

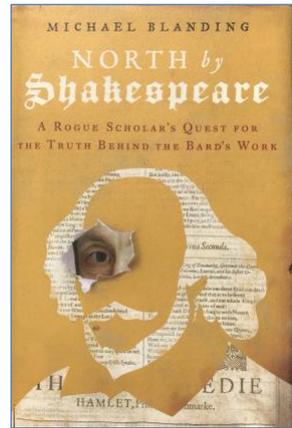
BOOK REVIEW

North by Shakespeare: A Rogue Scholar's Quest for the Truth behind the Bard's Work

By Michael Blanding

Review by H. H. Patrick O'Brien

Michael Blanding attempts to moderate the over enthusiasm of Dennis McCarthy in his claim that Shakespeare produced many of his plays by adapting earlier plays written by Sir Thomas North (North), a younger brother of Lord Roger North, an Elizabethan courtier. Excluding some of McCarthy's wilder assertions, Blanding finds some genuinely interesting links between the life and works of North and Shakespeare's plays (although not his sonnets or poetry). From an Oxfordian point of view the book's weakness is that it completely accepts the Stratfordian Shakespeare; it fails to consider the consequences of its arguments if Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford is the author of the oeuvre. At the end of the day the weakness of the argument is that it cannot be shown that North ever wrote a play or any poetry.



We have met McCarthy before as co-author with June Schlueter of *A Brief Discourse of Rebellion and Rebels* re-producing a manuscript by George North (to be published in *Great Oxford III* and accessible now on the DVS website: <https://deveresociety.co.uk/library/dvs-articles-reviews/>). The exact relationship between George North and Lord Roger and Sir Thomas has not been established. *Brief Discourse* was dedicated to Lord Roger North with a tribute to Thomas North as a writer. Roger North's household accounts indicate that both his brother Thomas and George were staying at Roger's country home, Kirtling Hall in Cambridgeshire, in the four months preceding the presentation of *Brief Discourse* to Roger. So, George may be a cousin in some degree.

The argument of McCarthy and Schluetter is that *Brief Discourse* is a source for the works of Shakespeare. They used software programmes designed to detect scholastic plagiarism to establish more than twenty possible sources in the manuscript, including: Richard's opening soliloquy in *Richard III*; the archbishop

of Canterbury's discussion of aristocratic order in the societies of bees in *Henry V*; a list of six types of dog essentially the same as lists in *King Lear* and *Macbeth*; the final hours of Jack Cade in *Henry VI Part 2*; and the Fool's recital of a prophesy he attributes to Merlin in *King Lear*. They claimed that *Brief Discourse* probably exceeded all known sources except the Chronicles of Hall and Holinshed and the translation of *Plutarch's Lives* by Sir Thomas North.

They then searched the Early English Books Online – Text Creation Partnership database to exclude the possibility of other source texts for the shared content and parallel passages. McCarthy's argument now is that *Brief Discourse* was easily available to Thomas North and he has included these elements in his own plays which have in turn been used by Shakespeare.

The known literary output of Sir Thomas North is:

- (1) a translation of the Italian *Relox de Principes* by Bishop Antonio de Guevara made from a French translation and entitled *The Dial of Princes*, published in December 1557 with a further edition in 1568;
- (2) a translation of the *Moral Philosophy of Anton Francesco Doni* in 1570; and
- (3) a translation of Plutarch's *The Lives of the noble Greeks and Romans* based on the French translation of Jacques Amyot and published in 1580 with further editions in 1595 and 1603.

These works were compared with the works of Shakespeare using the same software plagiarism programmes resulting in many coincidental phrases and sentences. (There was a fourth work, a translation of *Nepos' Lives* published in 1602 but McCarthy places no particular reliance upon it.)

In addition to these three pillars of McCarthy's claims, there are many other circumstances and arguments put forth for his claim of borrowing by Shakespeare.

McCarthy begins by establishing that Alice Arden, the murderess of her Husband in *Arden of Faversham*, a play about a real event in 1551 which some believe was written by Shakespeare, was stepsister to Thomas North. Lord Edward North, father of Roger and Thomas married Alice's Mother in about 1528, becoming Alice's stepfather. So, Thomas was Alice's stepbrother. McCarthy's contention, based on similar phrases found in Shakespeare's Works identified by the computer programme, is that Shakespeare wrote *Arden of*

Faversham but based on an earlier play by Thomas North about his stepsister which is now lost.

