

'An unlettered peasant boy' of 'sordid character' — Shakespeare, Suffield and Tolkien

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In September 1928 an article in a Birmingham paper said of a Moseley nonagenarian: “his insuppressible vivacity, his merry humour, his geniality and his boyish playfulness ... have made him welcome always and everywhere”¹.

This was John Suffield, grandfather of J. R. R. Tolkien. In *J. R. R. Tolkien A Biography*, Humphrey Carpenter gives a similar description of Suffield: “as jolly as ever, cracking jokes and making dreadful puns”². Carpenter gives the impression that there was a rift in the family after Mabel Tolkien converted to Catholicism, but Tolkien continued to be in touch with his grandfather, as he was with other relatives. He wrote that Cotton Lane was important to him in his childhood³ — Cotton Lane, Moseley, was the home of his Suffield grandparents from 1904 until John Suffield’s death in 1930.

Probably the Took family in *The Hobbit*⁴ and *The Lord of the Rings*⁵ were inspired by the Suffields, with John Suffield as the Old Took. Tolkien noted “the title Old was bestowed upon him ... because of the enormous number of young, younger and youngest Took”⁶. For a few years in Birmingham in the early 1890s the name John Suffield spanned four generations, Tolkien’s great-grandfather, grandfather, uncle and cousin. The words ‘senior’ and ‘junior’ offer less flexibility than ‘old’ and ‘young’; at this time in Kelly’s Birmingham directories there were two entries for ‘John Suffield senior’. ‘John Suffield’ in this article refers to Tolkien’s maternal grandfather.

Carpenter does not mention John Suffield’s interest in literature; nor that on one subject — the Bacon–Shakespeare question — Tolkien in his youth seems to share the opinions of his grandfather. Carpenter quotes the King Edward’s School debate in which Tolkien makes an unreserved attack on Shakespeare: he “poured a sudden flood of unqualified abuse upon Shakespeare, upon his filthy birthplace, his squalid surroundings, and his sordid character”.

The debate concerned the authorship of works attributed to Shakespeare; was the author in reality Francis Bacon? Here I show how John Suffield took part in a discussion on the same theme, and the significance of Tolkien’s contribution to the school debate.

John Suffield and the Suffields in Birmingham

The Suffields were tradespeople, middle-class, nonconformist, interested in literature and education. They were important men in nineteenth-century Birmingham, already by then the second largest city of England. J. R. R. Tolkien’s description of the hobbits in the Shire: “there in that pleasant corner of the world they plied their well-ordered business of living”⁵ could apply to the Suffields, as could his description of the Took: “The Took family remained both numerous and wealthy, and was liable to produce in every generation strong characters of peculiar habits and even adventurous temperament.”⁵ One of the strongest characters in the family was Tolkien’s grandfather John Suffield.

His father (Tolkien’s great-grandfather), John Suffield senior, grew up in Birmingham.

In 1826 he set up a drapery business in a half-timbered building in Bull Street, an important shopping-street. The Suffields’

shop was known as Old Lamb House and stood in Bull Street until 1886, when it was demolished as part of the Corporation Improvement Scheme; not to improve housing in this case but to improve the road system. John Suffield senior married Mary Jane Oliver in 1830. On 10 September 1833 their third child and first son, John, was born. More children followed. The Suffields thought education important, and John attended five schools; first in Leicester, then in Kidderminster, then two schools in Birmingham. Finally, in the mid 1840s, he was a pupil at the Wesleyan Collegiate Institution in Taunton, Somerset. His report for 1846 shows that he was “Good” in English, Greek, Latin, German, geography, commercial arithmetic and writing. For French, history and drawing his



J. R. R. Tolkien as a young man.

grade was “Exemplary” and he was top of the class in Latin. There was no universal education in England before 1870; his parents paid for his education.

John served brief apprenticeships with drapers in Dudley and in London before returning to Birmingham. By 1851 the Suffield family was living in Edgbaston, a pleasant and affluent suburb to the west of Birmingham town centre with large gardens, many trees and even a lake. In 1858 John married Emily Jane Sparrow, her father was also a draper. They had seven children in all, including Mabel, Tolkien’s mother. They were living to the south of the town centre by 1861, first in Balsall Heath then in Moseley; both in the neighbouring county of Worcestershire. Like Edgbaston, Moseley was an affluent area; rich businessmen worked in Birmingham during the day, but went home to their houses on the edge of the countryside in the evening. By the 1860s most of the Suffields lived in Moseley in large comfortable houses with one or more servants living in.

