

QUESTION 43

What part does James Wilmot play in the authorship story?

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James Wilmot was a Warwickshire clergyman who lived from 1726 to 1807. There's a manuscript in the Senate House Library of the University of London which appears to represent two lectures given to the Ipswich Philosophical Society in 1805 by a man called James Corton Cowell. According to this Wilmot had started trying to write a biography of Shakespeare but, finding little evidence, decided that the works must have been written by Francis Bacon. This would make Wilmot the first anti-Stratfordian. But recently people have questioned the authenticity of this manuscript. There's no evidence that either Cowell or the Ipswich Philosophical Society ever existed. And in 2010 James Shapiro, in his book *Contested Will*, showed conclusively that the manuscript is a forgery, done probably in the early twentieth century. This means that the beginnings of the authorship debate can now be said to date not from the late eighteenth century, as had been supposed, but with Delia Bacon, some fifty years later.