



NORTH BY SHAKESPEARE: A Rogue Scholar's Quest for the Truth Behind the Bard's Work

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What is in *NORTH BY SHAKESPEARE*? The author explains the main theories covered below:

Dennis McCarthy's theory is this: Sir Thomas North, an Elizabethan courtier and translator, wrote three dozen plays, which Shakespeare later inherited through his theater company, or which North sold directly to Shakespeare, and those plays are the sources for all of the plays in the Shakespeare canon. McCarthy also believes that several of the plays in Shakespeare's First Folio were actually North's originals, and not Shakespeare's adaptations. McCarthy posits that the anonymous play *Arden of Faversham*, which centers on a murder committed by North's half-sister Alice Arden and has been theoretically attributed to Shakespeare, is one of the Bard's earliest adaptations of one of North's plays.

There is no hard evidence that North's plays existed; however, that is typical for the time. No Shakespeare manuscripts exist either. Of the estimated 3,000 plays written during the period, less than 20 percent survive, and only a few of them in manuscript. We have records of the titles of another 25 percent. But the rest—like North's own supposed plays—are lost.

North is credited, however, with three translations that survived: *The Dial of Princes*, *The Moral Philosophy of Doni*, and *Plutarch's Lives*. The one established connection between North and Shakespeare is that Shakespeare used *Plutarch's Lives* as a source for his Roman Plays, such as *Julius Caesar*. As a translator, North put his own spin on each of the three works, and he wrote an appendix to *Plutarch's Lives* titled *Nepos' Lives*. In those surviving works, McCarthy has used plagiarism software to find unique phrases and parallel passages in common with Shakespeare's plays, far beyond those commonly accepted as borrowed from the Plutarch translation.

McCarthy also discovered two previously unknown Thomas North journal manuscripts from 1555 that include hundreds more unique phrases and parallel passages. McCarthy has been able to connect almost every single Shakespeare play to a consistent narrative matching up with Thomas North's life, surviving writings, and the history North witnessed. Many of the corresponding details have to do with the attempts of North's patron, the Earl of Leicester, to woo and marry Queen Elizabeth—and the Earl's attempt to dissuade other suitors.

McCarthy suggests that North was a playwright for Leicester's Men, the acting company patronized by the Earl of Leicester. That company's plays would have been performed in court in the 1560s and 70s, and at public theaters in the 1580s. Some of these plays would have then become the property of other theater companies to which Leicester's players migrated, including Lord Strange's Men, a predecessor of Shakespeare's own company, the Lord Chamberlain's Men. Shakespeare came to London in 1589, and started his company in 1594.

There are several specific connections that could tie North directly to Shakespeare. The main actor in Leicester's Men, John Burbage, was the father of Shakespeare's main actor Richard Burbage. Another member of Leicester's Men, Will Kemp, became Shakespeare's main clown. North's publisher for *Plutarch's Lives* was from Shakespeare's hometown of Stratford-upon-Avon and also published some of Shakespeare's first plays. So any or all of North's translations, journals, and supposed plays could have ended up in Shakespeare's hands in any number of ways, or North could have sold his work to Shakespeare directly. McCarthy believes that a surviving satirical pamphlet about a gentleman-scholar who sells his plays to an upstart playwright is specifically about North and Shakespeare.

Many plays were either not published or published anonymously in North's era. When plays were published, they tended to carry the name of the theater company or a producer, as often as the writer—the same way that today we think of films as being “by” the director, rather than the screenwriter. Also of note, during the time North was writing, theater was not seen as an erudite literary form, but rather as cheap entertainment—so strange as it may seem to us today, North would have seen his translations as his true legacy, while his plays were ephemeral. Gentlemen like North did not often publish their plays or poetry under their own names. That started to change with Shakespeare's generation, when younger playwrights who had come up from the merchant classes, such as Christopher Marlowe, Ben Jonson, Thomas Kyd, and Shakespeare, himself, increasingly touted their works in the public theater. So North may have seen selling his plays to Shakespeare as a way to hide from his work and make some money, while Shakespeare would have no problem putting his name on works that he adapted.

There have long been theories about the providence of Shakespeare's plays, but no one prior to McCarthy has ever identified Sir Thomas North as the source (aside from the acknowledged borrowing from North's translation of *Plutarch's Lives*). And neither has anyone put forth this expansive of a theory, that one single person from an elder generation of writers (North lived from 1535 to 1604; Shakespeare from 1564 to 1616) is the single source for all of the plays.