The Suffield business was prospering. John’s brothers Mark Oliver and Robert also worked for the family business. This did not take up all their time as both John and Mark Oliver took a lively interest in literature and drama, and were active in two of Birmingham’s literary societies. The Birmingham Dramatic Club perhaps played the more important role in John Suffield’s life, as it was smaller and more intimate. He and the family enjoyed drama and acting. However this is only mentioned in passing as this article focuses on Suffield’s writing about Shakespeare, done for the Central Literary Association.

The Central Literary Association came about following a discussion by five businessmen in Birmingham who made the resolution: “That a ‘Central Association’ for literary purposes be now formed.” The group first met for a literary meeting on 28 November 1856. Meetings were held in the evening, and for the most part included a debate, or a talk given on a topic of literary or occasionally of musical interest. Membership was limited, a maximum of 250 members was permitted. The association was for men only. However there were some ‘semi-public’ debates that ladies could attend, and once a year there was a *Conversazione*, an evening for dinner and dancing where understandably the members were happy to have ladies present. Arthur Tolkien, father of J. R. R. Tolkien, was a member of the association from 1877 to 1889, so could have met Mabel at a semi-public debate, or *Conversazione*. Most of the members were Birmingham businessmen or professional men, among them nonconformist ministers, librarians and teachers.

Some were men who had built up a successful business or who had inherited one from their father — Birmingham at this time was manufacturing and exporting goods all over the world. They did not have to spend all their time at their business but had time to devote to study, and to enjoy the kind of lifestyle that Bilbo and Frodo enjoyed when living peacefully at Bag End. Some of these men wrote books and

collected material about the history of Warwickshire and Birmingham. Dr J. A. Langford and Samuel Timmins were two such who were also members of the Birmingham Dramatic Club. Hobbits would have approved of Langford’s

books: “they liked to have books filled with things that they already knew, set out fair and square with no contradictions”⁵. John and Mark Oliver Suffield were both subscribers to Langford’s *Century of Birmingham Life*, published in two substantial volumes in 1868⁷.

In January 1873 the first *Central Literary Magazine*⁸ appeared. Every magazine began: “It must be distinctly borne in mind that this Magazine is neutral in Politics and Religion; and that each contributor is responsible only for his own contributions.” The magazine carried a mixture of club news and announcements and material from association members. There were articles on literary topics, contemporary society and poli-

tics; fiction, reminiscences and poetry. Most appeared under pseudonyms, but probably members would know the identity of the author. Many can be deciphered; Howard Shakespeare Pearson was ACHESPE — the sound of his initials in French; on the same principle John Suffield (junior) was JAYESJAY.



John Suffield

Suffield and Shakespeare

John Suffield’s first article was published in the April 1874 magazine. It urged the members of the association to institute some form of celebration of the birthday of William Shakespeare. He urges his readers to consider this on moral grounds: “What can he teach? Everything! Religion, Morals, and Philosophy; the love of whatsoever is true and of good report, the hatred of meanness, malice and all uncharitableness.” The article sounds like a sermon, with exhortations and appeals to the reader: “Take him for guide, and he will pilot you through the dangerous waters of life.” Suffield gives quotations to show Shakespeare as a reformer, as a critic of slavery, as one who made a plea for peace. Suffield did not mention that the Birmingham Dramatic Club had already held dinners to commemorate Shakespeare’s birthday. He himself had been present at the first in April 1871. He and his brother Mark Oliver had sung a duet: ‘Sound, sound the trumpet’, and then each had sung a solo⁹. Some of his readers would have known this as they belonged to both clubs.

Suffield read widely. In this short article he also quotes from Ben Jonson, Spenser, Milton, Dr Johnson and Samuel Pepys. Over the next few years he wrote articles and gave talks at the Central Literary Association and at the Birmingham Dramatic Club about Christopher Marlowe, Ben Jonson, Congreve, Dryden, Chaucer and other English writers. Suffield describes Shakespeare’s work as something to be read, rather than as a drama to be watched: “Let him that is unacquainted with the powers of Shakespeare . . . read every play, from the first scene to the last.” By contrast Tolkien thought that Shakespeare’s plays had to be experienced as drama; writing to his son Christopher in 1944 about a performance of *Hamlet* that he had found inspiring:

“it emphasised more strongly than anything I have ever seen the folly of reading Shakespeare ... except as a concomitant of seeing his plays acted”¹⁰.

