

**THE SHAKESPEARE-BACON
CONTROVERSY: A REPORT OF
THE TRIAL OF AN ISSUE IN
WESTMINSTER HALL, JUNE 20,
1627**

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The Shakespeare-Bacon controversy: a report of the trial of an issue in Westminster hall, June 20, 1627 by William Willis

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WILLIAM WILLIS

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A REPORT
OF
THE TRIAL OF AN ISSUE
IN WESTMINSTER HALL, JUNE 20, 1627.

READ IN THE INNER TEMPLE HALL,
THURSDAY, MAY THE 29TH, 1902,

AND
PREPARED FOR PUBLICATION

BY
WILLIAM WILLIS

Treasurer of the Honourable Society of the Inner Temple.

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PREFATORY NOTE.

THE Shakespeare-Bacon controversy involves to-day questions of character, and if it had arisen soon after the publication of the Folio volume, might have involved questions of property. There is no better method for determining questions of reputation and of property than the method of judicial investigation. Entertaining this view, I have long thought that the Shakespeare-Bacon Controversy could be best determined by a trial legally conducted, particularly as such a process would exclude all hearsay evidence or second-hand information. Nothing can be more discreditable than to listen to hearsay, when it affects the character of another. If the person who speaks to the disparagement of another, professes to speak of his own knowledge, his statement should never be accepted, without an opportunity being afforded for denial or explanation. This conduct is due to the living; in respect of the dead, it is atrocious to accept or repeat to their injury second-hand gossip, or even direct statements, which they have not had the opportunity of denying or explaining. I had rather suspend my judgment than accept such statements. By retailing gossip of the worst kind, some have endeavoured to make Shakespeare an adulterer and a drunkard; some have also endeavoured to establish his youthful ignorance by retailing an anecdote which never saw the light until 137 years after Shakespeare's death. I apologize for putting into the mouth of the cross-

examining counsel questions as to Shakespeare's holding horses at the theatre door; no one then could have suggested such questions. I did it, because some of my hearers who had heard of this matter, might think that a question, founded on it, ought to be put. The story came in the following way. D'Avenant heard it from *some one*. D'Avenant told it to Betterton, Betterton told it to Rowe, Rowe told it to Pope, Pope told it to Newton, Newton told it to Johnson, Johnson told it to Shiels, who told it to the world.

It may not be unnecessary to state that the report of the trial in the following pages is not the report of a real trial, but such a report as I believe would have come into existence if the trial had taken place at the time named. The trial, although imaginary, is a real test of the question in dispute.

I hope the reader will pardon the introduction of certain passages, which do not directly advance the hearing of the cause. The paper was prepared for reading, and it seemed to me necessary to make the trial as nearly like a real one as possible. I therefore put in the interruptions of Counsel, the laughter and cheers of the spectators, and the loss of temper and indignation of witnesses, such as occur in a real trial. As the result of these imitations, some of my hearers supposed I was reading the report of a trial which had actually taken place, and asked for an inspection of the MS. they thought I had discovered.

Although the history of Shakespeare's youth has, I think, little bearing upon the question of the authorship of the plays, I considered that some account of his youth should be given; I thought some of my hearers might look for and require such information. I hoped to give the information by the examination of Mr. R. Field, a native of Stratford, well-known to Shakespeare,

the printer of "Venus and Adonis" and "Lucrece" which Shakespeare dedicated to the Earl of Southampton. I could not, however, find any evidence of Mr. Field being alive in 1627. I found he gave up business in 1624. I did not like to call him as a witness unless I was satisfied of his existence at the time of the trial. To procure the account of Shakespeare's youth and early manhood, I adopted the statement of Mr. Malone, that John Heminge, the actor, and one of the editors of the folio volume, was born within a mile of Stratford-on-Avon. Mr. Sidney Lee states that Heminge was born at Droitwich. I hope I may be pardoned, if "for this occasion only," I state that Heminge was born at Shotton, and through his mouth, get a slight sketch of the poet's early life.

I fixed upon the year 1627 for the trial, because at that time both Shakespeare and Bacon were dead. With every desire to be impartial in the conduct of the trial, I could not bring myself to suppose that the historian, lawyer, and philosopher would make any claim to the authorship of the plays. By fixing the year 1627 for the trial, I lost the testimony of three or four important witnesses, such as Burbage, the fellow-actor of Shakespeare, Camden, and R. Field.

The readers of this address must remember the year of the trial, 1627, or they may commit the mistakes of some of my hearers, who asked me why I did not use the quotation from Greene's "A Groat's Worth of Wit," in which a reference to Shakespeare is supposed to be made under the word "Shakescene," and why I did not call John Milton, who was in Court, and use his noble words on the dramatic author, Shakespeare. The answer is that Greene died in the year 1592, and that Milton could give no direct evidence. He was only eight years of age when Shakespeare died, and had nothing to do with the