

The Case for Sir Henry Neville as the Real Shakespeare

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The case for Sir Henry Neville as the real Shakespeare is one of the newest posited for any authorship candidate, having been made in print only since 2005. It was originated by an independent scholar in England, Brenda James. Sometime after I published an article in *History Today* in 2001 on the Shakespeare Authorship Question, I was contacted by a friend of hers, and introduced to her theory. I quickly became convinced that, astonishingly, she had probably hit on the identity of the real author of Shakespeare's works. In 2005 we collaborated on a biography of Neville as Shakespeare, *The Truth Will Out*, published by Longman in London and Regan Books in America, which received a good deal of press publicity. A number of further books, especially by Dr John Casson, have appeared arguing the case for Neville. I continue to be surprised that Neville was never mentioned by anyone prior to 2005 as the real Shakespeare, since he fits so extraordinarily well every criterion for being the real author.

Neville's Biography

Who was Sir Henry Neville, and why is the case for him so strong? He was probably born in 1562—the exact date is unclear—and died in July 1615. He was thus an almost exact contemporary of William Shakespeare (1564-1616), a fact which in and of itself has been a cause of confusion. His father, Sir Henry Neville (ca. 1529-93), was an MP and courtier, a descendant of the illustrious Nevilles of earlier times but whose family had declined to the status of major gentry rather than nobility. Our Henry's mother, Elizabeth, was the daughter of Sir John Gresham, Lord Mayor of London, and a close relative of Sir Thomas Gresham, the great merchant who founded Gresham College in London. Our Sir Henry was educated at Merton College, Oxford, where he was a favorite student of Sir Henry Savile, the great classical scholar, and was already noted for his learning and erudition. From 1578 until 1583 Neville accompanied Savile and other students on a lengthy tour of the Continent, visiting France, Italy, and Germany. In Italy he visited Venice, Padua, and Rome, giving him a direct knowledge of many of the places used in Shakespeare's plays.

In 1584 Neville was elected a Member of Parliament, and remained an MP until his death, excepting 1601-1604 when he was imprisoned in the Tower of London following his involvement in the Essex Rebellion.

Billingbear

Neville lived as a country gentleman at Billingbear, about five miles from Windsor, in Berkshire, and also had a house in the City of London. He was regarded as



Sir Henry Neville 1562(?) - 1615

a rising man in Court circles. His father-in-law, Sir Henry Killigrew, was extensively employed on diplomatic missions by Queen Elizabeth. Neville's father had married as his second wife the daughter of Sir Nicholas Bacon (Sir Francis Bacon's half-sister) and was thus a relative by marriage of the Cecils.

From 1599 until 1600 Neville served as Ambassador to France. Although he is described in some sources as a "diplomat", this was his only diplomatic experience. On a brief return visit to England, he was persuaded to join with Essex in 1601, and, when the rebellion failed, was arrested and sentenced to the Tower until he paid off the enormous fine of £5000. Among his fellow prisoners was his friend Henry Wriothesley, third Earl of Southampton, Shakespeare's supposed patron. Neither was in "close confinement," and they were allowed to write and meet on a daily basis. Both men were released in March, 1603, by King James I, in one of the new monarch's first acts.

Neville was seen as a popular hero, and expected great things from the new king. But James disappointed Neville, who spent the rest of his life attempting to regain the vast sum he had lost as ambassador to France and as a prisoner in the Tower.

The Strachey Letter

In 1609 Neville was hoping to restore his fortunes. Early in May his eldest son married the daughter of the Secretary of the London Virginia Company (LVC), and three weeks later, 23 May 1609, the company itself was launched, with Neville and Southampton among the directors. "Shakes-speares Sonnets" had been published just three days earlier—our view, elaborated below, is that the Sonnets' dedication wishing "the well-wishing adventurer in setting forth" is plainly a reference to the launch of the London Virginia Company.

As is well known, the LVC initially made almost no money. In 1610 one of its ships, *Sea Venture*, foundered in Bermuda, an event famously reported in the so-called Strachey Letter, accepted by most scholars as a source for *The Tempest*. As a company director, Neville would have been one of its recipients and must certainly have read it. But how William Shakespere, who had no connection with the London Virginia Company, ever came to read this private and confidential document is a complete mystery, and has given rise to many preposterous theories.

Although Neville was what would now be called a "leader of the opposition" in Parliament, and increasingly challenged an arbitrary executive, he never achieved high office, dying in 1615 a disappointed man. In his last years and perhaps even earlier, he was very friendly with Ben Jonson and the playwrights Beaumont and Fletcher, whose play *A King and No King* was dedicated to him or to his son, also Henry Neville.