By 1887 the second part of the statement at the head of the *Central Literary Magazine* had changed. The first part still read: “It must be borne in Mind that this Magazine is neutral in Politics and Religion;” but it now continued: “its pages are open to a free expression of all shades of opinion without leaning to any”. Two members of the association were about to be involved in an animated exchange of opinion. In January 1888 there was an article by John Suffield about Shakespeare: ‘Bacon v Shakespeare’. Suffield had lost none of his enthusiasm for Shakespeare’s writing, which he still considered to be: “full of the most profound truths and the highest philosophy, of tragic interest and enthralling beauty”. However a new book was about to appear — *The Great Cryptogram*¹¹ by Ignatius Donnelly — on the theory that the works of William Shakespeare had actually been written by Francis Bacon. John Suffield had already spoken about this in a debate in April 1877: “That it is highly probable that Lord Bacon was the real though concealed author of the Plays and Poems usually attributed to William Shakespeare.” He read the review of Donnelly’s book in *The Telegraph*. He was now prepared to be as enthusiastic about Donnelly’s ideas as he had previously been about Shakespeare and other writers.

As John Suffield did not have Donnelly’s book the remainder of his article consists of comparisons between Shakespeare’s character and Bacon’s. Shakespeare he calls “an unlettered peasant boy”. He argues that slanders against Bacon have been answered — Bacon is “the most generous of friends, and the most noble of patriots”. In a later article written in July 1888 he admits that he had “written in great haste” but says that he does not wish to retract anything. As in his article in 1874, his language is characteristic of a preacher or an orator; writing about Francis Bacon: “we have before us the noblest being the world ever saw, the Saviour alone excepted; and the most worthy to wear the crown in question. But was he capable as well as worthy? That is the question. Well! On the whole, he was.”

In his 1874 article about Shakespeare, Suffield had praised his female characters: “Whence did Shakespeare get his heroines? For spotless, lily-like purity and beauty of character they are matchless and supreme.” He then proposed that Shakespeare’s heroines should be role models for all English women. In his January 1888 article there is criticism of Shakespeare because he did not treat the women in his family correctly: “this man ... allowed his favourite daughter Judith to grow up unable to read or write”. From 1885 Suffield’s youngest daughter Jane had been a pupil at the new King Edward’s Girls’ High School. We do not know about Edith May and Mabel’s schooling, but it is clear that Mabel

had received a good education, as she was able to teach her young sons English, French, Latin and German, and to interest them in etymology and calligraphy¹⁰. Suffield believed in education for women.

In the next *Central Literary Magazine*, April 1888, came the reply in an article far longer than John Suffield’s, from Howard Shakespeare Pearson. He was a member of the association since 1860, lecturer on English Language and English History at the Midland Institute from the 1870s onwards, chairman of the Shakespeare Library for many years, also of the (Public) Reference Library and Lecture Committees. He had been a pupil at King Edward’s School at the same time as the artist Edward Burne-Jones and Archbishop E. W. Benson (*Old Edwardian’s Gazette* p. 3, 31 December 1923)¹². His knowledge of Shakespeare and his times could not be faulted. The title of his paper reverses Suffield’s title: ‘Shakespeare v Bacon’.

In obituaries Pearson was described as a lovable, helpful and conscientious man. His reply to Suffield starts with a note of condescension: “we must every one of us have a safety-valve through which to blow off some of that eccentricity and contrariety which are inwoven with the very fibres of the nature of man”. He cites several types of such eccentricity, proposes that it is best that he rather than another write the reply to John Suffield’s paper as he is “long bound to his antagonist by ties of friendship and respect” and finishes the long first paragraph with “Thus in all temperateness and good humour I crave leave to answer what has been alleged as to the character of Shakespeare, the character of Bacon, and the general probabilities of the case.”

