

# Shakespeare Cipher Stories, Part 1

*by Carla Groenewegen, MA*

Did Shakespeare write Shakespeare? Many people doubt that, for various reasons—the most obvious one being that a barely literate actor from the sleepy village of Stratford-on-Avon could not possibly have written with such accuracy and familiarity the many scenes in the plays that invoke the classics or the pomp of nobility and royal courts. Furthermore, no manuscripts by Shakespeare were ever found, and only six Shakespeare signatures are known to exist. The signatures all look different and give the impression they were written by a man who was not used to holding a pen. Some speculate that others' hands may have guided his own as he wrote them.

If someone other than William Shakespeare wrote the plays and poems published under his name, who was it? And did this secret author insert clues as to his real identity in his works? These are two separate questions, and one does not necessarily imply the other. Various bright Elizabethans have been championed as the true author simply based on their literary abilities, their fitting educational and social background, and plausible motives for wanting to conceal their authorship—among them Edward de Vere, the 17<sup>th</sup> Earl of Oxford; Roger Manners, Earl of Rutland; William Stanley, Earl of Derby; and Sir Francis Bacon.

In the last few centuries, quite a few people in the old and the new world alike have undertaken the search for hidden messages in Shakespeare's works that would prove such authorship. Anagrams, acrostics, word ciphers, string ciphers, letter ciphers, they've all been found. But are they all for real?

Anyone interested in the various ciphers said to have been found in Shakespeare's works should read *The Shakespearean Ciphers Examined* by William and Elizebeth Friedman. This thoroughly researched book from 1957 is out of print but copies can be found in libraries or on the Internet. Mr. Friedman, a professional cryptologist who helped decode the tantalizing Enigma ciphers employed by the Nazis during World War II, has been called one of America's foremost cryptographers.<sup>1</sup>

The Friedmans investigated dozens of ciphers allegedly discovered in the works of Shakespeare and analyzed them according to professional criteria of what constitutes a valid cipher. It's fair to say that in the process, little of the various cipher claims was left standing. One of the better-known efforts they showed to be unsound was that by Ignatius Donnelly. Donnelly, an attorney and politician, published *The Great Cryptogram* in the late 1880s. He revealed an elaborate and very impressive mathematical system of "root numbers," "multipliers" and "modifiers" that produced messages such as "...that More low [Marlowe] or Shak'st spur [Shakespeare] never writ a word of them." The numerical sequence to identify the word "More" on that particular given page ran like this: [root number]  $516-16=349-22b\&h=327-254=73-15b\&h=58$ .  $448-58=390+1=391$ .

However impressive Donnelly's mathematical sequences, some who tried to reproduce his efforts came up with startling results. The Friedmans cite a Rev. A. Nicholson who took the same text passages that Donnelly started from and, beginning with the same root number and employing the same intricate method, came up with a message of his own: "Master Will I am [William] Shak'st spurre [Shakespeare] writ the play and was engaged at the Curtain." Thus, the subjective nature of the system rendered it invalid.

The Friedmans dedicate a large portion of their book to the bi-literal cipher discovered by Mrs. Elizabeth Gallup Wells, who believed that Francis Bacon was the true author of Shakespeare's oeuvre. This part of the book is especially fascinating because the Friedmans themselves worked for Mrs. Gallup for several years. Once Mrs. Gallup's decoding work gained notoriety, she attracted a benefactor, Colonel Fabian, who then employed a large research staff working on decoding the various texts. Elizebeth Friedman joined the team in 1915, William followed in 1916. They remained with her almost uninterruptedly until 1920.

Mrs. Gallup started out on solid ground, since she worked with the bi-literal cipher invented by Francis Bacon himself. Bacon published this cipher in October of 1623, just a month before the First Folio of Shakespeare's complete works appeared. The bi-literal cipher is based on mixing two type fonts that are different enough to be distinguishable yet not too different to draw general attention. The First Folio is set in a curious mixture of italics and roman type styles, which quite naturally led to the suspicion that it may be hiding Bacon's bi-literal cipher.

Mrs. Gallup believed, somewhat arbitrarily, that the cipher was embedded in the italic words in the plays, and deciphered lengthy passages that revealed Bacon's authorship as well as his hidden life story. Once the Friedmans became involved in this work, they gradually came to the realization that Mrs. Gallup was the only one at the research center who could distinguish between the two fonts and produce meaningful messages. Everyone else invariably failed. Furthermore, Mrs. Gallup herself was unable to reproduce passages she had previously deciphered without considerable deviations. She also frequently omitted or added letters to make the cipher work. An FBI expert consulted by the Friedmans in the 1950s proved that there was much variation between individual italic letters in the Folio and that there were no characteristics that supported the strict classification into two fonts.

Since Mrs. Gallup's work could not be reproduced independently by other decipherers, the Friedmans concluded that although Bacon's bi-lateral cipher itself is a sound cipher, Gallup's work was biased and unacceptable. That is not to say there couldn't be a bi-literal cipher hidden in Shakespeare's works; it only means that if there is one, it hasn't been found yet.

#### References

Bacon, Francis –*De Augmentis Scientiarum* (1623)

Donnelly, Ignatius, *The Great Cryptogram* (1888)

Friedman, William F. and Elizebeth S., *The Shakespearean Ciphers Examined*. (Cambridge University Press, 1957)

Wells Gallup, Elizabeth – *The Biliteral Cypher of Sir Francis Bacon Discovered in His Works and Deciphered by Mrs. Elizabeth Wells Gallup* (1899)

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<sup>1</sup> See William Stevenson, *A Man Called Intrepid*.