The Case for Neville

The case for Neville as Shakespeare hinges in large measure on the orthodox chronology of Shakespeare's works. Most scholars date, say, *Richard II* to 1595,

and we see no reason to consider this to be inaccurate. The real problem with the established chronology of Shakespeare's works is that they simply do not mesh with the known facts of his life, except in the most general way, and never illuminate why he wrote his works when he did, or changed styles in writing.

Shakespeare's plays and poetry exhibit a very clear evolutionary trajectory. In particular, there is a major break around 1601. Before then he wrote Italianate comedies and triumphalist histories. After 1601 he wrote his great tragedies, the "problem plays," and the "Romances," reaching a kind of closure in *The Tempest*.

Biography and Literature

But as noted, there is absolutely nothing in the known facts of the Stratfordian Shakspeare's life to account for this, or indeed for many other anomalies and (above all) the lack of connection between his world and the *Works*. On the other hand, Neville's life meshes perfectly—always and without exception—with the evolution of the plays and poetry as described by orthodox scholars. Equally important, it always explains why "Shakespeare" wrote particular works at the times he did.

Neville's life especially explains the great break in Shakespeare's writings around 1601. As a result of his involvement in Essex's rebellion, Neville went overnight from being an ambassador with a future to an imprisoned traitor with almost none. Our view is that *Hamlet* was his response both to this existential predicament and the abortive uprising.

With no other authorship candidate is this true, including the 17th earl of Oxford and of course Shaksper of Stratford. Positing Neville as the true author eliminates the need for inventing a new, highly implausible chronology for the *Complete Works*, as the supporters of Oxford must do. Their man was 40 or so when the first plays and poems by "Shakespeare" appeared, and had been dead for nine years when his final drama was written.

Neville was also a close friend and associate of Henry Wriothesley, 3rd earl of Southampton, and in the 1600s was often linked with him in contemporary accounts. Perhaps no other authorship candidate was so close a friend of the young earl, let alone a co-conspirator who spent two years with him imprisoned in the Tower of London. The Lord Chamberlain's Men, Shakespeare's acting company, was known as the pro-Essex theatre company, and famously performed *Richard II* just before the abortive rebellion.

Notably enough, this performance took place only five days after Neville first met with the conspirators and agreed to join them. In contrast, there is no known personal connection between the rebels and any other authorship candidate, including Shakspeare/Shakespeare, who may have been in Stratford at the time.

Direct Evidence

There is, in addition, considerable direct evidence for Neville as Bard, some of which is quite extraordinary. Here are the main points in summary:

1. Thomas Vicars' Testimony

In "An Unnoticed Early Reference to Shakespeare" (*Notes and Queries*, March 2006, 72-75), Fred Shurink of the University of Newcastle upon Tyne reported his discovery that the Rev. Thomas Vicars (1589-1638) added the following note to the third edition of his *Χειραγωγία, Manuductio ad Artem Rhetoricam...in usum Scholarum* (1628), a book in Greek on rhetoric, in a section dealing with leading poets. Translated it reads:

To these, I think, shall be added that well-known poet who takes his name from 'shaking' and 'spear,' and also John Davies, and a pious and learned poet who shares my surname, John Vicars.

This appears to be incontrovertible evidence that Vicars, writing only a few years after the publication of the *First Folio*, believed that "William Shakespeare" was a pseudonym—he did not, for example, use any circumlocutions when identifying John Davies or John Vicars. Also significantly perhaps, Reverend Vicars was Sir Henry Neville's son-in-law, having married his daughter Ann in 1622. We may speculate that Neville-as-Shakespeare would likely have been family knowledge. Vicars' statement predates any other "anti-Stratfordian" claim by 200 years. One need hardly add that he had no known connections with Oxford or with Shakspeare.

2. The *Encomium of Richard III*

As reported in another *Notes and Queries*, a handwritten 17th-century document, *The Encomium of Richard III*, came to light in 1855. Dedicated to Neville and signed "Hen. W.," it's a work defending Richard III against his critics. "Hen. W" was of course how Henry Wriothesley styled himself when he was in the Tower, having been stripped of his other titles by the angry Elizabeth.*

Unfortunately, the importance of *The Encomium* has been completely overlooked. Among the few discussions are Kincaid and Ramsden, eds., "*The Encomium of Richard III* By Sir William Cornwallis the Younger" (Turner and Devereux, London, 1977). Dr John Casson dates the MS from its watermarks to 1603—that is, just before or after Southampton and Neville were released from the Tower.