Pearson then demolishes all of Suffield’s arguments with conviction, dealing firstly with Shakespeare’s character. Whereas Suffield had given quotations from recent Shakespeare critics, Pearson cited praise of Shakespeare from his own time. He then treats the character of Bacon, arguing that he might rationally be accused of wrongdoing. At this point he inserts a footnote giving five different references for the reader to “the highest authorities”. (There were very few footnotes in the *Central Literary Magazine* articles, and certainly none in Suffield’s articles.) He then makes an intriguing suggestion; Bacon had great intellectual capacity and a lack of sympathy with humanity; could a man of this calibre ever have written Shakespeare’s plays that had: “world-wide sympathy and unquenchable warmth of affection ... Bacon plus Shakespeare, great in two inconsistent directions, would be a monstrous creation”.

Pearson next answers Donnelly’s supposed arguments — they still do not have the book itself. Concerning the question of Shakespeare’s learning he devotes two pages to an analysis of and comparison between Shakespeare’s style, and Bacon’s. “Bacon’s fashion of speech is ... profound, thoughtful, acute, and imaginative, — but always measured and



Howard S. Pearson.

careful.” This he contrasts with Shakespeare: “Shakespeare is of all great writers . . . the most reckless of form.” He ends by asking the reader to reject Donnelly’s proposition in two sentences John Suffield probably resented: “I am not so foolish as to suppose that a belief which was never founded on reason will yield to argument. But to those who have been captivated by a specious novelty, and who, like my friend whose paper I am answering, are erring with a real desire to go right, I would make one earnest appeal.” Comparing the two articles it seems that John Suffield had simply been attracted to a new idea, whereas Pearson had considered the nature of both Shakespeare and Bacon more deeply.

John Suffield’s reply came in the next magazine in July 1888. He is indignant that he should have been named in the article by Pearson: “I think his paper would have been no less effective if it had been more general and less personal.” He then answers Pearson’s charges, defending Bacon’s character: “He laboured all his life for the benefit of mankind” and quoting the words of Sir Tobie Mathew who knew Sir Francis Bacon well: “A creature of incomparable abilities of mind, of a sharp and catching apprehension”, but this does not answer Pearson’s comments regarding Bacon’s: “lack of sympathy with humanity”. By now *The Great Cryptogram* had been published, and Suffield devotes the last part of this paper to commenting on the book. He cites various reasons for Bacon’s concealment of authorship of Shakespeare’s plays. He recommends that the reader study the cipher, but concludes that even if the cipher did not work any reader who studied the subject “fully, fairly, and candidly” would have to conclude that Bacon was the Shakespearean author.

Donnelly had visited Birmingham on 4 June 1888. In the Birmingham Dramatic Club Minutes there is an account of the “Visit of the Hon. I. Donnelly to Birmingham” written by the Chairman Arthur Butler, dated 13 September 1888. Arthur Butler’s careful phrasing suggests that although he felt an obligation to report the event fairly, he did not himself agree with Donnelly’s theorem, as he praised: “his [Donnelly’s] skill at extracting from the most unpromising material arguments that apparently supported the cause he was advocating”. The audience, estimated at 190, was unsympathetic to Donnelly’s ideas but received the speaker “cordially”. Butler reports that “Mr. J. Suffield” was Donnelly’s host and proposed the vote of thanks.

Finally an article written by J. W. Tonks appeared in the October 1888 magazine. Tonks was also a member of the Birmingham Dramatic Club, so would have heard Donnelly’s talk. The title was: ‘Mr. Donnelly and his Disciples’. Tonks tried to strike a note of good-humour by beginning with a quotation from Shakespeare: “bacon-fed knaves!”. It is clear that he does not personally support Donnelly, as he next cites Donnelly’s admission that he had “discovered Bacon’s love of cipher from the Boys’ Own Magazine”.

In the second paragraph having repeated Pearson’s observation that Bacon’s and Shakespeare’s natures were quite different,

he describes John Suffield’s nature. This ties in well with the descriptions given above. “Knowing that my friend who essayed to reply was ‘a fellow of infinite jest,’ his very answer seemed a colossal joke . . . one begins to wonder whether our friend will not come out at the end with a cheery smile, and the assurance that he was trying what our convictions were worth. His tone is certainly serious, but he is careful to inform us that the points stated are Mr. Donnelly’s.” Tonks was a successful businessman, having travelled to Vienna and Paris to promote Birmingham’s jewellery trade; in the 1890s he would become a local councillor. He may have wished to give Suffield a chance to withdraw gracefully.

