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PAUL COLLINS

YOUR GLORIOIS DAY IS COMING

We do not truly know our own times; at least, we don't know them as our descendants will. A literature scholar reading the above statement today would do a quick spit-take— no producers? 1857 ended what is now grandly called the American Renaissance—a period in the mid-1850s that saw the publication of Moby-Dick, The Scarlet Letter, Leaves of Grass, and Walden, and Emily Dickinson's first tentative publications of her poetry. And yet the best Emerson can do is halfheartedly endorse the young Whitman and . . .

Who?

DELIA BACON MAY be the most fatally doomed scholar ever to have set a pen to paper. She spent much of her life in poverty and illnesses both physical and mental, every book she published lost money, and her one great magnum opus goes unread even by her editors and biographers.

It is extraordinary that she published anything at all. Bacon was born in a log cabin on the Ohio frontier in 1811, a child of fervent poverty—her father, a missionary, gave everything in his failed attempt at establishing a school. He died when she was but six years old, and Delia's penniless mother had no choice but to farm out the children to kindhearted friends of the family. The Bacon children survived this ordeal to eventually rise to prominence—one grew up to become a crusading New York reporter, another an influential New Haven minister.

And then there was Delia. She landed quite fortuitously in the Hartford classroom of Catharine Beecher, the foremost advocate of young women's education of her time. Like her friend and classmate Harriet Beecher, Delia seemed marked out for achievement. Catharine Beecher later recalled that her "homeless daughter of the Western missionary" was "preeminently one who would be pointed out as a genius; and one, too, so exuberant and unregulated as to demand constant pruning and restraint." Her exuberant genius had one great vulnerability, though—she had, Beecher said, "a morbid sensitivity to criticism."

Bacon proved to have many morbid sensitivities. Her health was always precarious; after leaving Beecher to start a girl's school with her sister, both were stricken with malaria. Delia continued lecturing until, near delirium, she collapsed before her students. Later on she would be nearly killed by an outbreak of cholera; between these near-fatal plagues, she would be struck down for days at a time by recurrences of her malaria and by violently painful migraine headaches.

Yet amid these ills, Bacon's intellect thrived. After her youthful attempt at running a school failed, she moved back to New Haven at the age of nineteen. There she focused on her writing, and one year later had her first publication, the 1831 short story collection Tales of the Puritans. Soon afterward, the Philadelphia Saturday Courier awarded her $100 for her short story "Love's Martyr." It was a substantial sum of money, and her competitors were no slouches—for unknown to Delia, her closest challenger was a little-known Baltimore writer named Edgar Allan Poe.

BACON SPENT HER twenties teaching private classes to young women in New Haven and then in Manhattan in history, literature, and science. The erudite Bacon crossed disciplinary lines with ease, using each subject to illuminate the other. Her classes were a marvel of progressive education: no exams or textbooks, just lectures followed by intensive reading by each student in whatever field had caught her fancy. This method of research, of pursuing a single question to its utmost limit, was more than just how Bacon conducted learning; it was how she conducted her life.

While in New York, she grew close to Samuel Morse, an eccentric young artist. He earned his living teaching art at NYU, but in his off-hours he pursued a fascination with ciphers, particularly with how they could be applied to that newest marvel of modern life: the telegraph. And codes were a venerable field, Morse pointed out to Bacon—after all, even Francis Bacon had invented a cipher for use in his career as a diplomat. This curious fact occupied her mind long after she left Manhattan.

Life in Manhattan spurred her to try her hand at publishing once again. Her next book was published in 1839, The Bride of Fort Edward. It was a closet drama, a play not actually meant for stage. Closet dramas are a hard sell even for an established playwright, and so only 692 copies sold, leaving Bacon stuck with a bill for the 808 remainders. This was a common fate for authors of the time; Thoreau once grimly joked that he owned a large library, the majority of which was composed of unsold copies of his first book. But this was little consolation to Bacon: when she left the city in 1840, it was uncertain whether she could ever earn money as a writer.