If "Hen. W" was indeed Henry Wriothesley, and there seems no likelier candidate, *The Encomium* is a most extraordinary discovery. Why on earth would the author defend Richard III to Neville, who had no known interest in a king who died 120 years earlier? One explanation is that he knew that Neville was "Shakespeare." These data also give us a clue as to why Neville/Shakespeare's *Sonnets* were dedicated to "Mr. W. H".

* A newly discovered poem by Southampton, "To Queen Elizabeth," begging for mercy while he was in the Tower in 1602, appears with commentary in the Winter 2012 *Shakespeare Oxford Newsletter*.—Ed.

3. The Dimme Light of Nature

The famous passage describing Shakespeare writing “by the dimme light of nature” about which “our heirs shall hear,” was apparently sent by Francis Beaumont to Ben Jonson in 1615, the year Neville died.¹ It was immediately followed by seldom-quoted lines describing a Shakespeare “as free/as hee whose text was, god made all that is,/I mean to speake: what do you think of his/state, who hath now the last that hee could make/in white and Orange tawny on his back/at Windsor?”

Chambers suggests that the “white and Orange tawny” may have been the livery (uniform) worn by English ambassadors to France. This was the highest position ever held by Neville, in the livery of which he was presumably laid out at his funeral. If this is the correct interpretation of the passage, it is probably the closest thing we have to a “smoking gun” about the authorship question. There was apparently a far-reaching agreement, put forth by Neville, that his works should remain anonymous and be ascribed to a nobody.

4. Gresham College and Ben Jonson

Gresham College was founded in 1597 in the will of Sir Thomas Gresham (see below). Our Sir Henry’s father was his closest male heir and Chief Mourner at his funeral. Moreover, the rights of the Neville family in Gresham College were protected by two acts of Parliament. In October 1623 Ben Jonson described himself as “of Gresham College, gent,” a fact almost never mentioned in biographies of Shakespeare. What Jonson was doing there is a complete mystery, but the Neville family may well have found him his position. Shortly afterwards he edited the *First Folio* and provided its introductory material. Perhaps his task was to attribute the plays to “William Shakespeare” so that the world would “hear how far a mortal man may go by dim light of Nature.”

5. Neville and Falstaff

Sir Henry Neville was a fat man, like Sir John Falstaff. In June or July 1599, Southampton wrote to his wife that “All the news I can send you [is]...that Sir John Falstaff is by mrs-dame pintpot made father of a godly millers thumb, a boye that’s all heade and little body—but that is a secret.” On 26 September Neville wrote to Sir Robert Cecil that his note was shorter than usual “by reason of some domesticall Misfortune in my son lately born.” Neville’s wife, it should be noted, was a short, dark-haired lady. Southampton was Neville’s close friend. While none of this is conclusive, it is highly suggestive.

6. The Sonnets

Positing Neville as Shakespeare also offers a cogent explanation of why the sonnets were published when they were, and also clarifies their mysterious Dedication. As noted, “Shake-speare’s Sonnets” were published at virtually the same time as the launch of the London Virginia Company, and a few weeks after

Neville's eldest son's marriage. Our view is that the sonnets' Dedication was actually written by Neville signing himself "T.T." (Thomas Thorpe), just as he had used "William Shakespeare" as a pseudonym.

As Dr John Rollett has pointed out, the Dedication is far cruder than Thorpe's normal dedications. The reference to "our ever-living poet" was probably Neville being facetious, and the entire Dedication has an air of upbeat enthusiasm about it, reflecting Neville's mood at the time. As previously suggested, the phrase "wisheth the well-wishing adventurer in setting forth" may well be a reference to the launch of the London Virginia Company.

It is likely too that the first 18 sonnets were not written in the 1590s at all, but shortly before the book itself was published, and were likely addressed to Neville's son as an inducement to marry. In this they proved successful—and hence were printed first.

At his trial, Southampton revealed that Neville had been an Essex conspirator, previously unsuspected. The many sonnets stating that their author had received a "brand", a "stain", "troubled deaf heaven with his bootless cries," and the rest, were plainly and manifestly written by Neville when he was in the Tower with Southampton, as were the sonnets forgiving him for the harm he had done to the author ("roses have thorns," etc).

