

CHAPTER TEN

George North***A Brief Discourse of Rebellions & Rebels (c. 1575)***

By H. H. Patrick O'Brien, of Thaxted, Essex

A Brief Discourse of Rebellions & Rebels exists in a manuscript written by George North in 1576, consisting of 114 pages (British Library MS 70520). It was tracked down recently by two researchers, Denis McCarthy and June Schlueter.¹ Their study of *A Brief Discourse* was published in 2018, in which they explained how, after copying and digitising the contents, they were able to compare words and phrases in the manuscript with other works on the EEBO database. They claim that “linguistic and thematic correspondences between the North manuscript and Shakespeare's plays make it clear that the playwright borrowed from this document in many plays.”

George North (fl. 1561-1581) was a minor figure in the Court of Queen Elizabeth. He served for a while as Ambassador to Sweden and was the author of three politically orientated translations: *The Description of Swedland, Gotland and Finland* (1561), the *Philosopher of the Court* (1575), and *The Stage of Popish Toys* (1581.) The latter two were dedicated to Christopher Hatton; so George North would not seem to be in Oxford's camp.

George appears to have been related to Roger, Lord North (1530-1600), perhaps a brother like the celebrated Thomas North, or perhaps a cousin. Lord North lived at Kirtling Hall, Cambridgeshire, about four miles south of Newmarket and eighteen miles east of the town of Cambridge. Roger North was known to Walsingham and served on a number of embassies during the reign of Elizabeth, including one to France in 1574. Roger later entertained the Queen on her Progress in 1578 and for his final years served as the Treasurer of the Queen's household. His younger brother, Thomas North (1535-1604), was the noted translator of Plutarch. Thomas had studied at Peterhouse College, Cambridge, and at Lincoln's Inn. He had accompanied his brother to Paris in 1574. Thomas published his translation of Amyot's French version of Plutarch in 1579; *The Lives of the noble Grecians and Romanes Compared*, which of course was an important source for *Julius Caesar*, *Antony & Cleopatra*, *Coriolanus*, and *Timon of Athens*. Roger North's household accounts indicate that both George North and Thomas North were living at his home, Kirtling Hall, during the four months in 1576 leading to the presentation of the *Discourse* to Roger.

McCarthy had seen the manuscript mentioned in a 1927 Auction Catalogue of fine and rare books. The catalogue described it as “an original and unknown work” and went on: “It is extremely interesting to compare George North's poems on Owen Glendower and Jack Cade with Shakespeare's treatment of the same subject in *Richard II* and *2 Henry VI*.” After a difficult search, McCarthy and Schlueter were alerted to its holding at the British Library (BL) by Tony Edwards, Professor of Medieval Manuscripts at the University of Kent. The BL had acquired it in 1933. After digitising the contents, McCarthy and Schlueter used a software programme intended to detect scholastic plagiarism, Wcopyfind. Thus they were able to establish more than twenty correlations with passages from the works of Shakespeare in the manuscript including: Gloucester's opening soliloquy about his deformed appearance and villainous determination (*Richard III*, I. i. 14–30), Canterbury's discussion of aristocratic order in the societies of bees (*Henry V*, I. ii.183–212), Macbeth's comparison of various breeds of dogs to different classes of men (*Macbeth*, III.i.93–102), the citizens' uprising in *Coriolanus* (Act II), and essentially all the events surrounding Jack Cade's fatal fight with Alexander Iden in his garden (*2 Henry*

VI, IV. x). Similarly, George North's discussion and quoting of a Merlin prophecy also clears up long-standing confusions over the origin and purpose of the Fool's Merlin prophecy in *King Lear* (III. ii.79–95).

Indeed McCarthy and Schluetter claim that the manuscript's influence probably exceeds all known sources except for the *Chronicles* of Hall and Holinshed and Thomas North's Plutarch's *Lives*. They also established by reference to the Early English Books Online (EEBO) database that there are no other known sources for these speeches and incidents. These examples are not totally obvious. No undergraduate would be in trouble for plagiarism on the basis of them. I am not qualified to evaluate the strength of these claims. No doubt plenty of others (qualified or not) will attempt this task.

For anyone interested in the works of Shakespeare, and especially for those that doubt the authorship, three questions emerge:

- (a) Why did the manuscript remain unpublished when other works by George North found their way into print?

Walsingham was working closely with Cecil at the time of the Northern Rebellion in 1569 and given the close connections with the family it is possible that George hoped to gain favour by writing *A Brief Discourse*. Despite its anti-rebellion theme, the work was not published, perhaps because it did not go far enough in tainting the rebellious subjects.

- (b) What happened to the manuscript between its publication and its mention in a catalogue in 1927?

At the time of its writing George North was living with his relative, Roger Lord North, at Kirtling Hall or Tower, Cambridgeshire, to whom he dedicated the work. Thomas North was also living there at the time. Presumably it stayed in the archives until the family decided to sell their heirlooms.

- (c) How might the author of the works of Shakespeare encountered this private manuscript?