BACON SPENT THE next decade traveling the country, becoming caught up in a scandalous ecclesiastical trial, and above all engaged in constant learning. By the time she rose to the Boston lecture circuit in 1850, she was at the top of her form, and the city's female intelligentsia packed her lectures over the next two years. It was an uncanny experience for some: the brilliant Transcendentalist philosopher Margaret Fuller had just drowned in a shipwreck a few months before, and this woman onstage seemed to be her living reincarnation.

Her audiences were indulgent of her brilliance; so what if she occasionally strayed from lectures on Restoration monarchy or ancient Greece to suddenly focus intensely on the plays of Shakespeare, and on how such sophisticated literature could not

possibly have been written by some fourth-rate actor? She was, in fact, convinced that this so-called Shakespeare was nothing but.a front for a collaborative effort by Walter Raleigh, Edmund Spenser, and Francis Bacon, and that the plays were a cipher for a political philosophy that, if stated plainly, might have landed the real authors in the Tower of London.

Her friends worried, though. They had already watched her try in 1845 to pitch her brazen theory to the publisher Wiley and Putnam, only to have it fall flat with a heavy thud. Bacon's fixation on the Shakespeare imposture was so embarrassingly unconventional that friends would change the subject whenever she brought it up. One, hoping to keep her friend from becoming agitated, would hide all her copies of Shakespeare before Bacon came to visit.

But one new acquaintance, Elizabeth Peabody, was delighted. It would not be unfair to say that nineteenth-century American literature can be mapped out as Six Degrees of Elizabeth Peabody. First she wrote to her brother-in-law—Nathaniel Hawthorne, conveniently enough—and asked him to look over Bacon's theories. Hawthorne politely declined. Peabody had better success, though, with another good friend—Ralph Waldo Emerson. Emerson had read deeply in Shakespeare and his contemporaries, and Bacon's theory struck him as a brilliant answer to the nagging question of how a mere actor could have written the world's greatest works of literature.

"So radical a revolution should be proclaimed with great compression in the declaration," he advised in his first letter to her, in June 1852, "and the real grounds rapidly set forth, a good ground in each chapter, and preliminary generalities quite omitted. For there is an immense presumption against us which is to be annihilated by battery as fast as possible."

It was good advice—hit hard and fast, and let some later work deal with the niceties and the details. Bacon assured him that she was already in a position to deal some knockout blows: "Confirmations of my theory, which I did not expect to find on this side of the water, have turned up since my last communication to you, in the course of my researches in the libraries here and in Boston." Writing again to him a few weeks later, she coolly announced, "Be assured, dear sir, there is no possibility of a doubt as to the main points of my theory."

But Bacon knew that she would need extensive historical documentation to back up her claims, and there were only two places where she could find the original documents: London and Stratford-on-Avon. After finishing up a final round of lectures on Hindu scriptures, Persian poetry, and Egyptology, she paid a visit to Manhattan banker Charles Butler. He was a well-known intellectual benefactor, having already saved NYU from insolvency and then created its law school. And Bacon was at the top of her form as a public intellectual; in addition to Emerson, a slew of prominent intellectuals like Washington Irving, George Ripley, William Thackeray, and dashing

Arctic explorer Elisha Kent Kane had all attested to her intellectual prowess as a lecturer. Butler was suitably impressed, and bankrolled her trip to England for an entire year.

Bacon was ecstatic: her greatest achievement was now within her grasp. She made a pilgrimage up to Concord, where she at last met her mentor Emerson in person and spent an evening conferring in his study. He nodded sagely in his rocking chair as she talked.

"I should give the inductions first," he emphasized again, "and then clinch them with your facts."

"I find the internal evidence more convincing," she insisted. But she admitted, "Of course I am certain I shall find historical proof in England. But, even if I do not, I have already sufficient basis to make the theory at least respectable. In fact, sir, I believe it is irresistible, to a candid mind."