Tonks gives many examples of Jonson’s admiration for Shakespeare, using the device of rhetorical questions. He quotes a statement of Bacon’s to the effect that he did not believe authorship should be concealed — so presumably would have claimed ownership of Shakespeare’s plays had he written them. He makes use of Donnelly’s cipher to give the following “MASTER WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE WRIT THIS PLAY” then suggests a solution to the debate. On a visit to Shakespeare’s birthplace a few years before the guide said that a Delia Bacon from New England had lived with her brother, a curate, in Stratford. “This poor lady . . . had

a monomania that she herself was related to the great Francis Lord Bacon . . . she suddenly conceived the notion that if she could shew that Bacon wrote Shakespeare it would add greatly to the lustre of the family, and herself.” Tonks then declares that he will say no more. The next magazine, January 1889, carries no articles regarding Shakespeare or Bacon.

There is nothing to show whether John Suffield discussed this with his family. However the obituary for his youngest daughter Jane from St Andrew’s University, where she had worked 1909–11, praised her knowledge of literature: “her knowledge of English was so vast that one felt she should have been a Professor, perhaps of Poetry, a scholar and the author of many books” (St Andrew’s Alumnus Chronicle 1964)¹³. As she had specialized in science at school and at university it seems probable that she had learned about literature from her father.

In the same year, 1888, Mabel Suffield got engaged to Arthur Tolkien. He had been a member of the Central Literary Association for some years, and helped to organize the Old Edwardians’ Literary and Debating Society, which had been running since the autumn of 1884. In January 1886 Arthur was elected to the position of Hon. Secretary of the club, and wrote a report on the Literary and Debating Society meetings for the March edition of the *Chronicle*, 1886¹⁴. His report is noteworthy for the number of comments praising the speakers. The audience had reacted enthusiastically on each occasion, for example:

29th January Charles Dickens, the Man and his Books
“the paper, which occupied about two and a half hours in delivery, was listened to throughout with marked attention and frequently applauded”.

Tolkien’s comments about Shakespeare need to be seen in context.



There was no note of criticism of any kind. This is in contrast to previous reports, and indeed to some of his son's Debating Society reports.

Tolkien and Shakespeare

It may seem surprising to suggest a link between J. R. R. Tolkien and his grandfather in terms of their studies of Shakespeare. Nonetheless, Tolkien's oft-quoted participation in a school debate mentioned above means that Tolkien is considered to be hostile to Shakespeare by some scholars. Other scholars have come to the conclusion that although Tolkien felt this in youth, his work does show some influences from Shakespeare, and his views may have changed. In addition, Tom Shippey suggests that Tolkien may have felt that Shakespeare should have written more plays like *Midsummer Night's Dream* and *The Tempest*, instead of plays of political and historical import¹⁵.

J. R. R. Tolkien first spoke at the School Debating Society in 1909, at the age of 17. Thereafter he spoke a number of times on a range of topics. Comments were made in the reports on his humour, his use of puns — and his lack of clear diction. In the June 1911 *Chronicle* there was a section on 'Debating Characters', a humorous assessment of the active members of the Debating Society. Of Tolkien it was said: "Has displayed great zeal in arranging meetings throughout the session and considerable ingenuity in advertising them. He is an eccentric humorist who has made many excellent speeches, at times rather burdened with anacolutha." Sadly there is nothing in the King Edward's publications to indicate the nature of Tolkien's ingenuity. There may be a clue in the remark of a speaker in October 1910, Mr C. H. Richards, who "regretted bitterly the weak moment in which he had capitulated to the highwaymanism of the Secretary".

Reports in the *School Chronicle* from September 1910 to April 1911 were by J. R. R. Tolkien, as the Debating Secretary during these months¹⁴. He did not end these with his name as previous secretaries had done. His reports are distinctively humorous, with the type of humour later evident in *The Hobbit*, and *Farmer Giles of Ham*. When the quotation concerning Shakespeare is considered it should be appreciated that Carpenter quoted directly from Tolkien's report of Tolkien's speech — and Tolkien was writing to entertain. Moreover the report had appeared in the June 1911 edition of the *School Chronicle* — when Tolkien was joint editor with W. H. Payton. To summarize: Tolkien the editor included a report by Tolkien the debating secretary on speeches made by Tolkien and his friends.

