

## Francis Bacon Too Dull for Shakespeare?

*by Carla Groenewegen, MA*

Whoever wrote Shakespeare, he must have been a lively fellow. Virginia M. Fellow's book, *The Shakespeare Code*, makes a very strong case for Francis Bacon's authorship of the oeuvre of William Shakespeare, based on historical evidence as well as on statements found in cipher in Shakespeare's works. She's not alone in this; many have come to the conclusion that Shakespeare's works were not written by the actor William Shakespeare. Quite a few people support the claim that Bacon is the true author of this literary treasure—think Mark Twain, for instance, who wrote “To write with powerful effect, he must write out the life he has led—as did Bacon when he wrote Shakespeare.”

Amidst the various competing claims and the arguments quoted for each case, one of the lines of reasoning used by those advocating authorship by someone other than Bacon is that Francis Bacon could not possibly have written Shakespeare's plays and sonnets because he was a dull and boring fellow, more at home in the world of law than that of drama. Some have called him a “cold fish,” not remotely capable of affinity with the often rowdy or hilarious atmosphere evoked in the plays of the Immortal Bard.

This presents an interesting argument. It's true that Bacon spent most of his adult working life in the service of the law, but was he therefore dull? Could Bacon the crisp public servant and statesman—barrister, Solicitor General, Attorney General, Lord Chancellor—have had a more hidden side that generally escaped public notice? There are good places to search for an answer: in his biographies and in his own writings.

As for biographical comments on the lighter side of Bacon's nature, there are many. His first biographer, Dr. William Rawley, who worked for him for years as a literary secretary and functioned as his chaplain as well, records a remarkable statement by Francis as a young boy. Queen Elizabeth I often had her Lord Keeper's prodigy child (believed to be her own firstborn son) over at court. Rawley writes: “Being asked by the queen *how old he was*, he answered with much discretion, being then but a boy, *That he was two years younger than Her Majesty's happy reign*; with which answer the queen was much taken.”

Within the circle of his friends, Bacon was known as a lover of jest and word play. Alfred Dodd, Bacon's excellent biographer, quotes the poet Ben Johnson, Bacon's secretary and friend for many years, who once wrote this tribute to Bacon:

“His language was nobly censorious when he could pass by a jest.”

Dodd also quotes an eye witness account by Dr. Rawley:

“One morning, after a night’s illness, he [Bacon] dictated no fewer than 308 anecdotes, says Dr. Rawley, who published them in 1671. ‘This collection his Lordship made out of his memory without turning any book.’ Lord Macaulay [another biographer] declared in 1848 that it reigned supreme as ‘the best collection of jests in the world.’”

Bacon’s own writings clearly show his love for the written word—its serious as well as its comical side. Few people realize the amazing volume of literary and scientific works produced by Francis Bacon, nor the masterful, witty and often poetic quality of his writing—he being the man to whom we owe such pithy aphorisms as “knowledge is power.” For instance, his series of fifty-eight essays “moral and civil” contains passages and phrases that rival the best prose ever produced in the English language. These short essays offer profound and sometimes humorous reflections on a wide range of topics: Friendship, Truth, Death, Health, Fortune, and True Greatness, to name just a few.

Would the following sentence, that opens the first essay, “Of Truth,” have occurred to the mind of a dullard?

“What is truth? said jesting Pilate; and would not stay for an answer.”

Essay number 24, “Of Simulation and Dissimulation,” begins with a concise, astute observation that is as true today as in the bygone days of Elizabeth I:

“Dissimulation is but a faint kind of policy, or wisdom; for it asketh a strong wit and a strong heart to know when to tell truth, and to do it; therefore it is the weaker sort of politicians that are the great dissemblers.”

His essay entitled “Of Delays” is laced with clever, light-footed phrases that could easily have found a fitting home in a Shakespeare play:

“Fortune is like the market, where, many times, if you can stay a little, the price will fall. (...) There is surely no greater wisdom than well to time the beginning and onsets of things. Dangers are no more light, if they once seem light; and more dangers have deceived men than forced them; nay, it were better to meet some dangers halfway, though they came nothing near, than to keep too long a watch upon their approaches; for if a man watch too long, it is odds he will fall asleep. (...) The ripeness or unripeness of the occasion (as we said) must ever be well weighed; and generally it is good to commit the beginnings of all great actions to Argus with his hundred eyes, and the ends to Briareus with his hundred hands, first to watch and then to speed....”

And in “Of Followers and Friends” (Essay 48), how’s this for a memorable opening line:

“Costly followers are not to be liked, lest, while a man maketh this train longer, he make his wings shorter.”

Francis Bacon dull? Those who voice this opinion to argue he could not possibly have authored Shakespeare would do well to look for better reasons, for dull this great man most certainly was not!

#### References

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Dodd, Alfred – *Francis Bacon's Personal Life Story* (Rider & Company, 1986)

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Rawley, William – *The Life of the Right Honorable Francis Bacon, Baron of Verulam, Viscount St. Alban* (1657)