Emerson was delighted at her plans to travel to England. He wrote her a clutch of letters of introduction, including one to his old friend Thomas Carlyle. These recipients were carefully chosen, and would open the doors for Delia to the intellectual life of her new country, and to every major archive in London. Now all she had to do was step through these doors.

On May 14 1853, Delia Bacon left New York Harbor on the Pacific, a steamer bound for Liverpool.

ONE OF HER first stops on the way to London was Stratford-on-Avon, the final resting place of "that wretched player," as she called him, "of the sordid play house." She stood in front of Shakespeare's grave in the Church of the Holy Trinity. The wretched player's tomb was certainly gaudy enough, as graves go; while other old tombstones from the time carry chilling messages like Hodie mihi, eras tibi ("Today me, tomorrow you"—a spiteful epitaph if there ever was one), the great Bard's monument features a tarted-up painted bust and this odd little burst of doggerel:

Good friend, for Jesus' sake forbeare,

To dig the dust enclosed here,

Blest be the man that spares these stones;

And cursed be he that moves my bones.

Shakespeare, it seemed, was anticipating his visitor—but foolishly failed to extend his curse to women. For Delia Bacon was indeed thinking of doing just such a thing: if

Raleigh, Spenser, and Francis Bacon had formed a sort of literary cabal, what better place to hide a confession of their ghostwritten deeds than clasped in the hands of their dead spokesman? But now, amid all these reverent church visitors, was not the time to whip out the spade and crowbar—that would have to wait until later.

Arriving in London shortly afterward, Bacon found lodgings and sent Emerson's letter of introduction to the great essayist Thomas Carlyle. The letter gave Carlyle no clue to what he was in for, only said that his visitor had a certain theory on Shakespeare. Ah—but what decent writer didn't? Carlyle invited her over for scones and tea one summer day.

There, in his sitting room, she calmly explained her theory. Francis Bacon in particular fascinated her—his Novum Organum had helped to usher in the Age of Reason with its emphasis on scientific method and its underlying skeptical view of cant and unquestioned authority. The political implications of such freethinking were obvious, and dangerous—and they could only be baldly expressed in the history plays of Shakespeare, in which monarchs become less divinely ordained rulers than a tragic collection of human failings. That was why the leading writers of the time had to resort to a doggish hack, suspected by no one of deep thoughts, as their outlet for such revolutionary work.

Carlyle raised his eyebrows.

"Do you mean to say that Ben Jonson, and Heminge and Condell, and all the Shakespearean scholars since, are wrong about the authorship, and you are going to set them right?"

"I am. And as much as I respect you, Mr. Carlyle, I must tell you that you do not know what is really in the plays if you believe that that booby wrote them."

Carlyle began to whoop with laughter. "You could have heard him a mile," Bacon later wrote. But once he recovered his composure, he set out for her what she must do to complete her task—she must, by all means, go to the British Museum, and have a look at the Harleian manuscript collection. Hard evidence, he emphasized, was "worth all the reasoning in the world."

After his guest left he could only shake his head at the folly of what she was undertaking. Writing to Emerson, Carlyle lamented:

I have not in my life seen anything so tragically quixotic as her Shakespere enterprise; alas, alas, there can be nothing but sorrow, toil and utter disappointment in it for her! . . . There is not the least possibility of truth in the notion she has taken up; and the hope of ever proving it, or finding the least document that countenances it, is equal to that of vanquishing the windmills by stroke of lance.

Delia Bacon, in turn, was just as skeptical of Carlyle. She had politely accepted his advice about library research, but she did not follow it. She never made a single visit to the great library; her letters of introduction to the librarians at the British Museum remained sealed. Her one major outing was to the grave of Francis Bacon. Though not actually related to him, she might be able to talk her way into seeing inside his grave, where she thought she would find some papers confessing to the plays. But it was no use: she could not persuade the graveyard beadle to open the tomb.

