that matter, the abundant evidence provided in the many excellent resources collected at <https://www.SirBacon.org>. Presumably, Shapiro perused the sources he provided.

McClinton believes that the "real author" of Shakespeare (i.e., Bacon) intentionally created the "myth of the fictional playwright" (pp. 9–12). He is joined in this view by N. B. Cockburn, Mark Rylance,³ Peter Dawkins, and others. One might then logically ask: did the real author *intend* for the world to one day discover the truth? Cockburn thought not (pp. 51–52, 280). This fits with his view, unlike McClinton's in his chapter 10, that there were no ciphers in the plays. In contrast, McClinton sees the plays as treasure hunts, complete with hints and clues to help readers uncover their deeper meanings, not just pertaining to authorship, but not excluding it either. Dawkins shares this view (*The Shakespeare Enigma*, ch 13, 338–380; conclusion, pp. 414–415), as do I. Why

² Brian McClinton, "Shakespeare in the Psikhushkas," advance review, *Humani*, April 1, 2010 (published May/June, 2010), The Humanist Association of N. Ireland, <https://brighthumani.blogspot.com/2010/04/shakespeare-in-psikhushkas.html>; also at <http://irishfreethinkers.com/filestore/file/shapiro%20will.pdf>.

³ Mark Rylance, foreword to Peter Dawkins, *The Shakespeare Enigma*, xi. Peter is founder of the Francis Bacon Research Trust, <https://www.fbrt.org.uk/>.

would an author provide clues if that author did not wish for secrets to eventually be revealed? William and Elizebeth Friedman did not say in their 1957 book, *The Shakespearean Ciphers Examined* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, p.b. 2011, pp. 279–288, 280, 287–88) that no ciphers would ever be found in the Shakespeare works—only that they did not find them when they looked, and that, in their opinion, the matter was best left to professional cryptologists.

While recognizing that the seeming irrationality of some cipher arguments has done the Baconian cause more harm than good, McClinton writes, “And yet, the world itself is full of infinite jests and most excellent fancies” (p. 226). One is reminded of how Bacon wrote that people had to be willing to endure ridicule for chasing hypotheses that sounded preposterous and might ultimately turn out to be wild goose chases, if his plan to revolutionize science (by altering the methods by which the world acquired knowledge) was to succeed.

One of McClinton’s primary concerns, which he deals with in chapter 20, is that “the myth of the fictional playwright” has outlived its usefulness and is now casting a distorted reflection on the plays. While, for many years, the myth served to focus attention on the plays, the problem now is that attempts to hold onto the myth—despite the glaring disparity between the presumed playwright’s lack of qualifications (ch 4) and the learning displayed in the plays (ch 3)—have resulted in a “reduc[tion] in meaning and significance in an attempt to make them cohere with the mundane and mercenary life of William of Stratford” We must discover the man in order to rediscover his art” (pp. 11–12). Until then, the playwright’s intended educational purpose for the plays is not being fulfilled, due to the incongruity of believing an uneducated commoner wrote literary masterpieces, to state it simply (pp. 12, 75).

As to other candidates for authorship, McClinton sees them playing small roles at best, compared to Bacon’s. Alan Nelson’s *Monstrous Adversary* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2003) has given numerous reasons why it was highly unlikely that Edward De Vere, the seventeenth Earl of Oxford, was Shakespeare.

I challenge even the most skeptical of skeptics to read McClinton’s book thoroughly with an open mind and *not* come away convinced that Bacon is Shakespeare, although other hands may have contributed. McClinton explores the objections to Bacon’s authorship in chapter 20 (402–407). If the reader is not convinced, please, let us hear your fact-based, reasoned arguments why.