McCarthy and Schlueter suggest three possibilities: *A Brief Discourse* circulated in manuscript and that Shakespeare had access to it. However, if the manuscript had circulated, it would have been known to the contributors to the Holinshed project, but they do not list it, nor do they seem to draw on it.² Nor is it mentioned by other authorities such as Camden and Stow. Next they suggest that Shakespeare could have been with the Queen's Men in the 1580s, who visited Kirtling Hall. Shakespeare could have made use of the library at that point and even copied it. McCarthy and Schlueter are vague on the chronology: now we know from Lord North's accounts that the Queen's Men visited Kirtling Hall in June 1583, soon after their formation.³ Some biographers believe that young William of Stratford joined the Queen's Men and toured with them. But such a scenario is thought to have happened from 1587 after the death of William Knell.⁴ McCarthy and Schlueter finally resort to "an indirect source".

Another explanation readily presents itself to Oxfordians. Oxford was a neighbouring landowner to Lord North. They would also have known each other at court and perhaps met in Paris in early 1575. A further possibility is that both Oxford and North attended Queen Elizabeth on her Progress through East Anglia.⁵ The Progress was entertained by Lord North at Kirtling Hall on 1st and 2nd September 1578. The accounts for the visit to Kirtling have survived, listing all the food, wine and ale. The French Ambassador attended the dinner so a special meal was provided, served by the local gentry. The cost to Lord North for the three days was £762 (Dovey, pp. 114-18). It is quite possible that Oxford saw and read this comparatively short manuscript during this stay. George North might even have been seeking a patron to help publish and publicise his *Discourse*. The work however remained unpublished.

Making the reasonable assumptions that the manuscript remained at Kirtling Hall,⁶ and that there has not been any copy, it seems impossible that Shakspeare, who would have been twelve at the time of the manuscript's composition, would ever have had access to it.

It is my view that if those of you with the necessary literary competence are able to support the thesis of McCarthy and Schlueter, these are respectable arguments (a) against the authorship of Stratford's Shakspeare and (b) in favour of Oxford's authorship.

References

- British History Online, 'Kirtling: Manors and estate' in *A History of the County of Cambridge and the Isle of Ely: Volume 10* (2002).
- Dovey, Zillah, *An Elizabethan Progress: The Queen's Journey into East Anglia, 1578*. Sutton (1999).
- Kennedy, Ross, 'North, George (fl. 1561–1581)' *ODNB* (2004).
- McCarthy, Dennis and June Schlueter. *'A Brief Discourse of Rebellion and Rebels' by George North: A Newly Uncovered Manuscript Source for Shakespeare's Plays*. Boydell and Brewer (2018).

Endnotes

-
- ¹ June Schlueter is a retired professor of English Literature and Dennis McCarthy is an independent scholar who published *North of Shakespeare: The True Story of the Secret Genius who Wrote the World's Greatest Body of Literature* (2011). McCarthy states his arguments that Sir Thomas North wrote the works of Shakespeare.
- ² Henry Summerson has shown that the Holinshed team were working on their sources for twenty-five years, and had indeed examined an extraordinary range of evidence. In their list of authorities, ancient authors were deployed alongside the medieval chroniclers and continental sources. The Holinshed authors had access to the official records in the Tower, and to a range of unpublished MSS but there is [no?] mention of George North or of *A Brief Discourse*. See details on sources at 'The Holinshed Project' <http://www.cems.ox.ac.uk/holinshed/> (accessed 20.02.2020).
- ³ See Scott McMillin and Sally-Beth MacLean, *The Queen's Men and Their Plays* (1998, p. 41).
- ⁴ See Katherine Duncan-Jones, *Ungentle Shakespeare*, (2001, pp. 29-31 and pp. 36-43).
- ⁵ Leaving the royal palace at Havering on 21 July 1578, the Progress stayed at Latton, Standon, **Audley End**, Keddington, Melford, Bury, Euston, **Kenninghall**, Bracon Ash, Norwich, where it remained for a week. The return journey called at Kimberley, Wood Rising, Thetford, Hengrave, Chippenham, **Kirtling Hall**, Horseheath, Ashdon, Thaxted, Little Hadham, Sawbridgeworth, Abbess Roding, Theydon Bois and Chigwell. At Sir Thomas Smith's house at Audley End on 27 July, Gabriel Harvey publicly disputed before the Queen. He then complained of the unauthorised publication by Henry Binneman of his verses (*Gratulationes Valdenses*), which reflected badly on important figures. It was probably at Kenninghall (on the outward leg) that Oxford refused to dance for the French entourage. Oxford left the Progress at Horseheath Hall near Haverhill, shortly after the stay at Kirtling at the end of the return leg. See Zillah Dovey (1999).
- ⁶ Edward North had bought the estate at Kirtling Castle in 1535. Edward set about rebuilding the Castle under the architect, Francis Adams, who created "a gatehouse, gallery, lodgings, a banqueting house and a garden, complete with grand water features and ponds." The building was renamed Kirtling Hall. Edward was created first Baron North in 1554 and the estate descended with the title. Edward hosted Elizabeth soon after her succession at the London Charthouse (23-29 November 1558) and again for a few days in 1561. Edward North died in 1564 and was succeeded by his son Roger, who was in 1600 succeeded by his grandson Dudley. The Castle was eventually demolished in 1770 but the family continued to live in the remodelled gatehouse

which now survives as Kirtling Tower, a Grade I listed monument. The thirteenth and latest Baron North was John North (1917-1941) killed in action, after which the title fell into abeyance. See 'Kirtling: Manors and estate' in [British History Online](#).