It did not really matter. She had already decided that she would prove her case on internal evidence, rather than the external evidence of historical documentation. All the proof of authorship needed was within the plays themselves, which—like the vast, lonely world around her—were a metaphorical cipher stretching into infinity.

THE NEXT TWO years were a profoundly isolated time for Bacon, spent shut in her quarters reading the plays over and over again—especially King Lear, Macbeth, and Coriolanus. Butler had given her money for only one year abroad, but she had no wish to return home. She belonged here, in London, where she would pursue unceasingly the great riddle— The Shakespere Problem Solved, she wrote at the bottom of one manuscript, underlining it twice. The manuscript grew, and grew—becoming two, three times as long as it was ever meant to be. She could not stop writing.

She dined on crusts, fell behind on rent, lived with scarcely any coals to warm her little lodgings. When the winters grew cold, she wrote in bed, blankets piled over her; it was too cold to write at her desk. She did not speak to anyone—not even her old classmate Harriet Beecher Stowe, who was being regaled about London for her hugely successful Uncle Tom's Cabin. Bacon's own fortunes could scarcely have been more the opposite. Despite entreaties by Emerson and Carlyle, one publisher after another in the United States and the United Kingdom rejected her proposed book.

But eventually Emerson managed to land her an offer for a series of articles in Putnam's Magazine. Her debut, published in a January 1856 issue, was a slashing attack on the idolatry that surrounded the Bard. The absence of a substantial historical record of the life of this "poor peasant" was almost proof enough to her:

The two or three historical points we have, or seem to have, at length, succeeded in rescuing from the oblivion to which this man's own time consigned him . . . [and] constitut[e], when put together, precisely that historic trail which an old, defunct, indifferent, fourth-rate play-actor naturally leaves behind him.

Readers and staff reacted with outrage at this attack on the man she derided as "the Stratford poacher," and the Putnam's editors quickly rescinded their initial offer to make it a series of articles. Her follow-up articles, they claimed, did not say anything that she hadn't said in her first article.

Bacon was wounded by the criticism—but she took their check for $55. She had little choice. She had already stretched her one-year grant to two years, and was now desperately poor. One evening, her old student Eliza Farrar was roused by a visitor at her lodgings in Bayswater—a woman so shabby that Farrar's elderly mother was afraid at first to let her in. But when she did at last gain entry, Farrar was horrified to recognize . . . her old teacher. Bacon left that evening with £10, enough to tide her over for a little while longer. But when this too ran out, she finally appealed to her last resort, the American consulate. The consul paid a personal visit to her lodgings—governments ran a little differently, back then—but left not really knowing why she had called for him. Face to face with the one man in London who could bail her out and even repatriate her, she had crumpled into silence.

"I TAKE THE liberty of introducing myself to you without introduction," the letter began, "because you are the only one I know of in this hemisphere able to appreciate the position in which I find myself at this moment. ..."

As the American consul in Liverpool, Nathaniel Hawthorne was used to receiving all sorts of pleas and complaints from Americans who had managed to strand themselves, land in jail, lose their way, and otherwise fall upon hard times thousands of miles from home. And this letter was from London—not his branch consulate's territory, strictly speaking. But he did recognize the name at the bottom, and remembered the strange genius his sister-in-law Elizabeth had spoken so highly of.

She had poured out her theories, her travails, and her hopes for publication to him. Writing back, he marveled at her utter dedication: "Whether right or wrong. . . you have acquired some of the privileges of an inspired person and a prophetess—and the world is bound to hear you, if for nothing else, yet because you are so sure of your mission."

They exchanged friendly letters back and forth, and he paid her debts and read her essays—but at first she. would not see him. The world of people was no longer hers. The teeming streets of London, when she ventured into them at all, were filled with inhabitants of a former world. She was a mere vessel for the Theory that had grown within her, taking over her bones and muscle, pushing out the blood and marrow.