McCarthy claims to identify Thomas North as our English Seneca and the author of the supposed Ur-Hamlet. He found a passage in *The Dial of Princes* which he argues is the basis of 'To be or not to be.'

McCarthy calls in aid the passage in Greene's *Groatsworth of Wit* accepting the oft advanced view that the upstart crow, Shakespeare, is a plagiarist. *Groatsworth* tells the tale of Roberto, a scholar disowned by his family and penniless who meets an actor who promises to pay him for his plays. The scholar has a fraught relationship with his father and brother which is mirrored in Thomas North's life. He was left virtually nothing by his father and depended heavily on his brother Roger for maintenance. In fact, Roger gave him an allowance of £40 p.a. and he was able to live at Roger's homes in Kirtling and London.

In 1555 Queen Mary sent a delegation to Rome to reconcile England with the Pope. One of three ambassadors was Bishop Thirlby of Ely, a connection of Edward North. It was arranged that Thomas should go with the party as secretary to Bishop Thirlby. Thomas kept a journal of these travels which is full of suggested connections to Shakespeare's plays. A copy of the Journal is in the library of Lambeth Palace. The probable original is in the British Library. Oh, that de Vere had kept such a journal of his travels in France and Italy!

The party set out on 27 February and returned on 25 August 1555. They travelled out through France and Italy and returned via Austria, Germany and the Low Countries. They were received by Henri II at Fontainebleau. North describes a number of scenes in the continuing journey to Rome which McCarthy argues are the basis for various scenes in *The Winter's Tale*. He saw frescoes by Giulio Romano and a number of very lifelike statues in a Church in Italy. McCarthy argues that North wrote the original *Winter's Tale* based on these experiences and as an allegory for England being restored to Catholicism by Mary. This was more appropriate to the reign of Mary than at any time later when Shakespeare wrote his play. McCarthy identifies some sources for *Henry VIII* from an incident in the journey, a procession in Rome. He also argues that Thomas Smith was motivated to denigrate Thomas Cromwell because of a feud between Cromwell and his father, Edward North.

On his return from Rome, in early 1556, Thomas North joined Lincoln's Inn. There he translated *El Relox de Principes* by Antonio de Guevara, a Spanish Bishop, as *The Dial of Princes*. It was published on 20 December 1557. On 1st November 1556 Thomas North was elected by Lincoln's Inn to share the post of Master of the Revels with three others. It is difficult to draw any conclusion of an interest in drama from this because in February 1557 he was fined 26 shillings and eight pence for not exercising his office!

Next McCarthy argues that North, whom he has identified as our English Seneca, wrote his version of *Titus Andronicus* – 'Titus and Vespasian'. This is part of a campaign in support of his brother's ally Robert Dudley's suit for Queen Elizabeth's hand and against her marrying a foreigner. On 31 December 1564 Lord Edward North died at Charterhouse. He left the bulk of his fortune to Roger and almost nothing to Thomas – the proceeds from a Suffolk Parsonage – the groat of *The Groatworth of Wit*.

McCarthy imagines a further visit to Italy by North. He accepts that he has no evidence for this but points to similar expressions found in *Doni* on the one hand and *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, *The Taming of the Shrew* and *Othello* on the other.

In October 1574 Thomas accompanied his brother Roger on an embassy to the French Court. McCarthy finds sources for *Love's Labour's Lost* in this visit. There is a page boy, Moth, whose name is plainly taken from La Mothe. Berowne, Dumaine and Longaville are names derived from three French noblemen, Baron de Biron, the Duke de Mayenne and the Duke of Longueville. His claim for adaptation by Shakespeare is supported by the cover page for the 1598 Quarto edition: 'Newly corrected and augmented by W. Shakespere'.

It is generally accepted that Shakespeare drew on North's *Great Lives* for the Roman plays *Julius Caesar*, *Anthony and Cleopatra* and *Coriolanus* and the Greek play *Timon of Athens*. McCarthy argues that North also wrote the original plays.