The topic for discussion at the April debate was "That the works attributed to William Shakespeare were written by Francis Bacon". It had been arranged some time in advance; first advertised in the February 1911 *Chronicle*, with an appeal for a good audience. The March 1911 *Chronicle* when D. G. J. Macswiney was joint editor with W. H. Payton¹⁶ further promotes the debate. It opens with a verse describing the Debating Society then gives details of the debate on the 'Bacon-Shakespeare controversy':

'Hark where in windy platitudes,
Compound of the froth of undigested fact,
And ponderous tub-thump wit of the hustings-wag,
Each for his own advertisement
They rant — they bellow — they abuse.'

We are reminded by the ever-active Secretary of the Debating Society, that the Annual Open¹⁷ Debate takes place on Tuesday, April 4th, at 7.00 p.m.

With regard to the KES Debating Society therefore: Tolkien displayed zeal and ingenuity, was ever-active, could be accused of highwaymanism, and was an eccentric humorist. The report on the debate in the June 1911 *Chronicle* is given below in full to give the flavour of these debates. The opening and the close of the evening are reported in a conventional manner, but it might be unwise to take all the statements made during the debate at face-value. From the number of votes cast there must have been a very good audience.

'On Tuesday, April 4th, the Annual Open Debate was held as usual in the Governors' Room. It had previously been decided that the Society should revert to its older usage and that only present members should speak. There was an unusually large number of parents and friends present, attracted, we like to think, by this prospect.

Soon after seven o'clock, MR. ISAAC BRADLEY, the Bailiff of the past year, took the chair and after briefly addressing the House called upon F. SCOPES to introduce the motion 'That the works attributed to William Shakespeare were written by Francis Bacon.' The Hon. Member gave an eloquent and convincing survey of all the different points involved in this theory. Disclaiming any connection with the wilder theories put forward by Baconians, he pleaded for a more sane and tolerant treatment than that normally accorded by the Stratfordians. Having endeavoured to show the unlikelihood of the man Shakespeare being the author of the plays, he passed on to enumerate some of the extraordinary facts, coincidences and parallelisms in ideas and writings which would lead one to ascribe the authorship to Francis Bacon alone among his contemporaries.

R.Q. GILSON was then called upon to combat the Affirmative position. He contested in detail the Hon. Member's facts, authorities, and evidence, and made some good points. He was astonished that the firmly established tradition which had satisfied English people for close on 300 years should now be set so lightly aside. Never indeed had any secret been so well kept as that of Bacon's if his was the authorship. The Hon. Member's speech was an excellent counterbalance to the previous one, and no improbability or rash statement escaped criticism.

J.R.R. TOLKIEN who spoke next on the Affirmative, poured a sudden flood of unqualified abuse upon Shakespeare, upon his filthy birthplace, his squalid surroundings, and his sordid character. He declared that to believe that so great a genius arose in such circumstances commits us to the belief that a fair-haired European infant could have a woolly-haired prognathous Papuan parent. After adducing a mass of further detail in support of the Hon. Opener, he gave a sketch of Bacon's life and the manner in which it fitted into the production of the plays, and concluded with another string of epithets.

T.K. BARNESLEY, who had pursued the previous Speaker with unremitting energy throughout the session, here ran him to earth at the last Debate. Shakespeare having retired to the background, the previous speaker, the Hon. Member's own expensive toilet and delicate coiffure, Delia Bacon, Mrs Gallop, and 'Penelope Potts' were dealt with successively. Apparently nothing could keep the Hon. Member off the cryptogram.

W.H. PAYTON then followed, and with marked contrast to the previous speaker, returned to serious discussion. In a very careful speech, which was one of the most convincing of the evening, he dealt with the so-called 'mistakes' in Shakespeare. His chief attention was then directed to the author of the plays as a lawyer and to the clearing up of the difficulty in the 'Merchant of Venice'. He concluded by emphasizing the previous affirmative speeches by adducing some further parallelisms and coincidences.