Finally, in June 1856, she relented in a note not unlike those penned by Emily Dickinson to the one writer she deigned to show her face to. It is haunted by the soul of a body that is not even dead yet:

I hope you will call upon me. The reason I shrink from seeing any one now is, that I used to be somebody, and whenever I meet a stranger I am troubled with a dim reminiscence of the fact, whereas now I am nothing but this work and don't wish to be. I have lived for three years as much alone with God and the dead as if I had been a

departed spirit. And I don't wish to return to the world. I shrink with horror from the thought of it. This is an abnormal state you see, but I am perfectly harmless. But if you will let me know when you are coming I will put on one of the dresses I used to wear the last time I made my appearance in the world, and try to look as much like a survivor as the circumstances will permit.

When Hawthorne visited her, he was surprised. She was not the haunted being that he had expected at all—"She was rather uncommonly tall, and had a striking and expressive face, dark hair, dark eyes, which shone with an inward light as soon as she began to speak." The prospect of his visit reanimated her, and brought her enthusiasm alive again. When he praised the parts of the book that she had sent him and asked her when she would address finding historical documentation of the literary cabal, she confidently tapped a volume of Bacon's letters. She would not, she said, try breaking into Francis Bacon's tomb again.

"Bacon himself showed me my error," she confided to the writer. "The evidence is in Shakespeare's grave."

SHE WAITED IN the aisle as the sun set, and a gloom gathered in the Holy Trinity Church. She was alone. The pews were empty, and she quietly held a candle the clerk had given to her; its light cast a faint glow on the stones beneath her. Under one of these stones lay the mortal remains of William Shakespeare. Above her stood his bust, staring down at the woman who would dare disturb his bones.

As the church fell into total darkness, she lit her lantern and began sizing up her task. The stones were not so large, and they could be moved with effort. Perhaps there would be a sarcophagus lid to move as well. But not more than a few feet below her, in either case, lay the packet of papers that she believed were hinted at in the letters of Francis Bacon.

She heard a creak far back in the church—the clerk, perhaps fearful of her plans, had hidden himself to spy on his own church. Hours passed, and she could not be sure whether he had left. And so she just stared at the stones beneath her feet, the cool stone beneath her fingers, that somehow lay utterly out of reach. She had neither the strength nor the daring to tear them up from the floor.

At ten o'clock, per their agreement, the clerk returned and let Delia Bacon out of the church. She wandered off into the night.

SHE COULD HAVE done it. But she chose not to, because in that moment of clarity on the floor of the church she knew what she would find—what she would not find—in Shakespeare's grave. And her older brother, always her toughest critic, knew it too when he wrote to her:

Misguided by your imagination, you have yielded yourself to a delusion which, if you do not resist it and escape from it as for your life, will be fatal to you. How to say less than this, I know not. I am now to inform you that your theory about Shakespeare and Shakespeare's tomb and all that is a mere delusion—a trick of the imagination. For five years you have known that I think so. And—O my dear sister—can you not, in God's name, and in the strength which he will give you, break the' spell, and escape from the delusion?

And yet she clung to hope. Her theory could be proved, if only the world could see her book. She continued anxious, frenzied letters to Hawthorne, her sole friend left in the entire country, and the only person left in the world, it seemed, who would still listen to her. When he landed her a publisher—as he finally did in October 1856, with Groombridge and Sons—Bacon and the publisher alike relied on him to provide a preface for the book. He was a famous man. His word could get her taken seriously.

But he could not do it.

Or rather, he could, but he would not agree with her. It was a brilliant book in places, yes, but it was turbulent and jumbled, and, well... he just did not believe her theory. He finally ground out, with agonizing slowness, a preface that praised her as a dedicated and brilliant scholar. But he refused to affirm her theory.

When Bacon saw it, she was furious. She was the Theory now— any attack on the Theory was an attack on her. Her letters turned frenzied:

I have renounced all that I was, every joy and solace in life, to make myself a medium for those spirits that have been waiting so long to give their message. You must not decry my inspiration. You will find the title-page a more perilous place than you thought, if you do, for I shall throw you off entirely. You can not come inside of this book, if you are going to throw doubt on the Oracle. I consider myself a priestess . . . and I don't allow of any scepticism or profane speeches within the lids of this book.