There have been many theories about someone else writing the plays contemporaneously. McCarthy does not believe that happened. He believes Shakespeare wrote the plays, himself, but relied heavily and almost exclusively on North's well of writing for the plots, language, and most of the soliloquies. This theory answers a lot of perennially unanswered questions about where Shakespeare could have gotten his ideas, while at the same time it doesn't rely on conspiracy.

If McCarthy's theory is true, it transforms how we read the plays. First by transforming the way we understand playwrighting in that era, taking us inside the creative process and the ways of the theater at that time. If Shakespeare depended on North so completely, that leads us to see many

of the details and actions of the plays through North's eyes, as opposed to Shakespeare's, which implies new interpretations of the plays' content and philosophy.

For example, it's always been a mystery why Shakespeare wrote his darkest work, *King Lear*, about an old obscure deposed king when Shakespeare was at the height of his powers as a theater producer. It makes more sense if you understand it as a work by Thomas North written when he was old and impoverished and disappointed with his life. In a similar way, it changes *Hamlet* to think that North was facing imminent death at the hands of the Spanish Armada, and drawing upon dialogues about death from books that Shakespeare might not have had access to; it clears up incongruities in *The Winter's Tale* to think of it as an allegory of the life of Queen Mary I; it explains why Joan of Arc is presented as a horrible witch in *Henry VI, Part 1* when you realize that was part of North's anti-French propaganda to dissuade the queen's marriage to the Duke of Alençon; it reframes *The Tempest* to think of it in terms of North's tempestuous relationship with his brother. And so on.

North by Shakespeare weaves together two stories: a detective tale, in which McCarthy innovatively uses plagiarism software to analyze North's possible contributions to *Hamlet*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Macbeth*, and all of the plays; and the fascinating life story of North, a 16th-century Zelig who met the larger-than-life figures of Queen Elizabeth's reign, from the dashing Robert Dudley to the tragic Mary Queen of Scots, weaving their stories into plays that Shakespeare may later have adapted for the stage.

North by Shakespeare explores the multiple lines of evidence McCarthy has marshalled to prove his case—including North's own writings, personal experiences, contemporary works, and historical events—to demonstrate how each of Shakespeare's plays fit into a five-decade narrative of North's life. The book also wades into the cutthroat world of Shakespeare academe, profiling the scholars who both strongly support and viciously attack McCarthy's theories.

McCarthy's biggest champion is June Schlueter, professor emeritus at Lafayette College, and former editor at *Shakespeare Bulletin*. When McCarthy published a book several years ago detailing only a slim portion of his discoveries, David Bevington, editor of *The Complete Works of Shakespeare* and one of the top American Shakespearean scholars, expressed strong support. McCarthy also heard supportively from Columbia professor emeritus Martin Meisel and the director of the Folger Shakespeare Library, Michael Witmore. However, Bevington, Meisel, and Witmore have not yet been presented with the full extent of McCarthy's theory about Thomas North, which they may or may not support.

McCarthy's biggest attacker has been Brian Vickers, who ironically was a pioneer plagiarism software techniques. Vickers has used the them to try to prove that Shakespeare collaborated with fellow playwright Thomas Kyd on many of the plays. McCarthy has also been attacked by Princeton professor Rhodri Lewis, and numerous anonymous peer reviewers of his books and papers. One scholar who criticized McCarthy, but then came around on McCarthy's work on the journal as a source for *The Winter's Tale*, is Gary Taylor, the editor of *The Oxford Shakespeare* and enfant terrible of American Shakespeareans.

The criticisms follow one of two lines of attack: 1) that McCarthy has no hard evidence of the existence of North's manuscripts, or proof that he was even a playwright; and 2) that the unique phrases and parallel passages are merely coincidental, or that the plagiarism software techniques he has used to find them is flawed. To which McCarthy responds: 1) there are works of all kind that did not survive from that period, and North's contemporaries *did* refer to him as a playwright, using coded language; and 2) the sheer number of unique phrases and parallel passages could not be coincidence—and in fact, stack up far beyond what other source studies, related to other theories, have held forth as evidence.

Interestingly, scholars tend to support McCarthy when he only divulges part of his theory, but then quickly turn against him when he reveals the full extent. Even Vickers was originally enthusiastic when McCarthy sent him a list of parallel passages, but quickly turned against McCarthy as an anti-Stratfordian when he realized the larger agenda. But by demystifying this world of Shakespearean scholarship, and of Elizabethan theater, *North by Shakespeare* has the potential to usher in a genuinely fresh understanding of the plays in new and surprising ways—and to answer the age-old mystery of how a glover's son from Stratford wrote some of the world's greatest works of literature.