Sonnet 107, which is generally interpreted as showing that its author was not unhappy that Queen Elizabeth had died, makes absolutely no sense if applied to Shakespeare, Oxford, or Bacon, but does if applied to Neville. Like everyone else, I do not know who the Dark Lady was, but she might have been Neville's wife, Anne Killebrew, who was of Cornish descent and had black hair.

7. Shakspeare's Mother

Mary Arden, Shakspeare's mother, was a distant relative of Lord Bergavenny, Neville's grandfather, and her family had a similar coat of arms. (Chambers, *Shakespeare*, II, pp.8-32). This may well be how the two met, and why Shakespeare the actor and the theatre-sharer functioned as Neville's "front man".

8. The *Thomas More* MS

In his recent book *Much Ado About Noting* (2010),* John Casson presents striking evidence that Neville's handwriting was identical to "Hand D" in the manuscript of *Sir Thomas More*, often regarded as having been written by Shakespeare. Dr Casson is in the process of gathering more information about this, as well as about the similarity of "word clusters" in Neville's memoranda and Shakespeare's plays written at the same time.

* The book's title is indeed *Much Ado About Noting*.—Ed.

9. The Northumberland Manuscript

Neville's name and family motto appear to be written at the top of the so-called Northumberland Manuscript, an Elizabethan document discovered in 1867 in the London mansion of the Duke of Northumberland. In addition to Neville's name, it contains those of William Shakespeare, Francis Bacon, and other playwrights, together with the names of several of Shakespeare's plays. The manuscript, apparently a wrapper used to hold copies of Elizabethan works, remains highly mysterious.

10. Neville's Life, Shakespeare's Works

There are very many other examples of a complete mesh between the chronology of Shakespeare's works and Neville's life. For instance, in July 1600 Neville received permission as Ambassador to return from Paris to London, arriving at Dover on 2 August, and in London on the 6th. Two days earlier, on 4 August 1600, there appeared in the Stationers' Register a listing of four plays to be "staied"—three by Shakespeare. It has always been unclear why this entry appeared when it did. Perhaps when Neville learned that he would be returning to London he decided to register plays which he either had previously written and sent across, or was bringing with him. This is one of innumerable examples of the coincidence of dates between Neville's life and Shakespeare's chronology.

11. *The History of Henry VIII*

Brenda James has noted the close parallels between a manuscript written by Neville when he was in the Tower in 1602, and which is now at the Lincolnshire Record Office, and the coronation scene in *Henry VIII*, IV.i (1613). In her view, Neville was drawing up a pageant which was to be used in connection with the next coronation, regarded as imminent. For whatever reason, Neville apparently put it aside, but decided to use it when collaborating with John Fletcher eleven years later.

Arguments Against

What might be said against Sir Henry Neville as the real Shakespeare? Most obviously, that there are no literary works under his own name. If Neville was Shakespeare, he obviously wished to remain anonymous throughout his whole life. Probably there were two reasons for this: as a little-known MP from the age of 22, he did not want to become associated directly with Shakespeare's early history plays, given their potentially dangerous accounts of the overthrow of kings and dynasties. Early works like *Titus Andronicus* would have scandalized his mentor and patron, Sir Henry Savile.* If Shakespeare of Stratford did not write the

* Savile was not noted for his sense of humor. Told that a student was a "witte", he retorted, "in Newgate [Prison], there be the wittes".

works attributed to him, we still have to explain why their real author remained anonymous, whoever he was.

Another point which could be made against Neville is that he was too busy to write plays. From 1599-1600 he was Ambassador to France, and after 1604 a member of many parliamentary committees. But in both cases he had plenty of time on his hands. After 1603, Shakespeare's production of plays declined from two per year to one per year. The question might also be asked how William Shakespeare, allegedly a fulltime actor as well as an author, who maintained two households in different parts of England, managed to find the time to write thirty-seven plays and the rest of his works.

Conclusion

All of this information about Sir Henry Neville has been compiled within the past six or seven years, and with the involvement of only a few scholars and researchers. It is not unreasonable to think that the active participation of more researchers will produce even more useful and striking evidence about his likely authorship role.

We might also note that recently important new evidence has been brought to light by pro-Neville researchers, which will add enormously to our knowledge of Shakespeare's sources in a most unexpected and striking way. I cannot elaborate on this as yet, but will do so as soon as possible.

Notes

¹ E. K. Chambers: *William Shakespeare: A Study of Facts and Problems*, Vol. II (Oxford University Press, 1930), p. 224.

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