But Hawthorne would not balk. Enraged, Bacon cut Hawthorne off without a word, and never spoke to him again.

The Philosophy of Shakespere's Plays Unfolded arrived at bookstands that April. It was a dense, heavy tome of more than six hundred pages. Copies went to reviewers around the country, and Bacon waited for days and weeks as they read through it. Her vindication was about to begin.

BIOGRAPHICAL ACCOUNTS OF Delia Bacon—Hawthorne's 1863 article in The Atlantic Monthly, Theodore Bacon's 1888 account, and the 1959 biography by Vivian Hopkins—all share one striking characteristic. They do not quote from her book. Almost without exception, they talk around her book—describing it in broad terms,

quoting from her letters about it, quoting the comments of contemporaries, even venturing a little into her Putnam's article or the preface of Philosophy, but. . . never into the book itself.

Inevitably, impious thoughts form in the mind of any reader. Did these writers not read Delia Bacon's most famous work? And as it turns out, the answer generally is no, they did not. Theodore admitted to his friends that he had never read her book, and Nathaniel Hawthorne has this to say in his own account: "I believe that it has been the fate of this remarkable book never to have more than a single reader. I myself am acquainted with it only in insulated chapters and scattered pages and paragraphs."

How did this come to pass, that a book so widely commented upon should be so little read? The answer, as anyone who picks up a copy of her work soon finds out, is appallingly simple.

It is unreadable.

TO WATCH A brilliant mind unravel into madness is one of the most painful sights imaginable. As the medicines and nostrums fail, and the babble sets in, there comes a time when one gives up on such acquaintances: you cannot hold a conversation with them, because they are simply making no sense. And yet it is not an obvious madness; that is not how the human mind works, nor how it fails. Educated madness retains all the syntax and cadence of rational, educated discussion. It sounds sane. But when strung together, the words make no sense.

And so it is in The Philosophy of Shakespere's Plays Unfolded. Biographical accounts tend to excuse Bacon's tortured writing and frequent incoherence on the grounds that she was really a lecture hall orator, not a writer. But this claim soon falls apart: well before Philosophy, after all, she had written two perfectly readable published works, a novel and a play. Take, for example, this passage from the title story in her 1831 volume The Regicides:

When the subtle spirit of popular superstition is once aroused, it floats not long in unsubstantiated rumor; the airy nothing soon finds a local habitation and a name. So it was in the present instance. The mountain which rears its head about two miles west of the village, was at length declared a favorite haunt of the unearthly visitant. ... It became, at last, generally reported and believed, that just as the white mist began to break away from the rock, a female form of exquisite, but faded beauty might be seen standing amid the wreathing vapor, and gradually vanishing as it slowly curled from the mountain.

It's a fine bit of local New Haven legend, and prose that would scarcely be out of place in a volume by Washington Irving or Nathaniel Hawthorne. But twenty-six years later in her Philosophy, after nearly six hundred tortured pages of endless circling around

her claims without ever getting to the point or to actual proof, we find buried in the text this almost ungraspable attempt at summarizing her book's thesis:

This is the philosophy precisely which underlies all this Play,— this Play, in which the great question, not yet ready for the handling of the unlearned, but ripe already for the scientific treatment,—the question of wrestling forces,—the question of the subjection and predominance of powers,—the question of the combination and opposition of forces in those arrested motions which make states, is so boldly handled. These arrested motions, where the rest is only apparent, not real—where the yielding forces are only, as it were, annihilated, whether by equilibrium of forces, or an absolute predominance, but biding their time, ready to burst their bonds and renew their wrestling, ready to show themselves, not as subjects, but as predominators—not as states, but revolutions. The science "that ends in matter and new constructions"—new construction, "according to true definitions," is what these citizens, whom this Poet has called up from their horizontal position by way of anticipation, are already, under his instruction, boldly clamouring for. Constructions in which these very rules and axioms, these scientific certainties, are taken into account, are what these men whom this Magician has set upon their feet here, whose lips he has opened and whose arms he has unbound with the magic of art, are going to have before they lie down again, or, at least, before they make a comfortable state for any one to trample on, though they may, perhaps, for a time seem, "as it were, annihilated." . . .