C.L. WISEMAN was then called upon to support the Negative. He seemed in a somewhat awkward position as he had to avow he scarcely believed in Shakespeare but he held that the motion was that the author was Francis Bacon, and this he did not think proved. Among other facts opposed to the Baconian theory he thought that the constant use by Bacon of the triplet — which was not to be found, he said, in Shakespeare — was important.

R.Q. GILSON then wound up the Negative in an eloquent reply. He could not, among many other things, see what the drains of Stratford had to do with genius, if he must again use that hackneyed word.

F. SCOPES then concluded the Debate. He dealt with each argument of the Negative which had escaped his colleagues and exploded the triplet theory of the last speaker on the Negative by sensationally reading out a long list of triplets occurring in Shakespeare.

MR. ISAAC BRADLEY then spoke while the votes were being registered, and was followed by MR. R.W. REYNOLDS who proposed a hearty vote of thanks to him for having taken the Chair. This having been carried unanimously, the Secretary, J.R.R. TOLKIEN took the opportunity of also thanking Mr. Reynolds¹⁸ for his continual kindness throughout that Session and many others. The votes were then declared to be — on the Affirmative, 37; on the Negative 52. The motion was therefore lost and the House dispersed.

Tolkien's comments about Shakespeare need to be seen in context. This was the last debate of the school year, and the last debate during his time as a pupil at King Edward's. The participants were highly intelligent; they were in the top class of the best school in Birmingham. Tolkien had won an exhibition (a minor scholarship) to Exeter College Oxford; F. Scopes a scholarship at Corpus Christi, Oxford; W. H. Payton had an exhibition at Trinity College Cambridge; T. K. Barnesley had a place there to read history. Christopher Wiseman, and R. Q. Gilson would spend another year at King Edward's, and would then also go to Cambridge (Wiseman to Peterhouse, Gilson to Trinity). They were all accomplished debaters. They would not have expected the listener or reader to think that what they said necessarily represented what they believed. The art of debate consisted rather in being memorable and in entertaining the listeners — to attract

their vote at the end — than in establishing a truth.

Tolkien's approach to the topic indicates that he had probably discussed the Bacon–Shakespeare question with his grandfather, or heard his grandfather talking about it, or borrowed the book by Donnelly from him. However his participation in the school debate did not necessarily mean that he held the same views on Shakespeare as John Sufield. Shippey suggests that in fact Tolkien did not reject his co-author from Warwickshire, rather he was “guardedly respectful of Shakespeare . . . and may even have felt a sort of fellow-feeling with him”¹⁹.

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1. *Birmingham Evening Despatch* (10 September 1928).
2. Carpenter, H. J. R. *R. Tolkien A Biography*.
3. Hammond, W. & Scull, C. *The Lord of the Rings A Reader's Companion* (2005).
4. Tolkien, J. R. R. *The Hobbit*.
5. Tolkien, J. R. R. *The Lord of the Rings*
6. Tolkien, J. R. R. (ed. Tolkien, C.) *The Return of the Shadow*
7. Langford, J. A. *Century of Birmingham Life from 1741 to 1841*
8. *Central Literary Magazine* (Birmingham): 'Shakespeare's Birthday' Vol. 1, (April 1874); 'Bacon v Shakespeare' Vol. 8 (Jan 1888); 'Shakespeare v Bacon' Vol. 8 (Apr 1888); 'Bacon v Shakespeare' Vol. 8 (Jul 1888); 'Mr. Donnelly and his Disciples' Vol. 8 (Oct 1888).
9. Tolkien, J. R. R. *The Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien* (ed. Carpenter, H.).
10. *Birmingham Dramatic Club Minutes* Volumes 1–3, 1865 onwards; — manuscript held in the archives section of Birmingham Central Library.
11. Ignatius Donnelly was a lawyer and congressman from Minnesota.
12. *Old Edwardians' Gazette* (1923).
13. I am grateful to Andrew Morton for this information.
14. *King Edward's School Chronicle* March 1886, October 1910, March 1911, June 1911.
15. Shippey, T. *The Road to Middle Earth*
16. MacSwiney left at Easter, Tolkien was the editor in the summer term.
17. 'Open' meant that friends and relatives could attend as well as the boys.
18. R. W. Reynolds (Dickie) gave Tolkien, Scopes and L. K. Sands a lift to Oxford in his car in the autumn of 1911.
19. Shippey, T. *Roots and Branches Selected Papers on Tolkien*