McCarthy proposes that North wrote his *Merchant of Venice* in preparation for the visit of Queen Elizabeth to Kirtling Hall on Progress from 1st to 3rd September 1578. Roger North had sent his son John on a visit to Italy from 1575 to late 1577. John's last residence on the visit was in Venice. McCarthy speculates that Thomas was inspired to write *The Merchant of Venice* by his nephew's account to him of this visit. He further speculates that it was played as an entertainment

for the Queen providing the mechanism for the presentation of a ring given by Roger North. Apart from the amount of speculation there are two problems with this. Firstly, there is nothing in Roger North's detailed household accounts suggesting the presentation of a play – as opposed to the ring. Secondly, Churchyard, who usually recorded entertainments on Progress, was present at Kirtling and makes no mention of it. Edward de Vere was present on this part of the Progress and was no doubt acquainted with Roger North and his family.

As for *Romeo and Juliet*, McCarthy argues that Brooke's narrative poem, *Romeus and Juliet*, widely believed to be the source for Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, was based on an earlier play by North possibly written for performance at Lincoln's Inn. Brooke had written in a preface to his poem, 'I saw the same argument lately set forth on stage ...' He surmises that North could have written that play and changed the name Montecchi in the original story by Bandello to Montague, after Viscount Montague, one of the three ambassadors he had accompanied to Rome in 1555.

McCarthy conjectures that biographical references to de Vere's life, for example, in *All's Well That Ends Well* and the robbery at Gad's Hill in *Henry VI Part 1* were designed to parody a rival Lord, namely de Vere.

In December 1585 Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester, accompanied by Roger North whom McCarthy describes as Leicester's right-hand man, set sail for Flushing and war in the Low Countries. There is no evidence of Thomas North accompanying them but McCarthy speculates that when in the summer of 1586 five of Leicester's players, including Kemp, visited Helsingor (Elsinore), Thomas may have accompanied them and been inspired by an ancient tale!

In 1587 Thomas did accompany Leicester and his brother Roger to the Low Countries as Captain of 150 men from Cambridgeshire. McCarthy suggests that the miserable time Thomas spent there provided material for him to write *As You Like it*. The Forest of Arden is really the Ardennes. Many would agree with this but Flushing, where Thomas North was based, is a long way from the Ardennes!

And so, we reach 1588 and the Armada. Thomas North was given charge of 300 men in the Isle of Ely. It was feared that there may be a rising of Catholics to support the Armada and avenge Mary's execution. McCarthy speculates that the prospect of death would have been real to Thomas and that this inspires Hamlet's

dilemma. He proposes that North wrote the Ur-Hamlet in about 1588. The famous soliloquy is echoing a deathbed speech of Marcus Aurelius in *The Dial of Princes*. Pikes and briars become slings and arrows. The ‘sea of troubles’ is the Spanish Armada.

In the later chapters McCarthy is establishing links between North’s life and translations with *Othello*, *King Lear* and *Macbeth*.

The author Michael Blanding found a marginal entry in North’s copy of *The Dial of Princes*: ‘The condition of a wicked man. He is compared to a candell.’ The text referred to is: ‘We may aptly compare an ill man to a candle which, after it is once light, it never leaveth burning ... til it have made an end to itself.’ He related this to McCarthy who readily linked it to Macbeth’s ‘Out, out, brief candle ...’ Blanding found other marginalia in this book relevant to the ingredients of the Weird Sisters cauldron. The list of dogs from *Brief Discourse* is also relied on.

Finally, McCarthy turns to *The Tempest*. He argues that although it is interpreted as a farewell it bears no relation to Shakespeare’s life but does reflect the life of North. There is, of course, no investigation of its relationship to de Vere’s life.

Blanding concludes that he has found nothing conclusive to either prove or disprove the notion that North wrote source plays later used by Shakespeare. There are no surviving plays in North’s name and no hard evidence that North – gentleman, scholar, soldier and diplomat – was a playwright. There are no references to his dramatic works or plays in letters, theatre registers or revel records – or in Francis Meres’ *Palladis Tamia*. What Blanding is left with is the thought that if North did not write plays that Shakespeare adapted, there are a great number of coincidences to suggest that he did. I have related a number of these but there are many more in this book. Some involve fairly convoluted explanations.

This book is well written. It provides some heavy but interesting material on sources of the canon. It is lightened by the relation of the search and the people involved. Plainly North provided some source material for Shakespeare in *The Lives*. Probably some more in his other writings. But I remain wholly unconvinced that he wrote whole plays that were purchased or borrowed and adapted.