And so a great mind is overthrown. Bacon is desperately wrestling with an idea here, a coherent idea. But it is like light trying to pass through several panes of cracked glass—bent through layer after layer, until it is refracted and twisted into a wraith of reason.

PREDICTABLY, THE CRITICS were merciless in their savagery—and those that did not ridicule the book simply ignored it. But it scarcely mattered anymore. By the time Philosophy came out, Bacon was almost senseless. She continued to linger in Stratford-on-Avon, a ghostly and deranged presence. She slipped in and out of fevers, accused her kindly landlord of stealing from her and plotting against her, and dragged herself to the doorstep of the mayor of Stratford to complain. The mayor took pity on her and spent months caring for her. When she turned suicidal, and began claiming to be a descendant of Francis Bacon, he had her committed to an asylum.

Just before her committal, though, Bacon had scribbled a cryptic message on a scrap of paper—a letter to herself, perhaps, and an epitaph of sorts to her sanity:

it was a mmrble mmt when you at the Avn. The signs of it are in the strt whether you understand them or not. There reason in those reasons whether you observe them or not. You have forded the Avn. You have untied the spell. Theres reason in the whole. You have crossed the Avon twice. You crossed it in the E. & you crossed it in the West.

You crossed the old in the N Haven. The E in the West and you crossed the New, the West in the East. History rest in me a clue & run a right spirit millim me.

Bacon slipped into madness so deep that she could not tend to herself. Friends shipped her back to America, and her brother arranged for her to live in a New Haven asylum that they had innocently walked past many times in her former life.

Her fevers continued on and off for over a year, until one day her brain burned for the last time, and the tortured genius inside writhed no more.

THE FIRST TO give her story to the world was Nathaniel Hawthorne, who contributed the essay "Recollections of a Gifted Woman" to the January 1863 issue of The Atlantic Monthly. Much of Hawthorne's essay is a meditation on the town of Stratford itself; he seems unable to turn fully to the story of the ghost that inhabited it. "This is," he sighs, "too sad a story." And Hawthorne had given more to Delia Bacon than she ever knew; without her knowledge, he had secretly pledged to the publisher to cover the losses on her book. This quiet act of friendship, which he stuck to even after Bacon shut him out of her life, cost him £238. The whole affair, he mused, had turned into a sinkhole: "No author ever hoped so confidently as she; none ever failed more utterly."

And yet, at the margins of Shakespeare scholarship, a few still cling to her notions. What began as a metaphorical cipher has become, to some, an actual cipher, with hidden identities and messages to be found in the plays through elaborate numerologies. The height of the approach probably came with the great American eccentric Ignatius Donnelly, who took a break from pondering the lost world of Atlantis to pen the thousand-page Baconian tome The Great Cryptogram (1888). And Francis Bacon, who only existed to Delia Bacon as the probable head of a cabal, has become to some the man behind Shakespeare.

Few scholars are impressed.

In 1888, Theodore Bacon put out the family biography of Delia, and it is a fascinating and rare volume. There is a battered copy in the archives of the San Francisco Public Library. Scrawled in ancient pencil near the end of the book, just as her impending death looms in the narrative, is a hopeful cry across the years from a long-gone library patron:

The ignorance . . . the superficially "cultured" ignorant in their brutal attack upon her published life's work—drove her, beaten and broken into insanity. The battle and burden had been too long and too heavy the heart and mind of the noble little woman failed altogether, But, wait! Wait! Delia Bacon—your day, your glorious day is coming!